

## CWM Audio 18

### Interview with Francis Beverly “Bev” Kelley, 1980

#### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Bev Kelley:	00:07	So, while it was not hard to sell the idea that, uh, we could talk about things that would interest their, uh, listeners, uh, women, circus women and wardrobe, the way the circus families took care of their children on tour, and that, uh ... and well, [inaudible 00:00:25], I know the women's programs, that was an easy way to get in. And then of course another area's a program about the music, circus music, and athletes, especially the athletic. And we got into press [inaudible 00:00:41]. You could usually get a column out of any sports editor because our promise was that next to the Olympic Games the greatest concentration of circus ... of, uh, star athletes in the world took place under the big top, and it was true. And you could usually find a sports editor who wanted to take a day off and he'd run my column.
Tom Parkinson:	01:06	(laughs).
Bev Kelley:	01:08	So much for golf.
Tom Parkinson:	01:09	Yeah.
Bev Kelley:	01:10	Don't sell us short.
Tom Parkinson:	01:10	(laughs).
All:	01:10	(laughs).
Tom Parkinson:	01:15	You mentioned a couple of great name ... many great names already, but, uh, give us some insight into your knowledge. You'll have a recollections of some people. Let's talk first about Dexter Fellows. What do you- what do you recall, quickly ... what- what first comes to mind about Dexter Fellows?
Bev Kelley:	01:33	Well, he was helpful to me, for one thing. Dexter knew I was the first of many and, uh, he treated me r- ... with respect, and I learned a lot from him. I learned a great deal more even from- from Frank [Werdon 00:01:47]. I learned from all the men- men there. A lot of what not to do, which was equally as important as to know what to do. But Dexter was so ... such an amusing guy and such a- an interesting character to look at, too. I remember the time that, uh, in Fitchburg, Mass, which was his

home town ... and, uh, this- this was not in Fitchburg. This was in another New England town, but not far from his home town of Fitchburg, Mass, where his family had been in the ... had a drug store, and among other things had, uh, developed a- a nerve tonic called Fellows Hypophosphates, and up until a few years ago, you could still find it among [inaudible 00:02:37] medicine.

- Bev Kelley: 02:38 Well, Dex was on ... in the marquee, in another, uh, New England town, one evening when, uh, a man came out of the menagerie with his wife, held her by the hand, tears running down her cheeks. And looking at Dexter, who looked like ... he always looked like he owned the circus. Circus owners in- in those days didn't, uh ... the bigger- bigger the circus, the less they flashed their wardrobe and their diamonds. John Ringling looked like a banker. He never looked like a circus man or what the average person thought of as a circus man. Dex was, uh, standing there, very imposing in his, uh, checkered coat and his cane. And so this man with his crying wife looked at him and assumed he was the big man, the main guy. Said, "You may believe it or not, sir, a tiger has just urinated in my wife's eye." Well, Dex thought quickly. We had a t- ... not only tigers, but, uh, a lion, who'll- who'll do this too.
- Tom Parkinson: 03:48 (laughs).
- Bev Kelley: 03:50 We had a tiger named Whitey. He was a Siberian and he was big and beautiful. And he had a trick of- of about eye level, when you'd stand in front of the cages in the menagerie, he'd urinate straight out, back up to the cage and let somebody have it. Straight way, I knew a- a lion on the [inaudible 00:04:10] show would do the same thing. It takes talent.
- All: 04:13 (laughs).
- Bev Kelley: 04:13 So, Dexter- Dexter stalled for time. He- he knew what not to do, and he said, uh, "Sir, uh, have you ever heard of a Fitchburg, Mass?" He said, "Oh, yes, yes." He said, "That was my home town." He said, "We had a drug store there," and he went on to tell him about Fellows Hypophosphates. Now this guy's bored silly and his wife is still upset.
- All: 04:41 (laughs).
- Bev Kelley: 04:41 Dexter finally came round to saying, "We discovered, among other things, in our drug store, our pharmacist discovered that tiger urine is one of the best eye washes known to man."

