

Interview with Nellie Hanneford  
Interviewer John Daniel Draper  
Great Circus Parade Showgrounds  
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DRAPER: Nellie, how long have you been riding? You started quite early I guess.

HANNEFORD: I started when I was two years old and I've been riding ever since.

DRAPER: That's really quite a record. When did you start to do principal riding?

HANNEFORD: At two years old.

DRAPER: I imagine you prefer that over high school or do you have any choices?

HANNEFORD: I like all types of riding, that's why in my act I try to display all the different types.

DRAPER: I think it was very beautiful and I think it was very, very unique. Would you care to describe it just a little bit?

HANNEFORD: Well, I first start on my dressage horse and then I do a series of principal. Then I bring in my liberty horse.

DRAPER: The liberty horse is a different one from the dressage, was it not?

HANNEFORD: Yes, it's different.

DRAPER: How long have you been doing this presentation?

HANNEFORD: I just made this act last year. It was the first time I worked it.

DRAPER: It's a very, very unique, very beautiful. You do some wire work too don't you? Low wire.

HANNEFORD: Yes, I'm a low wire walker I guess you could say.

DRAPER: Is there any relationship between the equilibrium in wire walking and in principal riding? Anything at all?

HANNEFORD: I think it's...the balance is a lot alike between the wire and the horses.

DRAPER: I've done a lot of checking on equestrians and equestriennes, but equestriennes go way back into the 1800's and I've found that a number of them were wire walkers. There was a woman named Winnie Sweeney that was over on the Great Wallace Shows who did this. Lottie Imar was a very famous one - she was also a musician incidentally. She played the bell wagon, this bell wagon we have over here. She was the second instrumentalist on it in 1893. Are you in music at all?

HANNEFORD: No, I'm not.

DRAPER: You're not in music, okay. In riding in the ring, what size ring do you have in here? Is it a 42 foot about or is it a little less?

HANNEFORD: It's about a 38 I believe.

DRAPER: Do you have much trouble if you would change from a 38 say to a 42 foot ring in your equilibrium in a principal act?

HANNEFORD: Yes, you have to change it. In the smaller rings you have to ride with your shoulder a little more inside and when you switch to a bigger ring, you have to be careful that you don't fall outside.

DRAPER: The 42 foot ring is standard one I know. You know that goes back before 1800's. It's actually 13 meters is what it is. A meter you know is 39 or 37 inches. I know that because I taught chemistry. If you work it out, it comes out to be approximately 42 feet. That was discovered way back. It was supposed to give you more stick-to-it-ness or something on the horse's back from the centrifugal force forcing you in. I don't know whether that's true or not, but is there anything to that really you think?

HANNEFORD: I think there is. I think that's a good reason.

DRAPER: Sort of have to lean in a little bit.

HANNEFORD: Uh, huh.

DRAPER: In a fast finish act do you - you were in it here partially - you have other routines do you not on the principal act than what you've done here?

HANNEFORD: Oh yes.

DRAPER: What are some of them? Do you have sort of a fast finish act sometimes?

HANNEFORD: Yes, I can do anything on the horses.

DRAPER: You do a leaping through the...bursting the balloon so-called?

HANNEFORD: Go through the paper hoop?

DRAPER: Yea, which they call bursting the balloons?

HANNEFORD: I've never tried that, but that's one of my next things that I'm going to try.

DRAPER: You've heard of that expression.

HANNEFORD: Yes.

DRAPER: The early acts they usually had the rider do the posing on the horse and then they did the jumping over the banners and bursting the balloons. That was the second part. They had a clown stop in between. Then they had another clown stop and then they brought in another horse. It was a very fast finish act. Really whirlwind. When I was a kid I thought that poor horse is tired, so they're bringing in another horse. But it was actually that I guess they didn't want the horse to change pace. They didn't want a horse running slow and then running fast or he might change pace accidentally and be very dangerous, wouldn't it be?

HANNEFORD: I would guess so...

