**CWM Audio 1**

**Floyd King Self-Recording, December 1973**

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Part 4

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| Floyd King:  [00:00:30] | I had been in contact with most of the circus owners of the past two or three generations. Among the various characters that I have met, was Walter L. Main, Charlie Mugavin, Bird Powers, Fred [Galmer 00:00:22], Charlie [Galmer 00:00:23], Fred Buchanan, John Ringling, Charles Ringling, and Charles Hunt. And Ernest Haag and most of the other gentleman who were famous in the circus world. |
| [00:01:00]  [00:01:30] | Among these characters that I met, one of the early ones that I had a business dealing with was Walter L. Main. Walter L. Main was one of the smart showmen of his generation. He started out with the Walter L. Main Circus and along about 1903, I believe it was. He had a serious wreck in western Pennsylvania, and he had a good attorney. |
| [00:02:00] | Quite a number of people were killed and nearly half of the equipment was totally destroyed, sleeping cars, baggage wagons and so forth. These were located near Altoona, Pennsylvania, the general shops of the Pennsylvania railroad. Main's attorney was very fortunate in getting the railroad to rebuild his equipment that had been destroyed. He built new baggage wagons, flatcars, stock cars and so forth. And they sent him out on the road in about 10 days with a complete circus, with modern cars and so forth, replacing those that had been destroyed. |
| [00:02:30] | It was no doubt strictly the fault of the railroad. They were showing a town up on top of a mountain and the conductor wanted, the engineer wanted a loaded flatcar to be hooked on in front of the engine with the brakes on to slow it down. They turned him down on this, and on the way down the mountain, the engine got away and they jumped the track, and completely wrecked the train. And as I stated, killed quite a number of men. |
| [00:03:00]  [00:03:30] | The owner of the show was Walter L. Main. Main had a quick, quicker trained mind. The only trouble about Walter Main was that he had a larceny in his entire system. He was always out to trim someone. He lease, he Walter, he in 1904, the Adam Forepaugh Sells Brothers Circus was auctioned off at Columbus [inaudible 00:03:33]. Nearly every circus owner in the country was there, some wanted to buy an elephant, some a high school horse. And people, this and that. |
| [00:04:00]  [00:04:30] | When they got there and they opened up the sale, the auctioneer says, hey I have for sale the Adam, great Adam Forepaugh Sells Brother Circus, now owned by Lou Sells, James A. Bailey, W. W. Cole, and am I offered a bid? James A. Bailey spoke up and said, I'll bid 150,000 dollars. Well, no one wanted to bid against Bailey because they figured no matter what they bid, Bailey would out distance. So he said, sold outright to James A. Bailey. |
|  | Later that afternoon, down at the Chittenden Hotel, James A. Bailey and John Ringling came out of the elevator and announced that half of the Forepaugh Sells Brother Show had been sold to Ringling Brothers, and it was now jointly owned by James A. Bailey and the Ringling Brothers. |
| [00:05:00]  [00:05:30] | They bought this Forepaugh Sells Brother Show which had been a great money maker, had the famous loop to loop man on a bicycle with it. They had bought this show as a leverage to keep off opposition. They had spent a great deal of money in the other years fighting one another. They figured with this show they could route them and avoid opposition in the future. This circus was taken out later by Al Ringling. |
| [00:06:00] | The Ringling Brothers occasionally used to have some terrific battles among themselves. Give them credit for one thing though, the five brothers that took a vote, the winning side, nothing was ever said to the losing side, they went right on ahead and nothing was ever said to the losers. But they took a vote on everything, when there was a dispute. |
| [00:06:30] | Their nephew there in Baraboo, Wisconsin told me that he was in winter quarters, he built a wagon for them. He was a first cousin, and he built all the wagons in those days, parade wagons and baggage wagons, he and his brother for the Ringling brothers. And they were expert wagon builders. |
