

CWM Audio 4-3

Mary Jane Miller Interview, March 6, 1972

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Richard Flint: I'm speaking with Mrs. Mary Jane Miller in Sarasota, Florida on March 6th 1972. To get started, you don't have to worry about the sound. To get started, can you tell me how you got into the circus business?

Mary Jane M.: Well, no one in my family had ever been in show business of any kind. I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan. When I finished high school we happened to be in Sarasota in the wintertime for our vacation, because we had an ice cream business and our vacation couldn't be in the summer. So we were in Sarasota living in the city trailer park in a travel trailer and in the park was a young girl named Glenna Hartsel. And her mother and father were both clowns on the circus. In fact, her mother was one of the first lady clowns. So, we were girlfriends and I was going to be a secretary, and I told her about, and rehearsals were starting. And she said, "Why don't you come out and watch me rehearse?" And this was in 1941, and this was the first year they hired a lot of girls as showgirls. Johnny North was head of the show then and he decided he wanted a lot of showgirls and they were going to climb this big rigging and the American flag would fall down and things like that.

[00:01:00]

[00:01:30] So I went out and watched them rehearse, and I thought it was a lot of fun. So she said to me one day, "Why don't you join the circus?" I says, "Oh, my mother would just die if I joined the circus." We were from a very Dutch, tight family in Michigan and no one had ever been in show business. So she says, "Well, ask her." So I asked my mother and she, "Oh, heavens no." So I said, "Why not?" She said, "Oh, I'd worry about you and this and that," even though I was out of high school. So she knew Mr and Mrs Hartsel and she liked them, so she went out to watch them rehearse and she said, well, maybe I could go for one year if I lived with the Hartsels and if they looked after me and so on.

[00:02:00] So I was very happy. So I asked Pat Valdo, I said, "I'd like to join the circus," and he says, "Well, I'm sorry, we don't hire them as young as you are." And I said, "But I'm 18." He says, "No, I don't believe you." I was very little and very thin and looked young, and he says, "I can't hire you." So I brought my mother out to prove that I was 18. So he said, "Well, all right," he said, "Someday," he says, "bring your shorts out, we'll see if you can climb the rigging." The new girls were getting maybe not even 10 feet off the ground, and they'd get scared and Tuffy Genders would have to go out and help them down, and they'd cry and all this. So I'd always been sort of an old tomboy, so he says, "Someday bring your shorts out."

[00:02:30]

And Pat Valdo tells this story over and over. And I said, "Well, I've got them on!" And I took this wraparound skirt of mine off and I had my shorts on. And everyone was still rehearsing and Tuffy Genders was there and Pat says, "Tuffy, see if she can

[00:03:00] get off the ground." So Tuffy told me what to do, how to climb the ladder, so I made up my mind I was going to get up there. So I started climbing, and Pat Valdo turned around, he says, "My gosh, look at her go." And I went right to the top. I was the only new girl that ever made it to the top, so I stood up there and Tuffy told me to not be scared, not look down, rest a minute and come down. So I got down so they hired me. So that was how I joined the circus.

[00:03:30] As Tuffy Genders was very good to me. He's now at a Ringling show. He had a flying act and he and his wife would take time out to teach me things during the summer in between shows, I learned to do a trapeze, a little bit on that, and I ended up working swinging ladders and then I rode an elephant. And gradually I learned, I eventually ended up, I worked in a flying act and I did a double trap act with several different girls. So I stayed with the show 14 years.

Richard Flint: On the winter rehearsals, can you describe a bit of what you went in, what was involved in the preparation of the show that first-

[00:04:00]

Mary Jane M.: Well, it was very good. Of course the year I learned the most I would say when Barbette was on the show. He was a terrific teacher. You'd think you just couldn't do anything, he'd say, "Yes you can." He's standing against the wall, and he'd say, "Now raise your foot and touch the wall." I said, "But I can't do it," and he'd take your foot and you'd touch it. And we did terrific work with him. He taught us the web number and he taught us the swinging ladder and the different acts, and he was a marvelous teacher. And of course in the spring when you started, which was usually in January, you're very stiff and sore. Oh, your muscles would kill you. You'd rub yourself with absorbing [inaudible 00:04:44] and just keep going.

[00:04:30]

[00:05:00] The rehearsals were hard. You'd get out there not later than 9 o'clock in the morning, you wouldn't get through until 5. Some days it would require just sitting and waiting, and waiting, and waiting for production numbers to be rehearsed. Other days you were doing something all the time, we had rehearsal in the morning for the aerial numbers usually, the web numbers. In the afternoon was production numbers. Of course John Murray Anderson was on the show then, he was very good. It was at the old winter quarters, so everything was outside dusty and dirty and you'd come home just filthy every day. But we enjoyed it, it was wonderful then. You look forward to the train leaving, you'd get prepared, everyone had to buy a trunk and you lined it with your oil cloth, and all the girls took pride in that. And you'd fix your bunk up on the trains so it was like your own little bedroom. A completely different attitude and way of life than it is now.

[00:05:30]

[00:06:00] It was like going off to a camp or something you looked forward to. You worked eight months and you were off four months. Of those four months it was really on two months, because you rehearsed two months.

Richard Flint: That first year, were you just a [inaudible 00:06:07] spec?

