

CIRCUS WORLD MUSEUM LIBRARY PROJECT

SUBJECT: MARK KAROLY

INTERVIEWER: DAN DRAPER

TRANSCRIBER: Evelyn Riker

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: GREAT CIRCUS PARADE GROUNDS, MILWAUKEE, WI

DRAPER: How are you, Mark?

KAROLY: I'm doing fine. Just a little sore after four shows the last two days. Four more to go today and I'm gonna get in shape one way or another.

DRAPER: You have been in principal riding about how long?

KAROLY: Well, I started riding with my mother when I was about eight years old. Of course, I didn't do a lot of riding, per se, it was more vaultese (sp?). I was just getting started at about nine.

DRAPER: So you've been at it since then? Now you also brought along the high school riding with this at the same time, didn't you?

KAROLY: Yes, my mom taught me.

DRAPER: At one time did you do bareback riding, or did you go right over to pad, and when, and so on? Do you ride both?

KAROLY: Oh yeah. I first started without the pad, because at the time we got started we didn't know anything about the pad. The pad they used to use in the older days was like a platform on the horse, and we wasn't gonna do that; that was good for juggling acts and what have you.

No, I started out with bareback riding, just plain out resin back riding and then I went to the pad, and the reason we went to the pad is that we found out the horses - the pounding on their kidneys - it gives them a cushion. It is more comfortable when you do fork jumps with the girls, you don't have to put the resin on the horse's back, so their skin don't (???). It doesn't take away from the act, at first I thought that it would, but it doesn't seem to make any difference, and it does help the horses tremendously;. the horses last a lot longer.

DRAPER: Well, I understand, well, I'm sure that most acts are doing it that way. Have you always ridden pretty much in this size ring; did you ever ride in a 42 foot ring?

KAROLY: No, I've heard a lot about a big 42 foot ring, but I've never rode in one.

DRAPER: This is what, about a 38 foot?

KAROLY: 38 foot.

DRAPER: There's a little bit of difference, isn't there? You have to lean a little differently.

KAROLY: You have to stay way inside, although we do practice at home in a 36 foot ring. And that sure teaches you how to stay inside because you've got to turn three-quarters of the ring then to stay. Bigger rings definitely make the job a lot easier. You know, like these people that do four, five and six backs in one round, well.. . . .

DRAPER: I guess it was the Cristianas, the ones on the Ringling show in 1940, and Terrell Jacobs came over there and he had a huge wild animal act and they made a bigger ring, they went to a 50 foot ring and I think it messed up their timing a little bit from the 42 foot ring, because they had to go from that. They lost their timing a little bit because it was a 50 foot ring, which was a horrendous ring as far as the size is concerned.

KAROLY: Yeah, I would definitely say it would affect your timing if you're used to one thing. Like anything else, you know.

DRAPER: Now, what do you interpret, or what do you feel is your role as a clown, I mean it's really a philosophical thing, what are you really doing - trying to take people's minds off of their daily troubles, or are you trying to make them see some of the funny incidents that occur in their lives?

KAROLY: The comedy, when I go out there with that, I don't really have any goal to say, well, today I'm going to make all these people happy because they live in a terrible world, or whatever. I just go out there and I've got a sense of humor, I love to watch someone who makes me laugh, you can have a chip on your shoulder or be in a bad mood and it kind of picks you up, or even if you're just lonely, it's fun to laugh. I used to, like I told you before, I was a principal rider, or somersault rider, and a big, flamboyant stylish type - good looking young buck, or whatever - but those

days are gone, and the comedy, Mr. Hanneford said to me, "Mark, you ought to try doing the comedy because that's something you can do a lot longer than the somersaults." I disagreed with him, because I was young at that time, and I thought, well, the girls are not going to like me if I go out there and start dropping my pants and making a fool out of myself. So I kinda started doing it real gradually, just a few bits, and I got the laughs and I started enjoying the fact that I was getting more out of the laughs from the people than I was out of the applause. It gave me....I'm satisfying their....what they come to the circus for, to have a good time and, yet, at the same time I'm really therapeutically helping myself. I mean, when I get a good audience and they really enjoy what I'm doing, it makes me feel good, myself.

