

Interview with Struppi Hanneford
Interviewer John Daniel Draper
Royal Hanneford Circus
Great Circus Parade
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DRAPER: Mrs. Hanneford, or may I call you Struppi?

HANNEFORD: Yes, please do.

DRAPER: You started your career in Europe. On what shows were you there?

HANNEFORD: First of all I was trained by the lady Trude Luvas. Our first engagement after the war was with Circus Berenz, which was an outdoor show, very beautifully equipped and very sensational to come out right after the war. From then on in we continued on. We went with Circus Holzmueller, which was under a tent. We traveled with them for a season and then the next tour we went to Cirkus Scott in Sweden. From then on we went to England. In England we performed only theatres. That's when the great offer came either to go to France, to go to Belgium, Spain or America. Naturally, I preferred America. I wanted to meet the cowboys and the Indians.

DRAPER: In America then you...

HANNEFORD: We came in 1953 to America with Mills Bros. Circus where we spent two seasons with Mills Bros. Circus and then we got the offer through Alto Bridge to play all the big shrine circuses starting in January in Detroit, Michigan, which was quite a big success for us. This is when I met Tommy Hanneford. We continued work and naturally the end of the year that was in 1955 (in January I met Tommy) end of the year in 1955 we got married. I naturally traveled for a year, for one year not doing anything except practicing and that's where Princess Tajana came from. It was Tommy's idea to come out as Indian princess on the horse with the feathers, the beautiful entrance and it was absolutely sensational. It has been very, very good to me.

DRAPER: Very, very well remembered.

HANNEFORD: Yes, it was well remembered and like I always say, I played all the big shows leading Ed Sullivan's, Hollywood Palace, Chicago Trade Forum, Toronto Expo. Beautiful memories. Like I always say, show business has been very good to me and I have given my best to show business.

DRAPER: I'm certain of this.

HANNEFORD: One year, naturally in the meantime Tommy was very proud of me and he continued practicing with me. With him I became a bareback rider.

DRAPER: Did you ride principal?

HANNEFORD: Yes- yes and no. Naturally never could I compare with his sister, Kay Frances or any of them real born into the business.

DRAPER: But you rode in the family acts?

HANNEFORD: I did help out and as a matter of fact there came the big offer in Los Angeles. They were looking for the picture Jumbo four of them to do a four jump-up on the horse. They run out of ideas. They didn't have anybody. So, Dobritch called up Tommy Hanneford in Dayton, Ohio and he said, listen Tommy can you help me out. We need...we're stuck, the scene is stuck. We need four people to jump on the horse. Tommy said, I have the rider. Mr. Dobritch said, who would that be? He said, naturally Struppi. He said, she cannot ride. She cannot jump on the horse. And Tommy said, she will. From then on in every morning for a week or so we practiced, practiced, practiced and we went out to Los Angeles for the big event in the coliseum for Mr. Dobritch and on the side we did the picture Jumbo. I was a Jimmy Durante finally. It went very successful. I jumped like there was no tomorrow. They helped me onto the horse and we made it. It was filmed and naturally I was very proud of it.

DRAPER: This reminds me though coming up very, very much later of the picture Jumbo, the video that was on the radio just last year that you did in Canada. Barnum.

HANNEFORD: That was Circus Barnum. Yea, that was a beautiful, beautiful movie. Tommy was featured and he really had terrific conversations with Burt Lancaster.

DRAPER: How long did they tape that movie, incidentally?
Several weeks?

HANNEFORD: No, I got news for you. They interrupted everything because we only had eight days open where we're supposed to play Altamont, New York. In between they stopped their filming and hired our tent and moved everything up to Montreal. They couldn't believe it that they could do that scene, particularly with Burt and all of us that fast. It was very successful. Enough today that they thanked us that everything went so great.

DRAPER: It's quite authentically accurate as far as the history goes too. Getting back then, after your introduction as Princess Tajana, how long was it before you did the wild animal acts?

HANNEFORD: That was a sad ending. Again in a riding act it was in Winnepeg that Enrico, which was Tommy's style rider Enrico Suarez, evidently he sprained his ankle. Tommy said, just go in the act to finish and just jump on the horse. Pretend like you jump and come off again. So we practiced it in the morning and

Tommy said, great that I have the mechanic on.