Mary Jane M.: Yeah, I did spec. And I did, of course you all had to do finale, and the manage

[00:06:30] number. And then I learned web number, I learned that. And as you progressed you could get into aerial act. I mean, the web numbers were most all the girls were in that, or swinging ladder. Happened to be swinging ladder my first year and I didn't get to work until the show hit Pittsburgh because I just didn't know enough about it and I had absolutely no muscle when I joined. You have to have a little strength. But you do have to appear in spec and finale and the manage number even if you were at a buggy.

Richard Flint: How many years was it before you got into an act?

Mary Jane M.: Well, the following year then I was in the diving act. I went up there and you dove from a platform into a net. I was in that and then the year Barbette had several girls doing acts, and I worked a double trapeze act with Joyce Seawell, and then another year I worked for the Wallendas and their ladder act. So as you, they would get to know what you could do. Sometimes, they did this one year, they had about eight different numbers of two girls each doing trapeze acts, and I was in that. So I'd say by the second year I was starting to get into more acts. I was never a featured act or anything like that, but one year they'd have two girls and they'd call you the Mardon Sisters, and the next year they'd have two girls and they'd call you something else, and I was always one of the two girls, usually, in one of those acts.

[00:07:30]

Richard Flint: What were the living accommodations on the train?

Mary Jane M.: They were very good. I live in the girls' car all the time when I was on the show, and we had a porter, she would cook night meals. In the morning you'd get up and you'd have your coffee, and if you wanted breakfast you could have it. I never did, I'd just have my coffee and went the lot using May Cookhouse. But each girl, when you first started out you had a bunk double. You weren't privileged to have bed by yourself until at least you were on the show a few years, and then you'd graduate from being in a double below to a single above. And then as you got a little longer with it then the great thing was you'd have a single below, which I ended up with.

[00:08:00]

[00:08:30]
Richard Flint: Why was it better to have an upper as opposed to lower-

Mary Jane M.: Well, it would be hard for two girls to sleep in an upper, and so the double down below was a little bigger bed and a little more room, and so two girls would have to double up there. 'Cause the beginning of the season there were always girls that you knew were not going to last, maybe the first month, maybe the first week, they would double. As the girls were weeded out and they quit and went back home for disillusionment or whatever, then we were able to get a bunk by ourselves.

[00:09:00]

Richard Flint: Did you ever go into a period, in your first season or first month, with any disillusionment? Did you ever think you might want to leave?

Mary Jane M.: No, I absolutely love the circus. Like I said, I was very tiny and skinny and puny, and I don't know, I guess you'd say never the healthy type, but once I got on the circus all that fresh air and the food and the exercise, I guess, I was never healthier in my

[00:09:30]

[00:10:00] life. And I loved the circus, I really did. I loved everything about it and I never got homesick. And when I got home in the wintertime I was fine, but I was very anxious to get on the road again. There was a wonderful group of girls at that time, it was like I said, going off to camp or something. But I loved the traveling and I always made it a point, which a lot of girls didn't, but we'd hit some big town like Salt Lake City or somewhere, I would make it a point to get up in the morning and go downtown, shopping or something. You know, to see some sights beside the train and the cookhouse. Some girls slept right up until the last minute, but I always got up early and went downtown. And I'm glad I did.

Richard Flint: Can you think of any events in the course of the, what was it, 14 years you were on shows that stand out particularly?

[00:10:30] Mary Jane M.: Well the Hartford fire of course is one thing that was very traumatic and very bad that we all remember. Because we were on the lot, I was half dressed, I had my tights on for an aerial act, and about, well say five minutes later I would have been in the air in this double trap act with another girl. But I was half dressed and we heard this noise, and I went, "What in the world is that?" And I lifted up the tent cover in the dressing room and we could see this fire on the top of the big top and I said, "Oh my gosh." And of course we slammed our trunks down, and what we did, we took buckets of water and threw them over our trunks so that they got on fire. [00:11:00] And my husband, as the man on the circus, I was married to him at the time, he carried a little girl out that they never identified.

[00:11:30] And he was really shaken up over that, he helped carry a lot of people out of the tent, he was on his way from the big, he was a ticket seller on his way to the front to the back. And he was talking to Merle Evans when it happened, and Merle looked up and saw it and so did Dick. So, that was one experience that was real bad. And then the fire in Cleveland when all the animals burned, that was real bad. Course you always remember opening nights in New York.

Richard Flint: What were they like? What was the tension-

[00:12:00] Mary Jane M.: Oh, dress rehearsals are worse than opening night. The dress rehearsal, you're performing for your friends. All your performers are sitting in the seats watching you. And that's much worse than opening night. Once dress rehearsals are over, you can just relax. Because the performers are very, well to themselves, critical and everything, and you're nervous about it, and there's always a tension of nervousness in New York. But it's fun, and years ago when the show opened, several girls they'd get an orchid or something sent to them by their boyfriend or their husband on opening nights, and you'd put on all your best makeup and have your hair fixed just so. It's always an excitement about opening night, which is great.

Richard Flint: What was the stand in New York City like? Did it become too long?