| [00:07:00] | He told me one day they were in the wintertime, office boy came down from the Ringling Brothers winter quarters saying they wanted him down at the office of the circus in Baraboo. He got down there, the office was upstairs in a story and half building, downstairs used for the auditing and bookkeeping department. And upstairs was a little cubbyhole where the brothers used to meet and said the policy that they were to follow. |
| [00:07:30] | They told me that John was away from the show, there were four brothers there. Two of them wanted to spec a certain way, and two of them wanted it another way. There was one bachelor in the crowd, and that was Otto Ringling. He had nowhere to loaf at night, he lived with his brother and his wife, Alf T. Ringling. |
| [00:08:00] | But at nighttime, he would wander down to the wagon works, and he would sit around and cut it up with the wagon builder. He would tell them different things that happened during the year. He'd put on a side show, and how it should be, his steel side show, sealed, to be replaced, and different things. So he said he became quite familiar with Otto, being down almost every night, couldn't have helped with him. Discussing various details of the circus. |
| [00:08:30] | So he said they presented the case to him when they got up there in the office. Two of them wanted to spec a certain way, and two of them another way. And he said, I didn't know a damn thing about the spec, but I went along with Otto because I was closely associated with him. |
| [00:09:00] | He said the following August, they were all worried, circus Ringling Brothers was over at Madison, Wisconsin. He and several of the boys there in Baraboo went over to see the circus and they were standing in the connection when the spec went by. He said, Al Ringling came over and put his arm on his shoulder and he says, how do you like your spec? It seemed that the spec that they were using was a spec that he had voted for along with Otto, period. |
| [00:09:30]  [00:10:00] | Had operating a two car show for several years, we built it up to three cars, then to four cars. In 1924, we operated his Harris Brothers four car circus. We had a very big season that year and we, my brother and myself, Howard Caine, decided to enlarge the show to ten cars. Andrew Downey at least had sold his fifteen car railroad circus to the Miller brothers at Marland, Oklahoma to augment their Wild West show. He had lease for several years, the title Walter L. Main Circus, and he operated the Walter L. Main fifteen car railroad circus. |
| [00:10:30] | One year he had May Worth with her, and another year, Stella Worth. And no one ever accused Andrew Downey of not putting on his first class performance. He had started out originally as an actor. He and his wife done what is called a dancing spade act. In a way, he had different titles, LaTina Brothers Circus, and Downey and Wheeler, and so forth. |
| [00:11:00] | How he finally got ahold of the lease of Walter L. Main title, and he found out that really meant something. It was a great drawing card known through the east, the Walter L. Main circus. So he leased this title, Walter L. Main Circus and operated it for several years, and made a great deal of money out of it. |
| [00:11:30] | After he sold the circus, title was available. So I contacted Walter L. Main and I made a deal with him whereby I would lease the circus for one year, 75 dollars each week the show was on the road. |
|  | That year we had a terrific season, we made almost 100,000 dollars. With this 10 car show, Walter L. Main Circus which previously had been operated as a 15 car circus. |
| [00:12:00] | When the Gentry Patterson Circus closed down in Arkansas, side show manager and several of the people came on over to our Walter L. Main Circus in North Carolina, where we were showing. The side show manager told my brother about the equipment they had with the Gentry Brothers show, all the flatcars, except one was steel, and the high class parade stuff he had. |
| [00:12:30]  [00:13:00] | He told my brother it would be a great idea if he bought this show, which was bankrupt, and enlarged this, our 10 car show to 15 cars. My brother says operating with 10 cars, I had nowhere for the working men to sleep. They was sleeping under flatcars and the weather was cold down south, in the Carolinas in latter part of October and November. So he said, we've got to add on another car. Well, I said, the first thing you've got to do instead of adding on one car, you have to pay for 15 cars, you just want to enlarge it to 15 cars. |
