

CWM Audio 70-12

Interview with LaVahn Hoh

July 22, 2017

Part 2

Interview conducted by Nancy Davies

- Nancy Davies: Section 2 interview. Nancy interviewing LaVahn.
- LaVahn Hoh: And Lavahn interviewing Nancy. And my wife Mary Francis is in the background.
- Nancy Davies: Yes, she has joined us and I bet she's got stories to tell too. Alright so you were-
- LaVahn Hoh: So, I took my class down to Richmond, and one of the Chipperfields had the elephant herd. And this was before the evening show. And so, my class was standing in the center ring and he brought an elephant out, with a big bag of apples. And asked if anybody wanted to feed an apple to the elephant? And so, along with us was a reporter from the alumni news at the university. And she was doing a story on me for the alumni magazine. So, I don't know, it was Thomas Gram, Chipperfield, I can't remember which one it was said, "Anybody want to hug an elephant?" And I'm going, "Hug an elephant? How do you hug an elephant?"
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- [00:01:00] Can't put your arms around the waste or anything. So, I just went up and put my arms around the trunk and took a picture. That wound up on the cover of the alumni magazine for the university.
- And it was great for the students to be able to touch an elephant, which most of them had never done before. Let alone hold an apple here and an elephant would snarf it up with his trunk. So, it's a ... Now that my wife is here I can tell this story. That when we got married I was writing a book, "Step Right Up: The Adventures of Circus in America."
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- Nancy Davies: Which, I have.
- LaVahn Hoh: Oh, Good.
- Nancy Davies: Yes. It's in my collection.
- LaVahn Hoh: Good. We came here for the Great Circus Parade. So, we wanted to watch them load and all that. So, our honeymoon was riding the circus train from Baraboo to Janesville, that was the first leg of it. So, we were on that. And then, the next year we rode from Janesville into Milwaukee. So, that was ... People go, "So, where'd you spend your honeymoon?", "Circus."
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- Nancy Davies: And people who knew you, that was fine.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah. And my wife had not been to a circus until I took her to Ringling Brothers show. I think it was the first one she went to, in Richmond. I love going to the circus. It's just a, it's an exciting time. And when the shows would come to town, the traveling shows, and even the ... Well, they're all traveling but, moreso the tented shows. And I'd see people that I hadn't seen in a year. It's such a great time, it's such an up. And then, they leave that night, and that's such a downer. But, as you know, you'd see it down the road. We never say, "Good-bye." It's, "See you down the road." So, this was a high moment and a low moment within 24 hours.

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But, with Ringling show, after I started working with them, I'd see the show three, four, five times. And then, they would come into Richmond I'd take food into the clowns, into the ally. Someone reminded me of that yesterday. He said, "You always brought us food in Richmond." But, yeah. That's right I did.

Nancy Davies: Tell us about being the archivist for the Clown College.

LaVahn Hoh: It was an amazing job. It was a difficult job in a way because, the records hadn't really been kept carefully. So, there was kinda a helter skelter of a lot of things. And I remember one ... Clown College was not in session and I went down to ... I don't remember what town it was, north of Venice. And Ringling, or Feld Entertainment, had taken over most of this little strip mall. And so everything's stored in this building, stored in that house, and stored in there. So, Clown College stuff was in one of those. And so, I would go in there and it looked ... The first time I went in there it looked like somebody threw a dynamite stick in there. There was stuff everywhere on the floor. And so, I spent a lot time just catalog ... And not even cataloging, just getting it organized, and getting it up off the floor into filing cabinets.

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Nancy Davies: That's gotta make your heart just go, "Oh no."

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LaVahn Hoh: Yeah, yeah. And what happened ... Then I went up to corporate headquarters in Vienna and spent a lot of time up there. So I go, "What do you have on Clown College?", "Well, I don't know." So, I started going through filing drawers and he said, "Well, you might find some stuff in here, and here, and there." Well, nobody knew what was in there so I started making the records of what was there. And then, the photos. And again, when I was working on the book I was up there and I said, "What photos can I use?" And they said, "Well, let us know what you want. And we'll seek permission for them." So, I'd been there so often that I didn't have any trouble getting permission to put photos in. But, there were ... It would have been neat if there had been a big filing cabinet that said, "Clown College." But, it didn't.

