

**CWM Audio 4-11**  
**Albert White Interview, March 7, 1972**  
 INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT  
 Part 1

- Richard Flint: I'm speaking with Albert White in Sarasota, Florida on March 7th, 1972. Can we start by telling me how you got into the circus business?
- Albert White: Yeah. Good evening, Richard. My name is Albert White. I am a Whiteface picture clown. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland June the 14th, 1903. I come from a family of 11 children, and I am the only one of all the brothers and sisters that is in show business. I first started out in show business with the Walter L. Main Circus in 1929 and in 1930. Then we used to parade every day, and we used to give two and an eight o'clock performance.
- [00:00:30]
- [00:01:00] From the Walter L. Main Circus, I went to the Downie Brothers Circus, then owned by Charlie Sparks, who is now deceased. I was with Mr. Sparks' Downie Brothers Circus for six consecutive seasons, and I enjoyed every one of. In fact, it's really the nicest circus that I ever trooped with. We also had a make parade there, and those years, we never worked on Sundays, like you do today. We looked forward to our Sundays, so we could go to the hotel and really have a nice, wonderful day.
- [00:01:30] From the Downie Brothers Circus, I was with Mr. Ray Rogers' Circus out of York, South Carolina. It was then known as the Barnett Brothers Circus. I was with that circus for two years, and I had two very nice years there, and Mr. Rogers was a very wonderful man.
- [00:02:00] From there, I went to the Cole Brothers Circus, owned by Mr. Zack Terrell out of Louisville, Kentucky. He wandered on the fair grounds, and I was with Mr. Terrell for eight consecutive seasons, up until I went to the Ringling Show. I joined the Ringling Show here in Sarasota. We have six weeks rehearsal, then John Murray Anderson did the show then, and the second year that I was there, he brought on Dick Barstow, who has since then produced every production of the Greatest Show on Earth Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus.
- [00:02:30]
- [00:03:00] I have now, for the last five years, I have been working all the big Shrine Circus states. I work independent dates. I don't work as much as I did on the Ringling Show, but I ended my season with much more money than I would if I would work the way the Ringling Brothers Barnum Bailey Circus does today. In fact, I just come back from the Rogers Circus in Cleveland, produced by Mr. Paul Kay out of Hollywood, California. I'll be home now for about four weeks, and then I go onto Toledo.
- [00:03:30] I was in the motion picture "The Greatest Show on Earth" produced by the late Cecil B. DeMille, and I also doubled for Martha Raye in the motion picture "Jumbo" during the clown bits. I design and make all my own wardrobe, and right now I am

making wardrobe for a lot of friends of mine.

Richard Flint: To go back to your first few seasons on a circus, the Walter L. Main; was that the year it was managed by Andrew Downie?

[00:04:00]

Albert White: No. No. It was then owned by Honest Bill Newton, and his wife run the cookhouse. We called her a belly robber, and everybody on the show called her Hamburger Mary. Her name was Marry Newton, and everybody on the show detested her.

Richard Flint: Was that a truck show? Or?

Albert White: That was a truck show, yes.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about life on the truck show? You were on that one [crosstalk 00:04:22].

Albert White: Well, life on the truck show is a lot different than that on a railroad show. I forgot to mention I was also with Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus and the Sells-Floto Circus, but life on a motorized show is, like I say, it's so much different than that on a railroad show, 'cause the show moves at night, right after the performance, and you get up in the morning. If you wanna ... You couldn't go to the cookhouse, with cookhouse opens from seven to nine. After nine, if you're not to the cookhouse, you miss your breakfast.

[00:05:00] We dressed then in the pad room, just like we did, when I first went to the Ringling Show, and I guess you know what the pad room is. It's partitioned off. The ladies side of the dressing room. The men's side of the dressing room. In the end, they use all the ring stock that they use in the circus ring. You would get up early in the morning to do your own washing and things like that. You did your performance every day at two and eight o'clock. Sometimes, when we had a late arrival, which was many, many times due to a long jump. Why they wouldn't put out the big top, they'd just side wall the circus, and they would put up the regular feats and we worked out in the daylight. But that didn't happen too often.

[00:05:30]

Richard Flint: Do the truck shows carry many clowns [crosstalk 00:05:51]?

