

CIRCUS WORLD MUSEUM LIBRARY PROJECT

SUBJECT: ROBERT STEELE, SR.

INTERVIEWER: DAN DRAPER

TRANSCRIBER: Evelyn Riker

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: GREAT CIRCUS PARADE GROUNDS, MILWAUKEE, WI

DRAPER: Mr. Steele, would you care to give us a little bit of an outline of your career with the circus and with animals and animal training and presentation, and so on, then I'll ask some questions as we go along to try and amplify it.

STEELE: I would be very happy to, yes. I was born in Dover, Ohio in 1913 and by the time I was fourteen I was an expert horseman. I rode the Lexington Sweetheart, the highest paid three-gaited saddle horse in the International Horse Show at that time- and won. Then I went on to become a world champion trick rider for eight years. My father was an expert horseman and he built that all into me.

DRAPER: And what was his name?

STEELE: Well, to me it was Dad, he was my hero, believe me he was. His name was Clem. I started traveling from the time I was sixteen years old, the first thing I can remember is old Jack King's Rodeo, I made side money at night going over there after the horse shows were over.

DRAPER: I've heard of that rodeo, but I've never heard much about it. I'd like to hear a little about it.

STEELE: Well, he carried about 150 head of stock and he was a rough old boy, but. . . .

DRAPER: Where was he from? Was he from Ohio?

STEELE: I don't know where his home base was, but he played most of the Ohio and Indiana fairs. But, way back I was on the 101 Ranch when I was trick riding; and on the Christy show I worked wild animals and elephants.

DRAPER: Did you know Ted Elderd over there on the 101 Ranch - "Suicide Ted?" He did the hurdle over the automobile, and so on.

STEELE: Yes I did. Well, we sold a lot of good pulling horses, because that was our business, buying and selling work horses; my father's business. And we sold a lot of good ones to Zack Miller over there. I was a kind of assistant around there for a long time because I knew pulling horses at a young age. From there on, I don't know, just all kinds of circuses such as the Hunt Bros., the Russell Bros., Sells-Floto, and all the way up and down the line.

DRAPER: Did you get to know Phil and Stella Wirth at all over on Hunt? Stella played the organ, I believe, at that time, and she was the sister of May.

STEELE: Yes I did. Well, there's so many things sometimes that would fill volumes, but when you look back some of them were very tearful and some of them were so hilarious, you wouldn't have missed the

chance of being there for anything in the world. From then on, I wanted all the headaches, so I got my own show.

DRAPER: What did you call that?

STEELE: It was Steele's Frontier Days. Then I had Steele's Cavalcade of Stars, Steele's White Horse Troupe, and I had four units running on fairs. We had 35 to 47 fairs a years, and we traveled mostly in Canada; had the B circuit in Canada for seven years.

DRAPER: And you'd be performing in front of grandstands?

STEELE: Yes, we used to supply the grandstand attraction. We carried about 50 horses and 50 people on each unit.

DRAPER: So you had pick up horses where you would ride over the side, or was it more rodeo?

STEELE: We had trick riding. I used to go around the belly and the somersets and the headstands, all this thing, you know. Just kind of like the bareback rider only much different. . . .

DRAPER: Oh yes, very fast.

STEELE: Straightaway, as hard as the horse could run. But on our shows we even had chariot races, about seven chariots all together, and we had burning covered wagon races.

DRAPER: So you had cowgirl riders also?

STEELE: Oh yes, we carried about 50 people on each of our units, and in Canada for several years I traveled by rail, which was excellent. We

loved those Canadian people very much. But the best part of the fair business is through the agricultural country - North Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio - and that's where we had the biggest part of our fairs. Presently I run the Southern Louisiana State Fair in New Orleans.

DRAPER: And what does that consist of?

STEELE: It's a hugh fair.

DRAPER: Industrial or agricultural?

STEELE: Mostly industrial, not so much agricultural because we have to put it all under tent, it's state property. We have 150 acres there.

DRAPER: Where do you meet, along the river?

STEELE: We're right at the lakefront arena next to Ponchatrain Lake.