DRAPER: One day, gee.

HANNEFORD: He said, take the mechanic off and then just run and jump. I did, but I already was tired and I didn't get my feet underneath fast enough and I landed spread-eagle with my arms out in the middle of the ring. Well, that very night when I was pulled up on my trapeze, evidently the shoulder was damaged and by the time I put my weight on it I'd tore practically every ligament in my shoulder. Unfortunately, that was really the end of my career. I continued working little bit later and the shoulder dislocated constantly. I wasn't anymore Princess Tajana. I was not happy anymore with my work. I was unhappy. I told Tommy, I said I have to find another job. But in the meantime before the shoulder injury, mind you I was doing a high-wire act. I was known as Shahara and I did it with Arthur Godfrey show around Chicago someplace. I was Princess Tajana, Blessed Shahara on the high wire. There was another career I started, but due to the injury of the shoulder had to discontinue that. That's when Tommy came up with the idea. We had Frank Simpson's wild animal act on the show and Tommy said, how would you like to do an act like that? I said, no way!

DRAPER: You never had any idea of doing that.

HANNEFORD: That was the last thing. As a matter of fact every time we worked together with wild animal acts I kind of walked away, because it got me excited. I just didn't have...I loved the animals. I always have. But then he went to Mr. Frank Simpson and said, how about do you think Struppi could do an act. We'd pay you, you stay on, and let Struppi present the act. And Mr. Simpson said, not a bad idea because I do have a bad foot which needs to be operated on and this would be a terrific opportunity for me. So, true enough he came to Florida. We practiced for I think a month or so. I took the act over and that was the beginning again of the Tajana presenting wild animals. Two years after that Mr. Simpson bought a little tiger by the name of Tommy and he sold it to us and we trained it. Tommy and I trained that animal, Tommy the Tiger to ride on top of the elephants with a whirlteering pedestal we bought from Gunther Gebel. We invested a lot of money, had a lot of training too. Charlotte Walch came. She helped us. I was really excited and really proud. Just before the time came to go for the season, Tommy the Tiger got sick. So in other words I could not do the act because he wasn't ready. He was laying back home totally...500 stitches in his stomach. But I had another act standing by and that was the black panther Rama which used to be the star in Robert Baudy and Charlotte Walch's act. So Charlotte sold me the act, so I at least came out with Rama, the black panther, until Tommy the Tiger was good and ready to join up with us which he did.

DRAPER: He got better then.

HANNEFORD: He got better and we finally got together. We did the act and it went really beautiful until one night in Muncie, Indiana Tommy the Tiger just made one big loud sound and he was dead.

DRAPER: Right in the cage while you were performing?

HANNEFORD: Not in the cage, no. It was at night when we arrived back in his home. Every night I went out naturally to check if he was okay. To me it was a tremendous shock. I almost had a nervous breakdown over it, because all the work, all the love, all the investment, everything...everything just gone over night. Tommy says, that's not the end...Struppi come on, after a couple of days. Let's go. I'm going to get you an act together and he started looking around, telephone calls, advertisements. By the time we finished a season he had three tigers and one lion ready when we come home in winter quarter to go and start a new act. He called up Trevor Bale and Mr. Bale came up and helped us. Then we started real fast every day, every day really pushed and worked hard and by the time we were ready to go out for the tour, I had a little act together. It was nothing sensational, but it was a beginning. So we added cats then, and when I finished I had nine tigers which I presented for about nine or ten years. Very successful, very happy. Loved my cats. Had my ups and downs with them and so forth, but it was a good act. There again we played all the big shrine circuses which Tommy had - Baltimore, New Orleans...

DRAPER: You were getting into the shrine business by then.