Albert White: Then? Yeah. Yes, they did, and they carried many, many name clowns today. Now, when I was on Charles Sparks' Downie Brothers Circus, we had some of the biggest clowns that ever lived. Today, a lot of them have deceased, which you don't find today, and it was really nice working then. It was a much happier medium in show business then, than it is today. Like today, now, with the Ringling Show, they have this clown school, that they break in these young boys from six to eight weeks, but I'm gonna talk from my experience. You cannot make a clown in eight weeks, 'cause it comes with years of experience and hard years of experience too.

[00:06:30]

Richard Flint: You made some comments earlier about Charlie Sparks. Can you tell me a bit more about him as a person to work for?

[00:07:00]

Albert White: Mr. Sparks was ... His right name was [Gindall 00:07:00] Sparker, and he run the cleanest circus that I think that I was ever affiliated with, and what I think about Mr. Sparks and his wife Ms. Abby: they were wonderful people. They used to go through the ... I was also on their railroad show, which I forgot to mention. They would go to the sleepers every day, and the sleepers have to be just so. One nice thing about them: they both ate in the cookhouse with all the personnel at the staff table, and they were served the same food that the performers and the roustabouts ate.

Richard Flint: That was not true for most other managers?

Albert White: Most other circuses: the staff table, they were served food that weren't even given to the performers. Like if we would have roast beef, they would have probably steak or a filet mignon or something like that.

[00:08:00]

Richard Flint: You mentioned you worked for Charlie Sparks on his railroad circus, and so you started in the business before you were on the Walter L. Main Show?

Albert White: Oh, yes. I was always interested in theatrics. I had a very, very nice voice, and I used to sing in movies. They would have contests, and I won several amateur contests, singing then.

Richard Flint: You said you were on Sells-Floto and Hagenbeck-Wallace. Is that when they were corporation?

[00:08:30]

Albert White: No. When Sells- Floto Circus was when I belonged to the corporation, but when I was on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, powered by Jerry, who is now deceased, he managed the show, and Poodles Hanneford was then the equestrian director and Poodles, who was a very good friend of mine, he's also gone on now.

Richard Flint: Right. Right. Can you tell me something about the clown numbers back in those days? [Crosstalk 00:08:54].

Albert White: The clown numbers that they used in those days. Now, for instance, we do the levitation gag. We would do the clown wedding. We would do the clown band, which today you don't see, and in fact, when we did a clown band on the Cole Brothers Circus, I was fan dancer with the exaggerated bust and the exaggerated hips. When I'd come out to the ring, they'd strip this cape off of me, and I'd go into my fan dance replica of what Sally Rand used to do, and when I used to come in the ring, they would announce me as Rally Sand the Fan Dancer.

Richard Flint: Who were some of the producing clowns, back in those days, that you worked with?

Albert White: [00:10:00] Some of the producing clowns back in my day was Arthur Borella. He was a fantastic clown. He was known for ... He used to go and do all the publicity ahead of the show. He would go to the different clubs, and he was like an after-dinner speaker, and he was noted for his scissor. Another very famous clown that I worked for, who I'm going to work for was Paul Jung on the Ringling Show. I worked for Paul for many a year, and he was one of the finest, finest producing clowns, that I ever worked for.

[00:10:30] Then I worked for Jerry Banks, who I am going to work with this fall on the Texas Shrine dates, which is in Dallas, San Anton, Austin, and Fort Worth. It's a 43-day engagement, and Mr. Banks is going to be the producing clown then. Then I worked [00:11:00] with such clowns as [Myron Alton 00:11:00], Paul Jerome, Felix Adler, the Nelson brothers. I can go on and on and on, but I've mentioned some of the famous ones, whose names will never die.

Richard Flint: Are there any particular incidents, that you like to recall about [crosstalk 00:11:17]?

Albert White: [00:11:30] Yes. We were in several blow downs on the Ringling Show, and in fact, this one Sunday, we were playing up through the east, and we had just finished the matinee, and we were getting ready. Didn't have about an hour between the matinee and the night show, when this big storm come up and it blew the big top and it was just a terrible thing.