All: 04:59 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 04:59 Well, this guy was aghast. So he looked at him and he broke out laughing. He said, "By golly, you're all right," took his wife by the hand. She'd stopped crying then. Took her back into the menagerie and that was it.

All: 05:12 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 05:14 Now that is the difference between publicity and public relations.

All: 05:18 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 05:23 We're boring these people here, Tom.

Tom Parkinson: 05:25 Not at all.

Bev Kelley: 05:25 I came to listen. Well, then ...

Tom Parkinson: 05:27 (laughs).

All: 05:27 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 05:27 Tell us about Frank Braden?

Bev Kelley: 05:33 Well, what a guy was Frank Braden. You and I attended his services in a little cemetery in [inaudible 00:05:41], Illinois. Frank was a great guy.

Tom Parkinson: 05:46 He came to the, uh, Ringling show from the ranch, I believe?

Bev Kelley: 05:49 101 nights.

Tom Parkinson: 05:51 And, uh-

Bev Kelley: 05:52 1930. Joined the show a month after I did. I remember him sitting on a trunk in a circus office and Roland Butler hired him there, at that time.

Tom Parkinson: 06:04 What about Roland Butler?

Bev Kelley: 06:07 I learned a lot from him too. He was an amusing guy. He prided himself on being a bill writer, [crosstalk 00:06:15]. Yes, a [inaudible 00:06:17] bill writer. He collected [crosstalk 00:06:19].

Tom Parkinson: 06:18 Yes, that's right.

Bev Kelley: 06:19 He knew a lot about them.

Tom Parkinson: 06:20 Right.

Bev Kelley: 06:21 But Roland, I- I never saw anyone do a circus logos as- as well as- as Roland.

Tom Parkinson: 06:29 Right.

Bev Kelley: 06:29 And I had the p- ... total publicity department on the Ringling, so I never changed anything he'd done, except the content of the ad. But those tops, no, I never touched that work. I think he was the master at it. He came out of New England a- a commercial artist. He worked for The Traveler in- in Boston.

Tom Parkinson: 06:53 Yeah.

Bev Kelley: 06:54 He had a lot of funny things to say, tell- tell me about his school days and how long the Buffalo Bill show paraded. And he had a teacher who was very, uh, strict about names and the English language, which is not a bad way to be, and she said, "Oh, children, here comes Buffalo William with his long flowing locks."

All: 07:15 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 07:22 He also made, uh, one of the ... one of those, uh, ongoing attractions that you, uh, utilize to get a little publicity and also some very effective recruitment for the publicity business, was, uh, in a way, you could say you- you tied in with, uh, World War II. But let's narrow that down to the GI Bill of Rights. After the war, uh, some people that you brought on as a publicity people-

Bev Kelley: 07:49 Yeah. Principally, Doc Hall's son Eddy, who had been in, uh, in Arctic Bhutan.

Tom Parkinson: 07:55 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bev Kelley: 07:56 He came out in good condition, of course, as they all did. And Doc Hall, who was in the theatrical business, had been the founder circus man for many, many years, and he wanted his boy to be out- out of doors, and he wanted him to come back to [Hull 00:08:13], and he was in bad shape. So under the Bill of Rights, uh, we hired Eddy Hall. And Arthur Hopper was interested in this. We did it together. And he put him on the,

uh, bill call ... uh, there was a general agent, and that's the way Eddy Hall broke in. I don't recall if we had ... He was our first. I don't recall any others under the-

Tom Parkinson: 08:41 Okay.

Bev Kelley: 08:42 ... under the GI Bill of Rights. He was our token.

Tom Parkinson: 08:47 Right. (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 08:47 He was very good-

Tom Parkinson: 08:48 They hadn't invented that term then.

Bev Kelley: 08:49 ... learned a lot. Yeah.

Tom Parkinson: 08:51 Uh, an interesting switch that you made was, uh, in '47, in that general period. You were with Ringling, but-

Bev Kelley: 09:02 I don't- I don't miss Clarence [Dale 00:09:05] so much this afternoon.