| [00:13:30] | So a fellow by the name of John Pluto had formally been with the Cole Brothers Circus, his concessionaire, selling balloons and so forth. In his younger days out west, Pluto was in Baltimore and he made a great deal of money selling jewelry, selling household appliances like knives, forks, and so forth. |
| [00:14:00]  [00:14:30] | He would go into a factory, a salesman, and give outright a 24 piece set of silverware in a nice gage to the foreman. He says, this is for yourself and your wife, take it home. Now here's another case and they all have numbers on it, one, two, three on up. The fellow with number 24 would pay 24 cents. Fellow with number one would pay one cent, and on up. He had four, five of these salesmen on the road and they were unloading hundreds of these boxes daily and a great deal of profit poured into the circus. |
| [00:15:00] | This fellow's name was Johnny Pluto and he got a hold to me, I was over in North Cortland, Worthington, I was crucially watching the railroads to get into town two weeks prior to another show, like the Sparks Circus or the John Robertson Circus. Pluto says, if you come over here now, you can buy the show cheap, if you wait a little later until they run into business, the fellow won't want to sell it. |
| [00:15:30] | So I couldn't get away, so the Gentry Patterson Circus family folded up and went into winter quarters at Paola, Kansas. They owed the bank there 90,000 dollars over a period of years. They sent out a [inaudible 00:15:23] of what they had for sale, I never got a copy of it. Although Pluto told me, a few days later, that he got a copy of the inventory. He got ahold of me and he says, we can go out then, we can buy this show cheap. |
| [00:16:00] | I met Pluto in St. Louis, we went out to Paola, Kansas, and we made a deal with a bank there, a high class fellow, president of the bank. And I told him that the [inaudible 00:15:54] wanted to sell the show. Instead of writing on for some photographs and asking for a lot of information, we left our business and spent our money to come out to see him, see if we could buy the show at a fair price. |
| [00:16:30]  [00:17:00] | He says yes, I says, well what is a lease cash dollar that'll take over the Gentry Brothers Circus, Patterson Circus, is it operated the season of 1928, I believe it was. And just as he spoke up and said 40,000 dollars, the cashier was there and he had his mouth open, he was gonna make a bid himself. He had already contacted Jess Adkins and they made a deal, if he'd buy the show cheap or take it over that they'd operated his ten car circus and they could pay off the indebtedness and have the circus. |
| [00:17:30] | So he said, I'll sell it for 40,000 dollars cash. Well, I says, I tell you what Mr. [inaudible 00:17:09], he was the president of the bank, that is a lot of money and first thing we got to do is find out where we can store these railroad cars. And I says, I tell you the deal we'll make with you. We will give you 1000 dollars a piece right now, 2000 dollars, and come back here in 10 days with 23,000 dollars in cash. That'll make 25,000 dollars we'll pay you down for the show, and it'll leave an indebtedness of 15,000 due on July the first. |
| [00:18:00]  [00:18:30] | Well, he says, I thought you said you's gonna pay it all cash outright. Well, I says, we've got to find out a place to put it first, and we've got to ship it over there, and so forth like that. Anyway, we made a deal with Mr.[inaudible 00:18:14], we bought the show for the terms that I've just outlined above. Shipped it to Louisville, Kentucky. We wanted the cars over at Jefferson City, where the government had thousands of feet of railroad cars for the buildings over in that area which they used as shore house for all types of infantry like pistols and shotguns, and almost every conceivable article they had stored in the buildings there for future emergencies. |
| [00:19:00]  [00:19:30] | And we wanted our equipment, horses, out at Fort Knox, Kentucky. They had previously been a camp for the circus and it had been enclosed. A gentleman there in Louisville, who we bought our hay from, had sold a great deal of hay to the army during the year for the mules and horses out at Fort Knox. He got ahold of some of the fellows he had done business with in those days who were hired officials in Washington. |