DRAPER: Okay, I know where that is.

STEELE: And we were lucky enough to get the Mighty Thomas Carnival, which has won the national award for five years in a row. They come in with 100 semi trucks and trailers, 50 major rides. But I arrange my dates so that it's the end of their state fair season before they go back to Austin, Texas. I also book some other dates for them and, of course, I do some other booking.

DRAPER: When does that fair take place?

STEELE: October 27 to November 5 this year.

DRAPER: It's in the fall, then?

STEELE: Yes, we're trying to build up another one to follow that on their way home to Austin; it looks like it will work out all right. So I keep my office down there now, and I stay down there most of the time. Anything you'd like to ask me on that?

DRAPER: Yes, I would. On this trick riding that they did, they could stand up in a saddle and ride in a straight line, (Steele: Absolutely.) but it's pretty hard to ride bareback on a horse in a straight line because you need that centrifugal force. You never saw anyone do that, did you? Has it ever been done?

STEELE: The Cossacks ride a little different, they're very, very good.

DRAPER: But they do have a saddle. I mean standing bareback on a horse and running in a straight direction is well nigh impossible.

STEELE: Well, I used to do that with our work horses coming in from the pasture. I thought it was a lot of fun.

DRAPER: But you had reins then?

STEELE: No, I just grabbed the mane and stood up. But I also went for the trick riding; I never would have been a bareback rider. I'd go under the neck and under the belly, headstand in the saddle.....

DRAPER: Actually going under the belly, how do you keep from getting hit by their hooves?

STEELE: Well, if you feel the back of my head you'll see these big

bumps on here, the stifle joint would keep beating you there sometimes until you got a heavy callus on there.

DRAPER: They got you once in a while.

STEELE: It's the tempo of the horse.

DRAPER: Is it possible that you have to get in the right rhythm and know the exact time to do it?

STEELE: The exact rhythm and exact tempo of the horse, because of the timing of the stifle joint coming ahead, instead of back on the right side, that's where you'd get hit.

DRAPER: You've got to go through there. . . .

STEELE: It has to be just at the exact second that you have to swing under.

DRAPER: And the head is the thing that is the most important to protect.

STEELE: The back of your head is where you always got hit by the stifle joint coming up.

DRAPER: That would be a terrible thing to get knocked out.

STEELE: You can't take any horse for it, I had a horse that was. . . .

DRAPER: How do you train a horse like that?

STEELE: Well, you have to pick many many and test their strides to get the long stride of the horse. I had Chief, a big 1200 pound Arabian that was just perfect for it, he just had the perfect stride for it, and he was

powerful enough he wouldn't weave, he stayed in a straight line, and your weight wouldn't toss him off line. I think there's only one other person that started following me after eight years, he became very good at it, too.

DRAPER: Well then "Suicide Ted" Elderd, I don't know if he ever did that or not, but I know he was famous for the leaps over horses, broad leaps - vaulting and this type of thing.

STEELE: Vaultese, we called it. Going over the horse without touching their back.

DRAPER: Did you ever do any fire jumps or anything like that?

STEELE: No. That looks great, but it's not very sensational.

DRAPER: In your western acts, did you ever have Indians with you, or not?

STEELE: On my show I carried about 22 Indians out of Ponca City, Oklahoma. Of course on the show grounds right beside the stage I always had about six or eight teepees set up to give the atmosphere, and with the burning chuck wagons and the wild west stuff. . . .

DRAPER: That's what I was going to ask you - you'd burn up the canvas on top. I understand that on some of those covered wagons that were built for the 101 Ranch, they had a pin on the front that they could pull and the running gear would pull out and then the wagon would flip very spectacularly. I think we have one like that at the Museum; in fact it

it may be the one that's on the parade.

STEELE: Yakka Makka Nutt was a very good friend of mine and he, as he got older he specialized - he was a world's champion bronc rider - and he went to Hollywood and started specializing in these special events where the wagons would turn over and somersault over cliffs; and he became a specialist in it. Yes, there's quite an art in that, to do it without hurting the horses or the people.

