

CWM Audio 15

Roger Zoppe Interview, May 12, 2016

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Speaker 1: It is May 12th, 2016. The Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center. This is an interview with Roger Zoppe and Scott O'Donnell is conducting the interview.

Scott O'Donnell: Roger, a pleasure to have you here for sure.

Roger Zoppe: Nice seeing you again, Scott.

Scott O'Donnell: Pleasure to see you. I'm gonna dial back the hands of time and ask you to recall and to tell us a little bit about yourself or as much as you want to tell us about yourself and your family. Because I know that you have many generations of circus history in your background. So, to tell future generations about yourself and how you got to where we are here today. That's what we're gonna cover here on the journey. So with that, as far back as you can recall.

[00:00:30]

Roger Zoppe: Well, I know my family came over in 1936. And went to work with the Cole Brothers Circus.

[00:01:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah. And when you say they came over, where did they come over from?

Roger Zoppe: Italy.

Scott O'Donnell: Italy, okay.

Roger Zoppe: And the family ended up wintering in Rochester, Indiana. And bought a place there, eventually. And I lived there. My dad and mom got married in 1945. They were on the Gil Gray Show. And I was born in the travels, of course, born in McCook, Nebraska.

[00:01:30]

Scott O'Donnell: What's the population of McCook, Nebraska? I've never heard of McCook, Nebraska.

Roger Zoppe: Actually, I'm not sure.

Scott O'Donnell: Have you ever been back?

Roger Zoppe: No. I've been through it, actually.

Scott O'Donnell: Oh, good.

[00:02:00]

Roger Zoppe: Driving, working rodeos and stuff. Of course, I don't remember it. I remember my mom talking about it must have been like a, because it was Sister Pascalla that delivered me. And I don't know where that would be or what. But anyhow, it all worked out.

Scott O'Donnell: Well, she did a good job. That's a good thing.

Roger Zoppe: Well, I made it.

Scott O'Donnell: Now, your family came to the Cole Brothers Circus. What was the act that your family was known for?

[00:02:30]

Roger Zoppe: It was a bareback riding act.

Scott O'Donnell: Bareback riding act.

Roger Zoppe: And also unsupported ladder act. My mom, she used worked on quite a few shows. I can't remember the name of the show, but I remember her talking about Tiger Bill, that was like a Wild West thing. You'd have to look up who Tiger Bill was.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, chances are, in this building, we could find out who Tiger Bill is.

[00:03:00]

Roger Zoppe: I bet you can. I'm sure she mentioned the name of the show or something, but I can't remember it. Anyway, at the age of five, I started in the riding act, too with my uncle. He was the comedian in the act. And that's how I started, was doing comedy with my uncle. And we used to do the old, pick up the coat and hat bit, you know. And butt jump and just silly stuff at first.

[00:03:30]

And my uncle also did the head spin. So I learnt the head spin, also.

Scott O'Donnell: How many people in the act, Roger?

Roger Zoppe: There was seven.

Scott O'Donnell: And how many horses?

Roger Zoppe: We had about seven horses, too, I guess. We had a lot a horses.

Scott O'Donnell: Now, was there a particular breed of horse that's best for ...

Roger Zoppe: Belgian.

Scott O'Donnell: Belgian?

[00:04:00]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, we liked Belgians the best because Percherons, they're fannies drop off too much and you get too far back, you slide off.

Scott O'Donnell: See? Very interesting.

Roger Zoppe: Belgians are straight backed.

Scott O'Donnell: Got a big rump. Very good.

Roger Zoppe: Anyway, after working on Gil Gray, we continued on to Howard, [inaudible 00:04:28] Chuck and Gracie Macintosh. Well, you kinda name it, we were ...
[00:04:30]

Scott O'Donnell: And all the while, just performing in the bareback riding act, or did you learn unsupported ladder as well?

Roger Zoppe: Actually, I never learned the unsupported. I just is kind of a dummy. My brother and I, we used to dress in tuxedos and we'd just joke around because we could style it a ladder, but we couldn't do nothing on them. One time, my dad was late for the ladder act. And me and Dennis are out there, and we're styling, we're going, "Where's dad?" He was talking to some of the girls or something.
[00:05:00]

And so my brother picks up the ladder and I'm on one side and he's on the other. And he throws the ladder to me and I catch it and style and throw it back to him. And he catches it and styles. We were just bull shitting, though. And then we used to just dance around in there like we were doing something and style at my dad as he went up and down the ladder.
[00:05:30]

We didn't like it very much, my brother and I. It was like a bullshit act, you know. At least in the riding act, you did something physical. You know, doing somersaults and tumbling and things like that.

[00:06:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Very acrobatic in bareback riding act. And I believe that you have a particular trick that you were synonymous with.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. I did the passing leap with my brother. Which was I'd be on the front horse. There was two horses, one behind the other, running around the ring. And I'd jump off the front horse into the trampolette and do a forward somersault to the rear horse. And my brother'd jump across to the first horse. And we'd pass. After my brother and I separated because I had bought a chimp and trained the chimp to be in the act, my brother was really pissed off. Because it took my brother and I two years to get that passing leap thing down. And the chimp learned it in a week. And it went on from there. And the chimp was my buddy. And she was pretty terrific. Little jealous of me, but ... Sign language, "No good, Dallas."

