

CWM Audio 4-11
Albert White Interview, March 7, 1972
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
Part 2

Richard Flint: We'll take a minute for the tape to come on here. We probably have the tape now. After you were given the notice that the day of the outdoor show was-

Albert White: Was over with, naturally, we rode the show train back to Sarasota, and people tried to get work, and I got a job in a restaurant, [inaudible 00:00:26] cook, and was very
[00:00:30] fortunate. The salary was small, but we had nothing to look forward to the rest of the summer, because everything is booked up by then. The following year, why, they took the show out and started to play a ball park, and Bob Dole would come around in the fall of the year and asked us if we would like to come back to the show for the following
[00:01:00] season, which we all agreed to come back. We played mostly weekends, and we had to stay in hotels. Some of the hotels were very, very depressing that we had to stay in, because we were only getting three days' salary. It was really, really hard on everybody.

Richard Flint: What sort of talk went on while you were riding the train back to Sarasota? What were people saying?

Albert White: Everybody was so morbid, wondering what this one's going to do, this one's going to do, because, like you say, it come on so sudden, and usually if a person's going to go any
[00:01:30] place, they might plan. Nobody had made plans, and they were just in a quandary as to what is this one going to do? What is this one going to do? It was really, really a problem, as to what people were going to do when they got back.

Richard Flint: Was there any expectation that the show would close?

[00:02:00]

Albert White: Not at all. The reason for the show closing was the problem of getting it up and getting it down. And see, we were making it short of help, and we were making one day stands. The show did, up to the last, a terrific business, but late arrival.

Richard Flint: When I came up here, I passed the AGVA Office.

Albert White: Yes, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Flint: What is the role of the union with performers? How long is-

[00:02:30]

Albert White: Most of the ... Plenty. The only circus today that is AGVA is Ringling Show. The other circuses today, we get producers contracts, and it has no affiliation with the AGVA whatsoever. With producers contracts, we get much more benefits than we do with AGVA, although I keep up my dues, on account of the insurance. The insurance is very

[00:03:00] small. They cut it down from \$1000 death benefits to \$500, but still I keep it up. But most all my contracts, in fact all my contracts today are producers contracts.

Richard Flint: Now, what are producers contracts?

Albert White: Well, the Producers Association, the late George Hammond, he was the president of the Producers Association. Look all your big producers today, like Paul Kay, [inaudible
[00:03:30] 00:03:18], Hubert Castle, Hammond Morton, they all belong to the Producers Association. And Bill Kay. They all get producers contracts now.

Richard Flint: What are the benefits you get out of it?

Albert White: Well in case of accident while on the job, you get much more than you would for AGVA and you get it for a longer length of time.

Richard Flint: Now why does the Ringling Show remain AGVA?

[00:04:00]

Albert White: That I don't ... Well that is AGVA's big account. And you know they're not going to lose that. But a lot of the performers today don't belong to AGVA anymore, because like they say, why should we pay that dues every year and then not get any benefits out of it? You don't get any benefits. And AGVA does not get you any jobs. You have to get your own jobs.

Richard Flint: Do you do your own booking?

[00:04:30]

Albert White: I do all my own booking, yes.

Richard Flint: How do most acts do it?

Albert White: Most of the big acts have agents, like in New York, they have an agent on the West Coast, you know. But for clowning, a lot of the agents don't want to handle clowns because they don't have enough calls for clowns other than at Christmas time and maybe at picnics during the summer time, so they don't want to handle clowns. So this way, like I always do, I do my own booking.

[00:05:00]

Richard Flint: What is the status of clowning nowadays? A lot of clowns, a lot of demand for clowns

Albert White: It's the biggest demand in the world. Any producer that's going to put on a show, that's his biggest problem. He can get acts dime a dozen but his biggest problem is getting acts. And like these big producers that play these big dates, they want named clowns. They don't want to bring these kids that have clowned a year and say I'm giving you Joe Dopes. They want clowns with names and that's what they try to get. And there's still a lot of good clowns in this country, big name clowns. I have nothing whatsoever against the Ringling show but they don't pay. Like I said, they wouldn't pay me the money that I want.
[00:05:30]

Richard Flint: Yours is a living just like everyone else's.