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Then Ringling did a ... They hired this company to do ... Well, I should say Feld Entertainment hired this company to do a history of the circus. Only this was like a searchable website. But, it wasn't a website, it was just a disc. And you could put that disc in, or download it on to your computer. And then say, "Okay, I want to

[00:05:30] find out about ..." Put in a name. And then search. Search by acts, search by crew, search by whatever and that name might come up. And I used it a lot and then the PR people were using it, but less, and less, and less, and less. And eventually, I was the only person who knew how to use that program. And it doesn't exist anymore. Though, somewhere I have a copy of it but, it was an amazing program.

[00:06:00] But, I kept saying, "There's no Clown College on here." No, that would cost more money to have them research and put all the clown names in. So, I started putting that together of who was in what class. And so we know what every class now, who is in every class. But, it's still a little sketchy because we get that who was in every class at the beginning of the class, but people would leave. People would get thrown out. And so there was never say, okay, cross that name off the list. And then, have a ... So, at the end of Clown College there was a lot of how many people actually went through Clown College? And it was over 1,200. But, I've heard all sorts of figures on that. I remember one time it was a huge number and I said, "No, no, no, no, no." It was a little over 1,200.

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Nancy Davies: How many per class normally on average?

LaVahn Hoh: 30, 35. And the length of time changed over time. It could be eight weeks, 10 weeks, or whatever. And how much time you spent in a day usually stayed the same. Calisthenics started the day. And at the end of calisthenics, which was usually 9:00, the bus would pick them up from the hotel where they're staying. Get there at 8:30 and work out until 9:00. Get your body warmed up. Then for the next three hours they would take the class and divide it into thirds. So, the first third might work on gag development, second third might work on directing, the other one might work on stilt walking or juggling. Then when the bell would ring at 10:00, three go to one, one go to two, two would go to three. Then at 11:00, same thing.

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[00:07:30] Then at noon was lunch time. And they had the option of going someplace and getting lunch, or if they brought their lunch, we had a big TV screen there and we had Warner Brother cartoons. So, you look at those and old movies, black and white movies, you get clowning ideas. Warner Brother cartoons they got great clown bits. Then at 1:00 was makeup. Which, was always a fun time. The first or second, maybe the second class, Mark would say, "Okay, put your face on. What do you think you look like?" With no direction. It was scary. I mean, one guy just took red and put it like that, and covered his whole face in red. And then took black liner and outlined his eyes. I mean, he looked like a bad rendition of Lucifer. I mean, it was just ... So, they got that out of their system. And there's, I saw it the other day, there was a picture of me sitting in the middle of this chaos outside and they were all powder socking me. So, I got my initiation through that.

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[00:08:30] But, then after that they would go into more classes. And makeup I think went to 3:00. And then, they had one at three to four, four to five. Then I got them at 5:00. So, they would come to my class at 5:00, full makeup. And I'm looking at 30 clown faces. And when we were here it was fabulous because, we met over in the wagon building and I would then take them out and bring them around and say, "Okay, here are the Ringling Brothers, here's the Gollmar Brothers, here's this wagon. This

[00:09:00] is what the history of this is. So, they were touching it, seeing what the history was. And I always had to give them juices or something to get their energy back up because it was ... I'd have them from five to six. And I know when I was down in Venice and in Sarasota they confessed to me later that they were falling asleep during a lot of my movies. And I'd go ... It was probably the hardest teaching that I had to do just to keep them entertained.

You take a subject like history and you go-

Nancy Davies: And put it at the end of the day.

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LaVahn Hoh: ... And put it at the end of the day after they've been working since 8:30 in the morning doing a lot of energetic things. And then, from 6:00 until maybe seven, 7:30 ... I think till 7:30, they had dinner time. And then, they would come back and work until 10:00 on gags to prepare themselves for graduation. And graduation then, whenever that was, was their gags that they presented to Mr. Feld and whoever he had selected. In the meantime, the photographers were coming in taking a headshot, taking a shot with their makeup on, and then their full agent outfit. Their full agent costume. And then, I would get those things and develop a booklet. And put those three pictures in it and a page for them to write what their skills were, what there age and pertinent information about them.