[00:06:30]

[00:07:00]

Scott O'Donnell: You can say it. You can talk.

Speaker 4: The double forward.

Scott O'Donnell: The double forward. I think is what she's trying to ... I'm gonna play charades and say she's trying to tell you, "Don't forget to talk about the double forward."

[00:07:30]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, well that's one, actually I did the double forward, practiced it in our practice barn in Texas. And I did the double forward, full twisting forward-

Speaker 4: Who helped you with that?

Roger Zoppe: I did a double forward. But it was in a mechanic. I never did take the mechanic off. It was too scary. Really, Scott, it was. You had to jump off the horse and your timing had to be pretty darn perfect. About 12 feet into the trampolette. And you only had this big a square to hit. And then you had to turn over twice and catch the horse and hope he kept going the same rhythm.

[00:08:00]

I'd catch him about 50% is all. But sometimes, if you missed, you were like a rocket. You know? And that's why I didn't take the mechanic off. But I did do it in shows in

[00:08:30] West Hempstead, Long Island. That [Fleckles 00:08:44] had at the time. But I did it with the mechanic because I thought, "This is a little hairy to do without a mechanic on."

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah. Absolutely.

[00:09:00]

Roger Zoppe: But you always feel like you're cheating, wearing a mechanic. And I did full twisting forwards off it. I used to practice, we'd haul around a big trampoline, which my dad got. It was a great thing because it taught you control. And I used to take one jump, double forward. And do swing time double forwards. Do them in sets of ten. Where I got control, you know? And I'd beat it into my brain, "This is how you turn over twice." And that helped a lot, but after a while, and the sad part was people didn't know the difference.

[00:09:30]

Scott O'Donnell: But you did.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. I did it for myself. I did it for my own pride.

Scott O'Donnell: Sure. Yeah.

[00:10:00]

Roger Zoppe: And I was proud of the fact I did it. I mean, the only people that would appreciate it was another acrobat or another horseback rider, you know? But it was fun learning.

Scott O'Donnell: And how long did you have your bareback riding act?

Roger Zoppe: Gosh, I started at five and what was I, 44 when I quit, when we got the thing to go to Asia.

[00:10:30]

Scott O'Donnell: So let's talk about the thing that took you over to Asia. What is that?

Roger Zoppe: Let me go back a little bit.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, let's go back.

Roger Zoppe: Maybe I'm gonna be too long-

Scott O'Donnell: Because you talked about one chimp. There's other chimps that are gonna enter into our life. But I think that you have a partner in life that we gotta introduce here, too.

Roger Zoppe: Well, I bought, I was interested, I always had this thought about putting a chimp because they're so agile. Putting a chimp in the horse act with me. And doing comedy and stuff with it. So I searched around and found Pam. We worked together somewhere and I seen the chimps. And I went, "Oh, man, I'd like to have one of them." Well, and Pam, too ...

[00:11:00]

Anyhow, I told my dad, "I'm gonna buy me a chimp and put in the act." "Okay." So I drove up to, we had time off somewhere and doing them winter dates up there. And I drove up to Erie, Pennsylvania. And I talked to Pam. And, "Yeah, come up. I got one all sell you." So I went up there and bought a chimp off her. Well, it was four foot of snow up there. In Waterford, they used to live.

[00:11:30]

Scott O'Donnell: That was probably July.

[00:12:00]

Roger Zoppe: They had a riding stable with 50 horses. They had the one chimp, Old Judy. The boys were cleaning out, putting a wheelbarrow full of manure. And putting a manure spreader outside with the four foot of snow. And they got this big chimp, wheelbarrowing the manure out, manure spreader. And it was like, "Wow."

[00:12:30] Anyway, I wind up getting the chimp off Pam. And of course, she made the deal with me, "Well, I'll sell you this chimp on one condition, when you can't handle her

anymore, you give her back to me." "Okay, it's deal." So anyway, after that, we're calling each other all the time. "How's the chimp doing?" And this and that and the other. If I had any problems, I'd call her and ask her, "What shall I do?" And she goes, "This or that. Catch a cold or whatever."

[00:13:00]

Anyway, we got to liking each other. And we wound up getting together. Well, we worked dates together after that. And let's see, we were on the [Castle Show with old Red Hartman 00:13:29]. [inaudible 00:13:31] was there then. A lot a people.

[00:13:30]

Scott O'Donnell: And Pam from Waterford's name is and what's her family?

Roger Zoppe: Pamela Rosaire. Now it's Rosaire-Zoppe.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

Roger Zoppe: We wound up getting married in '77 because Pam says, "I can't afford this calling and flying and all this stuff." She says, because every time one of us would have time off, we'd go visit. It was a back and forth thing. She said, "We either do this, or forget it." I go, "But, I'm too young." I was 28 at the time. No, actually, it was 27. I was 28 when we married.

[00:14:00]

[00:14:30] I said, "I'm too young, hun. Can't we just keep it like it is?" "No." "Okay. Will you marry me then?" Not that it was forced or anything, of course.

Scott O'Donnell: So you came together and you had horses and she had chimps?