Albert White: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. That's all I do is show business and we have to make enough to compensate these layoffs.

[00:06:00]

Richard Flint: When you travel, do you have a trailer, or do you fly?

Albert White: No, I usually go by bus and when I have a time element I always fly.

Richard Flint: And you stay in a hotel?

Albert White: Always stay in a hotel or a motel. And usually when you get to the show, if you're going to continue on, if you have more than one date with this one producer, I always arrive with somebody and share expenses.

[00:06:30]

Richard Flint: Right. Now how are these shrine shows put together if it isn't a season job, it's a lot of acts coming together.

Albert White: Well these different shrine dates, they invite the different temples to see their show, and maybe they'll pick ... I'll give you an instance, the Texas shrine date, they go and they look all the big shrine dates throughout the country in the winter time and if they see this act, they'll get this act for their six weeks down in Texas dates, and they go, like the producer sends out, I'll show you what he sends ... Okay, now this is from the Cleveland grotto circus. Now he'll send these to the different temples all over the country. Now this is the dates that he plays. See? And he'll invite all these different committees to Cleveland, and he just closed in Minneapolis Saturday night. So all the different committees come and then they book the entire show if they like the show.

[00:07:00]

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Richard Flint: Now is this the performance on the other side?

Albert White: This is the performance on the other side. But that isn't the official program, that was just the throwaways.

[00:08:00]

Richard Flint: Is there any rehearsal involved?

Albert White: Oh certainly. The night before the show opens, they'll have a spec rehearsal and a finale rehearsal, and sometimes they'll have a rundown of the entire performance to get the timing of the show. A performance today can't last over two and a half hours on account of the union musicians. And if they work one minute over that two hours and a half, they have to pay them for one full hour. Every man in the band. So they tried to make it so the show shouldn't last more than two hours and a half. And a lot of these shrine dates now they'll have an earlier performance, like 2:00 and 7:30, to get the kids off of the street early in the evening.

[00:08:30]

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Richard Flint: Is there anything else about the clowning or your own life that you think you'd like to mention that I haven't asked about? Any other events you recall, or particular people or acts you enjoy working with?

Albert White: Well in fact I just worked with the George Hannaford Riding Act in Cleveland, and Mrs. Hannaford has two children. When they went in the riding act, I always took care of her
 [00:09:30] 10 and a half month old baby. And I was telling George when we were together on the Dallas show, when his whole family, his mother and father, the whole family were together, I used to take care of his sister, Kate Francis. And he says, "I'll never forget that, Albert, how you used to take care of little Kate Francis." Now she's married and she has her own children.

Richard Flint: So you've taken care of two generations.

Albert White: Oh yes, I certainly have.

[00:10:00]

Richard Flint: What were the living conditions like on those early shows, the truck and the trailer?

Albert White: Well it was a little rough. They would give you, they had a sleeper for all the clowns and you had to make ... What it really was, if you wanted it nice, you had a nice bedspread on your bed, you had nice curtains, it was up to the individual.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about your own acts, your own costumes and so on?

[00:10:30]

Albert White: Well like I say, I make all my own costumes. I have so many different costumes. Like on the Ringling show, I used to do an awful lot of female parts, which I still do today on a lot of dates. Now my one thing that I'm noted for is my exaggerated nurse. And I do a comedy strip, which is done very refined. I also forgot to mention that I do comedy magic when I have to go out to make a shrine hospital, entertaining the kids. I can do 25 minutes of comedy magic by myself, and my last gag I do a corset and vest gag where I have 24 vests on, and while I'm taking off vests I'm doing magic gag, and at the finish, I have this big pair of mystic pants and I drop my pants and I have this pair of women's drawers on with a big red bow on the back of them. It gets an awfully big laugh.
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 [00:11:30]

Richard Flint: Do you ever encounter a very young child who gets scared of a clown? What do you do there?

