

CWM Audio 4-13
Ed and Jenny Rooney Interview, March 9, 1971
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
Part 1

Jenny Rooney: Little Chihuahua

Betty: Okay come on.

Richard Flint: I just want to say [inaudible 00:00:09] preliminary. I'm speaking with Mrs. [Jenny Rooney 00:00:12] in Sarasota, Florida on March 9, 1971. To begin, can you tell me how you got into the circus business?

Jenny Rooney: [00:00:30] How I got into it? Some relatives of mine when I was seven years old, took me with them and they were circus people. And they took me with them.

Richard Flint: And what were their names?

Jenny Rooney: Hines.

Richard Flint: And what did they do in the circus?

Jenny Rooney: They were acrobats.

Richard Flint: Acrobats.

Jenny Rooney: That's the first thing that I learned was tumbling and somersaults and things like that. And then tight wire and trapeze.

[00:01:00]

Richard Flint: What was the first show you were with then?

Jenny Rooney: The first show that I was with was Van Amburgh circus. Did you ever hear of it?

Richard Flint: Yes.

Jenny Rooney: Oh you did?

Richard Flint: That's ... it was actually a very old title but it was used quite frequently.

Jenny Rooney: Van Amburgh?

Richard Flint: Right. Who was the manager that year?

Jenny Rooney: Jerry [Mugivan 00:01:21]

Richard Flint: And that was the very early corporation show then.

Jenny Rooney: Maybe you know more about it than I do.

[00:01:30]

Richard Flint: You were there. It was the American circus corporation.

Jenny Rooney: It was?

Richard Flint: Jerry Mugivan and Ed Ballard-

Jenny Rooney: Burt [Bowers 00:01:35]

Richard Flint: ... What was that first season? 190..

Jenny Rooney: I have no idea.

Richard Flint: No idea. Can you recollect who else was on the show?

Jenny Rooney: No.

Richard Flint: No, or what Jerry Mugivan was like as a person?

Jenny Rooney: Oh, he was a very nice man. And his wife was just a beautiful woman. Real sweet and nice, Mrs. Mugivan.

[00:02:00]

Richard Flint: What was the act that you did on the show that year?

Jenny Rooney: Acrobats. Nine people in our act.

Richard Flint: This is the Hines ...

Jenny Rooney: Kimble Troop.

Richard Flint: Right. What sort of acrobat ... what routine did you have?

Jenny Rooney: Well there were five men, and four children. I was seven or eight years old. And what they do is, they throw a child, somersault, catch the child on their shoulders then the child, girl or boy, does the somersault off the shoulders and lands on the ground or across to another mans shoulders.

[00:02:30]

Sometimes the child does that up three high you know? You've seen that.

Richard Flint: Who was your instructor when you were learning?

Jenny Rooney: Johnny Hines. The man that I was ... he was married to a relative of mine.

Richard Flint: Right, right. How long were you with the Van Amburgh Circus?

[00:03:00]

Jenny Rooney: Oh, I have no idea. That's going back so far. You know I'm old.

Richard Flint: I'm trying to pick your mind here.

Jenny Rooney: Yes.

Richard Flint: How long were you with the Hines Troop?

Jenny Rooney: Troop? Until I got married when I was 16 years old.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me how you met your husband?

Jenny Rooney: Yes. I met him in the parade with the Ringling show at that time. That's going back to Al Ringling you know? The young people weren't allowed to talk or they weren't allowed to keep company. They were fined if they were caught ... \$5 the first time, if they were caught talking. And \$10 and \$25 ... of course my troop was fined. I don't know what that was for, I guess they ... I don't know what that was for.

[00:03:30]

[00:04:00] Anyway, this now is when I was 16 years old. So that spring, my husband, Ed Rooney's family was with the circus, that circus. And so, everyone had to go in the parade. So when we saw each other at first, we liked each others looks you know? So he found out that the parade costumes, there was a man and woman, he found out that one was yellow velvet, and one was green velvet costumes.

[00:04:30] And there was another couple there too, twelve couples in fact. And he asked another young fellow if he would change his costume to match my yellow. And then when you ride in parades, you know, it's two near three hours in the morning and that's the only chance we had to talk. And by October 27th I think it was, we got married in Georgia.

Richard Flint: Unh huh. Wow. So it was because he arranged to sit by you in parade that-

[00:05:00]

Jenny Rooney: That was it, otherwise we would never have gotten to talk or you know, get acquainted.

Richard Flint: Were the young people not at all allowed to associate even on the lot?

Jenny Rooney: Yes, some. Mm-hmm (affirmative). But there were ... well I think the troops that they were with, you know in those days, they didn't want children to have any schooling or anything. That is true. 'Cause we weren't allowed ... I wasn't allowed to read a book or anything.

Richard Flint: Did you learn to read eventually?

Jenny Rooney: Yeah. Sure.

[00:05:30]

Richard Flint: How ... did you pick that up on the circuit?

Jenny Rooney: No, then later when ... there was a society and I think the name of it was the [Gary
00:05:36] society. And they went around and investigated all the children to see if they were in school. And we lived in a little town, Black Creek, Wisconsin, it was 200 population at that time. And they would close the circus season in November I think it was and then they'd go there. And then another woman who was my cousin and another little girl, a year younger than I am, you'll meet her in Baraboo, Mamie Ward.

[00:06:00]

Richard Flint: Oh yes, yes.

Jenny Rooney: That's my first cousin.