Roger Zoppe: Chimps and dogs.

Scott O'Donnell: So what was the family animal count?

[00:15:00]

Roger Zoppe: Oh my god, we had nine horses on the road, 35 dogs, and seven chimps.

Scott O'Donnell: And you had a half hour to yourselves every day, maybe.

Roger Zoppe: You never stopped shoveling. Never a dull moment. I'll tell you what. It was like ... Anyway, three rigs on the road, too. And boy, we were making great money. It was wonderful. But by the time you paid the feed bill and the fuel bills, you were back to point zero. It was like, "I love this, but it's just not paying off."

[00:15:30]

[00:16:00] I finally says, "Pam, we gotta cut down here. We just can't make it with all this." And I was constantly working on rigs. Everything my dad taught me to fix, half mechanical and stuff. I mean, it just got to be too, you know, you never got any rest. You just kept working. So finally, we got rid of the dogs. Matter of fact, gave the dogs to her little brother, Derrick. And he did the dogs for quite a few years.

[00:16:30] After we got rid of dogs, we got down to two rigs, which was much better. Great improvement there. And we kept that on the road for, gosh, I guess we must a been on the road another 20 years or something.

Scott O'Donnell: So you talked a little about horses. Tell us a little bit about chimps. Because not too many people in their lives have the opportunity to spend some time with a chimp. What's that experience like?

[00:17:00]

Roger Zoppe: Well, they're wonderful. But I've also gotten beat up a lot. Toto, her biggest male, when I was there, when we started going together, he hated me. Because he knew I had my eye on Pam. As far as he was concerned, that was his woman. And he was wonderful with her. And if she wasn't around, he was wonderful with me. But it took me five years to put my arm around the chimps, around Pam when they were around. Because they would just [inaudible 00:17:36] and want to tear your head off.

[00:17:30]

Oh, I've had some hairy experiences of old Toto. We used to have a machete in the chimp trailer that I cut up the produce with. He pulled that on me once. Took notches out of the plywood, trying to cut my head off. And instead of the chimp sitting down, I sat down on the wheel well. And I said, "Good boy, Toto. Just put it

down. Be nice." And I said, "Good boy." And thank goodness, he did.

[00:18:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Yes, agreed.

Roger Zoppe: Another time, he grabbed a stick and broke it over my head. That was interesting. And one time, he was beating me up in the chimp trailer and we were working a rodeo and some cowboy goes to Pam, says, "Mam, I think you better go get your husband out of that trailer. Them chimps are beating him up in there."

[00:18:30]

[00:19:00] But the good side is, they're so loving. We've had, gosh, we've raised, I don't know how many of them, sleeping between us til they're old enough. Because when you get them when they're young, they're like a baby. They're just helpless.

Scott O'Donnell: Right. And smart because you told us a little earlier that the chimp learnt the bareback riding act in a week.

Roger Zoppe: Oh, yeah. Just, yeah, they're very quick. And I mean, at first, you gotta get them over the fear of a big, tall animal like that. And once they realize it, [Kenya 00:19:34], I had her broke to a T. She was fabulous. Because she was with me all the time, she'd actually sweep up behind the horses. She'd pick up shit. Or, excuse me, manure. And she knew each horse's name. She knew their place on the picket line. I'd say, "Go snap up Brownie." And she'd snap him up.

[00:19:30]

[00:20:00]

And when they were all on the picket line, I'd say, "All right go get Frosty three flakes of hay." And you know what? That chimp was smart enough to know what a flake was and count off the flakes. And go carry it over and give it to him. "No, put it a little further forward so they don't step on it." Just stupid. But that all comes, Scott, from just perseverance and you just keep drumming it in.

[00:20:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Repetition.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. But they also like it because you're doing it with them. It's like a buddy system. You're working with them. N she did like it. And she was good at it.

[00:21:00] Because our horses were broke. One time in Indianapolis, we worked together on the [Castle 00:21:06] Show with Hannefords. And Hannefords, I don't know if you know that old building in Indianapolis at the fairgrounds where they used to have the carnival in the back. And that was the menagerie with all the animals. The elephants and everything.

[00:21:30] We had our horses on a picket line. Well, the routine was with our horses, you come out and we didn't, like Hannefords had to all have leaders for their horses. I'm sorry, we didn't have any of that. We'd call them. They'd follow you, like elephants or dogs. You know, "All right, guys. Come on." They'd all go. I had a big harness box that I put all the harnesses in. They'd come one by one. They'd stand there and wait.

[00:22:00] The water trough would be right there and you know, after they got done working, they were thirsty. And nobody'd go to that water trough with their harness on because it gets everything wet. So they stand there and I'd call them one by one. I'd unharness them, put it in the harness box. "All right. Go get a drink." And that horse'd go get a drink. And I'd call the next one. Same routine. And after they got a drink, now they could go to their spot on the picket line. And the chimp'd bring them their hay.

[00:22:30] But people ain't willing to put in the time like that anymore.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, that's true.

Roger Zoppe: Or at least, I haven't seen it.

Scott O'Donnell: That's very true.

Roger Zoppe: It's like most good animal trainers I've ever known. They feed their own animals. You ever notice that?

Scott O'Donnell: Yes. I do. I have noticed that.

