

Interview with Lou Jacobs  
Interviewer John Daniel Draper  
Great Circus Parade Showgrounds  
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DRAPER: We are certainly honored to have you here. When did your career start here in America? Was it in the 20's?

JACOBS: I came over in 1923 out of West Germany. Matter of fact it was after the first World War.

DRAPER: Were you a clown then?

JACOBS: Not really. I had a lot of ambitions for being a clown, a performer. My brother was in this business, in show business.

DRAPER: He wasn't a twin was he?

JACOBS: No, my oldest brother.

DRAPER: Was he a clown?

JACOBS: He was a straight man. He worked in tights, like you have in the plastic hosing.

DRAPER: Were your parents in show business?

JACOBS: No, no. My brother and I was about the only ones.

DRAPER: Did he come over to this country?

JACOBS: He was playing Moscow, big cities there in Russia. Then they signed a contract for North America where the... On my way to the border, they stopped the train because the war broke out. Then him and his partner were on the train, and his partner's wife, they all pulled everybody out of the train to line up in front. They sorted out the nationalities. Then they sorted out any companionship, like the relatives or friends or partners. Then they said, on the other side of the street there was a rail. There's another box car train. Everybody pile in there. Then they locked the door and they took off for Siberia.

DRAPER: That was a living death.

JACOBS: Three weeks on that...they almost froze to death. They had to broke some of the boards off in the box car and start a fire. 'Cause he was a civil prisoner, he wasn't a war prisoner.

DRAPER: You came into this country and you went with Ringling and Barnum & Bailey right away or not?

JACOBS: No, to him that after he came back after the war, he left for North America with (K..name of circus?). Then I wrote him a letter that if he could give me the fare to come, I would go too. So he sent me \$150 and I bought a ticket on a steamer. Then I left.

DRAPER: Could you speak any English then at all?

JACOBS: No, I learned a couple of words on the boat, but they were dirty.

DRAPER: You always learn them first. You learned all of it in this country.

JACOBS: You don't find out what that means until you talk to the wrong guy.

DRAPER: That's exactly right. That seems to be.

JACOBS: I had an uncle in Brooklyn. He had a delicatessen store there for many years. Matter of fact, he got the 32nd degree in... I stayed with him for a little while. Through him I got a job that was advertised in the Billboard. That was small troupe, as a matter of fact it was two people and a dog.

DRAPER: Where'd you play in theaters?

JACOBS: They was looking for a partner you know. Through him because they could read English, I went and met this guy. Then of course this guy, one of his partner there was an old man. He had cauliflower ears. He used to be a catcher in a big teeterboard act. But they were split up. So he did his own little vaudeville act. So I joined him. That way I got into show business here.

DRAPER: In that act you were...

JACOBS: I was doing clowning then.

DRAPER: What did you wear, a white face clown then?

JACOBS: I was doing the Coattess. I had a baggy pants and coat and all that.

DRAPER: That was your first clowning more or less.

JACOBS: I used to stand by the wings while he was working, I watched him. I just couldn't take it there stand there like a totem pole. I started mocking, and moving around a little bit. The first thing you know, I had a giggle and the next thing I had a big giggle and then they started laughing. When he got through with the show, he said what

the hell that is that they laugh about me. He forgot he had a comedian. I didn't say anything, but to find out what goes on he put his wife in the seats. He said, you watch and see what this guy is doing, why they laugh. She told him that I was mocking him.

DRAPER: It was no speaking part at all. It was all pantomime.

JACOBS: He was doing a trick. I was imitating him and talked to the audience.

DRAPER: You always did pantomime - never speaking part.

JACOBS: I never learned any, except by myself. I just go by my thought.

DRAPER: That pantomime is more in line with what you would do in a big show like Barnum. You couldn't have a speaking part.

JACOBS: A lot of kids have to go to a school and learn. But for some reason or other, I pictured myself out there and brought out this mime from the heart.

DRAPER: When did you go over on the big show on Ringling?

JACOBS: When they moved from Bridgeport.

DRAPER: Oh you did. That was about 1926 about.

JACOBS: After I quit this guy I was working with you know after a year. I got another job with another old fella, who came from England. He had a trapeze act, double trapeze. He was a contortionist. I was a contortionist. So I joined him and we were practicing in New York before the show came. The show came from Bridgeport out by the old, old, guns - on 27th Street. I didn't know that. He never told me, but he says we got a job. He moved into the ring and so did I.

