

Interview with Dennis Zoppe  
Interview by John Daniel Draper  
Great Circus Parade Showgrounds  
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DRAPER: Dennis, you represent a great tradition, family tradition and also a tradition of acts. Why do you think there aren't so many bareback riders or principal riders today? One time in the big shows, they may have carried as many as 30 principal riders.

ZOPPE: It seems like it's getting harder and harder now as circus modernizes and it's harder to get animals up and down the road, and they don't have the facilities.

DRAPER: Horses are pretty hard to transport aren't they?

ZOPPE: It's not that hard, but a lot of times you don't get the facilities to get into a building, and we can't keep the animals inside, or there's a Health Department that doesn't want them in. It's a shame.

DRAPER: When you started to ride, how old were you?

ZOPPE: I didn't go into the act until I was twelve. My brother started when he was nine, Roger.

DRAPER: You rode then in family acts then as well as a single act, principal act.

ZOPPE: I originally started with the Indian.

DRAPER: I remember that Indian act and I don't remember it. I can't quite visualize how those acts were. There were two people on horses, side by side.

ZOPPE: There were three horses abreast and my mom and dad had a bar across them, with bearings on each end. It was like an X. My and my twin sister were on there and my mom and dad would bend down and we would step on them. Tempo, and then we would both spin opposite so it wouldn't throw them off the horses.

DRAPER: That was a tremendously...I don't think anyone ever did that.

ZOPPE: It was quite a good opening act.

DRAPER: That routine that Roger did with spinning on his head, that was really a signature wasn't it.

ZOPPE: That was quite unique, yea.

DRAPER: What was he actually spinning on, his hands?

ZOPPE: No, his head. But he just would go up and do like a headstand and just spin with his hands. It took a long time.

DRAPER: It looked like he was coming off of them.

ZOPPE: When my uncle Rico came over originally on the Cole show. He was the one that taught my brother, Roger, to do it.

DRAPER: Joseph's brother.

ZOPPE: Yea, my dad, Joe Zoppe which his real name is Rotzio.

DRAPER: How many were there in that family, your father and Joe's?

ZOPPE: When they came over it was like twelve people in the act.

DRAPER: Were they all riders, pretty much?

ZOPPE: Oh, yea.

DRAPER: And Secondo came with them or before them?

ZOPPE: No, that was with them. They all come over. My dad was little kid then.

DRAPER: I remember. He was in Texas or somewhere.

ZOPPE: We lived...then we went to Gil Gray and he bought a place there.

DRAPER: Where is your home now, where is your base?

ZOPPE: I live in Sarasota. I sold my house in Dallas and moved to Sarasota. My dad has a trailer park in Sarasota.

DRAPER: Do you look back on the days when you used to do a lot of riding?

ZOPPE: It's a young man's sport, I'll tell you.

DRAPER: What goes, your knees?

ZOPPE: Yea, it's hard on your knees, definitely. You're jumping up and down off that horse.

DRAPER: Has your wife been a rider too?

ZOPPE: Oh sure, she was for a long time. She was originally with the Mandy's teeterboard act. Then we got married and she started riding.

DRAPER: It's a great family and I'm just trying to remember when they first came to America. It was in the 40's wasn't it?

ZOPPE: I'm not even sure of the dates. The funny thing is my dad came up to see this with me this year and I was really proud that he came up here. We were walking around yesterday looking at all the wagons. He sees this Cole Bros. wagon and he says you know what's funny son, I remember when I was a kid they had them on the show. Gee, that's quite a history. We took a picture by it and he says I want to have that to frame that.

DRAPER: At the Museum, we had Elvin Bale there this past opening in May. He was reminiscing on having been on the Ringling show when it laid over in Baraboo. He remembered seeing some of the things that were the sights of the town. It was sort of like a homecoming to him. Are you going to bring your children along in this riding or are you going to let them decide?

ZOPPE: It's kind of up to them. Really at this point I love it...

DRAPER: Was it up to you or was it expected that you'd do it?

ZOPPE: Oh sure. What happened is when he broke away from my Uncle Rico and they split up and the two families. My uncle he's a farmer in Oklahoma now and my dad wanted to continue on with the riding act.

DRAPER: Where about in Oklahoma?

ZOPPE: Soper, Oklahoma.

DRAPER: We lived in Bartlesville 40 years ago. I was with Phillips Petroleum.

ZOPPE: It's a little ways by Hugo there. So now my dad wanted to continue the act and so he started us kids practicing twice a day. There we went. The three kids and my mother and father.

DRAPER: It's hard work. I'm working on a paper now on the Davenports, Orrin Davenport and May and the whole group. The father of that group could not be a rider. He wasn't a rider. This goes back - he was born in 1838. You're talking now about a singing ringmaster about the Civil War days. He could never ride because he was too heavy. But he

was in the ring. He was in such close contact with these big riders and he became very interested. He was determined that he was going to have a rigging barn and he built three of them successfully - one in Kentucky, one in Toledo, Ohio and finally out of Madison and Chicago. He taught all of those children to ride and he also taught Orin Hollace. Orin Hollace was his brother and that's where Orin Davenport's name then appeared. That's where that came from. Orin, of course, was the one then that was supposed to have first done the horse to horse somersault. But maybe not in public. Maybe Oscar Lowande did it in public first. He was the one that started the shrine shows, the Moslem shrine in Detroit in 1906.

ZOPPE: Detroit was one of the biggest dates in the country for years.

DRAPER: That was the first shrine show, not the first shrine temple, but the first shrine show. What is your preference on performing indoors or outdoors or don't you care?

ZOPPE: It depends on what acts you're doing. When you're riding, that dirt is nice to be on. It saves you and it's easier on the horse, and it's easier on your legs. What we used to do in the summer time, we'd go to rodeos. My father kept us busy working rodeos in the summer time, it would slack off and you'd get in that dirt and boy you'd have to run. You'd have to jump for it and get up there.

DRAPER: And acrobatics, there's an awful lot of it. Did you do much trampoline work in connection with that?

ZOPPE: That's originally what we said we were going to do. You can do the somersaults and he tells me. He bought a trampoline and that's exactly how you learn coordination of your body.

DRAPER: About 1972 Evy and Mark were on Sells Gray and they came to the Museum there and I can remember Mark practicing with the trampoline there. That was the beginning.

ZOPPE: That's definitely good for you.

DRAPER: He was Antar Wazzan. I don't know whether you know him or not. He was showing him how he could throw a somersault with the sun casting his shadow on the tent. He could gage himself, what was happening. I can remember seeing that. I've known Mark for almost 20 years. I can't think of any other questions at the moment. I'm sort of overwhelmed being here in your presence asking you these things. I certainly appreciate very much your time. You certainly represent a great family and a great tradition. I wish you the best of luck.

ZOPPE: I hope the riders keep going.

DRAPER: I think that the circus is built around horses and the riding act. It's a classical act.