Richard Flint: Oh.

Jenny Rooney: And she was with that troop too. So we met some person, a woman from the Gary
00:06:30] society. Mamie and I, we were out playing and she asked us who we were and how old we were, and I told her we were circus people. And she said, "Do you go to school?" And we said, "No, we're not allowed to go to school." And then when the Hines troop got back to Black Creek, Wisconsin, they were forced to send us to school in the winters.

Then they'd go out with the circus again in the summer.

[00:07:00]

Richard Flint: What did your boss or the troop think of your getting some schooling?

Jenny Rooney: Well then he accepted it.

Richard Flint: He had to.

Jenny Rooney: He accepted it but whenever he caught me reading a book, I'd have to go out and practice after the matinee. You know, do flip flaps and work.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me the difference between flip flaps and jerks and the various tumbling tricks that you did?

Jenny Rooney: Yes, but you know that a back somersault, you don't touch the ground.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: You just do a complete somersault. A flip flap, you swing back, your hands hit the
00:07:30] floor and then your feet, that's a flip flap.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And a jerk, you stand on your hands and whip your knees and flip up to your feet.

Richard Flint: Is it a somersault?

Jenny Rooney: Oh no.

Richard Flint: No, it's ...

Jenny Rooney: It's a hand stand.

Richard Flint: Hand stand, and then back to the feet.

Jenny Rooney: Yes, you just sort of give yourself a little flip.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And your hands come up and your feet don't.

Richard Flint: Were there any other tumbling tricks that you can think of?

Jenny Rooney: Well I did all tumbling.

[00:08:00]

Richard Flint: Were you in the leaps? In the old days they use to have leaps [inaudible 00:08:02]

Jenny Rooney: No I was too little.

Richard Flint: Too little.

Jenny Rooney: That was men.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: There weren't any women in the leaps either.

Richard Flint: What about the races that they would conclude the show ... the horse races and so on, were you at all involved in any of that?

Jenny Rooney: No I was a little child.

Richard Flint: Just a little child.

Jenny Rooney: That was men, you know, in the races.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And roman standing.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: You've heard of that. And chariot races.

[00:08:30]

Richard Flint: How long were you in the Hines Troop then?

Jenny Rooney: Til I was 16. Til I got married.

Richard Flint: Then were you in an act after that?

Jenny Rooney: Then my husband and I had our own act.

Richard Flint: Your riding act. How did that develop-

Jenny Rooney: No it wasn't a riding act, it was trapeze.

Richard Flint: ... Trapeze, ah pardon me. How did you learn the trapeze? I imagine ...

Jenny Rooney: Well I had done trapeze with the Hines Troop, acrobats and trapeze.

Richard Flint: Right.

[00:09:00]

Jenny Rooney: And when Ed and I, my husband's Ed, left his family ... I told you they were on that circus too. They were bare back riders.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: When he left them and that was my business, doing trapeze, I went home with him to his mother and father and their home in Baraboo.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: Which you will see it if you'll look for it in Baraboo.

Richard Flint: What is the street address?

Jenny Rooney: It's 722 E. Street, and it's a big white two story house on the corner. And that's where we were. Let's see, then we went home to his mother and father who lived there. And then we went out to Ringling's, and practiced our trapeze act, and then we went to Chicago and had our own act. And we've had our own act, til we retired, ever since.

Richard Flint: A flying act?

Jenny Rooney: No, it wasn't, it was just a double trapeze.

Richard Flint: Double trapeze.

Jenny Rooney: Like the high school kids have.

Betty: Would you like to see a picture?

Richard Flint: Yeah, if you have-

[00:10:00]

Betty: Then you know what she's talking about.

Richard Flint: ... okay.

Jenny Rooney: And you know, the boy sits here and the girl sits here, and then they'd do the same tricks together and then he ... Did you do anything like that in high school?

Richard Flint: No, no.

Jenny Rooney: Oh. Well anyway, he gets, hanging by his knees but it's not by his knees, they call it a deadlock. And then he holds the girl tricks then he puts her back on the trapeze. But it is not a flying trapeze.

Richard Flint: Not a [inaudible 00:10:29]

Jenny Rooney: Not at all.

[00:10:30]

Richard Flint: When you said just trapeze, that's what I immediately thought of.

Jenny Rooney: And the house, that you will see when you go to Baraboo, his mother and father lived there. And Ed's older brother, who was with the Ringling show, he owned it. And then he was killed by a streetcar in Chicago after the circus closed.

[00:11:00]

Betty: Now see that's where Jenny is doing just a toe hold swing. They're just holding by their-

Richard Flint: Toes.

Betty: ... toes. I mean ...

Richard Flint: I've never seen that as a ... that's amazing.

Betty: And then this is you know, a hand to hand routine where she's doing a back fling.

Richard Flint: Right. I've never seen the toe to toe.

Jenny Rooney: Well we were good. We were one of the feature acts you know? Well then I was gonna tell you, so then the brother who owned the, it's quite a big home, he got killed. Why then, we bought that home and we owned that for years.
[00:11:30]

Richard Flint: When did you move from Baraboo?

Jenny Rooney: We moved from Baraboo, when the circus came down here, they're winter quarters, and I don't know what year that was.

Richard Flint: Well they went to Bridgeport.

Jenny Rooney: Yes.

Richard Flint: Did you go to Bridgeport with them?

Jenny Rooney: No, we did not.