[00:10:00] So, when Mr. Feld would come and hand them a book and he'd open it up, there are all the pictures with a number. And every clown had a number on his costume. So we'd know, "Okay, it's number 32. 32 is, Oh. Okay, it's this guy." And then, write comments in it, whether they wanted them, or whatever. So, that was all part of my job. And then I took a lot of pictures and documented that way. And it got to a point that I could walk in, nobody ever looked at me. I could just sit there and just take pictures, and they'd get so used to me being around there. And then cataloged all of those and got them into three ringed binders with the negatives and the dates.

[00:11:00] Nancy Davies: What's your understanding of why Clown College closed?

LaVahn Hoh: There are a couple of reasons. I've heard we have enough clowns. I've heard that ... I've also heard that it was a ... I can figure this one out, it was a huge finance. Financial ... There were I think 50 of us instructors the last year. Most of us where ... We had to fly to Sarasota. I had a car. I had an apartment. It got very expensive. And when we moved Clown College here ... Show her your shirt. There it is, "World's Funniest Clown Boy." So, this was the t-shirt that was designed to move Clown College from Venice to Baraboo, Wisconsin.

[00:12:00] We were here three years, this was the first year. 93, 94, 95, and then 96, 97, are our last two years in Sarasota. But, when we left here the word came down that we're not bringing back as much stuff. Fewer semi-trucks are coming back then we came up here. So, we had everything stored in a warehouse. And we had a when in doubt throw it out party. And it was pretty amazing. Some of the stuff, some of the

[00:12:30] props, came to the museum that Mr. Feld was fine with donating them to the museum. Other things went to the dump. Things were destroyed. So-

Nancy Davies: Did some of that just make you cry to see some ... Or was it that-?

LaVahn Hoh: No, the stuff that we got rid of was not-

Nancy Davies: Okay.

LaVahn Hoh: No, no. I would be more concerned about what's happening now that Ringling doesn't exist anymore. What happens to all of the wherewithal of the records, the costumes, and the properties. And everything that shows can't use. Now what happens to that? I don't know.

[00:13:00]

Nancy Davies: Let's talk about Ringling a little bit. When was the first time you saw a Ringling Brothers show?

LaVahn Hoh: 1946.

Nancy Davies: That was under tent? That's-

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah, 14 acres of canvas.

Nancy Davies: ... that's right. You told me about this when I first met you. So let's talk-

LaVahn Hoh: We were sitting and having lunch, yeah.

Nancy Davies: ... let's talk about it now. I want to hear your memories. I know you were very young.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah, I was four years old. We got up early in the morning and prior to that everywhere in town was paper. Banners across downtown, across College Avenue, every window down town had circus paper in it. On Wisconsin Avenue were a lot of stores, circus paper everywhere. I mean, if you didn't know the circus was coming, you were blind. It was just, the color was everywhere. And I didn't have enough wherewithal at the time to go ask for those posters after they left town.

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Mary Francis: Thank goodness.

Nancy Davies: We'll talk about that later. Of all the collection.

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LaVahn Hoh: So, we got down to the circus lot which was on the Fox River. Not the lot, but the train. And the fog was coming up off the river because the temperature was a little bit different from the air to the river. And I could hear the whistle of the steam engine way off in the distance. And it just got closer and closer. And through this misty fog, this giant headlight came breaking through, and then this big black steam engine. And behind it were the cars that were necessary to set the lot up. And I'm

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positive there were some elephant cars. Because there's none in the flying squadron. And that was used, and the cookhouse was there, and the lot layout, and everything that they needed to get the show in there.

[00:15:00] Then they split the train. The train passed us. And then, they left part of the flats on this side of the road, and part of the flats were on the other side of the road. And I was listening to the trainmaster the other day when I interviewed him, and he was talking about putting the train together. So, that when it gets to the next town, how do you unload it? What goes off first? What ... And then, when I saw it, it was always polls. Which, was the poll at the front a wagon. Polls to cab, which meant the engineer's cab. Or polls to caboose. So, half of the train the polls went to caboose, and the other half, polls went to ... That meant that's the split. And so you'd put each on each side of the road, and then you'd put the runs in there. And as the wagons they would be pulled off, the poles are facing the right direction.