DRAPER: The timing in that must be something.

STEELE: Split second.

DRAPER: Now, these so-called Cossack Riders, and you get various ones and I know some of them are genuine Russians, but a lot of these names sound very Russian but were they all really Cossacks?

STEELE: Yes, they come from the Steppe country. They're very rugged people and they are usually slim or else small people. They're not big, husky people at all, but they're very rugged people. Their background was herding cattle.

DRAPER: Now their horses that they would bring with them would be - would there be any Arabian strain there, do you think?

STEELE: Not too much. It's just basic like our cow pony was. There have a similar strain over there and, again, the fittest survive; in order to survive they were very tough horses. Sometimes they don't look so beautiful, but they're very, very good horses.

DRAPER: Now an Arabian horse does have considerable stamina, does it not?

STEELE: As a basic rule, but like individual people, there are certain characteristics that are different than the others.

DRAPER: They're sort of a short connected horse, they're not too long.

STEELE: Very definitely. And they have one shorter vertebra in their back, too, you see.

DRAPER: That's what I understand. You had a story you'd like to tell me - what is it?

STEELE: Well, my father was really my hero; he was my idol, because he always made me feel ten feet tall, even when I was a boy. When I was a boy about fourteen, he was training me how to train pulling horses and these horses for circuses because they'd have to have a level head and always get down and pull together, and he taught me all these little tricks along the line. So when I'm getting about nineteen to come back home and he said he had these four beautiful dapple greys that weigh about 1,500 apiece and I want to sell them to Zack Miller when he comes into town here. In those days horses were selling for about \$75 apiece, but he wanted \$300 a team, that's twice as much; but they were extra pullers. So, as they happened to pull on the fairgrounds at Dover, Ohio, the rear end of the canvas wagon was down to the axle and he had about

twenty horses on it, and they were getting no place, and he come up to Zack and said he wanted to sell him those four dapple greys over there. Zach said, "Farmer, I haven't got time, see that wagon sitting out there?" My dad asked him, "What's your problem?" Zack said, "Can't you see it's stuck?" My dad said, "That's no problem. I tell you I want to sell you those horses for \$300 a team, and if my son can't take those four horses and pull that wagon out, I'll give you the horses." He said, "You're crazy." Dad said, "I know it." So, I had already stepped off the ground and I knew where the ground was solid, so he unhooked all his horses and I said, "I want everybody back 300 feet, get out of here." I hooked them on the end of the tongue and turned it crossway - it was so simple - and I screwed it out. I pulled the front end out first, with my four horses on the tongue, and then I got them to running - I went around in a screw, and I pulled it right out. It turned the front end crossways and you just pull your front end out first; and the back end had mud piled up on it three feet deep. So, as you got the front end loose and the horses got on solid ground, they just jerked the rear end out, see?

DRAPER: I've seen them sometimes, with trucks, snake it where they would have the truck stuck straight ahead, where they would hook onto the truck with a tractor and they would pull the cab this way, that would inch it ahead a little bit, then they would pull the thing clear around the other way and inch it a little more. That's awfully hard on a truck to

do that, but that's what they call "snaking," but that's not what you were doing.

STEELE: Just turn the wagon completely right angle crossways and jerk the front end out of it.

DRAPER: I'll bet they were surprised.

STEELE: Oh, they were, they were tickled to death. He went over to the wagon and said, "All right, I'm going to fix you up on this, but I'm going to get back at you, too, for doing this." In those days, those dollar bills were about four times as big as today and he paid my father off in 600 one dollar bills, so he had it sticking out of his shirt like a bushel basket, you know. My dad then said, "From now on I want my son to assist around here and help your boss out whenever he can. He's trick riding in the show, you know." So I felt very honored by that.

DRAPER: You were about 19 or 20 then?

STEELE: I guess I was between 18-19, along in there.

DRAPER: It was quite an experience for you to do this.

STEELE: It was, but I had my biggest experience on the Christy show; I had a little bit of everything. I could do about anything; I guess not the best at any single thing, but a little bit of everything.

