

Interview with Tommy Hanneford
Interviewer John Daniel Draper
Royal Hanneford Circus
Great Circus Parade
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DRAPER: Tom, I would like to first get just a bit of background information. Your father was...?

HANNEFORD: George Hanneford, Sr.

DRAPER: Your mother was?

HANNEFORD: My mother was Katherine.

DRAPER: Your father did riding. Did he ever do high school riding or dressage?

HANNEFORD: No, he never did the rosin backs. At that time there was the term rosin backs came because they didn't have no pads in those days. They actually used bareback with a little rosin.

DRAPER: Your mother, did she ever ride?

HANNEFORD: No, mother never rode. She come from the Breen family which their competitive in the vaudeville days was the Foy family. They were singers and dancers.

DRAPER: Poodles Hanneford, of course, was the great riding clown as well as your father. Did Poodles ever ride straight after he started his clowning?

HANNEFORD: No. Poodles was my uncle who was the first one to introduce the comedy on the horse here to North America.

DRAPER: He rode straight earlier I guess. Was it before he did clowning?

HANNEFORD: That I don't know. I presume so.

DRAPER: Was he a conventional somersault rider ever?

HANNEFORD: I would say more of a jockey riding. That's an English term with tail tricks and very fascinating round backers and so forth.

DRAPER: Did he ever do the horse-to-horse somersault?

HANNEFORD: That I doubt.

DRAPER: Kay Frances was your sister. She was a very fine ballerina rider. Did she ever do somersaulting?

HANNEFORD: Nellie?

DRAPER: No, your sister Kay Frances.

HANNEFORD: Kay, yes, did a horse-to-horse somersault.

DRAPER: She did the horse-to-horse somersault. That's very interesting. May Wirth did that I guess and Rosa Rosalind and I believe Zefta Loyal did that on occasion. That's very interesting.

Having been raised, born into and raised in this great artistic family, did you start to ride in your choice or was it just expected of you to do this?

HANNEFORD: It was expected of me. In fact, I was the kind of the outcast of the family that didn't want to become a rider or anything else. I was about 12 years old before my dad started training me.

DRAPER: In the horse-to-horse somersault riding, I often wondered how you can judge the up and down motion of the second horse of the one you are going to land on. I can sort of slightly see how you could feel the up and the down and know that you're going to land on the horse when he's coming down if you're somersaulting on one horse, but how could you judge that on the second horse?

HANNEFORD: Very few horses in the back, second horse will gallop. Very, very few. The majority of them trot and being trotting there's definitely just an up and down. It's a lot easier to do a horse-to-horse somersault with a horse galloping in the back. Your chances of standing on it if you're a little off-balance are better.

DRAPER: When did you start riding comedy?

HANNEFORD: I started the comedy when I came out of the...I had a year and a half contract with a guy by the name of Uncle Sam. I didn't want to break that, so I stayed. When I came out in 1948, Dad said here's the fur coat and here's the derby hat. You're on. That's where I started...

DRAPER: By that time you could do somersaulting from horse-to-horse and so you did all that before hand.

HANNEFORD: Before I went into the act.

DRAPER: What is involved in comedy that really isn't obvious maybe to the observer or at least the casual observer that really is significant in comedy riding? I know it's very hard. I know the very star riders are the only ones that can do it, but what is it really?

HANNEFORD: The comedy is a feeling that you get not right away as you're learning. You really can't learn comedy. You got to feel funny inside. If you're forced to do a prat fall or so, it really don't come out. It has to be a feeling and this does come with routine doing it over and over again. For instance, when I taught Mark Karoly my routine in the act, and he's now headliner of my circus. It took him a little while to feel it and he's still learning. He adds pieces and takes pieces out. The art of comedy is very, very difficult.

DRAPER: There's a certain rapport that you have to have with that audience too, I guess. You have it anyhow, but there's it even more so.

HANNEFORD: You have to feel them and the self-assurance that you are funny certainly helps too. When you think, "Am I funny? Maybe I'm not", that comes right out on you.