Mary Jane M.: Very monotonous. We stayed in a hotel right across the street, most of them did at the Belvedere. And the first week or so, fine, and then after you're there a while

[00:12:30] the building starts to smell bad and you get tired of the same old routine, you just can't wait to get out on the open. We opened in Washington one year when the big top was up and Robert Ringling was on the circus, and of course he was more of a stage type person, opera singer. And I walked through the big top, and it was a beautiful day, and I said, "Oh," I said, "Isn't it wonderful?" I said, "I just love to get out in the open, this big top." He says, "Oh, Mary Jane, how can you think that? The circus will never look the way it looks in the garden."

[00:13:00] You know, he was strictly an indoor man. But we loved to get out, even if it was going to rain the first week, we didn't care. After the garden you're tired of it. You know, of one place and the same building.

Richard Flint: What was it like at the end of the tenting season? Was there any monotony or excitement about the end of the season?

Mary Jane M.: No, when you get to Florida, we'd hit Florida, and it always seemed to be nice weather. I don't know why, November on Jacksonville, and you could just tell the difference. And we'd be real happy and of course you'd look forward to seeing your family and start packing up your things, and a lot of the people then would get to Sarasota some way to pick up their car. So then they would travel the last few stands by car, they wouldn't be on the train. So sometimes you'd think, well, I'm gonna miss it. So there's kind of a sad feeling at the end, and they'd play [inaudible 00:13:51], and some of them of course you knew weren't coming back and you'd feel bad. And there's always romances on the circus, like you heard the expression [00:14:00] "I love you honey but the season's over," well that was very, very true. Some girls would be crying because they didn't know if they'd ever see their season boyfriend again, which was cute. But it was kind of a sad thing, because most of the girls if they really liked it, they'd miss the show.

Richard Flint: What sort of social life was on the show?[crosstalk 00:14:21]

Mary Jane M.: Well, when I was on the show it was very good. I've still got pictures of the [00:14:30] Halloween, we'd have a Halloween party and the girls would, we'd have popcorn and punch and cider and things in the dressing room. And if someone had a birthday we'd usually have a big birthday party.

Richard Flint: This is just among the girls?

Mary Jane M.: Yeah. Well, 4th of July was a big thing for everybody on the show, they would have 4th of July part in the big top between shows. After you had your big chicken dinner, or your big [inaudible 00:14:49] cookhouse, then they had a party and some of the men would dress up funny. I know my husband dressed up trying to imitate Otto Griebling one year. And the clowns would put on an act and some of the girls would put on some acts, and it was a lot. The ushers joined in, ticket sellers, and it was just a nice big thing on 4th of July. Then quite often in the summers they would have a softball team between the ticket sellers and the performers, which when [00:15:00] we'd get to a town where we were adjacent to a ball park they would play ball games, and when it was hot in the summer one of the bus drivers would, after

[00:15:30] cookhouse he'd holler, or before cookhouse if he didn't want to make it, we'd all get in the bus and go to a nearby lake, and we'd swim. And then he'd get us back in time for the show.

So those were the type of things it was when I was with the show that made it more fun. It was more of a comrade type thing. Or you'd play San Francisco and maybe at night after the show the bus would be there and everybody would make arrangements, you'd get a busload and you'd go downtown to a nightclub or that type thing.

Richard Flint: Then there was some leisure time on the show, or were most of these events usually when there were two or three day stands?

[00:16:00]

Mary Jane M.: Well, if it was two or three day stands it was better. Because if you're going to move it was hard. Sometimes we do one day stands, but say that we were going to be in the town for two, three days. And then the second day we'd go on a bus trip in between shows, or at Salt Lake City I remember we took a busload and went to the lake swimming. You know, a different time we played Denver, Colorado, and in the morning the bus got a busload and they went up to the mountains to see, you know, like that. So there were different things that went on.

[00:16:30]

Richard Flint: So you could really see the country if you wanted to, as opposed to-

Mary Jane M.: Oh yes. And then some places you'd play there would be certain stands where they lived, and they would invite you to a party in the evening. Someone didn't care about it but I always seemed to make it with Bob Dover, the two of us always went. And we enjoyed it very much, of course you get to bed a little late but then you could sleep later. So there were activities you could do, you didn't have to just stay on the lot.

Richard Flint: Are there any towns that you were particularly anxious to play or anxious to leave?[crosstalk 00:17:02]

[00:17:00]

Mary Jane M.: Well, Chicago was always sort of a halfway mark. And everyone, you'd been making one day stands for weeks and weeks, or possibly two, but then all of a sudden you looked for Chicago, boy, we're gonna be there two weeks. You know, it gave you a chance to do a little shopping and go to a hotel and stay for a week or so. And just be in one spot, so you didn't have to pack that trunk every night and get going. And it was a cement lot, you could dress up a little and not be filthy dirty when you left. You know, you could go out to eat after the show and didn't have to run to make a train. So we looked forward to Chicago, and then if we went to California we always looked forward to Los Angeles and San Francisco and some of those big towns.

[00:17:30]

Richard Flint: Any towns that you didn't particularly look forward to?

Mary Jane M.: I never liked the east. Around Newark, we were always in such jammed up lots and

[00:18:00] the town people would just wander everywhere, you couldn't keep them out. And kids, and I don't know, that was just my personal opinion. Of course, then we dreaded the fall and the Carolinas because you just freeze to death, oh, it would be so cold through the Carolinas and Alabama. It'd get down to 20 and you're running from the dressing room to the big top with little shorts on, you know, your legs would be numb and rain, that was a bad time of the year.