[00:12:00] When I was on the Cole Brothers Circus in 1943 in Galveston. I was also in a blow down, and for five days, we weren't able to show. All the performers, everybody, got out and repaired the big top, and our next stand from Galveston we went into Shreveport, but Mr Terrell was very nice and he paid us and he gave us a cookout and everything during the five days that we were off.

Richard Flint: If you don't mind, what sort of salaries do clowns make in the early days?

Albert White: [00:12:30] In the early days, if a clown got \$35 a week salary, that was considered a nice salary, which today you can't even work a day for that, much less a week, but then we had our sleeping accommodations and the show transported us and we got our three nice meals in the cookhouse, which was in your contract. Now, today, when [00:13:00] you go out with a show, the show does nothing like that. Like on the Ringling Show: everybody has to feed themselves. They have to pay for their birth, but the show does transport them, actually out of town on the train.

Richard Flint: We got talking earlier about superstitions and so on ...

Albert White: [00:13:30] Like years ago, on a circus, it was a superstition for people to wear yellow tights. You never heard whistling in a dressing room. You never heard people eating peanuts in the dressing room. That was all a ... And a harmonica. If anybody played a harmonica, like the roustabouts used to do, they would run them off the lot. That was just out of the question, but today, everything goes. You don't have those superstitions today like we had in the younger years.

Richard Flint: Is there any reason why there were some of these superstitions? Do you know?

Albert White: They claim that ... Sometime somebody like aerialist: if they wore yellow tights, they always said that they were gonna have an accident. That they were gonna fall or something, but like today with these fantastic colors we have, they don't think anything of it. It's just like if performers say, especially, while the Catholic performance that was there. They always bless themselves before they go in to do their act, and they always hope for the best that nothing happens.

[00:14:30]

Richard Flint: Are there any particular performers you remember, who were especially superstitious at all?

Albert White: I can't mention all of them, as far as that's concerned, but like I say, the younger generation that you work with today ... We work with quite a lot of foreign acts today that years ago we didn't have. America had wonderful performers. See, today, they go over to Europe and bring a lot of these acts, just like the Ringling Show. They bring them from behind the Iron Curtain, and most of their performers that they bring over are schooled over there like in Poland and Czechoslovakia and in Bulgaria and when they come to this country, when they do their acts, they wear a mechanic. See, where years ago, you would never see anything like that, but I guess it's the law over there, and when they bring them over to this country, I guess they have to see to it that they have them work with a mechanic.

[00:15:00]

[00:15:30]

Richard Flint: Are there any incidents regarding superstitions that you can remember of people bringing a hat in or ...

Albert White: Oh, and then another superstition is like if a person come to visit you, especially if they would visit you in your compartment, and they put a ... Putting a hat on a bed is a terrible superstition. Today, I wouldn't even do in my own home, as far as that's concerned, but it's just a superstition, and we carry it too. I'm talking about the old timers. The young ones today: they'll never know those things, so they'll never have the experience that we had, 'cause a lot of the young ones start out today: it's a novelty to them for a while, and after, oh, six or eight months or a half a season, they say, "Oh, this isn't gonna get me anywhere," and they quit. That's the trouble with the Ringling Show today. The two units of keeping these young clowns.

[00:16:30]

See, there's so few of the old ones, and we ... Like I say, when you get a little older, you have to step back and let the young ones come in and take over, but the trouble with them: the older timers try to teach them, and after they've been doing it a couple weeks or so, they try to tell the old-timers. That's a wrong, wrong thing to do. After we've been through it and we've had the experience and they're just starting, but show business. I enjoyed show business much more, when we were under canvas, like on the Ringling Show. It was just fabulous, when we were under canvas.

[00:17:00]

[00:17:30]

Richard Flint: Why do you say that with the problems of more frequent [crosstalk 00:17:33]?