DRAPER: This was when you were learning English all along now too.

JACOBS: Yea. In my spare time, I used to go...I just loved movies. So I used to watch the movies.

DRAPER: Can you speak German now or are you...

JACOBS: Oh yea. So I watched the movies and the mimes from the movies tell me what they're talking about. I put that two and two together. And so I learned my language and writing. I remember how the letters were written, what they meant and then I remembered it and I wrote it. So I got free schooling. I didn't graduate, but I did alright.

DRAPER: You did better than graduate. You graduated all right. When did you develop some of your more classic acts, like the little automobile and so on.

JACOBS: As you would know yourself today isn't what it was 20 years ago. The first time I went to Los Angeles, California with a house trailer and my wife. I got into that mess there about 5:00 in the afternoon on the freeway, and there were six lanes deep there. I didn't know whether I was coming or going. I couldn't go over one lane or another, because there was no room. They were bumper to bumper. So I left one lane open in case somebody want to pass, and then even if they come by they were hollering at me, "get off of here, you're going too slow" or something. It came to my mind, God almighty these automobiles. What about if I had a little automobile, being a contortionist and crawl in there. So I built it; I was living with the Wallendas then, the hire wire act. They were good friends of mine. Their grandfather was a kind of mechanic. So he helped me put it together.

DRAPER: That was your original car.

JACOBS: I still got it today.

DRAPER: Was that run on gasoline?

JACOBS: Oh yea, this was a little motor. The smallest car, the gas motor car in the world. Of course I was a little ahead of the Volkswagons. I had my motor already in the back.

DRAPER: I don't know how you got into that thing. You really folded yourself to get in there.

JACOBS: You know it's surprising after maybe 40 years, I can go in there today.

DRAPER: You had at that time the face that made you famous, the clown face, the long elongated face.

JACOBS: Yea. The time that came on was in the 30's. I was working white face then.

DRAPER: Was Pat Valdo then or was he earlier?

JACOBS: Yea, he was a clown.

DRAPER: Was he clowning when you were here or had it been before?

JACOBS: He was their clown before...He was doing white face, but he was doing a boomerang act. He was throwing them

inside the tent around his quarter poles. My god, they came back to him. But then I saw pictures of him, and that's how I knew Pat then. Then going home at night, we only had one or two bosses, and everybody wants to get home. So when you have white makeup on, you had to bring it way down your neck, and a lot more makeup to take off.

DRAPER: Then you had a high collar around your neck or not.

JACOBS: I had pretty close to it. But you had to makeup your neck too, so it don't show. By taking that off, you blow both buses. So there you are. So I got to thinking, there must be a way out. Then I changed my makeup, the same makeup, but I put it in flesh. Then it didn't take me but a minute to take it off and I went home with the bus. So that's the reason I changed. The character, my character, really fits my personality.

DRAPER: You have to find that. You were with the Ringling show for many, many years. When did you...you were that at the time of the fire in Hartford or not?

JACOBS: I have to say this, I was and I wasn't. You wonder why.

DRAPER: Were you an advance?

JACOBS: No, I was on a show. But the day that fire broke out, that was around 2:15 in the afternoon when the show started, I took a bus to see my brother upstate in New York.

DRAPER: You were away on a visit.

JACOBS: I didn't know there was anything until the next morning about 4:00 in the morning. At 4:00 in the morning we were listening to the radio. We didn't have a T.V. Here it come. After breakfast there, I took off right away. Ma and my pop say, you had a big top. But then there were some of the boys good enough to put them out of there and one of them got burned pretty bad, but I saved most of it.

DRAPER: Did your children like Lou Ann and Dolly, did they grow up on the show when they were little kids?

JACOBS: Yea, when the first one was born there was a strike there in '38, in Scranton. We went home and I stayed home and some of the other performers went on the Hagenbeck-Wallace show because the Ringling bought it. But then they overcrowded their big performers. They had to double up and all that stuff. It wasn't made for so many people. So I decided to stay home. But when I was home, there were several other people home. One of them was Fred Branno and Alice. We promoted, got together in Sarasota and opened up a Ringling show, similar to Ringling show. I know

the name sounded similar. A one ring circus. We had a guy there that was in the automobile business that owned Sparks Circus. He bought the Sparks Circus.