Richard Flint: Are there any particular acts or friendships that you had that you like to remember on the show?

[00:18:30]
Mary Jane M.: Yes, I was very good friends with [Yeti 00:18:31] Wallenda, she was killed a few years ago on a high pole. We were quite close, and through her I knew the Wallenda family. I've met a lot of real wonderful people on the show. Dolly Copeland and I were sitting next to each other all the time in the dressing room, and Margie Lawson and I were next to each other. A lot of girls you become very attached to, and families that you remember, and I still see them, they come in the store here to buy things from me because they're still in show business, a lot of them, and I'm not. But I get to see them, I'm really kind of in between the show people right now.

[00:19:00]
Richard Flint: Were there usually the same girls every year? [crosstalk 00:19:09]What percentage?

Mary Jane M.: Yeah. Quite a bit. Well, I would say 75% were girls from year to year, then you'd get a whole group of new girls. And of course as the years go by you can kind of spot the ones that are going to stay, because you just know the ones that are going to quit right after New York. I think they just joined so they can get a free trip to Florida and rehearse and get back to New York and then quit. Some of them would last for about the second rainy day out of Philadelphia or something. They'd say, this isn't for me. You'd take a bath in a bucket, sleep in a train that isn't heated, I mean, it takes a certain breed of person, really. They say there's no people like show people, well there's no people like circus people. You have to put up with all types, or at that time, all types of things. Elements and traveling and stuff like that.

[00:20:00]
Richard Flint: You mentioned quite a number of acts that you took part in, can you tell me a bit more about them?

Mary Jane M.: Well, when Karl Wallenda had the ladder act, it was a pyramid ladder act. I was one of the girls in that. And then I was in a flying act for a couple of years, and outside of that the only, like I said Barbette would have two girls on a trapeze and they would be billed as such and such that particular year. But I was never a part of an act as you'd call it, I was just one of the girls. If they needed you somewhere they moved you there, and I was small and little so they actually stuck me in the air, I was always in the air. I never rode a horse, but I rode elephants, things like that.

[00:20:30]
Richard Flint: Can you remember your first time up on an elephant?

Mary Jane M.: Yes. I was scared, and I still don't like elephants. I was thrown a couple of times real bad, and it's a wonder I didn't break my neck, but I didn't. The lord was good to me all those years, I fell off the web and oh gosh, I got thrown by an elephant and all that stuff, but I never had any broken bones. Of course, now I can feel where I did all the crazy work I did. But the elephants, most of them were good. Once in a while you'd get one that was kind of mean and if you didn't sit just right they'd throw you off.

Richard Flint: What sort of relationship was there between the performers and some of the working people? Was it quite separated or were there some-

[00:21:30]

Mary Jane M.: No. Well, of course, they had their own trains and things. But it was friendly, like if you had a certain rigger for your aerial work and you got to know them, they were friendly. They had their life of their own, they didn't mingle too much really, except some of the property bosses, they'd be married to some of the girls. They'd come around and sit in the dressing room in between shows, same way the ticket sellers did. They were married to the girls or going with one of the girls. But as a whole the working men just stayed to themselves. They were friendly, there was never any disputes or anything like that. They just stayed to themselves.

[00:22:00]

Richard Flint: You mentioned in regard to baseball team that it was the ticket sellers versus the performers, and several other times you mentioned ticket sellers. Why were they more-

Mary Jane M.: Well, ticket sellers, I'm saying that includes ticket sellers, ticket takers, and ushers. I just said ticket sellers, but it included the ushers. The ushers and the ticket takers and ticket sellers and the ones that working the front wagons were more or less classified all in one. So they would all get together and they would be a, in other words they were apart from the performers. So they would play the performers.

[00:22:30]

Richard Flint: What about the candy [inaudible 00:22:37], where did they fit in?

Mary Jane M.: Well, they were ... Everybody got along. They had their own car, their own train section, and they had their own tent. So between shows they would be tired and they'd go sit out the tent. Unless, like I say, one of them would be married to one of the girls, then he'd come by and sit with her between shows or something like that. But they ate at their own place at cookhouse, same way I was sitting at the girls' table in cookhouse. You just didn't sit wherever you wanted to, you were assigned a place, so everyone was in their own special place.

[00:23:00]

Richard Flint: What was your last season on the show?

Mary Jane M.: '54.

Richard Flint: '54. So what did you do for the years after? I'm just wondering how you received the news of [crosstalk 00:23:21]-

Mary Jane M.: [00:23:30] In '54 I'd been married 10 years, and I decided I wanted a child. So I got pregnant and I left in Chicago, and I had my son the next January. So then after that I did work at the circus hall of fame for two years doing web and a little trap act with my ex-partner, and I did do that, and I was a guide out there for a little bit. But I was completely happy away from the show because I had my son.

Richard Flint: Right. How did you receive the news of the show closing in Pittsburgh in July '56?

Mary Jane M.: [00:24:00] Well, that was the first year I was home, and my girlfriend Dolly had had a baby just six months before me. We'd both been on the show all these years, never had any children, and we both had one within six months. So she went back to the show and left the baby with her mother, so they came back, of course, after the show closed. And I just thought, well, I'm just glad I wasn't a part of it. And Dolly came home, and of course she was happy to get home to her baby, but it was quite a real bad experience for the show people that had been with it so many years, and all of a sudden they find out that it's no longer going to be the way it used to be. So, to me that was the end of the circus as I knew it.