- Albert White: Regardless of the hardships, that we had to go through, even today, when you show in buildings, you have problems that arise, but years ago, when we were under canvas ... The spring of the year was very, very cold when we first started out. We looked forward to the nice summer, which was nice. Between shows, the performers used to sit out, and they would read. The girls would knit and they would write letters.
- [00:18:00]
- It was a much happier medium that performers got closer together, than they do today. Now like playing a building today, like we do. Right after the matinee, most of the performers have their own trailers. Right after the matinee is over, they go to their trailers and then you never see them, until time for the night show, which years ago on a circus we didn't have anything like that, and everybody was friendly. Not that they're not friendly today; don't misconstrue my meaning there. They're wonderful today, but it was much happier.
- [00:18:30]
- Like years ago: on Sunday, we would have picnics. Women on the show would ... Each woman would fix a different thing, and we'd go out to some amusement park or maybe we'd go out to some beach and we'd have a nice big spread of wonderful food, and it was such a wonderful get together. Today, you don't have those things.
- [00:19:00]
- Richard Flint: What were some of these activities? On the Fourth of July, there was usually ...
- Albert White: On the Fourth of July, the first thing they ... At the cookout, they would always serve a wonderful, wonderful dinner. After we would go to the cookout, we would all go to the big top and different performers would imitate other people's acts. Up to the working men and everything. This one's a bareback riders, this one's a wire walker, and this one would imitate his right to a T. Like I say: today, they don't have anything like that.
- [00:19:30]
- Richard Flint: What about the social life on the show? Was there much chance for that? Or?
- [00:20:00]
- Albert White: No. I would say you don't have too much social life on the show, 'cause sometimes single girls, when they're with their families and their stuff. When they're with their family squad, they ... Naturally, they like boyfriends and things like that, but who can they meet on the show other than the performer or a working man and stuff like that? They don't have the opportunities that the girl on the outside does of meeting nice people, 'cause you're around your people say, 32 to 36 weeks out of the season.
- [00:20:30]
- Where do you get to go? Maybe you're on three or four night stand in a big city after the show, like on a Sunday night. They'll all go out to dinner, go to a movie. They all look forward to that, but during the week, they don't have chances like that. Although a lot of marriage comes through girls on show meeting boys and ... But I mean the boys on the circus, and they're fine. They get married.
- [00:21:00]
- Richard Flint: It's usually within the circus then?

Albert White: Oh yes. Yes. They u-

Richard Flint: What was it like at the end of the season? Was that a sad occasion?

Albert White: Years ago, we used to hate to see the show come to an end, especially if it's such a morbid feeling at the closing performance, when the bands would get up and play Old Lang Syne. Nobody says goodbye, we just say, "So long," and if you were coming back the following season, "Well, I'll see you next season."

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It always left a little tears in your eyes, 'cause you really hated to see the show, but like today, when the show closes, people can't way to see the show close and go. Now some of your seasons are so long. It starts so much earlier in the winter time than it did years ago. See, we would always open up in the spring of the year, and we would close before Thanksgiving, but today, a lot of the shows close even after Thanksgiving and way up in December now.

Richard Flint: How did you get a contract the next season or change [crosstalk 00:22:17]?

[00:22:30]

Albert White: A month before the show closed, the management would send one of the personnel from the office around and you would sign like a paper that you would like to renew your option for next year. They'd come around and spoke to different ones weekly, but we'd like to have you come back again. Then you sign this paper, and those that they didn't want, they didn't ask, but you always knew a month ahead of time if you were gonna come back the following year.

[00:23:00]

Richard Flint: Was that a tense time, as to whether certain acts were gonna be back at all?

Albert White: Usually, as far as acts were concerned, they only kept the acts not more than three seasons, 'cause with clowns, we can always change our numbers. With acts, they do the same act year in and year out, year in and year out, and it's kind of hard for them to change, so they usually hire them one season with an option of the following season, but now if an act is good sometimes they keep them for three or four seasons.

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Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about life in clown alley and ...

Albert White: Life in clown alley is kind of nice. You know a lot of the boys. They played cards. A lot of the boys: they read. Lot of the boys: they have different activities. Some of them are athletic, and between shows, they like to play baseball. They like to play football, and they're a very jovial bunch of people, and they try to be that a way all the time, and especially when they're out in front of the audience.

[00:24:00]

Richard Flint: Do clowns like to play jokes on people or funny [crosstalk 00:24:19]?

Albert White: They used to do years ago, but you don't see that in the dressing rooms anymore,

[00:24:30] 'cause I tell you why. Like myself playing independent. Say you play a date, and then maybe a week later you're gonna play another date. You may not have the same clowns on the second date, that you had previous to the date that you'd played before. Now, we never know from one date to the other what clowns we're gonna have and what clowns we're going to work with.