DRAPER: Why do you feel there's so few principal riders today?

HANNEFORD: I think the art of bareback riding is diminishing and it's very obvious because there's only two bareback acts left - American acts that I know of here and that's the Loyals and Mark's act. I just think it's an endeavor just a little bit too much for someone to take on. You got to rely on the horses, people, the rings, getting the horses overland. Nowadays I would say that a young man would think several, several times before he would start a riding act.

DRAPER: I imagine that you could also say that there isn't that genuine appreciation in the audience for what you are doing then. They look on it...they can't differentiate between that very skillful procedure and something that may be flashy but has no substance to it.

HANNEFORD: I'm not very prejudiced, but I would say that the stars of the circus and always will be, will be the bareback riders and the aerialists.

DRAPER: I have always felt this of course too that the circus hinges on horses. It started with horses in England with Ricketts and America and with Astley in England, and I think that's very, very true. I can't think of any circus without thinking of horses in some form or another. Is work on the trampoline good preparation for acrobatic riding?

HANNEFORD: I would say no. It kind of gives you a false lift that if you tumble on the ground and go on the trampoline, you're waiting for that lift and it's not there when you're tumbling on the ground. However, it's the thing of today. The trampoline is very popular. I would say it's not the...it's a very easy art. I would compare to tumbling on the ground.

DRAPER: The whole thing is that you don't have a very big area

to hit when you're on that horse. It's a very, very small. Would you care to comment any further on the work of Mark Karoly who has been in your organization about a decade now hasn't he?

HANNEFORD: I would say Mark again not because he's on my circus, but I would say that he's in the category of a super-star. It's not only my committees that want him back, but it's Mr. and Mrs. John Doe that sit in those seats and they applaud and laugh at him more and more every year and ask for him back.

DRAPER: I met his mother in 1956 on the Ringling show the night that it closed in Pittsburg. She was there and everyone as she were all in tears. That's been a long time ago now, but that's something that hasn't been relived since.

Other than the obvious, how would you distinguish between pad and bareback riding?

HANNEFORD: It's about ten times easier with the pad than on the bareback. It's a lot easier on the horse, especially on on the somersault riding and breaking a horse, because when you stand up bareback you're right on the horse's kidneys. One out of ten are ticklish. With the pad, they don't even feel that, but it's ten times easier with the pad than bareback.

DRAPER: How do you choose a good bareback or pad horse?

HANNEFORD: You don't choose them. Like my dad said, they're made. Dad always said one out of ten and he's right. You can break them to kneel and lay down and what have you but when you're standing on their back and they're ticklish, there's nothing in the world you can do but get another horse.

DRAPER: What is the role of the finish horse? We know that it travels faster, but does it...how many less paces around the ring for instance in one circumference of the ring over the horse you would use in the first part of an act.

HANNEFORD: I just would get on a 42 foot ring, how many...

DRAPER: But it's several less, isn't it?

HANNEFORD: Yes, it's several less because... and it all depends. The finish horse is usually a smaller horse and has a smaller stride, which will consequently will give more gallop paces. If the big horse gallops slow, he'll go maybe 22 paces around the ring whereas a finish horse will do more with a shorter pace.

DRAPER: I've often heard and I don't know whether this is correct or not that a person if she is flat footed, is a better candidate for riding than if they have a high instep. There was a big discussion about this back in the last century between Charlie Fish and Jimmy Robinson. Robinson was flat-footed and Fish had this very high instep. They were both great riders at

that time, but there was this big discussion between them. Is there any truth to that?

HANNEFORD: I've heard of those remarks by...but I really don't think that has any bearing on riding the horses. You're on there when you're a rider, you ride on the balls of your feet and not on your heels. I don't think that has any bearing.

DRAPER: What problems do you have, if any, when you switch from one ring size to another? The standard 13 meter or 42 foot ring and say get it a little bigger or a little smaller. Is there a problem to adjust?