[00:24:30]

Richard Flint: Can you remember the train coming into Sarasota?

Mary Jane M.: Yes. It was a sad experience, really. I think, for the people that had been with it. And I still know quite a few girls that have been retired ever since that or before, and they still get feelings when they hear that circus train leave. I don't. I had a life before the circus and I had had a life after, and the part I was with the circus was enjoyable and I wouldn't have given anything for. I've met wonderful people and enjoyed it, but it was just part of my life. So I don't miss the circus at all, I think it's because I'm so busy now, and my son is 17 now. And he's given me a lot of enjoyment and pleasure, so I love the circus, but I don't miss it. I like to look back through my scrapbooks at how it used to be.

[00:25:00]

Richard Flint: How do you evaluate any circus performer, whether it be Ringling or any other show, today with the performances while you took part?

[00:25:30]

Mary Jane M.: Well, some are great. Really, I saw the show in different circuses and some are really dedicated performers and they're just terrific. Others are doing acts that are mediocre. I know some of the trap acts that I see, we did that ourselves. The girls did as much under Barbette's training we did as much. So I guess when I was on the show too there were mediocre acts. Some of them would come from Europe and boy, they just weren't anything at all. John Ringling North hired them and I don't know if he didn't know what he was looking at or what, but they weren't anything at all. They'd last a couple years and that was it. Some of the new acts I've seen are really great, they really are.

[00:26:00]

Richard Flint: Are you thinking in particular of Ringling or other shows?

Mary Jane M.: All shows. Some of them are really good, whether they're on Ringling or whether they're on some of the other shows. And some of them is a disgrace, they really

[00:26:30] don't take pride in what they're doing. They're out there, well, maybe they were brought up in the business so they've got an act and they're just getting through and trying to get by. But I think times are changing, people aren't going to stand for seeing some of those acts, and the circus owners aren't going to stand for that. And some of them go on to Las Vegas and different places to work, and they've got to be good. They've got to be top-notch, they just can't just not do anything.

Richard Flint: We were talking earlier, before the tape, about Father Ed. Can you tell me how you first met him?

Mary Jane M.: Well, I met him through the Wallendas, through [Yeti 00:26:55] really. In Boston, the train was getting ready to leave, and he always went to see the Wallendas. This was my second year on the show, and [Yeti 00:27:06] was a good girlfriend of mine, so she says, "Oh, come in, I want you to meet someone." So Father Ed was having a cup of coffee with the Wallendas in the state room, so she walked in, she says, "Father Ed," she called him, she said, "would you buy me a beer?" And he says, "Yes, [Yeti 00:27:20], come on, I'll buy you a beer." He said to me, "Do you want one too?" I says, "No, I don't drink beer but I'll have a Coke or something." So that's how I met Father Ed. And for some reason we just hit it off.

[00:27:30]

Every time he came to the show I would make a point to talk to him, visit with him in the backyard, and through the years we became very close friends.

Richard Flint: Did he ever stay on the show for any period of time beyond the Boston stand?

Mary Jane M.: No. He would visit, like in Texas, he'd visit and he said mass under the big top which was a great thrill. And he would visit and stay on the train, but never as an official part. He was very close to Robert Ringling, and when Robert Ringling was on the circus, Father Ed more or less had free rein. He could stay on the train and he enjoyed the time he was there. And he was making plans to have his own car, he would have a chapel in it, he would have a little hospital. He would stay on the trains, he was going to get special leave from the Archbishop. He was going to travel with the circus. He was all ready, and that's when Robert Ringling was ousted.

[00:28:00]

[00:28:30] So his dream fell apart, so he never did become an official part of the circus. But he did travel with it a little bit while Robert Ringling was on the show. And of course when he came to Sarasota he always stayed with Robert Ringling, when he was alive, at his home.

Richard Flint: You mentioned earlier, or you started to mention about his relationship with the establishment of Show Folks.

Mary Jane M.: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well he was down here, of course, every time someone died, Father Ed was called to funerals. Sometimes he would be flown in at the expense of the family just so he'd be here for the funeral. And so he said one day, he says, "You know, is this terrible, the only time we ever all get together is at a funeral," he said, "why should it be such a sad occasion when we say hello to each

[00:29:00]

[00:29:30] other and say how are you and how you been?" He says, "We should get together, have a club or something." So the idea got thinking more. Don Edwards at the time and Ludwig Machino, and quite a few says, "You know, we should get together." So we met back at Charlie Boris' bar. This was, I think it's been about six years now, there were probably 20 people at the first meeting. And they agreed, well, let's get together every so often, and I think they made it once a month or so. And they would meet at Charlie's and I was one of the first members. And that's how the club started. And it's just progressed real fast.

Richard Flint: When did they build the clubhouse?

Mary Jane M.: Oh golly, let me think. That's been about four years ago, that's all.

Richard Flint: And of course, there was a recent addition.