Albert White: This is my way of thinking. If somebody comes up to you with a child and the child shies away from you and they cry, I ignore them for the time being. And I never believe in scaring children, like some adults come up and say oh, the clown is going to get you, which is the wrong attitude to take for a child. And eventually I'll win them over and then you can't get rid of them. But the majority of children today, before they come to see a circus performance, their mothers are telling them about the clowns, and when they bring the children, they'll say now shake hands, which we always do, shake hands with my little daughter or my little son. You want to see the clown. And then they'll talk.
 [00:12:00]
 [00:12:30]

You'll ask them what their name is. And the majority of them are very, very nice and friendly. And the ones that shy away from you most are the colored kids. I think it's the white makeup that scares them.

Richard Flint: Again, I can't think anything more to cover particularly.

[00:13:00]

Albert White: I think you got a nice interview.

Richard Flint: I think so too, thank you very much.

Speaker 3: Albert, tell him that you taught the children.

Albert White: Oh, I meant to tell you. During the years that I was on the Ringling show, and while we were under canvas and we dressed under the seat wagons, I taught school to the German children, the French children, the Spanish children, and Italian children. And I speak a little bit of Spanish and I speak German, and I can understand it fluently. And lots of times I had a place under the one of the seat wagons that was just like a red school with the blackboard, and long tables where kids sat on either sides of the tables, and I conducted school in clown makeup because I didn't have time to take my makeup off. And I taught some kids today that are up and married.

[00:14:00]

Richard Flint: Were you teaching them just English, or-

Albert White: I taught them English, I taught them to read, to spell, to write. And I used to give them homework every night, and they would have to bring it back to me the following day, which I corrected. But on Saturday and Sunday, I let them off school.

Richard Flint: How long were you-

Speaker 3: Also tell them about your display at the bank.

[00:14:30]

Albert White: Oh, this past July I had a display at the Sarasota Bank and Trust Company of my wardrobe, my big clown shoes, my hats, my ties. And it was just real great. And the president of the bank said it was the nicest display that they have ever had in the bank since this new bank has been opened.

Richard Flint: How many costumes and shoes and ties-

[00:15:00]

Albert White: Oh my, I could go on and on and on with costumes and things like that. But today I condense everything and just use two little trunks that I take. Traveling today is so expensive anyway, and then when you get to a date, like I say, we never know who the producing clown is going to be, or what numbers he's going to be. Sometimes you bring all of your stuff and you don't wear anything. And then he'll want you to wear the wardrobe that he has for his numbers, which is no more than right. But that's what I say, you never know what you're going to use and what you're not going to use, but still, you

[00:15:30]

take them in case you have to have them. But most all these dates that we play, we always have to make visitations out to the shrine hospital and the different schools and organizations. And then when I do, I always do comedy magic for the kids, which the kids just loved.

[00:16:00]

Richard Flint: To go back to the school, can you recall any of your students? I'm supposed to meet, what's it, Marcelo Tootsie, was he growing up at the time you were-

Albert White: Well he wasn't one of mine, wasn't one of my people.

Richard Flint: How was it, teaching them English?

Albert White: Well I'll tell you, it's very hard to do, because after all, a child speaks German and then you've got to drum it in their head, you have to teach them how to count one, then in German, [foreign language 00:16:33]. And in Spanish, uno, dos, tres, quatro, cinco. You know, it's kind of hard, you have to drum it into their head, one, two, three, and I'd make them repeat. The same way A, B, C. And in arithmetic the same way. And it takes quite a time, but toward the end of the season ... You'd be surprised, foreign kids, how quick they pick up English. They do much more quicker than the older people do.

[00:17:00]

Richard Flint: I'd imagine they have to if they want to communicate.