Betty: Here's another trick where they did hands and feet. And they caught this picture when she is just suspended really in air. You see his hand is not grabbed her yet, he has just let go of her hands and he's going to grab her legs.

[00:12:00]

Richard Flint: Does the foot drop to his shoulder then?

Betty: Yeah, right in-

Jenny Rooney: On his arms I think.

Betty: To the hocks. His arm goes to her hocks and her toe goes around his ... You know, she catches like this. But you see, he had thrown her and let go of her hands. And as he let go of her hands, then he let go of her hands and grabs her legs.

Jenny Rooney: That's what made it a good trick because we worked as high as anybody else, without a net.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And we did things like that.

Betty: But this picture was caught, right in the change. You know, that's not easy to get a picture like that.

[00:12:30]

Richard Flint: No, and it's such a sharp one.

Betty: Yeah.

Jenny Rooney: That was good. Good picture.

Richard Flint: Very good picture.

Betty: Well I just saw this when I was looking through there.

Jenny Rooney: Well Mamie Ward, excuse me Betty.

Betty: Yeah.

Jenny Rooney: Mamie Ward, my cousin you'll meet. Oh you did meet her?

Richard Flint: I've met her once, but never to talk to at any length. I was just introduced to her.

Jenny Rooney: She's a very nice person.

Betty: This is 1933.

Richard Flint: Oh the golden jubilee.

Betty: And see it say's Jenny's coming home.

[00:13:00]

Richard Flint: Ah, yes. You were on the Ringling still then that year?

Betty: Yeah, then that year, yeah. This was [inaudible 00:13:07]. That's just talking about them coming home.

Richard Flint: Right.

Betty: I thought this was really [crosstalk 00:13:14]

Jenny Rooney: Do you have that old picture of the Ringling Brother's? Show him that. At the bottom on the other ... Turn it over.

Richard Flint: I think it's ...

Jenny Rooney: Turn it over.

Richard Flint: Did you know, living in Baraboo, you must have known several of the Ringlings?

[00:13:30]

Jenny Rooney: No. I only know Al Ringling and John Ringling and Charles Ringling.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: We worked for Charles Ringling.

Richard Flint: Right. Can you recall Al Ringling at all, his personality?

Jenny Rooney: No.

Richard Flint: Course he died in the 19 teens.

Jenny Rooney: Well after he built that theater there-

Richard Flint: 1915.

Jenny Rooney: ... I don't know if he lived to see it open or not.

[00:14:00]

Richard Flint: Yeah, he died in 1915. Let me see, yeah, 1916 it says. You were on the Ringling show when it was just the Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows correct?

Jenny Rooney: Yes. First we were on Al Ringling. He took out a circus, I think it was [inaudible 00:14:14]

Richard Flint: Oh yes 1911.

Jenny Rooney: Yes and that's the year that Ed and I got married. And I've been married 60 years. It's goin on 61 years now.

Richard Flint: Wow, marvelous.

[00:14:30]

Jenny Rooney: It is marvelous. You know we-

Richard Flint: Looks like you've got several years ahead of you ... many years ahead of you.

Jenny Rooney: I don't know. In the morning I don't feel like it. But anyway, what was I talking about? I wanted to tell you about Mamie Ward.

Richard Flint: Oh yeah.

Jenny Rooney: She's quite a person. And I haven't seen her in probably 50 years, do you think so?

Betty: Well not that long. They were during the war years so that's what? Almost 30 years.

[00:15:00]

Jenny Rooney: Working in different circuses, we didn't get to see each other. Not as much as I would have like to. But at one time she had the largest flying act in show business.

Richard Flint: Right. You ought to go up to Baraboo sometime.

Jenny Rooney: Well, I just don't think I'll ever leave Sarasota. I love it. It's nice and warm and you

know.

Richard Flint: Can you recall your season on the 4paw sells circus at all? You made parade then
[00:15:30] 'cause that's how you met your husband. How long were the parades? Were they a hard task?

Jenny Rooney: Well, as I remember, Cincinnati had the longest parade. Yes I can remember a lot of
[00:16:00] things about it. That summer I had a boyfriend other than Ed, you know, how young people flirt around. Well anyway, he was a clown and so in [inaudible 00:15:57] he was up on this clown bandwagon, they couldn't play but they just tooted you know? So I was riding my horse along and Mamie and we heard this terrible noise.

[00:16:30] Cincinnati's all cobblestones. And we heard this noise and this team running away and for everyone ahead of this big wagon float to know that the team was running away, the band just tooted and howled with their instruments and everything. So me, I rode over to the side of the road and I just fell off you know? And I fell in some soft cement, they were building a side walk.

[00:17:00] There I am, all soft cement you know, and my dress ... I had one foot in the stirrup and my dress went over my head and this woman that I was with, Mrs. Hines, she had always told us that we should wear like bloomers when we were out in parade or anything.

But you know I didn't. So here I am. In those days, they wore these big ruffled under things you know? And here I'm sticking up there with these big white starched panties and my boyfriend went by on the bandwagon. Oh it's the funniest thing. I never forgot that.

[00:17:30]
Richard Flint: Any other incidents that you can recall from the circus of that period?

Jenny Rooney: No.

Richard Flint: People that you remembered working with or were impressed with? Incidents in you act.

Jenny Rooney: No. Really I can't.

Richard Flint: You were with, you said the 4paw Sells in 1911. That year, they had an automobile loop the loop act. Do you remember that at all?