HANNEFORD: Already by that time - big in show business. But I felt guilty. I said, Tommy I come back every year with the same. I said, we should change. So one time we hired Kay Rosaire and I put my cats aside. I said, why don't we hire a male trainer, let him present the act for a couple of years and then I go back again and it's a new... They don't know - cats are cats. So we decided to do that. We hired Mr. Bill Golden and he came down to winter quarter and started practicing with the acts, which we then advertised all to the shrine circuses - Detroit, and so forth. He was advertised Bill Golden with the golden tigers. After about two weeks of practice Mr. and Mrs. Golden came over one day to the house and says, look we're in trouble. Your big cats don't like me. They're out to kill me. We have to get rid of them. It broke my heart. I says, what am I going to do with my cats. He says, well I don't know but Mrs. Golden says I will not let my husband go in the arena because the cats are out... Because he was different, for me they loved me, but for him it was discipline. Which I agreed with, the cats were not exactly wonderful 100% disciplined because I did it with kindness and it really didn't make that much difference to me. But an ego in a man is that he is the one who wants to be the winner. That's right. So we had to make a fast decision because he was already advertised in all the programs and so forth. We couldn't

back off. We bought a couple of little tigers from John Zerbinski and Mr. Golden put the little tigers in with the rest of the good tigers. We pulled the three big ones out and he continued, which was a nice act he put together. Naturally, the little tigers needed more training and so forth. In the middle of the season Mr. Golden did not practice the tigers any more and the act wasn't really that good anymore. Ina the Elephant started out as the Apaloosa that we had in the riding act. He died. We went out to Los Angeles and again at that time for the color scene for the big show looking that we can replace that Apaloosa. Evidently there was not such an animal to be found. So Tommy came up with a fantastic idea. He said, why don't we use an elephant for a finish horse, which we went to Thousand Oaks. There was God knows how many little elephants. Tommy picked Ina the Elephant. Look, we take this one. He tried to stand on back because it's a total different situation to ride an elephant than a horse. So Tommy tried it out and he says, I think that's going to be something different. True enough the three of them - Tommy, his dad and Kay - the three of them they bought Ina the Elephant.

DRAPER: When he performed on his back did he use reins up or did he stand...

HANNEFORD: No....the little elephant Ina, she shuffled along and Tommy just stand from the right to the left and it went over real good. So we made a little comedy on the finish that Tommy jumped through a hoop and had a gown on. Then we designed something that Ina the Elephant went through the hoop and she came up with a gown on. Went over the ring curb, sat up with a big hat on her head and it was a great finish.

DRAPER: While you were training wild animals to ride on the elephant. Had these elephants ever been exposed to wild animals before that?

HANNEFORD: There again it was Ina. When we purchased Ina she was only three years, three or four years of age. She grew up with us. First she was the little star in the riding act. Then we used her to put Tommy the Tiger on her back. But I designed a big heavy leather cover for her naturally. We learned from other people that helped us that she had to have her protection over her head and so forth. So the tiger don't bite her neck.

DRAPER: Did the tiger jump from a pedestal that she ran under?

HANNEFORD: No, the tiger jumped right from the ground up onto her back. She was well protected.

DRAPER: How did she respond to that?

HANNEFORD: She was beautiful. Couldn't believe it.

DRAPER: This is in a cage.

HANNEFORD: No, that was outside. Tommy the Tiger was little at that time as yet. But naturally Tommy grew a little bit in the middle of that year, so we did put arena around it. It got too serious. So little Ina's been with us for quite a long time.

DRAPER: Is Ina still with you?

HANNEFORD: Definitely, Ina. In the meantime then we bought Tina the Elephant and Shangra. So this is where the elephant act came together. So we had three elephants.

DRAPER: This is in the show in New York.

HANNEFORD: This is at the present day working at Darion Lake. Mark Karoly is presenting the riding act.

DRAPER: Evy, his mother is at the Circus World Museum. I talked to her a little bit. I met Evy in 1956 when the Ringling Show closed under canvas in Pittsburg. I was there that night. She was there in the back yard very sad.

HANNEFORD: That's a sad ending.

DRAPER: Ilonka was there, her cousin, Ilonka Karoly.

HANNEFORD: She was quite a bareback rider too wasn't she?

DRAPER: She was indeed. She was on the show again in 1958 opening in Madison Square Garden. Then she didn't continue after that year. Now, then you had the leopard or the black panther on the elephant too?