[00:30:00] Mary Jane M.: Yeah, they just built a Father Ed room. Now that'll be dedicated in his honor, if you notice we have a plaque up with everyone's name on that donated, and we have a mural drawn, painted there of Father Ed blessing the circus train, and that is called the Father Ed room, and it'll be dedicated this May when the circus fans have their convention here. It'll be in connection with him. 'Cause he loved the circus fans too.

Richard Flint: What sort of role did the circus fans have on the circus? Were they-

[00:30:30]

Mary Jane M.: They were great. Very wonderful. Outside of, there's always an exception, but I would say 99% are wonderful people. You get to a town, and if there was anything the circus needed the circus fans saw that it was done. If the route from the train, oh, excuse me.

Richard Flint: While we're still on circus fans, why don't we just pick up there and see if we can pick up again? I apologize.

Mary Jane M.: Yeah, but I don't know what we talked about after that.

Richard Flint: I guess I mentioned that you were the most photographed circus-

Mary Jane M.: Yeah. Is it on now?

Richard Flint: Yeah, it's on now.

[00:31:00]

Mary Jane M.: No, I said because I couldn't refuse them, they were such nice people. And if they were nice enough to come to see the circus and be nice to you, then I just thought, well, the least I could do is pose. And my husband was a photographer, so naturally I would have pose for him when no one else was available, so that's another reason my picture was taken so much in different programs and things. The other girls didn't want to get up and make the effort to get dressed and put makeup on and pose early in the morning, and I did.

[00:31:30]

Richard Flint: And one other thing I had asked you was how you had met your husband, if you don't mind going over that again?

Mary Jane M.: Oh, yeah. No, that was in Boston, and my sister had had a date with him, which would be the first date. And I didn't particularly like him, but she couldn't keep it. So I said I would go. So he took me to dinner and dancing and we went together after that for two years, and then we got married in 1945.

Richard Flint: Right. Was your sister on the show then?

Mary Jane M.: Just for two years.

[00:32:00]

Richard Flint: How did she happen to come on? Because-

Mary Jane M.: Because I was there.

Richard Flint: How did she like it?

Mary Jane M.: All right, but not like I did. I was a really circus nut.

Richard Flint: You were quite enchanted with it.

Mary Jane M.: I loved the circus, I really did. I had a good 14 years there. If it was still that way now as it was then, then I think I'd miss it. But I know it's not that way and never will be, so I don't miss it at all.

[00:32:30]

Richard Flint: Right. Well, I guess what I missed there was lost. I do apologize. I guess we talked a bit about, I can't remember now.

Mary Jane M.: The change of management.

Richard Flint: Change of management, right.

Mary Jane M.: Well, I was there when there was Robert Ringling and Johnny North and then Concello, and Jim Haley. And quite a few different heads of the show, and they all had their own key men, so if one was in their men were there, and if they got out

[00:33:00] then the others were out. So one year I think we had several changes, so it was getting to be quite a thing.

Richard Flint: And you said it upset the routine of the show to some extent?

Mary Jane M.: Well, it did. You'd get to like certain people and then because they were the key men on this particular guy that was coming in, they would be let out and they'd leave. And sometimes they were married to girls, and then the girls of course

[00:33:30] would have to leave too. So even though they were good, I mean actually the ones that were in had their own men. So Robert Ringling was strictly a guy that was interested in the performing end. He was always there at every show to make sure you smiled and you had your makeup on and you even had to have your nails polished and all that stuff. And I didn't always polish my nails, so he'd say, "Mary Jane, let me see your hands." I'd hide them, he'd say, "Now, you put that polish on." He was a stickler, for, you thought you were on the stage. He thought we were all on a stage, and that was his interest.

[00:34:00] And when Johnny North did a show he was just strictly interested in seeing the money came in and the show was in the black, and he couldn't have cared less whether the show was performing right or not. He wanted to make sure that the money was coming in.

Richard Flint: Who was responsible for putting the show together?

Mary Jane M.: Well, Johnny North had John Murray Anderson and Barbette, were the two that were directing the show. He produced it and they directed. And Robert Ringling, when he was there, he mostly directed it himself. Now, of course they have Dick Barstow now, who Johnny North hired. And I did work under Dick Barstow several years, he was on the show when I was there too and he's very great and he's still with the Ringling show. And he's directed a lot of wonderful numbers.

[00:34:30]

Richard Flint: Can you compare Barbette and John Murray Anderson and Richard Barstow as well, how do they-

Mary Jane M.: Well, it was really quite different. Dick Barstow was young and very energetic and very new in ideas, and he's what they need now. When John Murray Anderson was there he was at his tops at that time, he was getting older. And of course Barbette, he was just absolutely terrific. I mean nobody could surpass him as far as teaching girls aerial work and things like that, that's just what he did. Strictly what he did. And John Murray Anderson did the dancing and stuff, but Dick Barstow was very good to me and he's very good for this.

[00:35:00]

Richard Flint: Was Toni Concello ever in charge of the aerial walk when you were on the show?

[00:35:30]

Mary Jane M.: Yes, she was. She was in charge one year of teaching the girls the aerial number, and it was funny. In New York she had some personal problems and she didn't show up, and I got this note from her and she asked me to take over for the season. So I was aerial director for her all season long.

Richard Flint: What season was that?

Mary Jane M.: I can't remember. It was around '52, something like that. '50, '52, something.