DRAPER: You knew George Washington Christy? What kind of a fellow was he, was he pretty fair or was he tough?

STEELE: Well, he was a tough man because, you must remember, this

was the 20's when everybody was starving to death.

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DRAPER: The show was never physically large, but I understand it always gave a very big importance . . .

STEELE: It was such a variety. We had so many animals; we had so many horses and ponies and everything.

DRAPER: And Terrell Jacobs, I guess he was on Lee Brothers, the smaller show of the two, remember he had a Lee Brothers.

STEELE: Harry James was there at the time and I used to pick him up by the seat of his pants and put him on a horse to go to the trains.

DRAPER: Yes, Everett James was his father, the band leader.

STEELE: And he'd stand on that ring curb as a little boy and do a solo before the show.

DRAPER: Well you know there is a march that was composed, I can't think of the name of it at the moment, that was dedicated to Harry James when he was quite young; so it shows how good a player he was. He must have been a tremendous player. I met him later in life.

STEELE: Marvelous. Well, my boy Bucky Steele., when he was about eight years old he was handling my big elephants. He just grew up loving them and he is fantastic. I don't care how bad the elephant is, he has a way to get along with them, you know.

DRAPER: What about elephants now, are they, in general, more intelligent, do you think; or more tractable in training? They're different

from a horse.

STEELE: Well, they're the most mysterious animal in the world, but I love them very much because they've got a personality and they can think; like other animals can't. We've experienced some tests in that.

DRAPER: I know monkeys can think. I saw a monkey one time tied up along a tent row and the rope was tangled around. A dog would have just kept tangling it in and gotten it all mixed up; but that monkey sat down and thought about it and he went around in a way that he could untangle himself.

STEELE: My son's got one of the biggest males I guess in the country today - Booky. He's a giant, up there about 11,000 pounds, about 10-1/2 feet. Of course we can't take him on the road any more, he's just too big, he'd turn trucks over. But I've seen that elephant go up to our electric fence - he goes down to the lake and picks up a chunk of wood, like an old fence post, brings it up, sets it down, and he would set that post down beside the electric fence then push it over to break the wire so he could step out. He wouldn't touch the wire. Another one, Lulu, she liked to have a spare tire to play with, she'd play with this thing, drag it around with her foot and when he'd stop at the truck stops and open the door to feed her, she'd lay it out on the ground, she didn't want the others to have it. When my son come to close the doors to go, she'd bang the doors open so she'd reach down to pick up her tire - she didn't forget it. One day it was

getting cold, he came from the lake, he came up the hill to go into the barn and Shang, she's a mischevious thing, she grabbed her tire and throwed it and it rolled all the way down into the lake. Fine, we put them in the barn for five days, it was cold; so it warmed up again and we opened the door, let them back out to go play in the lake and another animal would have forgotten that, but not Lulu, she went down and hunted all through that lake, four feet deep, until she found her tire. She remembered that tire was in the lake. Now that is thinking, that is remembering. A horse wouldn't do that, a monkey or anything else.

DRAPER: That's right. The story was told, I think on the Floto Show or it may have been Barnes, this elephant was, of course, chained in the menagerie to a stake and there was hay left in the menagerie and every morning this hay would be gone. All the elephants were there, they couldn't get near it because they were tied, so they watched one night and this darned elephant would pull his stake up, go over and get the hay, come back and stick the blamed stake back into the hole again.

STEELE: Big Babe used to do that all the time.

DRAPER: Just to think that thing through, and just fool everybody; they didn't know how she was doing this, you know.

STEELE: Years ago I bought Big Babe off the Christy show for \$500 when they closed up, and took her over to Sam Dill. Sam Dill was a great operator and I wanted to be around him. He was head of the Circus

Corporation of America. . . .

DRAPER: Yes, I knew he was. He had the Sam B. Dill show for a while and then that became Tom Mix.