| [00:20:00] | At a time, he made arrangements whereby we could lease certain buildings out at Camp Knox, and lease trackage for these 25 railroad cars we had, 15 car Gentry show, and 10 car King show. We could place these cars across the river from Louisville over Jefferson. And that way we got through the winter at a very reasonable price. And got ready for the road again, and we opened the 15 car show in Louisville in the spring. A few days earlier, we opened the 10 car show over, I believe, at Shelbyville, Kentucky. |
| [00:20:30] | The manager was Jess Adkins, made a deal with Ms. Adkins whereby he was to manage the show and make 5000 dollars a year plus his board and lodging, with a small percentage for the profits, without the winter quarters. Ms. Adkins was with us for two years. He was a high class business man, and we got along splendid together. |
| [00:21:00]  [00:21:30] | Although my brother resented the fact that we had two shows, he wanted me to pay all my attention to the circus, he operated 15 cars. A down deal with him sounded okay and he was able to go to Europe during the winter, and unbeknowning to me, and made an intensive tour of Europe. I figured the least he could have done, since I spent so much on the tour to Europe with my wife, is an equal amount for you. I didn't like that part, but anyway, it's difficult for partners to get along with, even though that they are brothers, period. |
| [00:22:00]  [00:22:30] | Went along every year around total, 19 hundred and, the depression hit us, in 19 hundred and, I believe it was in 29, and brother it really hit. I was over at Fayetteville, Arkansas and I would [inaudible 00:22:01] a bank in Dyersburg, Tennessee about 15,000 dollars. I went down into the Western Union and award them 1000 dollars. I figured the money that I had took in the rest of the season, this was the latter part of October, I would use to one of the circus on. With business, [inaudible 00:22:26] it cost us about 1500 dollars a day to operate the 10 car show and we were making 100 or so a day, prior to that. |
|  | And when that Depression hit us in 29, it dropped down to 1000 dollars a day gross, then seven or eight hundred dollars. And finally to, it got down to where we was only taking in three or four, or five hundred dollars. Just enough money to get us to the next town. |
| [00:23:00]  [00:23:30] | However, then we finally got down to Burnham, Texas where we closed. And I was able to get out through help from the National Printing Company, Thomas Hanks, high class business man. And my brother left the 15 car show in Paris, and as he, the old [inaudible 00:23:24] got me some money. And they shipped the show into winter quarters at West Peyton, and most of the elephants and other animals were sold outright. And there was very little demand for any kind of circus equipment. Everybody was broke, flat, didn't have a dime. I did manage, though, to get the team where the circus had on the road. |
| [00:24:00] | We opened in 1930 in Uvalde, Texas, a home of the old vice president, who, of the United States, who lived there. Went on down from there to the Mexican border. He went from there straight across on the Union Pacific to San Diego, California, and the town below there. |
| [00:24:30] | Altogether, we paraded five times in old Mexico. We were just getting enough to get from town to town. Although we hit one lucky streak, town in New Mexico, at a mining town. And show grossed 3500 dollars. |
| [00:25:00] | The show went on up the road and got as far north as the northern part of Washington. And Christy Brothers was headed west on the railroad, Northern Pacific. And the year before, we'd been out there on the Great Northern. So there was only one railroad to go east on, and that was Milwaukee and they had very few towns, so I had to go down the old deaf trail again. Down through on the DNRG, down from Ogden, Utah and over into Pueblo, Colorado. |
| [00:25:30] | And through Colorado, we were just ahead of the wheat harvest and the farmers were busy getting the binders ready, and so forth. We finally got into Scottsburg, Kentucky, about the third week in August. We had a double move out of there, and we couldn't go any further, so we had to throw the towel in. |
| [00:26:00] | So that ended the, I believe we called the show Cole Brothers that year, that ended the, my circus in 19 hundred and ... the first year after the depression. Even the Ringling show had a great trouble that year, as I had mentioned previously. |
| [00:26:30] | The next four years I was with the Al G. Barnes Circus, his general press agent. From there I went on over to the Cole Brothers Circus. And I was with that show four or five years as general agent, period. |