HANNEFORD: No, not Rama in the act too. Rama finally went on Ina too. In other words at that time he saved my life because Tommy the Tiger was sick and he had to recuperate. So in the meantime, Rama took over the part.

DRAPER: Are these panthers different than the tiger? Are they quicker?

HANNEFORD: They're faster, definitely. In the meantime we bought another little tiger - another little leopard I should say, Sabu. Sabu was trained and as a matter of fact Lou Ann helped us training at that time - Lou Ann Jacobs. She was with us. She knows Sabu. We wanted to give to her the end of the year, but evidently they left before the season so that's the only thing that's left, Sabu. Because like I says, Bill Golden which presented the act decided he's going to take a petting zoo out so he did not continue practicing with the act. When we came in winter quarter, I went back in the cage with my tigers. But they were not my little pussy cats anymore. They were wild.

DRAPER: Did they remember you at all?

HANNEFORD: Definitely, yes. They all were happy to see me.

DRAPER: But they responded differently.

HANNEFORD: They responded, but Tommy was afraid. He says, they're not that tame. They're not as tame anymore as they were before. They've been disciplined and I don't let you go in the cage anymore. Unfortunately, he did not let me go in. That day it broke my heart. I looked for a home to find places for my tigers. I wanted to give them away. I didn't want any money for any of them. I just wanted to find good homes that they were taken care of.

DRAPER: Where did they go?

HANNEFORD: I could not find good homes. Nobody really wanted my tigers, believe it or not. Every zoo, every petting zoo, every big zoo did not want tigers. So we put the act...we had Wade Burke in winter quarter and he put the act together again the way it used to be with all the big cats which I had still left. He did a real, real good job. We wanted to sell the act to Mexico. We had some person was interested. They came down. That day when Wade Burke presented the act to these people from Mexico, the cats got in a big fight. The man says, oh my god I can't have an act like that. So that was the end. We run out of time. Tommy's tour started again. So we had to leave the cats behind, which Enrico Suarez came and took care of them. He helped me out with them. We finally found a buyer which was out of Texas. The one I talked to was Lou Regan. I asked Lou... I says, are you taking care of the cats? He says, yes I will take care of them. I will feed them and all of this, and I help training them. I says, if you're there, I will sell my cats to that man, because I know you are an experienced man and you know me and I know you. So that's how I let the cats end up.

DRAPER: This was the end of your wild animal acts.

HANNEFORD: That was the end of my wild animal acts.

DRAPER: Then you went into choreography and lighting?

HANNEFORD: Not really, no. This is actually where I decided after I quit all of this, that's when I decided I going to... I was heartbroke, let's put it this way. It broke my spirit. It was very sad ending to all my good career. That's when I said to Tommy, I go in the background. I just retreat from the front. Let the younger generation take care of the business and I took over the bookkeeping and see to it that everything was running successfully from the back. I see that the animal acts are ready, that everything is taken care of while Tommy was up front presenting the shows. He saw that everything was running smooth up front, I saw that everything was ready in the back for him. That's how we were very successful throughout the years. We

built up the circus together.

DRAPER: I'd say that the Hanneford name, I believe this is true. The Hanneford name has been in the circus public in America longer than any other name continuously since 1915. Many of these years there have been two Hanneford acts since 1921. First George and Poodles and then the take-off of George, Jr. from the original and then Tommy continuing.

HANNEFORD: I always say history repeats itself. It was first his father and Uncle Poodles. Then it was Tommy and Georgie. Let's not ever forget the great little lady, Nanna Hanneford. Tommy's mother after that passed away. My mother came with us and she spent many years with us. At the end of her years she became a little bit senile and if you see that picture standing over there. Once she put that gown on, she was performing until 93 or 97. I forgot exactly now. She presented, she was in the riding act. Once she put that gown on, she always says I'm the queen of the circus. This is truly, truly, you always will be. When Nanna passed away in Charlotte, North Carolina. She came between shows in to have a cup of tea, then she had the brain stroke. When she left us three days later, we flew her home to Sarasota, we buried her in this white dress and that's how she left us, the queen of the circus.

DRAPER: Thank you very, very much. I appreciate this an awful lot. You're a grand lady.