

CWM Audio 70-12

Interview with LaVahn Hoh

July 22, 2017

Part 1

Interview conducted by Nancy Davies

Nancy Davies: Saturday, July 22, 2017. Interview with LaVahn Hoh by Nancy Davies.

LaVahn Hoh: And, interview of Nancy Davies by LaVahn Hoh. On the same date.

Nancy Davies: LaVahn, let's introduce everyone to you by giving a brief overview of who you are and your circus background.

LaVahn Hoh: Okay. I grew up in Wisconsin, the state of circuses. I saw my first circus when I was
[00:00:30] 4 years old, which was in 1946, and you can do the math and figure out how old I am. It made such an impression on me. It was a lasting impression. At that time, and maybe a year or two later, I made a promise to myself that I was going to do whatever I could to promote the circus. I think that the circus, no matter which circus it was, is generally, it needs promoting. People do not know that it is a great art form. So, I just carried that with me and when I was in 6th or 7th grade, I grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin, they had a really novel thing for students. If you found a book in the library that you really liked, they would buy it for you. They would give you this book, and I found the one on the Ringling Bros.
[00:01:00]

If people put their name on a little card in the back, whose ever name was last when they made the determination as who gets the book, I checked that book every day. Other names went on it, I put my name back on, then another name
[00:01:30] [inaudible 00:01:30] I finally got it, and I still have it in my library today. It's a real treasure that ... it was the history of the Ringling Bros.

Then I nagged my parents to come to Baraboo. I wanted to see where they started. So, we came down here, I want to say '55 for '56. The museum had not started yet. We got into Baraboo and dad pulled into a gas station to say, "So, where did the Ringling Bros. have their barns and ..." That's the thing, well, "I don't know." And so
[00:02:00] I said, "Ask them where the river is," and he pointed, "Just down the street." We went down the road and we could not turn right, so we turned left, and sure enough, that was Water Street, and I said, "There they are. There are those barns."

We stopped by the elephant barn. I swear to this day I could smell elephants, even though it was 1919 that they removed themselves from Baraboo. Grass up to my knees and my waist and-

Nancy Davies: So, these were all just abandoned?

[00:02:30]

LaVahn Hoh:

Yeah. They're just sitting here. They're in great shape. Now I know that at the time, they were working on turning this into a museum. I think it was '57 that they started the museum here. I said, "Wow. This is great." Since that time, I've made a lot of appearances here at the museum.

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As time went on, I had got my masters of fine arts at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison. I was just a stone's throw from Baraboo, but I had to concentrate on my studies, so periodically I'd sneak over here and spend a day just walking around the grounds. I took a job at the University of Virginia, 1969, and I think it was in 1978, maybe, '78, '79, one of the faculty members knew that I was really interested in the circus and that I'd done a lot of reading on the circus. He said, "Would you come into my course," which was on popular entertainment, "and do one day on the American circus?" I said, "Sure." So, I went in, did one day. A student said, "This is really great. You should do it again next year for him." I went to Arnold and I said, "Can I do two days?" He said, "Sure." So, the next year I said, "May I do three days?" He said, "Get your own damn course."

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I went to the chairman, and I said, "I'd like to teach a course on the history of circus." I think this was in 1982. He said, "Well, yeah, sure, go ahead." You know, yawn, that's not going to make. So, I wrote a letter to the [Enquirer 00:03:51] Printing Company, then I called them and I had window cards made up to advertise my class, and I posted them all over Mr. Jefferson's grounds. Next day they were all gone. I found some people and they said, "Hey, we really like that circus poster." And I was like, "Did you take it?" And they said, "Well, sure. Your course isn't going to make, so it's going to be a collector's item." I thought, "Not with his confidence."

[00:04:30]

That year I had 45 students in my class, and so the next year I asked the chairman, "Could I teach it again." He said, "Sure." I turned 150 students away that year, and I got twice as many posters from Enquirer. I didn't put them all up at once because I knew they would get taken down. From that moment on, every year I was turning students away that signed up for the course, whether I taught it in the summer time. I would always teach it in spring, but I would also teach it in the summer time. I've estimated that well over 3,000 students have gone through my-

Nancy Davies:

That's amazing.

LaVahn Hoh:

[00:05:00]

... and have learned about the history of the circus. There's so many gratifying things that came out of that class. I got a postcard one day and it was from this place, and all it said on the back, "Guess where I am." And a big, "Thanks." The students said they heard about it in class, they were going down the interstate, they went, "Wait a minute. Baraboo." Took that turn and came over here and spent the day at the museum. I'm just really happy that I've been able to change the lives that way.

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I had one student went to be a groom with the Big Apple Circus and horses. I had another student that was the lighting technician on the Ringling show. I had four or five students go out to Vegas and work on Cirque Du Soleil. So, it's ...