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[00:16:00] So, we sat there and watched all of that. And these big, silver flat cars. And I never realized ... I remember one time I went over here to the Deppe building and I was standing there looking at it. And I got down to what I thought was my height at that time and, "My god. This cart is way up there." So, we then went up to lot and watched them put up the tents. I was just mesmerized by them putting up the tents. We had to pull up those poles, the center poles, with the elephants. And the menagerie tent, the cookhouse tent, the horse tent, the big top, side show. All of those things were all kind of happening sequentially. So, that was on that first train ... In the meantime another train has pulled in. And there's still two more to go. And all of that equipment is now being brought up to the lot.

[00:16:30] And somewhere I read, there's 1,400, 1,500 that were involved with the show. And so, by 2:00, 14 acres of canvas was up. The midway was open. All the joints on the midway, the grease joint, and the bug joint, and all of those places were all up for business. Sideshow was there, the ballet platform was out there. People were coming out onto the platform. 2:00 the show started. And if you were in the sideshow they made sure you got in through the connection, through the menagerie, and got into the big top before the show started.

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Nancy Davies: So, this is three rings under canvas and maybe some stages?

LaVahn Hoh: Maybe. I don't remember if there were stages. I'd have to go back and research when stages were used. I think I have that somewhere, as to what years they used the stages. But, I don't know if it was in 46 or not. My guess is probably not. Because not long after that they started to dwindle down because by the time they hit the 50s, menagerie tent is now in the big top. At one end of the big top. And the seating is ... And that's when they ... I noticed that last night in The Greatest Show On Earth, they had those Frank and [inaudible 00:17:39], that they're semi-tucks where the sides come up and then they tilt up, and their seats were all on there. They just set up all the seats. And they could use those trucks than for hauling equipment. And there was a power assist bring a jeep up in the back and he'll put a coupling on it and turn on. And those things would just raise up.

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[00:18:00] So, I'm trying to ... We usually went to the evening shows. Because we were pretty tired by the time the two 2:00 show started. So, we'd go home and then we'd have dinner, and then go back to the circus to see the evening show. And we'd walk on the lot, everything's there. 8:00 show started. 10:00 done. You'd come out of the big top, nothing there. It's all gone. Everything that's left was the big top.

Nancy Davies: So, it's just a one night?

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LaVahn Hoh: Yep. We just had one night's in Appleton. And not every year. So, then we would obviously go home. And years later I'd always go back to the circus lot the next day, or the day after, to see if I could find a memento. Clean. Nothing there. Wagon tracks and peanut shells is about all you could find.

Nancy Davies: [00:19:00] So, you've had quite the opportunity that some of us didn't have from canvas, to early days in the building, to unfortunately the end. And how did you see it progress?

LaVahn Hoh: Well, I think I was ... I got an interesting discussion with Fred Dellinger one time about the heyday of the American circus. Was there really a heyday of the American circus? To me the heyday was before 1929. When 1929 happened, and the Great Depression, that to me said okay the circus now is going to be doing a lot of floundering. And by the time it got into the late 40s, especially into the 50s, it was starting to up and down, from gas prices, to petrochemical crisis, whatever. The circus was being affected by a lot of national and international things.

[00:20:00] When it hit 56 in Pittsburgh, and it was announced that that's the end of them. John Ringling North said, "We're done. We're going home." It was the same feeling that I had when Kenneth Feld announced that the show was done. Only I had a bigger impact with Kenneth Feld because it's over. The guillotine has fallen. When John Ringling North announced that, at least they were going back and there was no talk of it's done. But, there was a lot of talk that the circus is over with now. Just like we're having now.

[00:20:30] And it wasn't over. There were other shows out there on the road. And a lot of people saw that just because Ringling was not under canvas anymore that that was, boom, done. But, then when they started coming back out and the Feld's got involved with it, and Judge Roy Hofheinz, all of the sudden there's a bright future out there for it. Then Irvin Feld sells it to Mattel Toy and then he buys it back from Mattel Toy, and they go, "Wow, this is great." And you go to the show, and to me, it was in the building, yeah. And I remember Johnny Pew told me one time he said, "You know, when a shows in a building that's antiseptic, that's not circus. You need the smell of the canvas. You need the smell of the grass. You need the smell of the elephants." Well you can get the elephant smell in the building, there's no problem there.