Richard Flint: So you can't get to know them well enough?

[00:25:00]

Albert White: Like with us, we know all the name clowns, but these that are just coming up: some of them, I've never heard of, and we try to be very hospitable to them too, 'cause after all, they're beginners, and they have to learn like we did, when we started.

Richard Flint: See quite a few pictures over there in your makeup.

Albert White: Those pictures: that is me in makeup. We had a friend of ours that was stationed right out of Tokyo, and he found four artists over there, and we sent our eight by ten publicity pictures and on the back of the pictures, we wrote the colors, and they paint just right from the picture. This friend of ours, his name is Diamond Jim Parker. He is stationed now in Albany, Georgia, and he says they have the most fantastic artists over there. They can paint anything. But anyways, all of those were painted in Tokyo. Aren't they beautiful pictures?

[00:25:30]

Richard Flint: Oh, they are.

Albert White: Yeah.

Richard Flint: Is that the makeup you started [crosstalk 00:25:58]?

[00:26:00]

Albert White: That's ... Well, yes. That's my makeup, and like I said, when I first started, I am known as a Whiteface picture clown, and I could work in all entrees. I work in the meet and greet. I work in the come-in. I work throughout the entire program. Go in the spec, go in the finale. That's what is expected of us.

Richard Flint: Now, is that the style of face you started with?

Albert White: No. I have improved my makeup. I can put many types of makeups on. I can put tramp makeup on. I can put character makeup on, but I deal myself as a Whiteface clown, and I use that type of makeup, 'cause all my wardrobe is very elaborate. Now, you will notice. See all of these I make myself, and I have costumes to go with everything. That's why, like I say, I call myself a Whiteface picture clown.

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The majority of clowns today are getting away from Whiteface more and more, 'cause it involves ... It's very hard to keep a wardrobe up today, especially with your laundry problem and sending clown [inaudible 00:27:08] is very expensive today. Today you don't see as much white wardrobe as you did even 15 years ago, 'cause, like I said, it's the expense problem. Today, most all clowns go in for very bright



psychedelic colors, and the colors today are just fantastic anyway.

[00:27:30]

Richard Flint: Right. Yeah. They really are. Can you tell me a little bit about how a clown puts on a face? What goes on first [crosstalk 00:27:35]?

Albert White:

The first thing that you do ... We have a makeup cap that we put on top of our head, to keep the powder and the oxide of zinc, which the makeup is out of, out of our hair. The first thing you do is you apply your white, and now, like myself, I take the white off of my mouth, and I take the white off of my nose, and then I powder down very, very heavy. The idea of your makeup is to look velvety. Real smooth, and not a greasy appearance. Then I start with my nose. I outline my nose with red. I put my red mouth on, then I go work with my eyebrows with ... I use Maybelline makeup pens. It's contoured very, very dark, and then your eyebrows, then your eyes. Then the finish you use the tears and your mouth.

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After you got all your colors on, you powder very heavy again, and then you take your dusting brush and you get all this excess powder off your face. Like I said, the idea of a makeup is to look very smooth and velvety. The main thing, which a lot of clowns don't do today, and I'm gonna mention this 'cause I am an old-timer, and I've always done it. Makeup behind my ears and bring it down in back of my neck, 'cause I was with shows years ago. If a clown didn't put makeup on his neck, the management would come and say to them, "What's the matter? Do you have arm trouble? You have that makeup on tonight on back of your neck," and it was there.

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Like I say, some clowns today just put ... Which, to me, looks terrible. They're just the face and the ears not made up, but, like I say, I come from the old school, and we really have to do it that a way. I think once you live to that tradition, you never get it out of your system.

Richard Flint:

When do you put the skullcap on?

Albert White:

[00:30:00]

I put my skullcap on after I am all made up, my hands are washed, and the first thing I do is put my skullcap on and my hat, then I put my dicky and my collar in my pants, and then my coat. Always go in for every number with white gloves, which a lot of clowns today don't do. But like the old-timers, we were always taught that way. Always use and your gloves better be clean and your tennis shoes better be white. Nice and clean too.

Richard Flint:

What are the major types of clowns? You're a Whiteface.