[00:23:00]

Roger Zoppe: Because you gain that respect. And a relationship.

Scott O'Donnell: Right. Agreed. So you're on the road with chimps and horses. At some point, what ends first? The horses or the chimps in your life?

Roger Zoppe: As it turned out, it was too difficult to take horses to Asia. That was when I stopped the riding act is. And plus, doing all them acrobatics and stuff, Scott, the body only lasts so many years. You keep beating it, beating it, beating it, guess what? After a while, it starts aching.

[00:23:30]

Scott O'Donnell: So where was the last time that you performed your riding act?

Roger Zoppe: Oh, gosh, you know what? That, I'd probably have to ask Pam. I can't recall. Because in my mind, which is a stupid mind, but at the time, I thought, "When we get done with this, we're going over for two years." Well, it wound up being six. But I thought, "When we come back, we'll just crack out the riding act again."

[00:24:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Pick up where we left off.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. Well, you don't do that. If you're not doing that every day, baby, you're done. You stop doing it, you're finished. But I really loved it. That was what I enjoyed doing, even though it was very physical. But I enjoyed it. And after we went to Asia

[00:24:30]

...

Scott O'Donnell: And who did you go to Asia for? What was that opportunity?

Roger Zoppe: Ali was who we first went. And we first went to Taiwan. Then Malaysia.

Scott O'Donnell: And was it a circus or was it theme parks?

[00:25:00]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, it was a circus. Matter of fact, [Eldor 00:25:02] was over there. You know, Eleanor Gaynor's sister? She was over there with a flying act. Marcel Peters had the cats over there. I don't know, I'm getting senile, I think.

[00:25:30]

Scott O'Donnell: You're doing very well ... So you were contracted to do the chimps there, yes?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. And oh, Derrick was over there. He had a doberman act. Pam's brother, Derrick was over there. So we had companionship over there. And Dallas was little.

Scott O'Donnell: And what's that like? If you gotta travel overseas and go to a foreign land with foreign cultures?

[00:26:00]

Roger Zoppe: Oh, it's culture shock, for sure. Let's go drink some snake blood, Scott.

Scott O'Donnell: And did you? Was it good?

Roger Zoppe: No, I didn't. I didn't go for it. But it was amazing, every one of them little Taiwanize towns would have a thing they called snake alley. To us, they're exotic. They're normal over there. All these cobras and all these different snakes that you go, "Whoa." They'd have them all over there. It'd kinda gross you out a little bit.

[00:26:30]

[00:27:00] But, the one place we went to over there, they had a young orangutan, probably about a three or four year old or something. And had it chained up and on a trapeze in this little shop. And Pam goes, "God, look at that beautiful orangutan." At the time, they were like, 60 thousand over here. And we had an interpreter with us. I said, "See how much that orangutan is."

[00:27:30] So we go back and forth between the interpreter. "Oh, you can't afford it." And when you're over there, because their money was called NT. I don't know, anyway, that's what it was. So you carry a calculator because you have, there was so many thousands to an American dollar. And the guy says, "Well, I wouldn't take any less than this much." And I go ... Figuring it out on the calculator. And, \$800. I go, "Pam, wow. That'd be great. The only thing is, we can't get it home because of the laws." The American laws, you couldn't.

[00:28:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Because of [inaudible 00:28:06].

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. You couldn't. Too much paperwork. Anyway, that was one thing. And the other thing was, we first went there because we took Dallas's little dachshund, Red Dog.

Scott O'Donnell: And Dallas is, you just introduced her name. Who was Dallas?

Roger Zoppe: Four or five, I think.

Scott O'Donnell: And who is Dallas?

[00:28:30]

Roger Zoppe: Oh, I'm sorry. Dallas is our daughter.

Scott O'Donnell: Excellent.

Roger Zoppe: She was born in '79.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

Roger Zoppe: Anyway, she wasn't gonna go to Asia without her dog. So that was a big hassle in the paperwork. Well, "Is the dog working there?" Okay, the dog works in the act,

now. I need to get it over there.

Scott O'Donnell: And how do you get to Japan with your chimps? Do you fly? Do you go on a boat?

[00:29:00]

Roger Zoppe: No, fly. We flew. Actually because we came back, Pam had to come back because she wasn't an American citizen yet. And she had a green card. After two years, I think, she had to fly back. And from Johor Bahru, Malaysia, we were supposed to go to Indonesia with this Paul Lee. But things weren't looking real good and we spent like three months laying off there in Johor Bahru. He was still buying the animal food and everything, but things weren't looking good.

[00:29:30]

[00:30:00] And when he wanted to renegotiate going to Indonesia, well, it's funny because our sponsor in Johor Bahru there in Malaysia, they own a dirt bike club. And they go, "Roger, you don't want to go there." I said, "Why?" And we'd all taken a diving, five of us on the show. Oh, Doug Terranova was there, also. And Dinky Patterson. And we'd all taken a diving course. And we all got certified in the South China Sea. Anyway, this Paul Lee says, "Oh, we're going to Bali. That's the diving capital of the world." He's trying to con us into going, right? I mean, you can see the handwriting on the wall. He's, "The only thing is, I gotta cut your money some."