DRAPER: Edgar?

JACOBS: No.

DRAPER: This would've been in 1920? Oh it was either Downie, Sparks, Gentry?

JACOBS: No, he was in an automobile. We hired him for advanceman. We didn't know whether he knowed someone. But anyhow, we needed help you know. So we took out of Sarasota.

DRAPER: How did you travel, on a train?

JACOBS: No, we had cars and trucks and stuff like that. We went upstate, playing all these little towns. We both up on the middle of the state, and we pulled into town there. A cop standing there and I pulled up to him and I said, would you know where that circus is going to be? He said, what circus? We're supposed to have a show here - Circus Supreme or whatever the name was. He said, I never heard of it. I think you got the wrong town. By god, I couldn't figure that out, but he never got to know about it until the show started that we were there. We show and then we went on and ended up in Quincy, Florida - it's above Tallahassee. That's where we did all that show.

DRAPER: Were you using newspaper ads or bills?

JACOBS: We used anything that was available. Besides that I used to go in the morning, sit on the front fender of the car with a mike, talking, talking all over town. "Come and see us".

DRAPER: Did you have any animals on there at all?

JACOBS: I had a little dog I think and let me see, I don't think we had...

DRAPER: You had the little dog with the huge rope didn't you?

JACOBS: I had the biggest Dachshund that was alive under this world. You know what it was - a pup Dachshund, but I had two kits and I put one on the front and one on the back.

DRAPER: Didn't you have the little dog with the big rope on it?

JACOBS: Yea, I had that too.

DRAPER: You did the one with the rabbit shooting the rabbit.

JACOBS: Johnny Bell used to do that on the show. After he passed away, I thought maybe I'd keep up the old tradition. I always mention his name because I let him have the credit.

DRAPER: How did you get that dog to drop over when you'd shoot things, cue him?

JACOBS: I don't know whether that - you know they don't talk back to you - but it seems like you can read their mind when they look at you when you practice something. But I picked this dog up in the winter quarters. They had about eight or nine dogs then and they were going to have somebody train some of their dogs to go on the road. But when it got to rehearsal, you didn't have time to eat - morning, noon, or night. But it got to the last week where we were going to dress rehearsal and the dogs, they were still out there in the pen. Nobody trained them because there was nobody that had time. So I looked at them dogs one time back there and when I got near, I thought they were going to kill me or something. They had a grudge against me or something. They didn't know me, because I had no makeup on. Then I said, let me get out of here. Big ones too. Of all the dogs, this one I picked there at the last minute, he was the worst one of the whole bunch. He barked so much during the time he was there, that he lost his voice and he squeaked. He squeaked so loud like somebody put something in your ear. So I said, any dog but him. And you know something, when it came to the final week there, I had an idea for coming home as a fisherman with a pole and a line, the bob and the hook on the end. I went to the taxidermy there and got a fish there about two feet long. I told him I'd like to have a fish skeleton, just a head and the bones. I put that on a hook. I had this dog follow me, made up as a cat with a big stomach, like he ate the bloomin' fish. That was Knucklehead. The boys there at the winter quarters gave him the name Knucklehead. When the day came I had the pop, I had to get him. So he didn't know me from Adam, but by that time I had my makeup on. I said, here's the idea. If you want to go on the road, you cooperate with me and we both get along fine. I put him on the table. I said, this isn't going to hurt. I'll just put this suit on you and you just follow me. It's like talking to somebody that I knew all along. I went in and did the gag and I gave him credit and I gave him something to eat and boy we were partners from then on.

DRAPER: What did he die of, old age I guess?

JACOBS: He had developed a little inside sickness there and I lost just recently, we lost three more.

DRAPER: Did you try to train another one to replace him?

JACOBS: Yea, he got caught in Chicago in the old amphitheater. We were parked in the back there by the train. He got caught with some other dog that belonged to a flying act. They got together and then it was too late. I could've had her taken care of, but then I thought maybe it's good to have some puppies. So we had eight puppies out of him. I don't know where they came from. If somebody tell me that dog's going to have eight puppies, I wouldn't believe it. Anyhow, they all came out in the living room one after another. I said, push, push. You know I was talking to him while she was having her babies. Push one after another, I said it's about time you quit you know. Finally, he come up with a little one like that. God, almighty I hope that's the last one. Sure enough, that was the last one. That was the runt of the family. He'd go up a little bit, but he couldn't get to her milk. The other guys were all big and heavy. So I had to drag some of them off and put him in there to get something to eat. One day he was sick. Then I was worried about him.