Jenny Rooney: Well I guess-

Richard Flint: A woman named Alouise Eddie?

Jenny Rooney: ... Oh no, I didn't know her.

[00:18:00]

Richard Flint: 'Cause she is from my home town and in fact lived with for several years, some distant relatives. I was wondering if you recollected her at all?

Jenny Rooney: No.

Richard Flint: She was on the show, I know that. After 4paw Sells, were you on the Ringling show?

Jenny Rooney: Yes, then the next season we came on the Ringling Circus.

Richard Flint: How many years were you-

Jenny Rooney: We were there 32 years, 32 years.

Richard Flint: ... Well in 1919, when they combined with the Barnum circus, was there quite a bit of friction between the two shows?

[00:18:30]

Jenny Rooney: Not the performers but the bosses. There always was John Ringling and Charlie Ringling. Charles Ringling had his performers that he hired, and John Ringling had his performers that he hired.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And I understand as I saw, the two brothers didn't get along very well. And whoever, was popular with John Ringling, was not popular with Charles Ringling and John Ringling didn't like the performers that Charles hired, so there we were. That's the truth.

[00:19:00]

Richard Flint: Who had hired you?

Jenny Rooney: Charles Ringling.

Richard Flint: Mr. Charles?

Jenny Rooney: But it would have been better for us if John Ringling had hired us. He was more powerful later you know.

Richard Flint: Right. You mentioned that there was quite a bit of fighting and feuding among the bosses, did this ever get into anything serious at all that you saw?

Jenny Rooney: Oh no.

Richard Flint: No? But there was no bickering among performers, Ringling to Barnum?

[00:19:30]

Jenny Rooney: Not at all. They just, to them it was just a job.

Richard Flint: Right. What sort of salaries, if I can ask, were paid in those days?

Jenny Rooney: Well we got \$225 dollars a week at that time.

Richard Flint: Was that good for the type of act you were doing?

Jenny Rooney: Yes, that was good for what we did, and we were tops and that was about tops. But now the stars, like Lillian Lietzel and who, [Ardeltey 00:19:52]

Betty: Then the big acts too, they were-

[00:20:00]

Jenny Rooney: Well that was more than ... That was troops, nine or 10 people and that's why they got possibly a couple thousand I guess. I don't know. But Ed and I got, for quite a few years, we got \$225 dollars a week.

Richard Flint: Right. And that would include your stateroom on the train?

Jenny Rooney: Meals, and we had a little stateroom on the train.

Richard Flint: What were your accommodations on the train?

Jenny Rooney: On the train, we had a ... oh about a six by eight stateroom. And in one corner was a little kitchenette. We had two beds, one above the other. But the upper went up like a Pullman.
[00:20:30]

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And we had a lavatory in the corner with a place up there for drinking glass and this and that you know, just like a Pullman. And it was very nice. I used to make our breakfast and late lunches after the show.

Richard Flint: On the lot, what sort of accommodations did you have?

[00:21:00]

Jenny Rooney: Well I never had a private tent or a private wagon like most of them.

Richard Flint: That would be the very star, top act.

Jenny Rooney: Well not exactly, but they say the wheel that squeaks, gets the oil you know? And I was sort of ...

Richard Flint: You didn't squeak?

Jenny Rooney: I didn't squeak. I do now, but it's too late.

Richard Flint: Were you then in the ... What sort of dressing room did you have?

Jenny Rooney: I dressed with the other women. There were about 64 women in there. But I had a nice space, a space of two or three trunks you know. I had my own chair and I could have whatever girls I wanted, next to me, which was Betty and girls that I liked. Young girls. I was a young girl then too.

[00:21:30]

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: But we had a nice time, you know, we were all there ...

Richard Flint: What sort of social activities did you have on the show?

Jenny Rooney: Oh we didn't have any at all.

Richard Flint: Anything to do to amuse yourself? You must have had some [crosstalk 00:21:52]

Jenny Rooney: Yes but there wasn't anything to do with the circus. What did we do? We used to go out and sit in the chair between the ...

[00:22:00]

Betty: Well for a while, you had you know, bridge. Whenever there would be foursomes of bridge that we liked.

Jenny Rooney: But not often.

Betty: But not often and then there wasn't enough time to go between shows.

Jenny Rooney: Where can you go in a strange town after matinee?

Richard Flint: Right.

Betty: We made sometime we made in later years-

Richard Flint: Why don't you come over and join this conversation?

Jenny Rooney: Come on over. Betty was 18 when she came on the show and she was graduated from high school.

[00:22:30]

Richard Flint: What year did you join the show?

Betty: In '34.

Richard Flint: '34? Did you do anything on the show?

Jenny Rooney: She worked with us.

Betty: Yeah, I did ... I was in the aerial ballet. Uh huh. Yeah.

Jenny Rooney: Oh I wanted to say this too, that my husband was the originator and the producer of the present aerial ballet. Through Sam [Gumpertz 00:22:56]. You remember when he was or you read about him.

Richard Flint: Right.

[00:23:00]

Jenny Rooney: You didn't remember?

Richard Flint: He managed it for the banks interest on the show.

Jenny Rooney: Sam Gumpertz?

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: Well he was manager.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And he came to Ed one day and he said, "Ed do you think you could produce and aerial ballet number?" And Ed said, "I'll try." So Ed got 42 girls, where's their pictures? Right over there. Forty two girls he trained and had that original aerial ballet. He's ever-

[00:23:30]

Betty: This is the very original one ... I'm gonna get the one that shows ...