Richard Flint: By that time were you the senior member of the aerial crew?

[00:36:00]

Mary Jane M.: No, I was close to Toni Concello because she was very nice and we seemed to be good friends and I worked the flying act a little, so we became close friends. So she just figured, I guess, that I would be able to help her. So all summer I taught the different girls the tricks that the new girls joined, or if somebody was having difficulty I made sure that the webs were all filled each show. Things like that.

Richard Flint: [00:36:30] There's been a book written that's regarded as perhaps one of the outstanding, real classic. It's "I Love You Honey, But the Season's Over".

Mary Jane M.: My girlfriend wrote that, Connie Clausen.

Richard Flint: I was just going to ask-

Mary Jane M.: It's being reissued in paperback very soon.

Richard Flint: Was all of that true or not? It seems so mystical.

Mary Jane M.: Yes, yes. I'm Mary Louise in the book, and it's true. Every bit of it's true. She wrote a true book, that's all the way it was when I was on the show. I've read it over and I've enjoyed it more reading it lately, it seems. I don't know, it brings back so many memories.

[00:37:00]

Richard Flint: Did you see the book before it came out?

Mary Jane M.: Yes, she was here and I helped her some on it. We sat and talked trying to refresh our memories of things that happened, you know, 'cause she had only been on the circus two years. So she sort of, she had a marvelous time while she was there, and it'll say so in the book. But she had forgotten some things, so we renewed our memories about it at the time. But it's true, every bit of it.

[00:37:30]

Richard Flint: Were the Cristianis quite a clan as it says?

Mary Jane M.: Yes, yes. I knew them when they first came over, and Pete at that time was just a little boy of like, when I first met him say 13, 14. And now he's of course the director of Circus Circus in Las Vegas, and I saw him last summer for this first time in, I'd say, 20 years. And he was standing there and he looked at me and I looked at him and I said, "Oh my gosh, Pete," I said, "what are you doing here?" And he teased me, he said, "Well, I'm on props." I said, "Oh really? I didn't know the difference." And then [Taska 00:37:59] was there and she told me that he was the performance director now. And I knew him when he was just a kid, but it was a great family, the Cristianis.

[00:38:00]

Richard Flint: You mentioned the Wallandas who you knew quite well. Are there any other people that you worked with that you can recall outstanding [crosstalk 00:38:18]

Mary Jane M.: Yeah, well of course Captain Hayer. I knew him when his son was just a little boy, and his daughter on the circus. And [inaudible 00:38:26] when their son was on the show, and now he's a professor at New College here, and I saw him the other day. [00:38:30] He was always gonna marry me when he was a little boy. [inaudible 00:38:38], and a lot of different names, you know. I can't think right off hand, but there were so many different performers on the circus. And some of course were there a long time the way I was.

Richard Flint: What was a child's life on the circus like?

Mary Jane M.: Very good. They were spoiled and it was real good, really. They'd [inaudible 00:38:57] the lot and then the working men would spoil them, you know, bring them things and when it was hot weather they'd sit in a bucket and splash around the water, and they'd go to cookhouse and eat. They had a good life. [00:39:00]

Richard Flint: How many children were on the show, generally?

Mary Jane M.: Probably 20, something like that.

Richard Flint: What about their schooling, how was that?

Mary Jane M.: Well, they were the little ones then. Once school started, then they stayed in Sarasota somewhere to go to school until the summer started. See, they would join in June and stay with the circus until September. Then they'd go back to Sarasota and stay with, well Mama Johns has several that stayed with her while school was on. Of course, we were through in November then, then they'd go with their parents and stay with their parents until the show left in April. So it wasn't like it is now. [00:39:30]

Richard Flint: You mentioned earlier the various games and special dinners and so on, were there ever any social organizations on shows?

[00:40:00]

Mary Jane M.: Oh, there were a few clubs formed, but not too much. Some of the girls would get together, you know, or something like that, but there were a few ... One winter we had a girl's club here, and we would get together and meet.

Richard Flint: But it was generally quite informal.

Mary Jane M.: Yeah, that's right.

Richard Flint: Can you explain why you're so enchanted with the circus? Some people, you know, are glad that they're away from the mud and the rain and the-

[00:40:30]

Mary Jane M.: I don't know, maybe it's an adventurous spirit in me or something. I love the traveling and I love the train. I don't know, I like the way of the circus. Everybody was friendly and it was like one big family.

Richard Flint: Did you like it as much even when you were on the show?

Mary Jane M.: Well, yeah, that's when I liked it. I wouldn't go back now the way it is, I mean it's not the circus at all. I think that's why I enjoy Show Folks club, because you go out and you see a lot of your old friends that, at least you see them out there like
[00:41:00] Captain Hayer and Tamara, Ellie and the Wallendas and Charlie Boris. They were all in the circus when I was there, and Dolly Copeland and her husband. You get to see all these people that you knew at that time.

Richard Flint: One person I was going to ask you about is [inaudible 00:41:16].

Mary Jane M.: Mm-hmm (affirmative), he was a great man on the show, real great. He and his wife.

Richard Flint: Any particular incidents that you can recall?