Albert White: Oh, certainly they do. And like today, you take all these acts that come up, you come into dressing room today, you hear very little English spoken. Only among us English speaking people. Because most of the acts, like I say, work with quite a lot of Mexican acts, and regardless of how long they've been in this country, when they get amongst themselves, they always talk Spanish.

[00:17:30]

Richard Flint: I think that's true of Americans overseas.

Albert White: Oh, naturally. Naturally. But I still think, but still they want to become American citizens and I still think when they're in the dressing room with American people they should speak English. But I never condemn them for it, because after all that's their mother tongue, and they can't get away from it.

[00:18:00]

Richard Flint: You mentioned trunks earlier. I was wondering, were there every any superstitions in regards to trunks?

Albert White: Yes, you can never carry a camelback trunk. And today the old tailor trunks, which is a rarity, I have two of them and I've been offered quite a lot of money for both of them, but I just keep them for sentimental purposes. They're probably deteriorated terribly, but still I keep them.

Speaker 3: Albert, and also you forgot to tell about the fires, the Hartford fire.

Richard Flint: Oh, were you-

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Albert White: No, I was on the Cole Brothers circus at the time of the Hartford fire.

Richard Flint: How did you get the news of that?

Albert White: We had the Harold Vorhees flying act was on the Cole Brothers circus with me, and her sister Rose Veehee, who's now a wardrobe lady with the Metropolitan Opera Company, she and her husband had the flying act on the Ringling show. And she's the one that called and told her sister about the Hartford fire.

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Richard Flint: Was it from her sister, then, that you learned of the fire?

Albert White: Yes, her sister Eileen, and then she told everybody. That night it come on the radio, it told us about the Hartford fire.

Richard Flint: Were there any difficulties, then, for the Cole circus because of the-

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Albert White: No, none whatsoever because their territory didn't conflict with ours whatsoever. The Cole show was a 45 car railroad show. The Ringling show was then on a 104 cars, and they tried not to cross each others tracks for business purposes. So we never were near the Ringling show.

Richard Flint: I meant as far as town officials giving problems because of the fire on the tents.

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Albert White: No. After that is when they had to start fireproofing canvas. See today, a tent show, like Bartok and some of your smaller tent shows, and like the Beedie show, all the tends are fireproof. And in fact the Beedie tent is made right here in Sarasota. It's all fireproof, it's gotta be today.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about the ShowFolks, about how it got started.

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Albert White: Well it started by the late Don Edwards and Leonard Aylsworth. They were the founders of the club. And when we first started, how many members did we have?

Speaker 3: I don't remember.

Albert White: I think we had about 50 members, and over the years-

Speaker 3: We are known as the largest-

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Albert White: We are known as the largest club in the United States, and our club is all paid for. And at our installation, when they read the minutes, we have over \$81,000 in assets. We are going to extend the club and make it larger, and eventually they are going to buy a plot

of ground so when people pass on they can have their own burial ground.

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Richard Flint: What are some of the activities that go on at-

Albert White: Very, very nice activities. They have, once a month, the first Saturday of each month they have a social. It's either a social or a potluck, and when they have a potluck you have ... You name the food, they have it.

Richard Flint: I was just thinking, with all the-

Albert White: And then they have, like at New Year's, they have to rent a big ... This year they have to rent the Robarts Arena because they have so many people come to the New Years Eve party. And they have a band and they have entertainment. But whatever they have in the club, like on a Saturday night, they always have an organist there. And then every Sunday they have bingo. They make a lot of money at that bingo. And they have so many people attend the bingo that a lot of the people have to sit out in the bar room to play.

Richard Flint: Is it just members?

[00:22:30]

Albert White: No, it's open to the public.

Richard Flint: Is the New Years Eve party also open?

Albert White: It's open to the public but you have to make your reservations at least a month ahead of time because they have such a large waiting list.

Richard Flint: Well there's a circus also, that the ShowFolks puts on.