Jenny Rooney: ... See, he trained all those girls.

Richard Flint: Wow. That's been an institution on the show ever since.

Jenny Rooney: Yes but I'd like Ed to get some credit so in your book, if you mention it, you might say that Edward Rooney was the originator and they-

Betty: And then this was a couple of years later when I was on the show.

Richard Flint: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Betty: That was one of the numbers the aerial ballet girls ...

Richard Flint: Beautiful, beautiful.

[00:24:00]

Betty: And this is where he taught them. This is the act that I was in.

Jenny Rooney: This was when the circus had quarters out here in Sarasota.

Betty: Over in the trees?

Richard Flint: Right. Right.

Betty: See among the trees?

Richard Flint: Right, right. Did you ever have to take part in any specs on the early show?

Jenny Rooney: I was Cinderella.

Richard Flint: Cinderella. Ahh.

Jenny Rooney: Mm-hmm (affirmative) There's pictures of it.

Richard Flint: What year would that have been?

Jenny Rooney: You know years to me, they just blend. Betty when was I Cinderella?

[00:24:30]

Betty: Oh it had to be in the 20's. Yeah, had to be in the '20's.

Jenny Rooney: Anyway, I was Cinderella and rode in a little old coach you know.

Richard Flint: That coach is still in existence up in a farm in Ohio come to think of it.

Jenny Rooney: Oh is it?

Richard Flint: Yeah. It was a pumpkin shape. Wasn't it?

Jenny Rooney: Well, it was just like a fairy princess coach would be, up on each side you know, and it had a little door footman up at the back and I don't know, six little ponies.

[00:25:00]

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And I sat in there with a little crown on my head.

Richard Flint: You were talking earlier about the dressing room and so on, it reminded me, were there ever any superstitions on the circus?

Jenny Rooney: Well the same superstition that is still in existence is, whistling in the dressing room.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: No they would just knock someone's head off if they whistled in ... literally, in the dressing room. That was taboo.

[00:25:30]

Richard Flint: Anything else?

Jenny Rooney: Well a funny thing that happened, has nothing to do with what you probably want to hear, but one day there were two old German clowns, old men. And they were in the men's dressing room, they were dressing you know and someone hollered, "Oh the lion is loose, the lion is loose." So these two old men, they stood up on their trunks and they looked over the sidewall, you know with their back to the aisle. And they were looking out over to see where the lion was and here's the lion walking right behind them in the aisle.

[00:26:00]

I thought that was very funny.

Betty: Here's Cinderella.

Richard Flint: Ah yes. I've seen ...

Betty: See she's got the glass slipper.

Richard Flint: I've seen many pictures of the backyard of the Cinderella float coming out. In fact some movies-

Betty: That picture is probably in here with that float. The are all the Cinderella pictures of Jenny. Yeah. Let's see where that is.

[00:26:30]

Jenny Rooney: Oh, I came across those but it's in that big fiber box. I just got some of these out that I thought you'd ...

Richard Flint: Yes. Chicago?

Jenny Rooney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Richard Flint: Oh from [inaudible 00:26:43] in Chicago. That's a close up of ... There was a picture here earlier of [Lietzel 00:26:53] can you recall here?

Jenny Rooney: There's a picture there Betty.

Betty: Yeah, is that one?

[00:27:00]

Jenny Rooney: That's her. But I thought that I ... there is two, the first one's down on the table.

Betty: She was wonderful.

Richard Flint: Ah yes, I've seen this. I've never seen this. Can you read what-

Jenny Rooney: Yes, she said, she wasn't an American, that's way. She writes like a foreigner. To my little ... my ideal circus girl, anyways she says. To a great little performer, my ideal circus girl, Lillian Lietzel. Jenny Rooney from Lilian Lietzel.

[00:27:30]

Richard Flint: Can you recall her act at all?

[00:28:00]

Jenny Rooney: Oh yeah. She was just wonderful, and a wonderful person, she wasn't like anybody else. You've heard about her a million times. She was very temperamental you know, but she was never boring I would say.

Richard Flint: This is a-

Jenny Rooney: Clouds ... that's my cloud swing .

Richard Flint: ... Well then you were in more than just the trapeze?

Jenny Rooney: Yeah we did two acts, I did the cloud swing ... Oh show him ... Almost every year
[00:28:30] that we were with the circus, I was in the center ring or Ed's act and mine together. I think we were in the center ring, this is an old lithograph of the aerial ballet.

Richard Flint: So you were the featured?

Jenny Rooney: In the center.

Richard Flint: In the ...

Jenny Rooney: And then all the 42 girls around-

Richard Flint: On the ladder. Right. Is that a single trap you did on the-

Jenny Rooney: That was my cloud swing.

Richard Flint: You did the cloud swing. They took a little liberty-

Betty: Well this just shows her ...

Jenny Rooney: The drawing just put a trapeze there.

[00:29:00]

Betty: With the trapeze too with Ed but not in the ballet she didn't.

Richard Flint: A little artistic license there.

Jenny Rooney: Yes. One [inaudible 00:29:06]. Whenever.

Richard Flint: What was the cloud swing, the routine?