Mary Jane M.: Well, he was a fiery old thing. Boy, he could cuss. I used to get so scared when I first
[00:41:30] heard him, I was just such a 1st of May, and I'd here him come out there and he would tell those girls off and those guys. Dapper little thing with his little trim mustache, you know. And he'd get out there and, "Get in there!" You know, if you were late or something. But, he was a terrific, colorful figure. He really was. But real nice to everybody. He put on a big front, you know, with the cussing and all that, but he was basically a real nice person.

[00:42:00]

Richard Flint: We had talked a bit about Pat Valdo. What was his job specifically during the season?

Mary Jane M.: Well, he had to see that the performance went on, that the performers were there, the girls were there. If someone was missing, he had to replace them. And he gave out the paychecks when it was payday, and he just generally ran the personnel department. So, Bob Dover of course now does it, and he was Pat's assistant. But
[00:42:30] Pat Valdo was just the guy you went to if you were sick, you'd say, "Well, I can't work today," or if you had a problem about the train or something like that, you went to Pat Valdo. He got all the beaks on all the performers, temperamental ones and other ones.

Richard Flint: I was just curious as to salaries and pay and money and so on-

Mary Jane M.: Well when I joined the show, this was in 1941, my salary was \$25 a week, which
[00:43:00] meant I got \$24.33 I think it was with the tax. I was so happy, and that year I saved so much money Pat Valdo went around telling everybody how much money I'd saved. I didn't buy myself a thing. My sister saw me at the end of the year and she had a fit, I hadn't bought myself anything new. So we got to Miami I bought myself a new dress and a new suit. But that was big money, and then of course the wages went up, and then you got extra if you were in extra acts, you'd get \$10 or \$15 a week extra for being in the ladder act, or you'd get \$25 a week extra for being in an

[00:43:30] aerial act. And so your pay could increase that way.

[00:44:00] But then I think the girls and I would get something like \$50 or \$60 a week. Of course, your expenses out of that, your cookhouse, you'd have to pay your milkman so much a week, and you tip your waiter, and then you tipped your porters on the train for changing linen, and then you always had a bill of night lunches. And then you gave 50 cents for your chair to be [inaudible 00:43:55], a quarter for your bucket, so there were some expenses that you had to pay every week.

Richard Flint: Was there quite a system of tipping and so on?

Mary Jane M.: Oh yes. Every week you tipped the water boy and you tipped the chair boy and you tipped the-

Richard Flint: What sort of tips were given?

[00:44:30] Mary Jane M.: A quarter, usually. At that time I think it was a quarter a week for your chair, and I think it was 50 cents or a quarter for milk at the cookhouse, plus your milk. I don't know, I've forgotten, really. I mean, it was a quarter or 50 cents. At that time that was a lot, because your salary wasn't that big. And then at the end of the year you usually gave the mailman a gift, or you gave your porters a gift. Whether it was in cash money or a tangible gift, either one.

Richard Flint: Can you think of anything that I might have left out?

[00:45:00] Mary Jane M.: No, except that when I think back of the hardships, how really hard it was. You got two buckets of water, everyday, every girl. And of course at the waterway, if you came by in between shows, that was great. You got your water buckets. Otherwise you didn't. You did your laundry, you took your bath, you washed your hair, you did everything in two buckets of water.

Richard Flint: How did you do it?

[00:45:30] Mary Jane M.: It was amazing. We were the cleanest people on the circus, too. Well, for instance you dumped part of your bucket out in another one, make it heaping full, and you use half a bucket to wash your clothes in. And you'd wring them out and dump that out, and then you'd put enough in to rinse. And you didn't wash your hair and do your laundry usually on the same day, or if you did you used your hair wash water for your laundry water. You had to kind of ration it out, but everyone took a bath every single show. You never missed. And it got to be, you're in a dressing room with a bunch of girls, and they know if you haven't taken a bath. And you just do, every girl took a bath everyday.

Richard Flint: How long did it take you to learn to take a bath out of a bucket?

Mary Jane M.: Not long. You're kind of shy at first, some girls will be very shy. They're standing there in the nude taking a bucket in front of 40 other girls or so, and they get kind

[00:46:00] of, especially some of the foreign girls. They'd hide behind their trunks and try to wash so that no one would see them. But in a few weeks they get used to it and you just take a bath, and that's it.

Richard Flint: Are there any other girls that were on the show that you particularly remember well, or incidents that they were involved in?

Mary Jane M.: Well, like I said Dolly Copeland joined just a year before I did, so we were together all through the 14 years. And I sat with Margie Lawson in the dressing room for many years, and Rose Alexander and Marian Seafert and, oh, there were a lot of them. Theo Marlow and her daughter Sally. So there were a lot of girls that you get to know year after year, and I still keep in contact with them.

[00:46:30]

Richard Flint: Any incidents along the way? You had mentioned the two disasters, but any activities that you particularly enjoyed?

Mary Jane M.: Well, some weddings. Girls would have weddings, and then-

Richard Flint: On the show?

Mary Jane M.: Yeah. One big wedding, we went to a church in Saint Louis, and [inaudible 00:46:58] had a big church wedding for her. And then some girls would get married, just come to the lot and we'd have a party for them. You know, things like that you remember. One of them would leave to have a baby and of course come back, and we'd all fuss over the baby. You know, things like that you remember.

[00:47:00]

Richard Flint: Well, that's about it on the tape, so. Well thank you, it's been most interesting. I've learned a bit.