

# CWM Audio 65

## William (Bill) Hommel Sr. Interview, August, 1964

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

- Interviewer: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Another broadcast direct from the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. We're enjoying this series of broadcasts this year more than we can tell people because of the wonderful people we're meeting. It doesn't change at all today. I am at the home, not at the museum, of William Hommel, Senior, who is a young fellow of 80 come July. He is a father of Dr. William Hommel, Junior, foot specialist here in Baraboo, and also the mayor. I might say that Bill tells me that he did everything he could do to prevent, but nevertheless, we got a good mayor in Baraboo in Mayor William Hommel, Junior.
- [00:00:30] [00:01:00] We're going to get back to Bill and want to talk to him. Today what brings you along and I've introduced you, said nothing about the circus, but there's circus background here, believe me, and a lot of it.
- Bill Senior, Bill Hommel, Senior, was the steward on the Ringling shows many years ago. Bill says, "You know they're so far back they can't recall how far back," but he knows it's a fur piece, right? This time I'd like to talk to Bill Hommel, Senior. Bill, what was your job on the Ringling Show?
- [00:01:30] [00:02:00] Bill Hommel, Sr: I supervised the preparation of food. I was assistant to Mr. Al W. Webb, who was with Ringling's for many years. He died in 1925. I hardly know where to begin, however, at that time the show was the largest that it had ever been before or since. We carried between 17 and 1,800 people and fed them three times a day providing we started breakfast by 10:00 in the morning. If it was later than that we served two meals and believe me, we fed them well.
- Interviewer: Bill, can you recall back how many years ago that has been when you [crosstalk 00:02:27]?
- [00:02:30] Bill Hommel, Sr: I started with Ringling's in 1912 and was there until 1918.
- Interviewer: In other words you were six years on the circus?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: On that show.
- Interviewer: You were a Baraboo boy, is this correct?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: No, I was raised in Indiana.

- Interviewer: Down in what town?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: The little town of Portland, Indiana.
- Interviewer: [00:03:00] Portland, Indiana? We'll talk about that later because my grandparents are all from Portland, Jay County. His name was Heffner and they had a farm just outside the town. I know all that [crosstalk 00:03:05]. We'll talk about Portland and Red Key.
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Dunkirk?
- Interviewer: Dunkirk and Albany. Those will certainly bring back memories to you. You were from Portland, Indiana. How did you get connected up with the Ringling Show?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: [00:03:30] In those days after school, I'd say about 1915, I left school and went to Peru, Indiana and went out with the Wallace Circus, which at that time was one of the finest shows in the America.
- Interviewer: What was your capacity on [crosstalk 00:03:38]?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: I started in there as a waiter in the cook house.
- Interviewer: The cook house, you mean tent?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Yes, the dining room.
- Interviewer: Is it true that when the circus is arriving into a town that the first car in is the cook tent and the cook material [crosstalk 00:03:56]?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That is one of the first things.
- [00:04:00]
- Interviewer: Tell me this, of course we have to think of the cook angle we look at it as stoves and baking ovens. They tell me that on the circus actually the baked goods was one of the top items, bread. You baked all this, correct?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: No, we bought bread, used about a thousand loaves a day.
- Interviewer: But you baked [crosstalk 00:04:21]?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Baked everything else.
- Interviewer: Everything else was baked? A thousand loaves a day?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Yeah.
- [00:04:30]
- Interviewer: For 1,700 people that's about right. Who had the priority to eat and was there any class distinction [crosstalk 00:04:35]?