Jenny Rooney: The cloud swing, was one rope as you saw, and I was in the center of it, and Ed my husband, was swinging me down below. And I wouldn't have done it if anybody else had been swinging me because they can jerk you off. Supposing somebody

[00:29:30] stepped on the rope you know? Stop you like a ... just shoot you off there. And I hung by my toes on this rope. No gadget, just hung by my toes and swinging and ...

Betty: Well like here's ... She's going into doing something there, but now ... that's going up but let me see. Here's where she does the break away from the-

Richard Flint: From the-

Jenny Rooney: Trapeze.

Betty: No this is the breakaway from [inaudible 00:29:57]

Jenny Rooney: Oh by my feet, yeah.

[00:30:00]

Betty: That's from the trapeze there?

Richard Flint: That's your husband there?

Betty: Yeah, that's Ed. There's that toe. I thought there just might be a picture to show you easy.

Jenny Rooney: There's not many of the cloud swing Betty, but there are some in that brown ... We got a big brown box that ...

Betty: Here's another picture of the cloud swing. It shows some-

Jenny Rooney: I was swinging by my toes outside when I did that for [inaudible 00:30:25] attractions.

Betty: Oh there's the ... there it is, there it is. She is in there.

[00:30:30]

Richard Flint: Is that you down front here?

Betty: Are you the first one or the second one?

Jenny Rooney: No, I'm up there with my hair done up. No down where your thumb is.

Betty: Right here. Right in there.

Richard Flint: Can you recall these other people?

Jenny Rooney: Ooh yes.

Richard Flint: Who were they?

Jenny Rooney: He was an ignorant, very ignorant acrobat.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: You know, nothing above the ears. You know what they say about the acrobats? Did you ever hear that?

Richard Flint: No. No what is it?

[00:31:00]

Jenny Rooney: It's just a saying that acrobats have nothing above the ears. And that's what he was anyway. And they had these three little girls, Mamie Ward and myself and another little girl. And they didn't have any more idea of raising children, than a hen mother with a little duck you know? Not that much even. And they were very mean. In the old days, the bosses of the children, were very mean and cruel to their kids. You know?

[00:31:30]

Richard Flint: Yeah.

Jenny Rooney: Maybe the circus doesn't like to have the public know that but that's true. That's true, if you didn't do a trick the way he wanted ... If I didn't do a trick the way he wanted me to, I'd get hit with a strap or his fist or anything else.

Richard Flint: Was this ... did it occur frequently or?

Jenny Rooney: No.

Richard Flint: You did your trick?

[00:32:00]

Jenny Rooney: Well I was pretty good at you know? I was a good performer. But when I was old enough, I was always pretty foxy. When I was old enough, there was a big fella, he was about six feet and very good looking Irish young man. And this one day, this ... Johnny Hines, over there with some agent and they [inaudible 00:32:19] ends or something and I missed a trick that he wanted to do a perfect act. So when I come out of the back door to run to the dressing room, I knew that I was gonna get it.

[00:32:30] And I started running and the performers wear these wooden shoes, wooden swap shoes they call them, and his feet were big and he picked up one of these off of his foot and threw it at me and hit me in the back and knocked me on my face. And everybody ran to pick me up. Well from that time on, this young man, he always stood at the back door when the act was on. When the act was over, he walked with me to the dressing room. So [inaudible 00:32:59] and see, he didn't dare do anything. So that was the last season.

[00:33:00]

Then soon as I could, I got married and I was very glad I got married.

Richard Flint: Were there any problems in leaving the act at all?

- Jenny Rooney: Oh yes. He was gonna throw us off the train. He was gonna throw me off the train because I ran away and I didn't tell him I was gonna get married. After matinee, in the morning in the [inaudible 00:33:26] Georgia, my husband and some other young men went down and got the marriage license and then after matinee, I just quietly walked off the lot and we got married. So then in the sleeping car, that night, I told he and his wife, and he wasn't ... He died in the insane asylum anyway. He was gonna throw me off the train.
- [00:33:30]
- [00:34:00] Well in the next half of the sleeping coach, were all the ticket sellers. Half stag and half performers. Well they didn't go to bed that night. They all sat up to see if he was gonna throw me off the train. But here I am.
- Richard Flint: So what happened the rest of that season? You were married ...
- Jenny Rooney: I worked with him and he treated me fine and Ed worked with his brother, bare back riding. And that fall, Ed and I went to his family, I told you, to Baraboo. And we practiced our own act and went for ourselves.
- [00:34:30]
- Richard Flint: How did you decide to have a trapeze act rather than your own joining the riding act?
- Jenny Rooney: Because, I did the trapeze and I figured that if it was easier for Ed to learn the trapeze than for me to learn bare back riding. You can't learn that in six weeks, we had a very good act going but to learn to be a bare back rider, that takes years. And besides, you have to feed horses, you had to buy them in the first place. You have to feed them when they're laying off and all. Most riders, that's a big overhead you know?
- [00:35:00]
- Richard Flint: I must remark, you were a very cute girl.
- Jenny Rooney: Well yes.
- Richard Flint: So ... very cute. Is Mamie Ward pictured in this picture here?
- Jenny Rooney: Yeah uh.
- Richard Flint: Can you identify the-
- Jenny Rooney: No, she wasn't in that picture. Mamie ward ... how'd she come in? She wasn't in here. Here's a boy dressed ... or is that Mamie?
- [00:35:30]
- Betty: That's Mamie. The second one, -
- Jenny Rooney: Well that's Mamie right there.
- Betty: ... the second one is Mamie.
- Jenny Rooney: I should send that picture to her?