All: 09:06 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 09:06 A guy like this can be dangerous.

All: 09:11 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 09:14 Say that again, Tom.

Tom Parkinson: 09:15 Okay. You left Ringling and you went to, uh, an interesting show that I'd like for you to [crosstalk 00:09:23]-

Bev Kelley: 09:22 Well, I had more fun with the daily show than with any- any show I'd had since I'd had since my first year with the big one.

Tom Parkinson: 09:28 (laughs). That was [crosstalk 00:09:30]-

Bev Kelley: 09:30 I'd- I'd planned, when I left the Ringling show in the autumn of 1947, I'd planned to spend a lot more time at home. And I was interested in a lot of things there. We had a furniture store and I'd helped to start a county fair and, uh, I was on the college board of directors. They made mistakes, too-

Tom Parkinson: 09:49 (laughs).

- Bev Kelley: 09:49 ... um, the trustees there. And so ... but I fell in love again. I, uh, fell in love with a young lady in Texas. Her name was Eva. Her name was Little Eva.
- Tom Parkinson: 10:04 Yeah.
- Bev Kelley: 10:04 She was named for Ben Davenport's wife. [Iam 00:10:08] Harvey asked me to take some shell script and go down and look at those baby elephants that, uh, Ben had imported and which Louis Reed brought into the show. There hadn't ... during World War II, you couldn't import animals from a lot of places. They were the first to come in. And, uh, Eva was not the smallest. Little Butch was the smallest. She was the second. I didn't wanna ... when we took one to the Republic convention, I didn't wanna take our feature away from the show, which was the tiniest elephant in America. That was Little Butch, named for Butch [Cohen 00:10:48], the show's charger. So we took the next in size, and that was Eva.
- Bev Kelley: 10:55 But I went down there and saw those baby elephants and, uh, Harvey knew he'd caught me. He- he knew he'd sight my interest if I saw these little bulls down there. So I- I watched, uh, this little elephant and Ben was raising them in his porch. He had a s- closed in sun porch in Gonzales, that winter. And, uh, the ... Little Butch was back there with, uh, [Singh 00:11:22], his keeper. Uh, Ben brought in three Muslim boys whose families had been elephant mahouts for generations. This was a very proud thing with them. And they had the wardrobe to go with it and they looked interesting, and he ... three of them, he brought. And here was baby Butch. I liked that and I knew damn well that this was the smallest in America. So I, uh, so a lot, I did at the Saturday Evening Post about raising a baby elephant in your own home. And that got, uh, got us off the ground with that. But there was a lot of fun to be had around that rough and tumble show, and some very good people there too. Bill Oliver had the Bill Choir. Jean [Allum 00:12:10] was there.
- Tom Parkinson: 12:13 George Smith.
- Bev Kelley: 12:14 George Smith was there later, after Ralph Noble died, who was the- the last superintendent for Ben. Died of typhoid at ... uh, I forget where, but, uh ...
- Tom Parkinson: 12:29 Ben himself was ill at that time.

Bev Kelley: 12:31 Yeah, we got Ben into the Mayo Clinic. Went from Cedar Rapid to Iowa up there and, uh, that summer, he was ill. But Ralph died from some other-

Will (unidentified): 12:41 [inaudible 00:12:41].

Bev Kelley: 12:42 Yeah.

Will (unidentified): 12:44 [inaudible 00:12:44]. Singh married, I believe, it was [inaudible 00:12:46].

Bev Kelley: 12:48 Sister, Will.

Will (unidentified): 12:53 Sister, that's right.. In '45, when the daily show was playing in Delaware, there was a piece in either the local paper or the old Billboard. And did Ben graduate from Ohio [inaudible 00:13:04] or go to school there?

Bev Kelley: 13:05 Ben- Ben was ... Ben's mother brought Ben and his sister ... was a school teacher ... to Delaware, Ohio, for the same reason that a lot of other people brought their children to this town, which was to go to the university. So, uh, they came at high school age. Uh, Ben was very popular in high school. I didn't know him then. He was just an [inaudible 00:13:30]. We didn't have anything in common at that point. And then graduated from high school. He then went to Ohio Wesleyan for one semester and then had trouble hitting the books. And he left after that and went to Peru, I think, and, uh, got himself a job with one of the corporation shows, and he was a circus man from then on.