[00:30:30]

[00:31:00] And right away, I'm going ... And these biker guys, the sponsors, they go, "You don't want to go there. We went there and we beat the Indonesians in a race. And we had all our bikes in a container there." Because they shipped them. "And we go to get our bikes after the race the next day. And there's guys with machine guns standing there." "What do you want?" "We come to get our bikes." "What bikes?" So they said, "Okay."

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, got their attention.

[00:31:30] Roger Zoppe: "They're yours." He says, "They'll do the same with your animals and stuff. And maybe you." Well, the rest of the show went. Pam and I said, "No." Matter of fact, Pam was still in the states, her and Dallas because she had to get the green card. I called her and I said, "Honey, stay where you're at. I'm gonna get us home." So I did all the paperwork. I got Donny Johnson's three elephants and my six chimps. It took me three months to get the paperwork done. Went to a place they called the USDA there. It was different, but it's the same-

[00:32:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Principles, right.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. To get your paperwork to depart. Well, I got it all done, finally. And I said, "Just stay where you're at, honey. I'll be home. Meet me in Long Beach." We had to go by ship. And it was a three week journey on ship. Anyhow, lost train of thought, shipping, when you went from Johor Bahru, you had to go to Singapore to get on the ship. Well, there's a causeway and the border there.

[00:32:30]

[00:33:00] The guys says, and I knew all the paperwork was correct, because I made double sure. And I had a shipping agent besides, named [Suhiemi 00:33:00]. Well, [Suhiemi 00:33:02] comes back. "This guy says the paperwork's no good." I said, "Yeah, I bet Paul Lee paid him off. Okay. Ask him how much it'll cost to make the paperwork right." He says, "\$750." I went ... Let's go. "Okay." Just like that.

[00:33:30] And so I went, thank god. But it was a long trip back.

Scott O'Donnell: I can imagine. So, back to America and you're working. Give us an idea, I have to imagine, on some shows, you probably worked with other chimp acts. Who's some people that you might have been in a display with or other animal acts you were in a display with.

[00:34:00]

Roger Zoppe: I think one time we worked with Fossetts, I think. But they had a problem with theirs. We didn't with our guys because they kinda knew. Unless chimps know each other, that's a pretty difficult thing to do.

Scott O'Donnell: Pretty difficult. Agreed.

Roger Zoppe: You know.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah.

Roger Zoppe: You put two chimps that don't know each other and it's an aggressive threat right away. But actually Pam knows more about chimps than I do.
[00:34:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Now, all the shows that you've worked on, do you have a favorite? Was there a favorite show or favorite circus producer? And if so, why?

Roger Zoppe: That's a hard one to answer.

Scott O'Donnell: Because you worked a lot. A lot of circuses and fairs, rodeos, trade shows.

[00:35:00]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. Actually, rodeos is probably the friendliest. I got my PRCA card when I was 16. I got my gold PRCA card now. Just friendly, good folks that help you out any time you need a hand. I mean, show people are that way, too, of course. But rodeo people are a little different than circus people. Oh, after we came back, after I got back from there, we went to Pamela's booking while I was on my way back, of course. And Ring Ling hired us to go to Disneyland in Anaheim.
[00:35:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

[00:36:00]

Roger Zoppe: So that was good.

Scott O'Donnell: Well, that is good. Yeah.

Roger Zoppe: In California.

Scott O'Donnell: Sure. And what was that like, working in Disneyland? Not too many people can say that.

Roger Zoppe: Oh, it was nice. It was funny, Scott, because you have to go through orientation. I grew up, I never went through it. I didn't even know what orientation was. So here's all these young kids from Disneyland, you know. All the Ring Ling people, Espanas and a few acts that they're in the Ring Ling clowns, of course. And everybody's there. And here's this young kid, about 21 or something up at the mike. And he says, "Now, I want everyone to get to know each other." Pam's just laughing. "I want everyone to get to know each other so just stand up and turn to your neighbor and shake hands and introduce yourself."

[00:36:30]

[00:37:00]

We all know each other here, you ding dong. "And each of you stand up and one by one and tell us a little something about yourself. So we'll know who you are." Well, each of them do. "Well, I do flying trapeze." "I do this." My name and when it come to Pam, it was funny because she stands up and says, "Well, everyone knows me. I'm the queen of show business." Typical Pam ...

[00:37:30]

Scott O'Donnell: I can visualize that very well.

Roger Zoppe: All the performers laughed like crazy.

Scott O'Donnell: And where did you perform at Disneyland? Did they have a tent set up?

[00:38:00]

Roger Zoppe: No. It was called Circus Fantasy, was it?

Scott O'Donnell: Circus Fantasy? Yep.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. It was like on a stage. I think it was like one of them show things. And they had the show in there. It was on a stage and the public was down. It was nice, working. And we did a parade every day. The theme was Rio. Had the Rio stuff. And all the women had to wear skimpy wardrobe. And when it come to Pam, she goes, "No, no. I do chimps. I don't shake my tits and ass." She says, "You got it wrong. I'm a chimp act."

[00:38:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Which something you usually don't hear at Disneyland.