DRAPER: Well, it makes an act great when there's some humor in it, it really does. I mean any kind of an act, an animal act or any kind of an act.

KAROLY: And there's just so little of it today.

DRAPER: That's exactly right. Now you got into elephants here with Tommy, also. Do you find much difference in working with elephants and horses, are they more intelligent? Do they remember more?

KAROLY: Yes, well, an elephant, I guess they are the smartest animals that walks on four feet. You can train a horse, you call him and he comes to you, but an elephant, voice commands.....

DRAPER: They understand words, I understand something like eighty words.

KAROLY: They can relate to you and they also have a sensitive feeling towards you; whether they like you or not, they do seem to show emotion. They are a very interesting animal and they are SO powerful, and from what I've seen with the elephants I work with here, they don't really realize their strength.

DRAPER: Well, even a horse, you couldn't control him if he realized his strength.

KAROLY: That's true, too. They are wonderful animals and I'm really glad I've had the opportunity to learn these things about elephants, to work with them and present them. Fifteen years ago, if you said "Mark, you're going to be working a herd of elephants," I would have told you you were crazy. I didn't grow up around them, I grew up around horses and that was different. But, things change and I'm glad I did learn. They are very interesting and, as you've seen the act, I don't just present them, I kind of do acrobatics with them.

DRAPER: And associate with them and really relate to them.

KAROLY: I enjoy working with them.

DRAPER: Well, that was a very fine act, also; I thought that was a very beautiful act. When you learned your horse-to-horse somersault, getting back to that again, now, you probably did it first from a mechanic,

right?

KAROLY: Yes.

DRAPER: But how can you tell - do you have to gauge where the stride of the rear horse is going to be when you land - in other words, you've gotta.....you can't catch him on a upbeat particularly, can you; or aren't they humping enough for it to really matter?

KAROLY: Well, everybody has different sense of time. My pushing horse, which is the front horse, I've been doing somersaults horse-to-horse with him for the last ten years, and he has developed a sense of time with me. He knows - I have a certain way I manipulate my feet before I go for the somersault, and he knows exactly when I'm going to go. Plus, I have a habit as I go I'll clap my hands like that, I don't know if you've ever noticed that, and if you watch today, I step back with one foot and I'll hit my hands together, and it's just a habit, it was never trained for that, and he picked up on that and I can regulate his push by how hard I hit my hand. If I really say, "All right, Don," and I talk to the horse, I actually communicate with him, I can see his ears listening to me, and if I really want him to push - if he's like lazy today, like after the fourth show, and I say, "Come on, Don," and I'll hit my hands and he'll push.

DRAPER: What about the rear horse, do you have to know where he's gonna be when you hit; I mean on the up and down part, or not?

KAROLY: Well, that's the tricky part of horse-to-horse. Really, the

most difficult part of the horse-to-horse is your back horse. He can make you, the little guy gives....the bareback horse makes the rider.

DRAPER: I can sort of slightly see how you can judge from the front one what you're describing, but I don't quite see how you know where the that last horse is - up and down.

KAROLY: Well, you turn around, you sight, and when you turn back forward to get ready to go it's just "trust to Jesus," you hope he's there.

DRAPER: No, I don't mean the horse is there, I mean that up and down part. Do you have to hit when the horse is coming up, or down?

KAROLY: Well, you take a lift tempo, yeah. Oh, on the back horse - no, you absorb that with your legs, you just have that split second.

DRAPER: That's a strain on your knees, too, isn't it?

KAROLY: Well, if you catch him on the up and you're coming down, it does kinda.....

DRAPER: That up and down part on the back horse you really can't control too much.

KAROLY: No, that's the punishment of bareback riding. It's one of the toughest acts.....

DRAPER: I can sort of sense what you are saying - on the front one, I mean, you can feel that; on the other one.....

KAROLY: On the other one, you just have no idea.