DRAPER: So you were travelling everyday with them?

JACOBS: That was home in the winter time. It's a good thing he had the puppies in the winter time, I wouldn't know how to handle it on the road. But anyhow, I called the vet up and he says give him an enema. I said, what? Enema? I don't know what an enema is. Well, I'll tell you. Just take a little soda and a little lukewarm water and put it up his keester. So I did that and by god boy he straightened out like nobody's business.

DRAPER: That one you trained.

JACOBS: He was very good from then on.

DRAPER: That's very, very interesting.

JACOBS: Then I broke another one in there. I did the little elephant with sides on they had a tiger suit and different animals.

DRAPER: I always liked that act. I don't think you did that one where the guys walked along with that darned plank. He'd turn around and walk the other way.

JACOBS: Bruce Randolph used to come on the show.

DRAPER: He was related to Lillian Leitzel.

JACOBS: Yea, right. He did it first. But then after he passed away, we had other guys do it. But it was a good

gag.

DRAPER: The one where they get in the fight and he knocks off his head completely and runs off without a head.

JACOBS: We had Paul Young there, he was doing a soldier gag. This one guy was a short guy and we built his shoulders up over his head. He got all messed up and then he knocked his head off.

DRAPER: The other one I like was the one man band where he got to beating the drums and all that stuff.

JACOBS: I still got that one.

DRAPER: He's got one like that over here.

JACOBS: I got my set at home with all the bells on top.

DRAPER: Those were great days and there were so many clowns at that time. You were one of the foremost one, but there were a lot of other very good clowns. We don't have them anymore. What's the reason?

JACOBS: You wonder why not everybody?

DRAPER: Why isn't there a Lou Jacobs coming along now really? Why is that?

JACOBS: I guess I should've had a son or something you know.

DRAPER: Why is it that they go to school to study this and there's some that come out of it.

JACOBS: Yea, they have every possibility.

DRAPER: Some of them come out of it, but you don't have those great clowns that we had in those days. There's one that I saw from Australia, this Ashton. He could look at you with such a contemptuous way like this. It was the most amusing thing I've ever seen. We were in Tivally one time...

JACOBS: He was a good worker too.

DRAPER: Doug Ashton, yea.

JACOBS: He's over in Australia now. I hear he's coming back.

DRAPER: He was good. I saw him in the Circus Hall of Fame in Florida one time performing. You were on the show at the time that it closed under canvas weren't you in 1956 in

Pittsburg. I was there that night.

JACOBS: We went into the buildings.

DRAPER: Do you think that there will be clowns coming along? There has to be a place for clowns.

JACOBS: I tell you what. What's the future of it? Since we got all these clown colleges, there's every possibility of clowns. You don't have to be all of them. But there always will be some there that are outstanding and some...

DRAPER: This Grandma act is a pretty good act.

JACOBS: Right. They couldn't get it any place else, the experience like in the Clown College because they learn more there in eight weeks than they would in eight years.

DRAPER: What is the role of a clown really? What is he doing? Is he trying to make people forget the cares of the world or is he making an estimate of the foolishness of a man. I mean really a man is trying to strive to be successful and there's something gets in his way. What is it?

JACOBS: A clown develops if he stays in long enough, the whole thing boils down to time. If you have any partners or old-timers where you can learn from while you're in front of the public, that helps you a lot more. By being in the business and putting in the time, you create your own self. By watching all the over guys, you come up with something that you would like to have for yourself. Through that you find these special characters that come out with ideas that fits them, like this Grandma. Nobody has to tell him that, but it's a living character where you can see him walk on the stage. A living character. So each clown has the desire, the aim for something big, something personal. If you stay long enough in the business, you can't help develop something on your own.

DRAPER: Lou, I think this has been wonderful. I don't want to detain you here, but I have enjoyed very, very much talking with you. This has been a great treat. It's a thrill.

JACOBS: Nice talking to you. You're welcome. It takes an old-timer to think back and look back and then repeat to tell you what goes on.