DRAPER: But that I think was the reason for the fast finish horse being a different horse. Have you ever heard of anything like that?

HANNEFORD: Oh, yea. We switch horses all the time. We have...I think that the riding has come a long way since the olden days.

DRAPER: Oh, yes. It's more beautiful than ever. Unfortunately, there are not very many people doing it today.

HANNEFORD: No, there's not very many principal acts anymore. I can only think of two right now that still do it.

DRAPER: Do you have any idea of why that is?

HANNEFORD: I just think that the art is dying out for some reason. It's becoming extinct. I don't know why because I think bareback riding is very beautiful.

DRAPER: I think it's the heart of the circus myself.

HANNEFORD: I really do too.

DRAPER: I think it starts with the circus...or it's the beginning of the whole circus. It's all built around it. Historically, it did.

HANNEFORD: I think so too because my family's been doing it for years and my mother before me.

DRAPER: I think and I'm quite correct in this that the Hanneford family which came here from Blackpool in England in 1915 with Barnum & Bailey have had except for the first couple of years, about 1920 when your grandfather split off from Poodles Hanneford and the two groups developed, they've had two riding acts. All the time and before that one and this has been continuous since 1915. There is no other family in America that has been continuously performing that long with the American public.

HANNEFORD: I don't think so, no.

DRAPER: I'm certain of that. Well, one other thing that I wanted to ask you here and I think I've forgotten my train of my thought. I have a theory maybe of why this has died out a little bit and it is that there's not a general appreciation of the audience. You can go back to 1902 with the Adam-Forepaugh Show and that was when the first horse-to-horse somersault was done in public by Oscar Lowanda. They carried on that show at that time about 30 principal riders. If you can imagine this. I think that people today don't appreciate what they're seeing. People can get up and do things without any practice at all - not that type of thing - but just riding high school. And in two weeks they go in there and they don't realize the time and the effort that has really been put in...

HANNEFORD: To the years of creating it.

DRAPER: To the real classic act. I have that feeling. I've gotten a little bit of that idea from the Herriots. Herriots are very good friends of ours. You know Johnnie Herriot I guess.

HANNEFORD: Yes, very well.

DRAPER: We've known the Herriots for many years. But I sort of have that feeling. I don't know whether that's a valid feeling or not, but I have the feeling because the general public doesn't understand horses the way they did once, they appreciate them more I guess when more people had horses.

HANNEFORD: You know I think that as times goes on hopefully in the younger generation after us, that will

help keep it alive. For the few of us that are left right now, I certainly will try and pass it on to my kids and I'm sure Mark will do the same.

DRAPER: Mark's got a great tradition too. Evy's grandfather, his great-grandfather, was on the Carl Hagenbeck Show in America in 1906. They were just here one season, 1906. His tradition goes back a long ways too. You're in that act with Mark and Kim and who's the other man that was in there?

HANNEFORD: We have two. We have Zega. I'm sure of his last name - it's too hard to pronounce. Then we have Gary Borstomick.

DRAPER: Then there's another young lady on it too, isn't there?

HANNEFORD: That's Dorion.

DRAPER: Did Kim come from a riding family or did she learn this afterwards?

HANNEFORD: Kim went to school in Sarasota and I guess they have Sailor Circus...

DRAPER: She learned it there.

HANNEFORD: Yea, and I think she got started, but she's been doing it a long time and she certainly is a good performer. She's very good.

DRAPER: The whole thing is so beautiful. Well, I want to thank you, Nellie for your time that you have taken. I didn't mean to intrude upon you, but I'm interested in circus history - equestrian history - and I'm trying to get together articles on this. I have an awful lot of information on the Hanneford family and I'm going to put that together in an article one of these days when I get time. I think you'd be amazed at the many places and shows, indoors and outdoors, that they have performed in over the years. You really are keeping up a great tradition.

HANNEFORD: I hope to.

DRAPER: I really congratulate you. Thank you very, very much. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?

HANNEFORD: I just hope that whoever reads it, will help keep the bareback riding and the equestrian circus world alive.