- Bill Hommel, Sr: We had the big tent, the big dining room was divided, and the performers in one end and the working men and bosses in the other. In those days we had a special tent for the colored people.
- Interviewer: [00:05:00] We're going to return to Bill Hommel, Senior, in just a few minutes. Right now we'd like to present some of our sponsors and some circus music.
- Bill was just telling you how the tents were laid out, a certain tent for certain people and the performers and the roustabouts, and this and that. Bill, I would imagine that that's what they called the workers, they were roustabouts, wasn't it, or what did they call it?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: No, working men.
- Interviewer: Just the working men?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Yeah.
- Interviewer: Tell me, who would be the heaviest eaters on this [crosstalk 00:05:28]? [00:05:30]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: The colored boys would be the biggest eaters.
- Interviewer: They really could lay it away, huh?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: They sure could.
- Interviewer: They liked their vittles, huh?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: They were my favorites. They were appreciative and we had less trouble with them than anyone else.
- Interviewer: Well now, what was a normal breakfast? Shall we say that we've got the circus in town, everything is running smoothly, not too much mud for the big wagon, and the tent is setup, what would be the breakfast procedure? [00:06:00]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: We would have always some sort of fruit, cereal, pancakes, meat, and boiled potatoes.
- Interviewer: That was the circus breakfast?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That was a breakfast.
- Interviewer: The menu would remain the same for everyone?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Everyone.

- Interviewer: Nothing special at all?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Nothing special.
- Interviewer: Now we're going to, we've got breakfast taken care of, and now when did you start to prepare lunch?
- [00:06:30]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That started immediately. The two later meals started immediately after we got going. If we had a good clean lot, in our wagons, I carried nine wagons in my department and about a hundred men.
- Interviewer: That was just with the cooking parts?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Yes, with the [crosstalk 00:06:45] and waiters.
- Interviewer: Carrying a hundred men. How many wagons?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Nine.
- Interviewer: Nine wagons. That's quite a lot to feed right there. Now we'll continue with the lunch.
- [00:07:00]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: We would prepare lunch. That generally was soup and the cold meats and salad and dessert. Then the dinner was a heavy meal. That would be, we didn't have soup but noon, but we had plenty of meat, potatoes, a vegetable, salad and dessert.
- Interviewer: Would the menu be varied from day-to-day?
- [00:07:30]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Every day was different.
- Interviewer: Did you like, say, Monday you had [crosstalk 00:07:34].
- Bill Hommel, Sr: No, it varied, but we never had the same thing twice in one week.
- Interviewer: Normally would, say, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday would be pretty much the same each week?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: each week, yes.
- Interviewer: Did the show normally show on Sunday?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Not many times in those days.

- Interviewer: Bill, how would the preparation for Sunday, would there be anything special done [00:08:00] for Sunday for the people, or would they be most of them off the lot, gone?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: No, they never missed a meal.
- Interviewer: [inaudible 00:08:07] was right there. What seemed to be the favorite food of the fellows that worked on putting up the tents?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That sort of varied. Of course the performers eat lighter, but they were more [00:08:30] particular. Pork seemed to be the best, pork or beef was the preference, but of course we didn't take any orders. We give it to them as we, because we gave them plenty.
- Interviewer: You mean plenty, could they have seconds?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: A dozen.
- Interviewer: You mean there was no ... If a guy was really a big eater or he was just ...
- Bill Hommel, Sr: The better we fed them the better the Ringling Brothers liked it.
- Interviewer: Is that right? We'll return to Bill Hommel, Senior, former steward, a young man of [00:09:00] 80, looks like he's really going to make 100. We'll be back with Bill in just a few minutes. Here's some messages from some of the sponsors and some circus music.
- [00:09:30] Back to William Hommel, Senior, Chief Steward on the Ringling Show some many, many years ago. First of all, there's a big problem always in preparing for many people is the procurement of the supplies. We'd like to find out, Bill, how you went about this in getting your supplies of meat, potatoes and everything, because refrigeration as we know it now was non-existent.
- Bill Hommel, Sr: In those days The Armor or all during my time with the circus, The Armor and Company furnished the meats. If we were in towns, if they didn't have a branch [00:10:00] house it was delivered by express in big boxes that had a liner of a tin box inside well iced with the meats packed in those boxes. Each morning we would have the days meals and the following morning's breakfast on the lot.
- Interviewer: Each morning? That would be seven days a week?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Yes, seven days a week.
- Interviewer: A regular thing. Now, of course, you'd have to have these huge stoves to cook. Were there separate wagons for that or was the wagon the [crosstalk 00:10:28] in the wagon?
- [00:10:30] Bill Hommel, Sr: No, we had what we call a range wagon. That had eight big ranges on, four on each side, then the doors led out and made a platform for the cooks to be around. We