[00:39:00]

Roger Zoppe: No, but they had all the young girls. You know, "We're going to Rio." And all that. So I had to dress a chimp in that and I went and done the parade every day. Pam got out of it, of course. After that, Feld liked the act and said, " Would you like to come to Japan after Disneyland?"

[00:39:30]

Scott O'Donnell: And was that Kenneth or Urban?

[00:40:00]

Roger Zoppe: Kenneth. And he was very nice. Anyway, we made a deal to go there in '88. That was a story, because Dr. [Hoak 00:40:04], something got messed up with our pony, Yute. That worked in the chimp act. And that's the blow off. The hind leg, Kenya doing the somersaults off of him and stuff. Anyway, that got messed up and Johnny Harriet was over there with the ponies.

[00:40:30] We couldn't get our pony over there. Pam didn't like that, because that's the blow off. That's the finish. And Feld says, "Well, what are you gonna do?" She says, "Well, get your Dr. Hoak there to take Roger out in a harness and go find a pony that the harness fits." So I go out and we were in Sapporo, Japan. And surprised me, there was a fellow that had about 30 head of horses in Japan. Because that's unusual, you know, he must have been a billionaire over there to be able to have stock like that and enough land to graze them on.

[00:41:00]

[00:41:30] Anyhow, I go out to this farm deal and I start looking. And now, Dr. Hoak, he's gonna pick out what I want for a pony. I know a little something about that. He picks one too big and scrawny and this and that. And I spot a little pony that's just about Yute's size, only he's wide. He looks like a little draft and a paint on top of it, which was, in the PR work, you know ...

Scott O'Donnell: Nice and showy.

[00:42:00]

Roger Zoppe: He was a paint. And I went, "Hm." Never had a halter on him. I put a halter on him. And he wasn't afraid of nothing. He was little stud, four year old stud. So I get a halter on him and get a lead rope on him. I get on his back. He don't move. He don't do nothing. He's not afraid. He's reaching back, trying to bite my feet. And I go, "Well, this is a good son." So I get off him and I jerk on his head. Boom, up on his hind legs. I said, "This is the one."

[00:42:30]

And you can ask Feld, in a day and a half, Pam and I, we stayed up all night and everything. But in a day and a half, we had him broke.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice. Not many can say that.

[00:43:00]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. Johnny Harriet, he says, "Pam, what are you guys doing? You're making me look bad." Because Johnny had actually, he'd volunteered a llama for us to use in the chimp act. Well, guess what? That chimp'll tie that llama's neck in a knot. You can't use a llama, for crying out loud. And he had a little one of them white ponies in his white pony drill.

[00:43:30] Pam says, "Well, can I borrow your little hind leg pony?" He says, "Oh, no. No I couldn't. But I'll let you use the llama." So that's when we went and found the pony. We named him Ring Ling, too.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

Roger Zoppe: And one day, I had a square, stainless steel pen that I had made in Taiwan for our pony. But I had it on the front of the chimp trailer. So it was there. So I had that inside the tent. And one day, the elephants go by. And this little jerk, he gets his head through the, because he's a stud, gets his head through the pen and drags the pen, going after the elephants. He's gonna go breed him an elephant.

[00:44:00] The guys come back and they say, "Hey, you gotta do something with your pony." I said, "Hey, that's not my pony. That's Ring Ling's pony." But of course, I straightened the problem out. Staked the pen down.

[00:44:30]

Scott O'Donnell: And how long were you in Japan for Feld?

Roger Zoppe: Three months. That was the first year of the Gold Show, the gold unit. It was real nice, too.

Scott O'Donnell: Good.

[00:45:00]

Roger Zoppe: And one time over there, Pam got salmonella, got sick. And it hit her coming out of the act. And she faints. And the two big guys that are carrying her out, her feet are dragging. Carrying her back, we had a dressing room where we dressed and undressed the chimps inside. And carry her back there. And Charlie Bowman, who was the ...

Scott O'Donnell: Performers director.

[00:45:30]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, the director. Because she had to go to the hospital, she was that bad. But the chimps, they get very protective. I can, gently, but nobody else can go up to her in a case like that. And I got all the chimps calmed down and Pam kinda come out of it for a little bit. And I said, "Honey, you gotta go to the hospital. Let's get these guys put away and then you go."

[00:46:00] Oh, and Larry Allen Dean was over that year, too, with the cats. Pam and I was his cage boy. I did the door and she run them in. But anyway, see, we all do a little bit of everything, don't we?

Scott O'Donnell: Absolutely. Very much so.

Roger Zoppe: After she was at the hospital and little Charlie, he says, "What we gonna do for the chimps?" I says, "Well ..."

[00:46:30]

Scott O'Donnell: That's a good impersonation, by the way.

Roger Zoppe: "Charlie, I can work three of them." I says, "Three of them I can work if I can just get somebody to hold leashes." And Larry Allen Dean, because we were working with his act, he said, "I'll hold leashes." I says, "All you gotta do is hand me leashes when I ask for who I ask for." I says, "You've known these guys for years, anyway." He says, "Yeah, I'll do it. I'll do it."

