

CWM Audio 4-14

Interview with Jean Carson

March 16, 1972

Interview Transcript

- Richard Flint: I'm speaking with Mrs. Jean Carson in Washington DC on March 16, 1972. To get started, can you tell me how you got into the circus?
- Jean Carson: Through marriage. My husband was in the business. The first year, the first part of the year, we joined the musical show, because he was a press agent. "The Chocolate Solider". We went down to Cantonville, and that's when we joined there. [00:00:30] Then we came here, and of course he was connected with the circus, and that's how I got into it.
- Richard Flint: What was his job in the circus?
- Jean Carson: First he had the front door, then he had the ushers, for 35 years. That's when we had our own ushers.
- Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did that first year on the Barnum show? Which year was that?
- Jean Carson: [00:01:00] In 16. The latter part of 16. I had to make parade every morning. Get up at seven o'clock. We'd leave lots of time to eat. Wouldn't get back till noon. I did dance some. Some ballet, and a little posing, at first, on horses, and riding ranch. Outside of that, I didn't do much. You all work for the circus.
- Richard Flint: How many years were you on the show?
- Jean Carson: This is going on my 55th year now.
- Richard Flint: Never missed a year, then?
- [00:01:30]
- Jean Carson: No. Well, I missed for sickness. Just out, for about a year.
- Richard Flint: Can you tell me about some of the people on the Barnum show, life on the show?
- Jean Carson: On the Barnum show, when we combined with Ringling, we had the Hannefords on our show, a riding act. Did you hear of the Black Devils? They were one of the old bunch.
- Richard Flint: I had dinner with Mrs. Hanneford about two months ago, she [inaudible 00:01:58] .

[00:02:00]

Jean Carson: Yes. Well, let's see who else was-

Richard Flint: The Picchiani troupe.

Jean Carson: The Picchianis, the Belfords. I don't know whether they're in existence now. They had a wonderful acrobatic act, all women, and they were very, very good. We had another act, we had an Italian act of acrobats, too.

Richard Flint: The Florence?

[00:02:30]

Jean Carson: No. Let's see- and our flying acts, we had the Silbons, Yvonne [Header 00:02:35], Jack Header's wife. She was a [inaudible 00:02:39]. And the Siegrist, the Siegrist-Silbon, they called it. Very good. Big act.

Richard Flint: Can you tell me a bit about your accommodations on the trains, and in the show?

[00:03:00]

Jean Carson: In those days it was good conditions, very good conditions. You had all those little cars in your four sections. They were kept up well. Of course, now they have steam heat in there, and showers, and things like that. It's the same as everything else, it advanced. But those were the happy days.

Richard Flint: They say that when the Ringling and Barnum shows combined, there was quite a bit of bitterness between-

Jean Carson: A little. There was no reason there should be. There as a little jealousy there, is what it was. It wasn't the- because the brothers, that was alright, but a few performers, you get that anyway. There was a little jealousy there, but there was no reason, because the Barnum show owned both. The Ringlings owned the Barnum show, and they owned the Ringling show, so there was no reason to be jealous. But there was a little bit, I don't know why. We straightened that out.

Richard Flint: How many seasons was that around? Just the first year?

[00:04:00]

Jean Carson: The second year. First and second year. I went for the latter part. When they joined us- when they first joined us, they were that way. [inaudible 00:04:11]. Mr. Ringling had his own circus, with its own stars, really. That's where [inaudible 00:04:18]. They were all stars.

Richard Flint: Which Ringling was this?

[00:04:30]

Jean Carson: Mr. John Ringling. He was the big boss. Mr. Charles was- I always compared them with- John North and his uncle John were very much alike. Very aristocratic. Buddy