[00:30:30]

Albert White:

Whiteface. There is a tramp character. There is the Auguste clown, which is a foreign type of clown. There is the rube clown, which you don't see anymore today. There is the ... I did mention the tramp clown. There is the Auguste clown, which is a foreign type of clown, too. Now, see, the clowns today ... The Whiteface clown is really slowly dying out, 'cause a lot of people don't want to bother with it. It takes a lot of time, and you have to carry much more wardrobe, than you do if you're doing

[00:31:00]

a character. You can throw one trunk, one big pair of big shoes in a trunk, you can carry one hat, and you're set for the season. With us, we have so many changes, and it takes a lot of room carrying them, and it takes a lot of care.

[00:31:30]

Richard Flint: Now, do the, say, the Whiteface and the Augustes and the tramps clowns have specific roles in the gags? [crosstalk 00:31:36].

Albert White: It's up to the producing clown. Now, the producing clown: when you go on a show, that he'll set all his numbers. Usually, he'll give ... Everybody can't have a principle part. Some of them have to be fill-ins, but now he'll pick his men and say, "Well, now I want you to do this part. I want you to do this part." He has wardrobe and

[00:32:00] every man in the clown alley has some part in every one of his numbers. See now, usually when Paul Jung produced on the Ringling show, he built all the props and the commercials that you know for that Ringling Show, and I think, for me, he and Paul Wenzel and Jerry Banks are the greatest prop dealers that ever lived. I don't think you'll ever find prop dealers like them again. That's just ...

[00:32:30]

Richard Flint: Your opinion.

Albert White: ... my opinion, and really the truth, but not because I just worked with him for so many years, but I had seen so many producing clowns come on the show with gags that was just ... They looked homemade like. The idea of when you're gonna do a gag, your props and everything, is to look very professional looking.

[00:33:00]

Richard Flint: I noticed that there are an awful lot of Shriners that put on clown [crosstalk 00:33:05].

Albert White: Most of your Shrine dates today that I play, and like I say, I play the largest Shrine dates throughout the United States. The Shriners: each temple has a Shrine Club, and they do wonderful things throughout the year. They make parades. They make visitations at the different hospitals, regardless of creed or color, and they really do wonderful things. When the circus comes to their town, they work in the lobbies. Most of them do balloons. Make nice balloon figures and things like that, but they never come down on the floor to work with the professional clowns, but they do go up through the seats and meet and greet. Like I say, they're not allowed to come down with ... There's some very, very fine men there. They're big professional men that do that.

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[00:34:00]

Richard Flint: In your travels with the Cole and Ringling and other shows, were there certain parts of the company that were better or more receptive to the clowns?

Albert White: You take like when I was with the Ringling Show. See, you'd always open up at the Madison Square Garden for six weeks. From there, we'd go to Boston. The New York audience is a very receptive. From there, we would go to Boston. Boston is the coldest audience in the country.

[00:34:30]

- Richard Flint: This is for clowning?
- Albert White: Not only for clowning. For any show that comes to Boston. They're just a very, very cold audience. You take like Chicago is a very, very warm audience. On the West Coast, Hollywood and Los Angeles is a very ... In fact, anywhere west, going west of Denver, you'll find the audience very well and receptive, not only to clowns, but the acts as well. Chicago, especially, is ... Clowns can just go out in front of the audience and stick up the finger and the audience just laughs like there's no tomorrow.
- [00:35:00]
- Richard Flint: What about the South?
- Albert White: The South: they're a little more reserved than they are up to the East and up to the North, 'cause lots of time there, they hate to laugh or applaud, 'cause they're so afraid their neighbors could see them and they don't want to be shocked. That's how we've always found it to be.
- [00:35:30]
- Richard Flint: Is there any incidences along the way? Specific things that you can think of, that you wanna tell about? Go right ahead. You mentioned, of course, blow downs, but I was thinking in particular, when show people get together, what tales do they exchange?
- [00:36:00]
- Albert White: Naturally, when show people get together, the first thing they tell about, "What kind of season did you have? Where are you going next season? What kind of contracts are you ..." Their conversation always pertains to show business, which they just can't get away from, 'cause it is their life.
- Richard Flint: Not to pry, but going back to that show folks dinner, what was your conversation wrapped around there?
- [00:36:30]
- Albert White: My conversation was all the people other than the show people, was to find out how they were, but most of the show people, you asked them about what kind of contracts that they have. That's just everyday conversation with show people.
- Richard Flint: Are there any tall tales that were ever told among show people? I was thinking of stories of jokes that you played on somebody else, 'cause you mentioned superstitions, which is [crosstalk 00:37:03].
- [00:37:00]
- Albert White: If I could get a little risqué, this happened on the Coles show in 1944. We were in Cairo, Illinois, and we had the Sunday off, and we all went to the cookhouse, and we had lunch. Being a Sunday, everybody straightens out their trunks and we were doing our washing. They had the elephants out on the picket line, and they had these two colored girls out in front of the elephants, and one of them must have been about 12 years old and the other, I imagine, about 16. The younger one kept feeding peanuts, and the older one wanted to go home, so she kept pulling at the little ... Pulling, "Come on. Mama gonna have dinner for us. We better get ready to go home." Anyway, the older one finally got very perturbed and she turned around to the little one, she says to the little one, "If you don't quit feeding them elephant
- [00:37:30]
- [00:38:00]