[00:47:00]

So I got back to Charlie. I says, "Okay, Charlie. I'm not gonna look sexy and pretty." I says, "But we'll at least have a little chimp act. You know, it won't be the big chimp act. It'll just be a little chimp act and I can still do the pony bit." He goes, "Oh, wonderful." So he goes and tells everybody else, Mike Falls and everybody.

[00:47:30]

So everything's good. We're gonna do a lousy chimp act, but at least it's a chimp act, right? And just before, Larry comes and says, "You know, Roger, I started thinking." He says, "That Kenya, she don't like me very much." I says, "You mean you're checking out on me?" He says, "Yeah." I went, "Okay. Now I gotta tell him that we're not doing it."

[00:48:00]

So I tell Charlie. And Charlie says, "Why you say you gonna do this one minute. And the next minute, you're not gonna do it?" I says, "You know what, Charlie? I'm so dumb. You're an animal guy. And you're big and they respect size, Charlie. You can hold leashes for me. It'll be nothing. They won't even try anything with you." "What you think I am, fucking crazy?" ... He did, you know. And I went, "Okay, I guess we're without a chimp act, then." So we were for about three days. And it was back to normal.

[00:48:30]

Scott O'Donnell: And you come back from Japan and ... With the Shrine dates or fairs?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, oh, we started the fairs, I think, after that.

Scott O'Donnell: Was there any circus dates that you still do at this time?

[00:49:00]

Roger Zoppe: Let's see, what as it, last year, we went. Because now, we're just hauling one chimp on the road, Chance. And we went up for Cindy Migley and did Jacksonville last year. But we're mostly doing like, what I gotta go home now to do is in Miami is a thing for the same producers that did the [inaudible 00:49:24] Michael Jackson. It was a video by the Teddybears. It's a Swedish group. I never heard of them. Don't know them, but anyway, look it up on is it Facebook or Amazon or what, I don't know, one of them things.

[00:49:30]

Scott O'Donnell: So a lot of commercial work now, with the chimps.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. That's all, mostly. Done a few commercials.

Scott O'Donnell: Now, my guess is you've worked with a lot of people over the years and seen a lot of performers.

[00:50:00]

Roger Zoppe: Oh, yes.

Scott O'Donnell: Any performer that ever worked that you had to come in watch. And said, "That's a heck of a performer."

Roger Zoppe: Oh gosh, a bunch of them. Reggie Armor.

Scott O'Donnell: What did Reggie do?

Roger Zoppe: Reggie was a flyer. In his day, he was doing the more consecutive triples, I believe, for an example, in Detroit for Fleckles, years ago. He did, because they were keeping count on him. I think they had some kind a bet amongst them. And he done 47, which was the whole day. He never blew a triple in 47 tries. That's pretty damn good.

[00:50:30]

[00:51:00] And actually from Detroit, I think we went to Milwaukee. And Paul [Mcauslan 00:51:02] was catching for him back in the day. And back in the day, I was in good shape. And I used to play around on flying act rigging a bit. Well, Reggie and [Sausa 00:51:21] said, "Come on in the act." So I went up one show, in the tights. I felt foolish. And I went up in Reggie's act and did a feets across to Paul [Mcauslan 00:51:36] and back. And made it. I made it. My big claim to fame in flying.

[00:51:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Of the bucket list, right?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. Let's see, the other one was La Norma. My brother and I used to spot Len Norma all the time. So we never missed a show there.

[00:52:00]

Scott O'Donnell: And La Norma, her act was, La Norma Fox? What did she do?

Roger Zoppe: She was one of the greatest aerialists. She did swinging heel catch. Don't remember Norma?

Scott O'Donnell: Oh, I do, but people that are listening ...

Roger Zoppe: Oh, I see.

Scott O'Donnell: Might not understand. Absolutely, I remember. Yeah.

Roger Zoppe: She just turned 90, by the way.

Scott O'Donnell: I know, bless her heart.

Roger Zoppe: We were there at the show [crosstalk 00:52:21].

Scott O'Donnell: Did you go?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

Roger Zoppe: She still looks terrific.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah. I agree. It's all that sculpturing that she does.

[00:52:30]

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. And boy, she's talented.

Scott O'Donnell: Unbelievable. Very talented.

Roger Zoppe: Very talented.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, I agree.

Roger Zoppe: And I knew Mack MacDonald very well. Elephant, Mack and Peggy. Best slew of elephants in the Polack Show. That was a good show, too, Polack.

Scott O'Donnell: I was thinking of another elephant person that you and I both know, when you were talking about styling earlier. When I was first getting going, I had Al Vidbel teaching me how to style. And he said, "Don't forget to lead with your thumbs, kid." So is it, always lead with your thumbs.

[00:53:00]

Roger Zoppe: There you go.

Scott O'Donnell: Right? Yeah.

Roger Zoppe: We used to have to, my aunt, Aurelia Hall, when we were all kids, you'd have to stand in front of a mirror and look at yourself and learn how to hold your hands and style nice. You don't do this, you know.

Scott O'Donnell: Some do.

Roger Zoppe: Oh, I know that. We only did that with the Indian act.

[00:53:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Now, eight generations. What did your family start with? Were they always in equestrian?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: Yep, from get go. And eight generations, that's many, many moons back.

Roger Zoppe: Yes, sir.