Albert White: We put on a circus in December and all the performers donate their services. And we give ... At the Robarts Arena ... And the proceeds, after the expenses are paid, is put in the treasury of the ShowFolks. So.

Richard Flint: That must be quite a performance.

Albert White: It is. Oh, and every year they have some of the largest acts in the country. They do two shows.

Speaker 3: And it's also for the crippled children.

Albert White: Uh huh.

Richard Flint: You cosponsor it with the shrine here?

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Albert White: This year the ShowFolks put it on themselves. And after all the expenses were paid ...

How much did they net? I think it was over \$5000 they netted for themselves, after the payment of the building and their other expenses. So that wasn't too bad for the one day's work.

Richard Flint: Any other superstitions you can think of? I'm quite interested in that. Any instances
[00:24:00] where you didn't follow the rule and something happened at all?

Albert White: Well, like I said, whistling every direction.

Richard Flint: Hat on the bed?

Albert White: Hat on the bed.

Richard Flint: Any omens as far as weather or the way ... Somebody mentioned when the Wallendas
[00:24:30] fell in Detroit that there was-

Albert White: I was there at the time.

Richard Flint: You were?

Albert White: The October circus, yes, I was there.

Richard Flint: Did you see it happen?

Albert White: Well we followed the flying act, the wire act, and when this thing happened, he had a
[00:25:00] nephew of his come over from Germany. And the boy walked right in front of me in spec. And he was sick that night. He didn't speak any English and I said to him in German, if you don't feel good tonight, why don't you tell Karl? I think he was kind of afraid of Karl. But right when the accident happened they called in all the clowns to try to quiet the public. You see all these bodies laying in the ring and nobody could touch them or anything. And I wouldn't want to see that again, I could guarantee you.

Richard Flint: Did you see it happen?

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Albert White: No, so like I say, we followed them. So after it happened we heard all these people
screaming and everybody run into the arena from the dressing room.

Richard Flint: Was it difficult to calm the crowd?

Albert White: It certainly was. And then Karl Wallenda's daughter Jenny, her husband was killed. And
[00:26:00] his son Mario, now he's in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. And it's really, really pathetic.

Richard Flint: Don't want to talk about it.

Albert White: Absolutely not.

Richard Flint: How do you look back on your life in the circus?

Albert White: Well I'll tell you, if I'd have to do it again, if I was a young person, I wouldn't want to do it again because it has too many hardships. Because like today, there's so many wonderful opportunities in the world today.

Richard Flint: Can you say you've enjoyed your-

Albert White: I can say I have no regrets.

[00:26:30]

Richard Flint: How can you sum up a circus? What sort of experience is it, either for a town person going to a show or for somebody in the business?

Albert White: You know, show people are the most critical people in the world. You know they're a very bad audience because they'll pick, this one didn't do this, this one didn't do this, this one didn't do this. Where your average public that goes to a circus, anything that ...

[00:27:00] Like the flying acts, they do such hard tricks, like the pack and leap and different things like the teeterboard act, four man high, which are very hard things to do. The public just love it, but they see it, they'll forget it quick, but a performer never will. He can see an act and he'll remember 50 years from now whether this teeterboard act did a four man high.

[00:27:30]

Richard Flint: Not to deal with any acts still occurring, but what are some of the great acts you think you've seen? What ones particularly impressed you?

Albert White: Oh I'll tell you, the Acopi's teeterboard act. When [inaudible 00:27:41] did his wire act, when Hubert Caskell did his wire act, when [inaudible 00:27:46] did their perch act. I'm mentioning big acts that I've worked with. And the girl in the moon, the Conselo's flying act. Oh, so many, I could go on and on and on.

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Richard Flint: You obviously had those on the top of your head. Well, thank you, it's getting late but that was very good, I think.

Albert White: With prop man and riggers and things like that, that have nicknames, and if I heard their name, you wonder who they're talking about.

Richard Flint: But you said it's among the working men.

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Albert White: Mostly among the working class. But the performers all call each other by their legal name.

Richard Flint: Right.