[00:21:00] But it's ... We were all energized that it was there. And at first, I have to admit at first, I didn't want to go to the building because I was a tent person. That's the way

[00:21:30] I saw it. A building? And I finally went to one, maybe I skipped maybe two years in there, because my own little rebellious self doing that. And I went in and I was, "Wow, this is great." Because spectacle is still there, the acts are still there, you still have seats in which you're trying to look around things and see where things are. And so, I had no problem with it. I went, "Okay. I can accept this."

Nancy Davies: Did you see some shows during the Mattel years?

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LaVahn Hoh: I might have. I'd have to go back and look at my programs.

Nancy Davies: Because I'd be curious how they were during those years and obviously from what I've read or understood that things were going down. And Mattel-

LaVahn Hoh: Mattel's brought it back up. Yeah. When Irvin Feld had talked to John Ringling North and said, "You need to take it into a building because ..." They were not circus people, the promoters of ... Was it, Paul Lanka and some of the singers and ...
 [00:22:30] But, I love the way in which they took over control of it. It was in the Colosseum in Rome. And there'd be lions there and I thought it was such a nice touch. Where you have Irvin, and Israel, and Judge Roy Hofheinz, and John Ringling North. And the mantle was passed.

[00:23:00] And then the mantel got passed to Kenneth Feld. And I'd never met Irvin, which was really too bad. I would loved to have met him. But, I know after he passed away I was at the corporate office in Washington. I don't know if it was Kenneth or, somebody said, "Do you wanna see the office? His office?", "Woah." That was pretty opulent. Per the amazing big elephant tusks, and vibrant colors. And it was really ... He was a showmen.

Nancy Davies: Now, you've met Kenneth?

LaVahn Hoh: Oh, Yes. Many, many times.

Nancy Davies: And the daughters?

LaVahn Hoh: I've met two of the three ... Actually I've met them all. But, I knew Nicole, she was the oldest one. I sure she might remember who I am. The second one, I met her, she was at The Big Apple circus. Kenneth and the girls where at The Big Apple. And Kenneth's wife. I went though their new corporate headquarters a couple years ago. She came right up to me and started talking to me.
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Nancy Davies: Oh, you have?

LaVahn Hoh: Well, I been through there a couple times. You haven't been there?

Nancy Davies: I haven't yet.

LaVahn Hoh: Oh my goodness. It is ... If you walk in the front door and Kenneth says, "Okay, go

- [00:24:00] out the back door." You're two football fields away. The scene shop is 52,000 square feet. I mean the place is ... It's the third largest building in the state of Florida. NASA, Amazon, Feld Entertainment.
- Mary Francis: You need to tell about Mr. Feld firing you.
- Nancy Davies: Well, I was gonna ask about. So, lets go there now. This is gonna be interesting.
- LaVahn Hoh:
[00:24:30] Well, it actually happened here in Baraboo. It was I think the second year. It would be 94. We had just finished ... 94, 95 ... We just finished graduation. And Steve Smith said, "I need to talk to you." And called me into his office. He said, "I have to let you go." And I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, Mr. Feld said to get rid of you because you've written unflattering things about the Ringling circus." And I said, "You gotta be kidding me, I haven't written a nasty thing about the ..." I never would, about any circus. Because the circus to me is just too darn important to say anything negative about them.
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- So, Steve went to Alan bloom, who is next in command, and Alan went, "Really? We all love Lavahn, I don't know what's going on." So, Alan says, well then have Lavahn send me everything he's ever written on the circus. And I was like, you got to be kidding me. Good lord. So we got this big box of paper. Shipped it up there. And I don't think anybody looked at it. I think Alan just went, "Oh. Well, we've come to find out." Alan says, "Hire him back." And so I was only off the payroll for a couple of months. Come to find out it was another ... He got me mixed up with another author. And I know who that other author is, and I won't mention the name, and I know that person has written some unfavorable things about the show.
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- So, I got back on. And I then did, "A 200th Anniversary of the American Circus." So, I'm in Washington with Rodney Hughey who is a PR man for Feld Entertainment, and Rodney said, "Let's go see the circus this afternoon. It's out at the armory." And okay. I said, "Is Kenneth there?" And he said, "No he's on vacation." Alright. Because I didn't know if Kenneth would go, "Are you working for me again? Who hired you back?" So, we pull into the private lot for the employees, and Rodney went "Uh-oh." And I said, "What do you mean, uh-oh." He said, "There's Kenneth's car." And I went, "Oh great". So, we come in a side door and there's a long hallway, and right at the end of the hallway there stood Kenneth.
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- [00:26:30]
- So, we walk in and Kenneth had a group of people there and I walked around. And as I'm going around Rodney's talking to Kenneth, he turns right and says, "Hey, Kenneth. You remember Lavahn?", "Hello." And he said, "That 200th anniversary is a fabulous piece, we're gonna sell it in the show." I mean, he was just enthralled with what had happened on that A&E two hour special. So, everything was fine. And then, eventually my position was just eliminated. Which was alright. And even that position was eliminated, I would still get calls from the PR saying, "Can you tell us something about ... For one, can you tell us something about the circus performances in Cleveland?" And I said, "Alright, I'll tell you what dates they perform there. What years, what day of the week. I can give you all of that
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information." And then I'll write about some anecdotal things that happen at some of those times. I get this out of route books or other places.