Scott O'Donnell: Yes, sir is right. And did they always work in circuses in Europe? Or in Italy particular or all over the world?

[00:54:00]

Roger Zoppe: All over Europe. Like, my dad, for example, he was born in Czechoslovakia. Or Czech Republic now, I guess.

Scott O'Donnell: Yes, right.

Roger Zoppe: They were traveling on some show there. You know, just like me, McCook, where's McCook?

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, where's McCook? I agree. Which I'm gonna look up once we're done here. McCook.

Roger Zoppe: Oh well, it's been a fun life.

Scott O'Donnell: It has. I'm sure you've seen a lot of changes over the years in this business.

[00:54:30]

Roger Zoppe: Oh yeah, definitely. To me at least, it seems like the talent part and they're not willing to work as hard for what you get. We used to have more competition. Like, I remember the day, we worked Gracie Macintosh's dates to Columbus, Ohio. Be dating then, days at the fairgrounds. And a big show. And there'd be like, there was three trampoline acts there. It was the Catastellis, Christianis, and I think the Guyonas, Tito, I think, back in the day.

[00:55:00]

[00:55:30] All us young guys, boy, there was enough acrobats there. You could a started Olympics, you know. And Bobby Yurkis was there with his flying act. And he had a kid there named, that nobody knew at the time, Don Martinez. Do you remember Don?

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, the diving fool, right? Didn't he go on to do that?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. No, Donny Martinez, Bobby Yurkis found him at muscle beach in California. He was doing a triple back on the ground on the beach, you know. Yeah, wow is right. And he goes, "Well, I'm gonna teach this kid how to fly." And he was little short, like four feet. But built like Arnold Schwarzenegger. And he's doing triples like nothing in the flying act.

[00:56:00]

But anyway, we'd all get together with all these trampolines there. And we'd all play add a trick on the trampolines. Well man, we'd get to doing some pretty hairy

[00:56:30] stuff on the trampolines. Some pretty wild tricks, one after the other. Everything's swing time on add at trick, right? After we got done on the trampoline, Donny says, "All right, you guys. You ready to play add a trick on the ground?" "Hey, I'm tired. We got a show tonight. You know, let's wait. We'll hold off on that now."

[00:57:00]

Oh, golly. The memories.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah. Now, I know you mentioned competition. Who was competition for you in the circus?

Roger Zoppe: Oh, gosh.

Scott O'Donnell: Who were your peers?

Roger Zoppe: Actually, in my time, there wasn't that much to compete against. I looked back more on the ones before me like Lucio and people like that, that were real riders. I don't know, for some reason, Tommy, he was a rider, okay. But mostly comedy because his actual riding, I didn't think was fabulous. But George was actually a better rider than Tommy, in my books. And then, who else, let's see ...

[00:57:30]

[00:58:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Suarez, maybe.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, Enrico was pretty good. Oh, another one, talking about Lee Stevens working in our act. And another one was, wait a minute, let me think, Lance Ramos. He was, what was he 16, I think. 14 or 16, I forget. And they had time off or something. That's what happens when my brother and I split and you start hiring people, you know. They're there one day and out the next. So you gotta be prepared.

[00:58:30]

[00:59:00] And Lance was a pretty good acrobat. So taught him how to ride. Didn't take long because he already was an acrobat. And he did real good at it. He stayed with us, I don't know, a year, I think. But we had a good time with Lance. He's a good guy.

Scott O'Donnell: And what do you think are the building blocks to be a good horseback rider? Is it
[00:59:30] patience, obviously, athleticism. You have to have good balance. What are the key components to being a good-

Roger Zoppe: And repetition. I used to-

Scott O'Donnell: Repetition.

Roger Zoppe: Geez, just to make my reflexes and myself do better, I used to standing up while the horse is running around. I used to try to do this, look up. And keep your balance. And you'd only do it just a few gallops, but you know, it's hard. It's like [Perchack 00:59:57], looking at clouds going by, you know. Messes you up.

[01:00:00]

Scott O'Donnell: And how about the person in the middle controlling the horses?

Roger Zoppe: Oh, that's very important.

Scott O'Donnell: That's very important, right?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah. There's some people that run the horse themselves and the horse learns to listen to that person. But if you're concentrating on doing tricks, it's a lot easier if you got-

Scott O'Donnell: A little hard to do both.

Roger Zoppe: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: Right. Yeah, I would agree. I think that's something that when people watch those acts, they don't always think about.

[01:00:30]

Roger Zoppe: No. It's a partnership between the whip master or whatever you want to call it, and the rider.

Scott O'Donnell: Well, good.

Roger Zoppe: Pam was very good at holding the whip.

Scott O'Donnell: Still? Is that what you said?

Roger Zoppe: Yeah, there you go, Scott. Oh, golly.

Scott O'Donnell: Roger, it's been a pleasure. We've been here for a while. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to tell?

[01:01:00]

Roger Zoppe: Oh, I think we've covered most of it.

Scott O'Donnell: It's been an absolute pleasure.

Roger Zoppe: Oh, all mine.

Scott O'Donnell: I hope you spend some time here at Circus World and come back and see us again.

Roger Zoppe: Definitely. Thank you.

Scott O'Donnell: Stay happy and healthy ...