- was Henry North. He was like his uncle Charles. He was real down-to-earth. If he met you, it wouldn't make any difference if you were in rags, or anything else. No, he'd come up and say hello to you and everything. Of course, I knew them as schoolboys, when they came here with all the [inaudible 00:05:00].
- [00:05:00]
- Richard Flint: They came on the show in summers.
- Jean Carson: Yes, they spent their vacation with us.
- Richard Flint: In fact, they worked on the ticket box.
- Jean Carson: Buddy did, but not John. He was around. But Buddy, Henry -- everyone called him Buddy -- he worked front door, and he was on site. He made it on time, though, to get under the canvas. Everybody got along. They were nice boys. They set this up. Mrs. Charles, she's been through with Mr. Charles, he managed the Ringling Show, he was head of that. And Mr. John Ringling was the Barnum show. Of course, those on the Barnum show considered themselves the biggest show, which it was.
- [00:05:30]
- [00:06:00] In that respect, the old bunch was always together. Mr Hutchinson was our treasurer, he'd been there for years, and all these different ones, they were there on the show for years. That was great
- Richard Flint: What was life like for a generally useful girl on the Barnum show compared with the recent years. Has it changed?
- [00:06:30]
- Jean Carson: Yes, a big change. A girl then, if she was a dancer, or could make parade, or was a pretty girl, did things like that, and posed, she could do the ballet or she could dance, get out there, do that part of it, if she had a nice figure, and not too heavy. Why, there wasn't too much for her to have to do. But now, when a girl joins the show, she has to be thorough. She has to know acrobats, and she has to learn the whip, that's a must for them here.
- [00:07:00]
- [00:07:30] You'd be surprised how many girls come here have never seen one before. Now, they have so many gymnastics at school that the girls are a little bit ahead of times in that. But those days, you couldn't get an act. It wasn't as easy for you to get somebody to practice, because they had their own people. But now, you see a girl come on and she can get ahead. It's different. Of course, you don't have to get her to make parades. She works in three shows a day, and all these numbers.
- Richard Flint: There was a -- I'm going to keep watching the tape as I'm running out -- there was a song that was on the show, something about "If you worked on the Barnum show, you didn't have to make parade." Do you remember that?
- [00:08:00]
- Jean Carson: No.
- Richard Flint: That was probably from the earlier years, they were talking about.

Jean Carson: You had to make the parade when I was here.

Richard Flint: There were a couple of years that the Barnum show didn't parade.

Jean Carson: I guess when they came back from Europe, they probably didn't.

Richard Flint: Yes. Or a couple of years there. Siegrist was telling me about this song, I couldn't recall all of its verses.

Jean Carson: No, I couldn't either. I wasn't around when they did that.

[00:08:30]

Richard Flint: What about superstitions on the show?

Jean Carson: No whistling in the dressing room.

Richard Flint: Is that still true?

Jean Carson: No, it isn't. This new tradition, they don't do things like that. A kid once in a while will say, "We wouldn't do that in the old days," but they were. Some of them were really superstitious. The other thing was, if the camel backed up did they tell you- they didn't tell you, did they?

Richard Flint: Some of them, but I'm just trying to gather a lot of-

[00:09:00]

Jean Carson: If the camel backed up- oh, that was going to be bad. I would tell there was nothing to it. That's just superstitious people.

Richard Flint: Any other superstitions?

Jean Carson: That's about it. That's the main thing I remember, the whistling, and- oh boy, they'd throw you out, if you started whistling in the dressing room. In the girls'. I don't think they bothered as much in the men's place. I don't think they bothered so much in the men's dressing room. In ours, they really bothered.

[00:09:30]

Richard Flint: What about social life for a young person on the show, then as compared to now?

Jean Carson: Now, it's much more. They do get together. We had gatherings, and it was like one very big family. If you had a day off, everybody got together, and you went swimming, or you had, as they called it, a Mulligan, a picnic, a big picnic. You were close, because you were under canvas, and you were all together. Now there's different dressing rooms, and separate rooms, and things like that. Yes, and the wardrobe was right outside of our door. Yes, it was different, yes. But happy days, too, they were.

[00:10:00]

Richard Flint: You'd do it again?

Jean Carson: [00:10:30] No, I wouldn't want to do it again. I didn't know any better. It would rain, and you'd have mud and everything, you accepted it, and you cleaned all your shoes and everything, and the next day, if the sun was shining, why, you never thought about yesterday. But now, if you're in the building, it makes no difference. Unless the building leaks, which it occasionally does.

Richard Flint: You were on the show in 56 when it closed under [crosstalk 00:10:52].

Jean Carson: Yes, yes.

Richard Flint: Can you remember the news about it?