HANNEFORD: When you go smaller, then your riding most of your stuff you'll be falling outside because you're used to a bigger ring. However, I imagine that other circus has a 42 foot...must of them are like 38, 39...but regulation is 40. You're outside if you go from the big ring to a smaller one.

DRAPER: What is the role of the Ringmaster or Ringmistress with the whip? In talking about keeping the horse up, just exactly what do you mean there?

HANNEFORD: Keeping them up is keeping them up at a steady pace so the rider won't get off time and you really have to be a rider to keep a horse up. Then you know when the man is going forward, you chase the horse on and say for instance Mark, if I'm not holding the whip, he will put the safety belt on when I'm not there. It really has no bearing on it, but it...psychologically you feel that guy he knows what the heck he's doing.

DRAPER: I've seen some of these old ring barns like down at Central City Park in Macon, Georgia. The buildings were built just slightly bigger than the ring. Is that done so that when they train horses, they wouldn't break out or sort of help keep them confined?

HANNEFORD: I think that was more or less economical-wise. We had a ring, in fact we had two up at Lake...Poodles had one and we had one. You're right, if you fell outside, you'd be right into the 2 x 4's.

DRAPER: In reading the literature we come across the name of Donna Farmer. Was she a relative of your family? She was a rider in the act. Donna Farmer.

HANNEFORD: This was a young lady that worked for my brother George and then later years she came with us. She was quite a somersault rider, not feet. She did feet-to-feet, but she did great flip-flops on the horse, which are considered harder than the actual somersaults.

DRAPER: Freddy Freeman, whom I understand was related to your family. I don't know whether that's correct or not. He and his

wife Ethel were both riders in many great acts like the Riffenachs, May Wirth, and others. I don't ever remember of them having an act of their own. What I'm wondering is, was he ever a principal rider in his own or did he always ride in these acts, so-called family acts?

HANNEFORD: He always did the part of what they call the straight man. Foot on the shoulder, he was on his knees and a guy jumped on his back. He also was a jockey rider, did tail tricks. But he was more or less...I'm sure he was a straight man for my Uncle Poodles and I think he was in the Rieffenach act too at one time and he worked for Joe Hodgini.

DRAPER: Also I remember reading somewhere that Otto Griebing once in awhile substituted in an emergency for Poodles because of his ability. He was trained I believe by Albert Hodgini, if I'm not mistaken, up in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

HANNEFORD: That's right. The Hodginis taught Otto and he did double for Poodles when Poodles was hurt. He was a funny man, Otto.

DRAPER: Just a couple of general questions. What is the future of the circus in America for tomorrow? We all hope and believe that it will exist. What form do you think it will take?

HANNEFORD: I'll boil it down to a phrase that my father always used and it's really true. I believe it with my whole heart and soul that as long as there's children, there will always be a circus.

DRAPER: I certainly concur with that myself, but...I wanted that word from an expert. One other question. As a great producer of shrine shows as you are, would you care to make any comments on the shows of that type in contrast to the other type of circus, the under tent show and so on that we think of in America?

HANNEFORD: I would say that you mean comparing the tent shows to the indoor show?

DRAPER: Yes, either in the format, particularly in the shrine show where sometimes it is thought of as a collection of acts, not integrated in the sense that a circus would be integrated or the sponsorship itself or anything you would like to say about it.

HANNEFORD: The shrine circus and the two circuses that I have that tour every year are not just a collection of acts. We do production numbers such as that other circus had. We have four production numbers with all the special lighting and wardrobe, which I know Cliff Vargas has a great circus and he does the specs, but I do believe that you can put a little more glitz when they're inside in an indoor show than you can in the tent. However, on the other hand, you have the nostalgia of the

old-time tent and the seats. It's hard to please them all. In my career such as now I'm ready for them all. I do the tent and I do the buildings.

DRAPER: Actually you're not at the mercy as much in a shrine show or that type of thing and you can also perform year-round pretty much where you can not do that in the other. Mr. Thomas Hanneford, thank you very, very much for this time that you have given me in this interview and we appreciate it very much, sir.