Will (unidentified): 13:57 Yeah, I do remember something about Delaware as ... he went to school there or something. I ...

Bev Kelley: 14:04 Uh, his mother owned a little house there. Uh-

Will (unidentified): 14:06 Think I saw [crosstalk 00:14:06]-

Bev Kelley: 14:06 ... and where they lived-

Will (unidentified): 14:06 ... well, actually they were in [inaudible 00:14:06]. Went out of state in '45. Went to Ohio in '45. [inaudible 00:14:17] around the daily and ...

Bev Kelley: 14:21 Yeah.

Will (unidentified): 14:21 ... I got [inaudible 00:14:22]. I don't know how, but I'll tell you, they got a couple of rough looking characters there. They came

back and were looking for Ernie Birch, and, uh, they brought Ernie back to see whether he knew it or not, [inaudible 00:14:40]. I don't think you'd ever meet. I think-

Bev Kelley: 14:46 We were in, uh ... with the daily show, we were in, uh, [Hagerstown 00:14:51], I think. When Bill Mann, the head of the National Zoo in Washington, and Melvin Hildreth, who was the head of the Circus Fans Association for a long time, came, uh, to visit us from Washington, which was no great distance. And, uh, the show was impressive. Ben had five rings and he kept them full most of the time. He had five rings of liberty horses going and five rings of elephants. And, uh, Bill, uh, um ... Ben gave me \$10. He said, "Here, take, uh, take Mel and ... Mel and- and Bill on the pike car and, uh, give them something to do." And, uh, I- I wasn't sure that, uh, they knew Bill ... uh, Ben had a pike car. It had, uh, what the [inaudible 00:15:43] devices in it. He had slot machines on there, and he had a crack team. So I took these two guys on there. I didn't think much about it. First thing they told me was, they say, "This is the kind of show that made circus fans out of us."

Tom Parkinson: 16:01 (laughs).

All: 16:01 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 16:01 And they meant it. So I put the 10 bucks that Ben gave me to entertain them and our crack team, and worked it up to about 30 and we called it a night.

Tom Parkinson: 16:15 (laughs). You're the only one that won. (laughs). [crosstalk 00:16:20]-

Bev Kelley: 16:20 I was a lu- I was a lucky boy.

Tom Parkinson: 16:20 Right. Right.

All: 16:21 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 16:21 Then we got some more [crosstalk 00:16:22]-

Bev Kelley: 16:22 We had a guy on the ... We had a grifter on Ben's show, had a little stand on the midway. Forget what it was. And, uh, his name was Luck.

Tom Parkinson: 16:34 Oh. Good luck or bad luck? (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 16:38 Yeah. He was a- a- he was appropriately named, our drifter named Luck. Never lost.

Will (unidentified): 16:44 [inaudible 00:16:44]-

Bev Kelley: 16:44 Hm?

Will (unidentified): 16:47 [inaudible 00:16:47].

Bev Kelley: 16:50 I don't know. I think it was a something, bird. Some kind of a bird game, I-

Will (unidentified): 16:54 Yeah, yeah. That's right.

Bev Kelley: 16:56 They had to give away canaries if you could win one. [crosstalk 00:16:59]-

Tom Parkinson: 16:59 But maybe some more cards-

Bev Kelley: 17:00 I gave everybody the bird on that midway.

All: 17:05 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 17:05 [crosstalk 00:17:05] I hear when they-

Bev Kelley: 17:06 Ben had, uh, Ben had log tossing and the nuts and peas in the sideshow. And, uh, I never went in to look at it. I knew it was there, but the reason I didn't go in to look at it, time was sold. If anybody in the media or anywhere else asked me, traveling ahead of the show, if there was gambling on the show, I could honestly say, "I have never seen it."

All: 17:36 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 17:40 Now, is that public relations or publicity? (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 17:42 That's public relations.