[00:11:00]

Jean Carson: Yes. We couldn't believe it, ourselves. We were in Pittsburgh. They even flew from New York to Pittsburgh, because people could not believe that this big show would ever have trouble and close.

Richard Flint: How did you get the news yourself? Do you remember?

Jean Carson: They told us. They announced it in the dressing room. We couldn't believe it. We thought, "Oh, this will never close." That's the feeling we all had. But we did. That was a feeling.

[00:11:30]

Richard Flint: You've seen a lot of acts on the show, you've been here so long. What are some of the outstanding acts you've seen?

Jean Carson: I always liked the flying acts, and I particularly liked Lillian Leitzel. Marvelous performer. I always say this. She's the only one. Lily Leitzel. Nobody ever beat her. I don't think anybody ever beat her. She was dainty, and she was a good performer. She was temperamental, but that went with it, too.

[00:12:00] [Fanny Collino 00:13:08] in his day. I never missed going to the back door, take a look, watch him make his entrance. He was very marvelous. I guess he's still living.

Richard Flint: Yes, he's in Florida. Where, I don't know.

Jean Carson: [00:12:30] He was a marvelous man. They were never nasty or anything, they were always friendly to everybody. Everybody was friendly to one another.

Richard Flint: Are there any other acts?

Jean Carson: Any flying act. I liked anything in the air. And horse acts, we used to have some wonderful horse acts. Horse acrobats. I wasn't crazy about acrobats, but I will say that they were really wonderful. They'd take a picture before they started, and they were big acts. We didn't have as many foreigners in those days. [inaudible 00:13:07] people are- that's too hard.

- Richard Flint: What about life in the dressing room? How were things arranged there?
- Jean Carson: We had one great big dressing room, and in that dressing room, there were around a hundred girls. There was no fights, no arguments, nothing like that.
- [00:13:30]
- Richard Flint: Among women, that sounds incredible.
- Jean Carson: Yes. It was loud. They probably would have got fired if they had started one. It was just one big family there. If anybody was sick or anything, everybody came to their help. Nobody ever needed help in the circus. If they did, they were taken care of. They really were.
- Richard Flint: What about the system of fines, and tipping, and so on in the show. How elaborate was that?
- [00:14:00]
- Jean Carson: I think they tipped quite bit in those days, for their rigging. The others, you weren't forced to. You weren't forced to give a tip to anybody. That happens of your own good will. If somebody takes care of your rigging for you and everything, and you depend on them, you're going to take care of them. Then on the train, we paid the porter, but I forgot how much. It wasn't much. The accommodations were nice. I always had it nice there.
- [00:14:30]
- Richard Flint: Can I ask what the salary of a general use girl was back in those days?
- Jean Carson: Nothing compared to what it is today. I really don't know what it was. I know lots of acts, and it wasn't steep. I know one time I asked- I didn't ask, they were talking about the flying act, and when they told me what money they made, and I made almost twice as much as they did, I couldn't believe it. I never asked, and I had an idea they were highly paid. But this day and age, everybody's well taken care of. Girls get a good salary. They wouldn't get it anywhere else.
- [00:15:00]
- [00:15:30]
- Richard Flint: Can you tell me a little bit about your job on the show nowadays?
- Jean Carson: I have to see that everything is kept in good condition, and repaired.
- Richard Flint: You're in wardrobe?
- Jean Carson: Yes, in wardrobe. Brooks of New York, they make our wardrobe. But I have to see that it's kept up. I have five helpers. '
- Richard Flint: How does the wardrobe compare today with the Barnum show you grew up in?
- Jean Carson: It's a little more elaborate. Everything is, nowadays. They're a little more brief, too, which they weren't in those days. They have nice wardrobe, they always had nice
- [00:16:00]

wardrobe.

Richard Flint: How would you compare the performance then as compared to now, overall, just the impression one gets?

Jean Carson: I think we had better performers those days that have dropped out of the business and passed on. Nobody can replace them. We have some very good acts that came from the other side. But the fact is, in those days they were big acts, and they were really good performers for generations and generations.

[00:16:30]

Richard Flint: Why is it that that next generation hasn't stayed in the business?

Jean Carson: I don't know. I guess it's too much hard work for them. You have to practice a lot.