peanuts, them elephants gonna reach out and grab you by your ass," and I never forgot that from that day to this.

Richard Flint: You mentioned elephants, and I think of spec and so on. What are some of the more impressive, from your point of view, specs that you've taken part in?

[00:38:30]

Albert White: On the Ringling show, I think the year we did the Greatest Show on Earth, I think that was a very, very fantastic spec, and ...

Richard Flint: Was that with the movie, you mean?

Albert White: We had the same spec for the movie, and we had it on the show. The movie was filmed in Washington and in Philadelphia, and some of the shots with Emmett Kelly and Little [inaudible 00:38:55] on the trampoline: they were taken out to the studio

[00:39:00]

on the West Coast, but when we made the picture in Washington, every performance we have a sellout, and the equestrian director, Count Nicholas at the time, would get up and announce to the audience that we're filming the motion picture, The Greatest Show on Earth, and anybody that does not wish to be in the film can go out to the ticket wagon and your money would be cheerfully refunded, but actually none of them ...

[00:39:30]

Richard Flint: They all wanted to be in the movie.

Albert White: Actually, they all wanted to be in the picture. Then when I made the motion picture "Jumbo", we made it out to the Paramount Studios on the West Coast. I was working at the time at the sports arena for Al Dobritch, who is now deceased. He put on a fantastic circus. The people that worked in the picture were out for the matinee, and then we would report for the night show. I had three weeks on that motion picture, and the people were just wonderful. Martha Raye and ...

[00:40:00]

Richard Flint: [inaudible 00:40:21]?

[00:40:30]

Albert White: Dorris Day, and they were all just so wonderful. They accepted us circus people so graciously, which at first we thought when we were gonna go out to the studio and work with these fantastic people, they would turn around and say, "Well, who are those just poor circus trash?" but they didn't. They were very, very lovely to us.

Richard Flint: You mentioned the Greatest Show on Earth spec. Any other specs or costume productions or ...

[00:41:00]

Albert White: I think the greatest costumes like myself that I ever had in specs was with the Ringling Show, 'cause when I first went to the Ringling Show, Brooks from New York made the costumes, and then in later years, Max [Waldy 00:41:14] made the costumes, but his costumes weren't as fantastic as Brooks' costumes. We would have to go. When the show opens the Madison Square Garden, we would have to

[00:41:30] go to [Leray's 00:41:28] for shoe fittings, and then we would have to go to Brooks for our final fitting of wardrobe. Then the night of the dress rehearsal, they had the dress makers there and the tailors and anything that had to be repaired. Some had to work all night long to get the costumes and things ready for the next day, but the costumes were just fantastic. I think Ringling Show was the most fantastic production cabaret.

[00:42:00]  
Richard Flint: What about the [inaudible 00:42:02] stage spec John Murray Anderson, Richard Barstow? Barbette also was ...

Albert White: Barbette is the aerial director.

Richard Flint: Aerial director.

Albert White: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and now on the Ringling Show, his [inaudible 00:42:14] used to be a flyer. She had the reputation of being the world's greatest lady flyer, which ...

Richard Flint: Only female to have done the triple.