- [00:11:00] had a battery of ranges on the ground. We also had a separate department which was the bakery. It just seemed like everything would work right out. We always planned on having breakfast ready within one hour from the time the first wagon lighted on the, or was set, and if the lot was in good shape.
- Interviewer: You mentioned the wagons would have a platform all the way down. These stoves were built in [crosstalk 00:11:15] right in the wagon?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: This battery of eight, four back to back.
- Interviewer: All they do, well, how would they ... In other words, how were they fueled? How were they fired?
- [00:11:30]
- Bill Hommel, Sr: They were fired with wood. We also had a steam plant to steam kettles, which cooked [inaudible 00:11:35], we cooked with steam. We could get up steam in 12 minutes. In about eight minutes after we had a full head of steam they used kettles up to 75 gallons would boil. Most of the roasts and the steaks and that stuff was cooked on the stoves and the soups and stews and boiled food was cooked in these big kettles.
- [00:12:00]
- Interviewer: Bill, of course, when you have terrifically hot stove that when a fire, how did you get them cooled off?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: Everything worked out. They cooled. The only thing that we ever had trouble with, we kept one big range going for the Ringling Brothers private dining room. If they were late getting over we were generally through and loaded at 6:30 in the evening. We were just throw wet bags over that range and pour water on it and then just stick it in the wagon.
- [00:12:30]
- Interviewer: In other words, the first to arrive on the lot was the cook tent and the last thing to leave?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That's right. You see, we left the town that we showed in Baraboo today. We would leave here at 9:00 at night.
- Interviewer: That was ahead of the regular train?
- Bill Hommel, Sr: That was called The Flying Squadron, which carried the cook house, the horse tents, and the cages from the menagerie.
- [00:13:00]
- Interviewer: That would leave even before the tent [crosstalk 00:13:07].
- Bill Hommel, Sr: We'd been in the next town many times before the show was out in a day before it's town.
- Interviewer: Bill, I would like to ask you this, did you know any of the Ringling boys personally?

Bill Hommel, Sr: I knew them all. That is, the two brothers, Otto and Gus, died before I went with [00:13:30] the show, but I knew all the rest of them and was particularly fond of Uncle Al and Henry.

Interviewer: They were both Baraboo men?

Bill Hommel, Sr: All Baraboo men.

Interviewer: Where was the circus actually wintering at that time?

Bill Hommel, Sr: In Baraboo.

Interviewer: The reason I ask, I wanted to find out how did you happen to get to Baraboo? Was it because of the circus connection?

Bill Hommel, Sr: Yes, I lived in Indiana and then I would go back to Indiana in the winter time and [00:14:00] then come here about three weeks in the spring to get my equipment in shape.

Interviewer: Bill, it's been a great honor to me to get to have this interview with you. I know as the time goes by at the museum and you watch what's happening you can only feel proud of what's going on at the World Museum. Would you care to make a remark about the museum right now being an old circus boy?

[00:14:30]

Bill Hommel, Sr: I studied the museum and watch it but the last few years I hadn't been able to be there much, but I can see it growing by leaps and bounds. Today it is one of the greatest places for tourists or anyone even living here. I can't say enough for the local museum.

Interviewer: Bill, I suppose as you sit here in your chair looking out the window that your mind wanders back to your six years with the circus?

[00:15:00]

Bill Hommel, Sr: I had more than six years. I was with the Wallace Circus before that, and then I had a couple experiences, which was my graduation in the show business. Both of them went broke. That was Clyde's World at Home Carnival and the Colonel Tim McCoy Show, which I dropped quite a little money in myself.

Interviewer: Bill Hommel, we will come back again to see you if you'll allow us that.

Bill Hommel, Sr: I'm happy to have you.

[00:15:30]

Interviewer: This certainly been a great honor, as I said before, to talk to Bill Hommel, former circus steward with the ...