All: 17:45 (laughs).

Tom Parkinson: 17:45 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 17:47 Ben, uh, Ben liked to ... he loved to go in there and watch those, uh-

Tom Parkinson: 17:51 Yeah.

Bev Kelley: 17:52 ... those grifters work. And Ben would o- ... he loved ... he must have had some actor in him. He wanted to be the stick every time.

All: 17:59 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 18:00 He was, uh-

Tom Parkinson: 18:01 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 18:03 ... he was the local boy who ... from some nearby rural community and, uh, he would exchange a word or two with one of the grifters. And Ben looked so much like what he was, which was the operator of the circus, that he never fooled anybody-

Will (unidentified): 18:20 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 18:20 ... and the grifters hated to have Ben come into the sideshow tent, because it- it spoiled the act.

Tom Parkinson: 18:28 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 18:29 These people knew Ben was- was with the show-

Tom Parkinson: 18:32 Yeah.

Bev Kelley: 18:32 ... and they would stop playing. So he wasn't the best actor in the world.

Tom Parkinson: 18:37 Yeah.

Bev Kelley: 18:38 But Ben had some very good qualities. He, uh, paid everybody promptly and he, uh, protected his own people. And Norma was on the show then. Very talented girl. Could do a lot of things. She wants to write a book about her dad. She writes me about it or called me once, in the last couple of years. She said she wanted to ... she's working on a book about Ben. Well, I encouraged her all I could and, uh-

Tom Parkinson: 19:09 You've done some other books, a lot of books, and there's one article that I'd like for you to comment on for this group in particular. National Geographic, your first story there.

Bev Kelley: 19:19 [crosstalk 00:19:19] in calling me a writer of circus stories, you should remember what was one of the best things said about it and I'm in pretty class company here with you and [Choppy 00:19:29] in the same room at the same time. I think somebody

said that, uh, an author is almost the only person who can be sure he may bore people after he is deceased.

- Tom Parkinson: 19:45 (laughs).
- All: 19:45 (laughs).
- Bev Kelley: 19:48 Continue to bore people-
- Tom Parkinson: 19:48 (laughs). Yeah.
- Bev Kelley: 19:50 ... after he's deceased. Well, I got the idea for the selling to National Geographic, uh, pure innocence. Uh, [Bertha 00:19:57] and I driving home from the closing of the, uh, Ringling show in October. I think we closed in Montgomery, in 1930. We drove in our little, uh, rumble seat Ford back- back up through Virginia and into Washington D.C. I wanted to stop in Washington because I had been told that the National Geographic magazine had never carried a circus story in it. It seemed odd to me that there were so many things Geographic about the people, about the animals, about the traveling and circus logistics, that, uh, it's funny to me that they never had thought to pay attention to the circus. Also, the pictorial possibilities were considerable and it was a picture magazine.
- Tom Parkinson: 20:45 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Bev Kelley: 20:46 So, stopped there, and I went over and met a couple of nice guys there, and it was surprisingly easy to excite some interest in them. So when, uh, they sent s- ... a photographer to Peru, so we could get some winter pictures there and the corporation shows were wintering. And also the picturesque that were in that first Geographic magazine, however, Tom, were taken on the lot in Washington at 5th and Florida, the old lot, in Washington D.C. the following spring. And they brought that, uh, article out in October, with the pictures they'd taken in the springtime. I had a little difficulty convincing them that, uh, about the timetable. I had to sell them on the idea that a- a considerably important and big section of the United States expects to see circuses in the autumn ... Dixie did ... not in the springtime.
- Tom Parkinson: 21:47 Sure.
- Bev Kelley: 21:48 So they published it in October. 17 years later, they took another one. And the interesting thing was to see how color photography had changed very elaborately in a span of 17

years, because they'd come up with the Edgerton lamp. It was a man in New England named Edgerton, and he had a- a flash bulb that- that barely blinked, it was so powerful. So we could take a lot of very relaxed, uh, in action without, uh, bothering them- bothering them and endangering them with the old-fashioned flash bulbs. They had this tiny thing made of ... uh, and in fact, that- that particular Geographic, uh, article devoted a- a section at the rear of the story to the Edgerton lamp-