DRAPER: Well, this act was first done in this country, in public, by

Oscar Lawanda, and Orrin Davenport is also supposed to have done it maybe before Lawanda, but not in public. It was about 1902 or 1903, and it was strictly an American adaptation; there haven't been a whole lot of people that have done the horse-to-horse somersault in the world, even today. I don't know, I've gone over the records, I don't know more than fifty at all times and I mean that goes way back the whole century, and in Europe and America both. It's a very unique thing and you have a beautiful presentation.

KAROLY: Well, I've done the full twister from horse-to-horse, too. Yeah, I did that back when I was not doing comedy, doing strictly acrobatics and, you know, from 18, 19, 20 on up to 25, you've still got a lot of strength and I was doing the full twist, I did the forwards on the horse, I did the backs on the horse.

DRAPER: I saw you practicing on that trampoline up there in Baraboo in the early years.

KAROLY: Yeah, that's where I started. That gave me a lot of help in the body mobility, to know where you are, 'cause you can take a trampoline and put an X on it and try to land on that X every time.

DRAPER: Your mom said that you wanted a motorcycle and she got you a trampoline instead. Is that the story?

KAROLY: Yeah, that's true. I had my choice of a motorcycle or a trampoline and I really wanted a motorcycle because every other kid on

the block had one.

DRAPER: But you're doing something that every other kid on the block can't do now, by far.

KAROLY: Yeah, well those kids are still riding their motorcycles, I guess, and I'm doing this.

DRAPER: It's really great. What about this cannon act that Tommy had you doing for a little while? Your mom didn't like that very well.

KAROLY: No, she didn't. I'll tell you, I thought it would be.....

DRAPER: What cannon was he using?

KAROLY: He had one made special from G&G Metals. It was a big manufacturing company down in Sarasota, Florida. Tom asked if I would like to do this cannon, and I was young and they started throwing dollar signs in my face, and I thought, "well, how hard is this," you just get down in it, they shoot you and you go. And I went. I went for about a year and, I'll be honest with you, I never ever lost the fear of it; I was always afraid of it. I didn't think I would be, it's just that I started realizing that I was dealing with a mechanical deal, and you didn't really have control. I remember one day in Springfield, Massachusetts, I was afraid of it - even Tommy became afraid of it - and we looked at each other one show and he said, "That's it." I said, "Thank you, that's it, I'll just quit. Let's get rid of this thing." And we did, we got rid of it. He was standing there holding his stomach every time I'd do it, and I was. but, we got

rid of it. We decided that bareback riders didn't need to be going out of this mechanical apparatus.

DRAPER: Do you have any preference for under canvas versus indoors?

KAROLY: Well, I guess I have been spoiled a little bit with the indoor facility circus, although it's not the same as the traditional - it's just not the same. The only thing I'll say about the indoor circus is you've got the climate controls, you've got the same ring - with the bareback riders it's very important to have a good ring - it's level, every day you know the ring is the same today - don't worry about the ring, it's not leaning to one side; it takes the sport out of it a little bit, but it sure does make you last a lot longer. I like, like now, we're doing it a little bit in the summertime, it's very hot in there at times which is traditional that you get nice days and bad days. But, with indoors I prefer only because we travel eleven months out of the year and as much conveniences as the indoor circuses have, dressing rooms with showers, with, as I said, climate control; if it's hot they turn on the air conditioning, if it's cold they turn on the heat. You know what I mean? If I had to work in one place for a year and they said do you want to work outside or inside, naturally I'd want to work inside.

DRAPER: Up in New York state last year, you were under canvas, weren't you?

KAROLY: At the park, yes. I worked there three months every day, two shows a day and three on weekends. I mean, you get used to it, and sitting in one place, I might add, that you can fix your ring up and it's going to be the same, and that helps. But now, traveling with a tent show, and different lots, as you know, sometimes you get a lot that's leaning way down, or it's got pot holes in it, mud, rocks, and then always when you have a bad lot somebody comes to see your act or see the show and you can't do half of it. That always used to aggravate me, that I'd have circus fans or friends come to visit and they'd always come on the worst lot.

DRAPER: Thank you very much, Mark, I know you're awfully busy.