Richard Flint: You mentioned that the first one is a boy dressed as a girl, was that frequent to his life

Jenny Rooney: No, but he was pretty. If you noticed his face. He had a very pretty face and he was short for his age. And he made a beautiful girl, they had a gold curly wig you know.

Richard Flint: Right.

[00:36:00]

Jenny Rooney: He got called more credit for his tricks you know, as a girl.

Richard Flint: As a girl ... right. Of all the-

Betty: This is that one I was gonna show you.

Richard Flint: ... Ah yes.

Betty: See it's the dive, real dive on that rope.

Richard Flint: Of all the tricks that you did, what would you regard as the most difficult?

Jenny Rooney: Well the most dangerous was swinging by my toes on the cloud swing because ... Have you ever tried to hang on a loose rope?

Richard Flint: No.

[00:36:30]

Jenny Rooney: This hand will go down, this one will go up you know. There's just no bar there to level off or anything. And I would put one toe on and then the other one on and let go and I was sure that Ed wouldn't pull on the rope while I was swinging you know?

Richard Flint: It's difficult enough on a bar but on a rope. Crazy.

Jenny Rooney: I was the only one. I was the only one in the world that ever did that without a gadget. You know they put hooks on their toes, but I didn't have anything on my toes.

[00:37:00]

Betty: Here she is holding by her toes on the rope.

Richard Flint: Yeah, this is why I started asking the ...

Betty: How old were you there Jenny? Was that before you married Ed?

Jenny Rooney: Oh yeah, bout 11 or 12 maybe.

Richard Flint: This is taken on the Ringling's World Greatest.

Jenny Rooney: Yeah, out in front of the side show for a free attraction. And when I did that, then I didn't go on parade.

Richard Flint: Was that better than parade would you say?

Jenny Rooney: Oh yes.

[00:37:30]

Richard Flint: What about with the riggers? Was there ever any problem of them not rigging things properly or-

Jenny Rooney: No, never. No, they had special men, of course some of them were men just joined in the spring and didn't know anything about rigging. But they knew that they had to put the ... They had a boss property man, he was wonderful. And he watched and then almost every act their own private rigging man and they paid him ... The show paid him, but then they paid him too to put their rigging's up. My husband, we had a good rigging man and he put it up but my husband, before the matinee, would go out and see if it was put up you know.

[00:38:00]

Richard Flint: Can you describe a little bit about the tipping that you had to do on a show. This was quite a system.

Jenny Rooney: Yes, we'd tip the waiters and the cook tent. And it was called a cook tent. You know when the hotel flag was up, it's on and when the blue flag is up, the meals are over. And it was customary, well the way they seated them in the cook tent, was the important people performers had tables together. And the stars, cause Lillian Lietzel ate at the table I did. But she didn't come in very often. She had a private tent and she was quite some person. We liked her real well.

[00:38:30]

[00:39:00]

And anyway, then the acrobats all ate together and the side show people, the freaks, they all had a table to themselves. They segregated people like that.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And then there was a big petition and there was the working men? And then in the front, they were was a stand where they sold fresh milk? But you could get if from the kitchen if you wanted to. Some people wanted more than that and they'd buy it. And-

[00:39:30]

Richard Flint: You then were given just one glass of milk?

Jenny Rooney: Oh you could have all you wanted. The Ringling show, anything that they had to eat in the cookhouse, which was everything in season. You know, strawberries, corn on the cob and anything and it was wonderful food and you could eat all you want. Seconds or thirds, if you wanted.

Richard Flint: Course there was a special feast on the fourth of July.

Jenny Rooney: Yes.

[00:40:00]

Richard Flint: And special activities. Can you remember any of those?

Jenny Rooney: Oh yes. I climbed a greased pole. Did you ever do that?

Richard Flint: I once was trying to.

Jenny Rooney: Well anyway, there was a girl and she wanted to do the act like my cloud swing. So she practiced it and she was good. And the only thing about her that made me provoke was whatever costume I wore, she'd copy it. And she was over one ring and I was over the other and so they teamed us up. Because Mr. Charles Ringling knew there was a little, you know, we didn't care for each other too much. They fixed up this party that ... Emily [Selvin 00:40:43], she's still here in town, should climb one grease pole and I'd climb the other.

[00:40:30]

[00:41:00] Oh it was a big deal. I had my trainers you know. So I put on a jump suit they called [inaudible 00:40:58] and they bound my arms with tape you know, so it wouldn't be loosened. You know the grease wouldn't ploop. And then i told her, that I was going to ... What'd I use, rosin?

Betty: I wasn't there.

Jenny Rooney: Oh you weren't there. Well anyway, I had a talk with her and I said, "Emily now I don't want to take advantage of you, I've got this suit on and I'm going to rosin my arms and hands and my legs, so you do the same if you want to." And she said, "Oh alright." So when I went to my pole and they said, Go. I just sneaked up on it. You know, I just put my hands up, carefully and got a lock ... leg lock.

[00:41:30]

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: Got my lock on it, then I eased up a little bit but she ran at it and jumped as high as she could and she went zoom, right down to the ground. Well she was covered with thick grease and so I won.

[00:42:00]

Richard Flint: You, when Lietzel performed, you were in one of the side rings weren't you?

Jenny Rooney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Richard Flint: What was it like working with Lietzel? I mean was it ...

Jenny Rooney: Well 'course I didn't know she was working and she didn't know I was working and all eyes were on her anyway.