Tom Parkinson:	22:43	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Bev Kelley:	22:43	... and how the pictures were taken for that particular time. A lot of them taken in the Boston Garden indoors where, uh, they could use overheads.
Tom Parkinson:	22:53	Yeah, I use the term "collectors item" frequently, and, uh, it just might be a point of interest to all of us and to you, Bev, uh, we all count that first National Geographic story a- a collectors item, and I'm gonna take a long shot here and ask, uh, each of you has a copy of that, who holds a copy of it, would you raise your hand?
All:	23:18	(laughs).
Bev Kelley:	23:19	[inaudible 00:23:19] would be proud of me. We sure fooled ... We fooled a lot of people.
All:	23:23	(laughs).
Will (unidentified):	23:26	[inaudible 00:23:26].
Bev Kelley:	23:26	'48?
Will (unidentified):	23:44	'48.
Bev Kelley:	23:46	1948?
Tom Parkinson:	23:46	For how much?
Will (unidentified):	23:47	I don't know. [inaudible 00:23:48].
Bev Kelley:	23:53	\$12 and 50 cents? I didn't know it was worth that much.
Will (unidentified):	23:58	(laughs).
Tom Parkinson:	23:58	Dick Flint, you had a question?

Dick Flint: 23:59 You've asked it.

Tom Parkinson: 24:00 All right. Ricky (Fred Pfening), you have a question?

Fred Pfening (Ricky): 24:04 I'm fine.

Tom Parkinson: 24:04 Are there any other questions that- that come up? But another side- another side of your long career included a great, uh, experience in legitimate theater. Uh, these people have known you through, uh, circus interests, but, uh, give us a- a quick summary of, uh, the people you were with and your experiences with, uh, legitimate theater.

Bev Kelley: 24:31 Well, Tom, I don't think that'd be very interesting. You know the son I was with, the last time I played your theater, I had a- a bit more hair, Ann Rogers in a revival of My Fair Lady. I liked working with them. I've worked with Lauren Bacall in a show called Applause, and, uh, with The Music Man, which is, along with The Fiddler on the Roof, my favorite musical. It's fun to be with those shows.

Tom Parkinson: 25:05 Was it you who developed the, uh ... I guess you'd say the catchphrase for, uh, Music Man, that had to do with [inaudible 00:25:14], Indiana?

Bev Kelley: 25:15 No. No.

Tom Parkinson: 25:17 Music Man is a conman?

Bev Kelley: 25:18 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Parkinson: 25:18 (laughs).

All: 25:18 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 25:22 Certainly he's a conman, Professor Harold Hill.

Tom Parkinson: 25:25 Yeah, right.

Bev Kelley: 25:25 Yes, certainly was.

Tom Parkinson: 25:27 Bev, I won't impose on your time longer, but, uh, I wanna tell you we all appreciate this and could go on indefinitely. If we just-

Bev Kelley: 25:34 No, these are my kind of people. I like being here.

Tom Parkinson: 25:36 Great.

All: 25:36 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 25:38 I don't mean to compliment them.

Tom Parkinson: 25:39 (laughs).

All: 25:42 (laughs).

Bev Kelley: 25:43 Thank you, Tom. It's good to talk to you.

Tom Parkinson: 25:45 Thank you.

Bev Kelley: 25:45 Under any circumstances. You do a great job where you are.

Tom Parkinson: 25:49 When you were, uh, [crosstalk 00:25:50]-

Bev Kelley: 25:50 You put a lot of class in the [Alini 00:25:51] state down there, [inaudible 00:25:53] of champagne.

Tom Parkinson: 25:55 When you were showing my publicity department how it ought to be done, you took them to a newspaper and the fellow there put this question to you, "Mr. Kelly, have you always been a press agent?" and your answer was, "No ...

Bev Kelley: 26:11 Not since I was a baby.

All: 26:13 (laughs).