Albert White: The triple. Yeah, she was, and she's a fantastic lady. Very fine.

[00:42:30]  
Richard Flint: Can you remember any of these directors? John Murray Anderson or Richard Barstow? Compare them. What sort of men were they to work for?

Albert White: John Murray Anderson was a fantastic man. He had a name for everybody. My name: he called me Spare Ribs.

Richard Flint: Why?

Albert White: I know you heard of Ernie Blinks [inaudible 00:42:51], the boy with the big  
[00:43:00] eyelashes. He give him the moniker of Blinks, which he uses today. Blinks the clown. That's all by Cecil B. DeMille. For every girl, ballet girl, every show girl on the show, he had a name for them, and that's what he would call them. When he'd come to rehearsals in the morning, when we rehearsed here in Sarasota, he would want to know all the gossip happened the night before, and we had to tell him too.

Richard Flint: For how many seasons did he produce the ...

[00:43:30]  
Albert White: He produced. I had worked for him for four seasons, and then he passed on. The second season I was on the Ringling Show, he brought Dick [inaudible 00:43:42] and his sister [inaudible 00:43:44], who is also now deceased. Dick [inaudible 00:43:48]: he's been there ever since then. He does a very fine job now producing his show. You don't have a time element that we had those years.

Richard Flint: What did you mean it was more [inaudible 00:44:01]?

[00:44:00]

Albert White: Today he had to do the show in, say, two and half or three weeks. Years ago, we had six and seven weeks rehearsal, before we went to New York.

Richard Flint: What was life in the winter quarters like? Did you spend your winters down here?

Albert White:  
[00:44:30]

We all lived. I have a large home here in Sarasota, and we would stay home, and then we had the personnel bus would take us after winter quarter. We would get our lunch out there at the cookouts every day, and then the personnel bus would bring us back to town every night. But none of the performers stayed out there. Just the working personnel stayed out there.

Richard Flint: There were public shows, who were given out there. Were you involved in the ...

Albert White:  
[00:45:00]

On Sunday, yes, and then on Sunday we would have to go out. They call us on a Saturday. Pardon me. On a Saturday, we would have to come out to do a show on Sunday, and then we would work here at the Ringling Hotel. We used to have a show on Saturday night and Wednesday night. I used to often have to go and sit web most of the night. We did it just free [gremis 00:45:18].

Richard Flint: Then if you want a job in the season to do a little extra.

Albert White: Oh yeah.

[00:45:30]

Richard Flint: What are some of the better aerial numbers that you can remember?

Albert White:

The last year that we closed in 1956, Barbette did the aerial number, which was a fantastic ... The trapeze, where the girls worked, and I happen to be one of the web sitters. It was a revolving trapeze, and the girls performed their different tricks, and then for the finish, we would give them the fast spin, like they do on the web. That was the nicest aerial number I ever worked in. In fact, I had a web in Cleveland.

[00:46:00]

Richard Flint: What's it like to sit web? What's [crosstalk 00:46:17]?

Albert White:  
[00:46:30]

I tell you. It's very hard, 'cause some girls ... The girl up there depends upon the boy down here, and everything he does, naturally, is gonna make her work better. Some girls like a tight web. Some girls like a loose web. It's up to the individual girl themselves. For the finish, a lot of girls don't like too fast to spin. I always got a girl, which I like to see that their body's just straight out in the air, and it really looks much nicer. See, some girls work a little more easier than other girls do.

[00:47:00]

Richard Flint: You were on that season 56, when the show closed.

Albert White:

When the show closed in July the 11th. I was in Pittsburgh.

Richard Flint: How did you get the news?

Albert White: The show had a late arrival, and the lot was just packed and jammed with people.  
[00:47:30] We did a four o'clock matinee, and Mr. Bob [Doer 00:47:31], the personnel director, as we were going in for spec, he said there will be a meeting in the boardroom tent right after the matinee. Then the people presumed that something was gonna happen.

[00:48:00] All the performers, everybody, all the working personnel, the prop hands, everybody went into the boardroom at 10, and it was closed up. It wasn't open to the public. They told us that Mr. North is closing the show here. Anyone wanting to ride the show train back to Sarasota may do so, and he made the announcement that the day of the after show is over with, and it was [inaudible 00:48:21].