Richard Flint: Just to fill in the ring?

Jenny Rooney: Yeah well, because of ringmaster always had an act everyplace, where everybody could see something going on, even on the ends of the tents.

[00:42:30]

Richard Flint: Are there any other performers that you particularly remember or that you thought had good acts at all? You were on the Ringling show for so long-

Jenny Rooney: Yes.

Richard Flint: You must have ...

Jenny Rooney: [00:43:00] I'll tell you, I wasn't [inaudible 00:42:46] I was kind of a loner. Many people knew more circus people than ... When I left the circus, I had very few friends and that's not anything to brag about. But I didn't chum with a lot of people. I had a few that I like real well. In fact two girls who were twins, they live on Bird Key now. Have you heard of [Kernen[inaudible 00:43:19] that owned the Clyde Beatty Circus?

Richard Flint: Oh Bonnie Kernen? Yes, they were two sisters.

[00:43:30]

Jenny Rooney: Twins and Gloria and they were our personal friends and my chums and still are. And they both now live on Bird Key, Gloria, Bonnie.

Richard Flint: Well what their last names,?

Betty: Gloria Karsky. Gloria Hunt.

Richard Flint: The Hunt twins.

Betty: They're mother is still living with Bonnie.

Jenny Rooney: With Bonnie and Bonnie has a home over there on bird cay and her husband passed away.

Richard Flint: Right' 62.

Betty: Yeah something like that.

Jenny Rooney: [00:44:00] And they were two that I had challenged. I'm a person I like a few people and I like them real well.

Richard Flint: That's mine.

Jenny Rooney: I hadn't got enough stamina or what ever to forgive myself. I'm not a [inaudible 00:44:09].

Richard Flint: Well can you tell me some more about the Ringling Brothers show. Going back to winter quarters, what was that like in Baraboo in the winter? What went on there?

Jenny Rooney: Cold. And then anyway ... you mean about the brothers themselves?

[00:44:30]

Richard Flint: Yeah and activities and quarters. Did you go there to rehearse or did you stay?

Jenny Rooney: I know we went to the elephant barn.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: And Ed and I when we'd be practicing our act, it would be up in the top it, it wasn't very high but the ... We practiced it. It was probably, well the elephants couldn't reach us, we were a little higher than that, but we'd be doing our little act you know, and we'd look down and here's one of these baby elephants would be walking around down there. He'd picked his chain you know? And then another baby elephant there as we came in the door to practice our act. He was right at the door and he'd make a swing at me with his trunk.

[00:45:00]

He didn't want to hurt me, he was playing.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: Make a swing at me and I'd scream and jump you know. And then I was in there practicing my act with Ed, that little baby would go through all the tricks that the trainer was trying to get him to do when we weren't there. And they'd beat him, and the big elephants would come over and you know they hover over the little one-

[00:45:30]

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: ... if ... when the trainer would start hitting the little one, the big ones would just crowd in on the little one. And they said, that little son of a gun, you know, when you're here, he goes through everything. He'd sit up and do all kinds of tricks and they couldn't get him to do anything at all when I wasn't there. Wasn't that cute?

Richard Flint: They should have put you training the elephants.

Jenny Rooney: Oh yeah, I'm scared to death of them.

Betty: Your parking lights are on, is that alright?

[00:46:00]

Richard Flint: Oh. How did you know you were gonna come back every season, because you were on the show for an exceptionally long time with any act.

Jenny Rooney: Always, longer than any other act.

Richard Flint: When would they come to you to tell you that they wanted you?

Jenny Rooney: In the fall of this previous, before the season closed in the Fall.

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: In September, October and it closed in November. And you always knew that you
[00:46:30] were coming back. And then you'd get your contract and then after years, when I did the ... swung by my toes out in front of the side show for free attention, when the parade come back-

Richard Flint: Right.

Jenny Rooney: ... Well Mr. Al Ringling, he promised Ed that if I did my act out in front of the side
[00:47:00] show, I wouldn't be put in parade. Well we found out then someone from quarters, came to us and said, "Did you know that Jenny's going in parade?" You know there's always somebody to tell you. And Ed said, "No." And the [inaudible 00:47:07] said to Ed, well I saw her costume she's gonna wear in parade, and Ed said, "Oh no she's not."

[00:47:30] So Al Ringling was down here in Florida, so Ed wrote him a letter and said, according to your agreement, Jenny's out of parade. And he didn't answer the letter. So Ed went down and turned our contract in to the office ... Ringling office and we quit. And that's the year we went to Europe. You know, we went to London, and Germany.

Richard Flint: About what year was that?

Jenny Rooney: Betty what year was it?

Betty: What

Jenny Rooney: When we went to Europe.

Betty: Oh. It was in-

Jenny Rooney: We worked the Palladium and the [inaudible 00:47:50] and ...

Betty: Early 30's. 30,31,33. You were there in '33 because you were back and-

[00:48:00]
Jenny Rooney: Then when we come back-

Betty: No not '33, '32, 1 or 30.

Richard Flint: Rather than parade you mean [inaudible 00:48:06]?

Jenny Rooney: No parade.

Richard Flint: Oh I didn't know they paraded then.

Jenny Rooney: At that time they did.

Richard Flint: I thought they [inaudible 00:48:16]

Betty: Oh no, they paraded when I started. I started late, but they were parading. I was in the parade in '35, '36, not '36 '35.