Nancy Davies: That's really got to be gratifying.

LaVahn Hoh: Oh, it is. Oh, it's so neat when you go to the show and you see somebody that you've taught and they've taken your course, and you go, "Wow. This is nice. This is fun." So, that parlayed into a whole boatload of things. Steve Smith and I became friends. He hired me to teach history, to be the archivist for Clown College, so I started that in 1988, and I've worked right through til the end.

[00:06:00] That then parlayed into, I don't know how many A&E specials that I did. The one was the 200th Anniversary of the American Circus, which was a two-hour presentation. You don't know how long you're going to be in these thing, so a friend of mine called me from Ringling and he said, "I saw it." And I said, "Well, did I make it or am I on the cutting room floor?" He said, "Invite your friends over and get a lot of liquor, because you're in it a lot."

[00:06:30] Then I did one on daredevils. One on the Wallendas, one on the Ringlings. People magazine picked up on my course and they came down, interviewed me, so they wound up in People magazine and then USA Today did a half a page on my work with Clown College and my class. The class has really had a lot of notoriety and a lot of interest.

Nancy Davies: Did you ever expect all of this would come from that day that you decided you create this course?

[00:07:00] LaVahn Hoh: No. Not at all. But, I was dealing with my desire, my wish. I know it was a dream of mine and I just pursued this like a race car. I just ... I wanted to do this. I started collecting, and I've spent a lot of time at this museum doing a lot of research here. Research at the Sarasota, at the John and Mable Ringling Museum. As far as I know, I'm still the only historian that's gone through the Hertzberg Collection since they moved it out of the Hertzberg Museum. It's now on an Air Force Base and still in boxes. I spent weeks there, going through that collection. It's been a grand ride. I can honestly say some of best friends are clowns, I mean, the real McCoy.

[00:07:30] Nancy Davies: And mean it. Yeah. Did you ever want to work with the show, directly, and be employed by them in some capacity?

LaVahn Hoh: I was employed as historian and archivist.

Nancy Davies: Yes, I guess, I mean with a touring show, I guess-

[00:08:00] LaVahn Hoh: I would love to. I remember one time I said to Johnny Pugh, who owned the Clyde Beatty Cole Bros. Circus, "God, I would love to travel with you guys." He said, "No, no, no, no." He said, "You just keep the thought and views that you have of this circus. You don't want to come in the back door and see all of that." I would have loved to have traveled with the Ringling show, but as the years gone on, and I go,

[00:08:30] "Well ..." I did have the opportunity to ... the publicist in Utah, in Salt Lake, called me up and said, "Could you come to Salt Lake?" And gave me a date. I said, "Sure. What's going on?" They said, "Well, were having a lot of press and we want somebody here that has a good knowledge of the history, and we'll put you on the train." I don't remember where it was, but they had a dome car that they put on to the circus train and it was filled with press people.

[00:09:00] So, I worked with the press then and we came in to Salt Lake City and it had wagons from here, sitting in front of the Temple, which was just a ... what a photo op that was, and then they did the same thing in Dallas. In both places they had a circus parade and they said, "You're going to be in the parade." I said, "What does a historian do in a circus parade?" Here was this banner, two children holding the pole, LaVahn Hoh, Circus Historian, and I'm in this wagon and I'm waving to people, and I go, "1793, 1842, 1956." I thought, you know, "What else does a historian do?" Holler out dates. That was fun.

[00:09:30] Circus, you know ... would go to other countries and we went to the ... my wife and I decided to go to the Festival in Paris, which is for the youth of tomorrow. So, we did that and we spent, I don't know, about five days there seeing, there's the A group, the B group, and then the A group and the B group, and then, the final night, and then they brought in the winners from previous ones. Then we got on a bullet train and went down to Nice and then took a train over to Monaco and saw Prince Rainier's Circus Festival and spent time there.

[00:10:00] I had planned out this whole trip except for one tiny, little aspect. How to get from Monaco back to Nice. They said, "Well, rent a car." I said, "Are you kidding me? I've been in Rome before, I know where I'm going." I think it was Tim [Holts 00:10:12], who worked for the Ringling shows, said, "Well, rent a helicopter." I said, "You can do that?" So, I went over to the helipad and they said, "Sure. We'll take you. What time do you want to leave?" As the sun was coming up, we were rising up from Monaco in our helicopter and flying over to Nice, which wasn't that very far, but ... and I went, "Wow, this is how the rich and famous work."

Nancy Davies: Pays to know people, I guess.

LaVahn Hoh: Have friends in low places.

Nancy Davies: Do you have a favorite act?

LaVahn Hoh: Yes, I do. I have two favorite acts, actually. Elephants and trapeze. I just wait for those two acts to come in. I just love ... elephants my favorite animal. I remember one time I took my class to the Ringling show in Chipperfield, had the elephants and-