STEELE: Well, I was there the first time with the first typewriter, in the first hotel room when we started hammering that thing out, and I went with him all the way. Then, you see he was quite a smart man, everybody else had gone broke at the time and this was hard times, so he puts up hugh signs - 25 cents, and they said he was crazy, that he couldn't operate on that. He said, "Look, if they've got a quarter they're going to come and spend whatever they've got, but if you put up '\$1.00' and they don't have the dollar they're not going to come and you're not going to get any part of it." So, when they come, if they spent their quarter, whatever they had left they cleaned out the concession and the dime sideshow and ten cents for my wild west show; and all of this. The man was very, very successful.

DRAPER: Now this became the Tom Mix Circus. Did you know Tom?

STEELE: Oh yes, I was there and was almost Assistant Manager. When Tom come over from the Floto Show, he said he wanted 50% after the expenses, and they said that was a hell of a steep bargain. Sam said, "Oh no, look - you see that line of kids out there, you go out and ask them how many know George Washington, and very few will, but if you ask everyone of them if they know Tom Mix, and they all will." And he was right - this

was fantastic, but when it went over into the management of Tom Mix, Sam got pretty sick then, you know he died along about ????, but when he turned over that I'm afraid that. . . .you see, Tom Mix was not a manager and he got all his cronies from Hollywood to sit around on their big chairs at a big salary, and that put the thing broke. It wasn't taken care of, he didn't tie up the loose ends, he didn't have the right you are only as good as the people around you.

DRAPER: You're exactly right; and who you can trust.

STEELE: As a producer, you're only as good as the people around you, and he didn't look into that; he didn't know how to do that. I got away from that end of it right away, when I seen how it was going.

DRAPER: There was one thing in that day and age, there were people like Clyde Beatty and Tom Mix that were known by everybody. We don't have any heroes like that any more. I guess the heroes are in other areas, I don't know, but these tied in with the circus and it made people more aware of the circus, and of its coming and bringing these heroes to the towns.

STEELE: On the Sam Dill Show, he had a contract with General Motors and with Goodyear and Firestone tires, and when a motor went bad they wouldn't repair it, they pulled it out and sent it back to the factory. This was the first major motorized show there was, and we showed 38 weeks. We always give two shows, and usually on the weekend we give

three, and in Flint, Michigan we give five to 21,000 people. But parade every day and the parade had to be on the street at exactly 12 o'clock. I don't care how the storm was or how deep the mud was, this was the contract. And my picture was on the inside front cover of the BILLBOARD for two years, showing me unloading the elephant truck I was driving at the time.

DRAPER: Well, you had a responsibility there and you had to be there.

STEELE: That's right, 'cause I had the wild west show there and I had the menagerie, and was parade marshall and what have you. But to think 38 weeks without a day off, it was a real tough grind.

DRAPER: It's really hard on you; one day just merged into another, I guess.

STEELE: The point was, everybody was starving to death, and team acts would come over for \$25 and \$30 a week. The boys that we had out of the prison in West Baden, Indiana, they got \$2 a week in dukie books, a shirt this week and a pair of pants next week, and shoes the next week, and that was it. But of all of those that we had, they all turned out to be very fine professional show people the rest of their lives, see. Black Boy, 101, Oklahoma, all of them, they just become traditional and lived the rest of their life on there.

DRAPER: That's exactly right, and they were very loyal to the management to make it go.

STEELE: Ethel Jennier came on there when she was about 16, and it wasn't "Jennier" then, it was ??????? and.

DRAPER: What was she doing then? Was she doing her aerial act then?

STEELE: No, she couldn't do anything. I just put her on horses to work my high school horses; I had 23 girls then. Then Walter Jennier got ahold of her and started training her for her aerial act. Then the next year he married her and then. and she just died last year, you know.

DRAPER: She has a daughter performing now, or was.

STEELE: She's very good, she's excellent, too. She just grew up around me and was like a sister to me.

DRAPER: Well, Mr. Steele, I certainly have appreciated very, very much these reminiscences that you have given us, and it's all just part of a wonderful history that just has to be preserved. Again, thank you very much and we're awfully glad that you're here this year with us.

STEELE: You're quite welcome.