[00:28:00] And then, I did a whole thing on the menagerie fire in 42. Which, they needed something to give to their PR people in Cleveland, it was in Cleveland. So, they had something they could use as a background history of the circus in Cleveland. So, I did a few of those things for them.

Nancy Davies: Are there any conversations that you could share with us that you've had with Kenneth?

LaVahn Hoh: Sure, I've had some great conversations with him. I ... Let's see Clown College reunion was maybe three years ago and he was there. That's when his wife came over and talked to me. And that happened in the first of October, the Clown College. And I then went to a theater conference in Virginia. And I'm sitting at UVA's drama booth, my cellphone rings. And I'm looking at ... And it said Kenneth Feld. And I went "Woah, really? How did he get my cell number?" So, I couldn't take it at that time. So, I called him later, and he wanted me to write a letter of recommendation. He wanted to move an act from one of the circuses to a Nuclear Cowboys thing. Which, I don't think he has anymore. Which, is a motorcycle thing laced with circus acts. And immigration said, no. Because Nuclear Cowboys was not a circus.

[00:29:00] So, I had to write a letter and say yes it could be a circus the way it is built and structured. So, I compared it to Circus Art Chaos from France. Which, they chainsaw cars in half and did all sorts of crazy things in there, and then sent this letter off to ... And so, I called him back and I said, "Am I getting any remuneration for doing this?" And he said, "Well, what would you like?" And so I quoted him a figure and he said, "If this immigration sees it they're gonna think I'm buying you off." And I said, "Well, good point." I said, "What would you offer me then?" So, he gave me a payment and I said fine. But, what he really wanted, he wanted it on University of Virginia stationary. And signed professor ... To which gave that whole thing credibility.

I never found out if that ever happened or not.

Nancy Davies: Oh, Really?

[00:30:00] LaVahn Hoh: He never called me back. But, for the longest time I had his cell number. I don't think I have it anymore.

Nancy Davies: That might be valuable.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah. Kenneth why did you do this to the circus world?

Nancy Davies: Well, let's go ahead and talk about the ending.

- LaVahn Hoh: You mean the 146 years ending?
- Nancy Davies: What was your reaction? Where were you when you heard? And what was that immediate reaction?
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LaVahn Hoh: I was at home. I got an email that night. An email, text, or I can't remember which one it was. But, suddenly it was just flooding in because, the word after they made the announcement at the two shows in January, David Tetrault, who was here, and another promoter, Bob Swanney, and I had been triangulating things from before the elephants left. And either one of them sent me something, or one the clowns, I don't remember who told me. And I couldn't believe it. I just could not believe it.
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But, then I thought ... Because rumors had been circulating that something was going to happen. But, all of us thought that the something was they were going to take the red and the blue and put them together. Get rid of one train, come out with one train, and just have a nice neat little package.
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So, that's where everybody was ... at least my friends that we were talking ... That's what we thought. And when this came out then next day that's all we were talking about online.
- Nancy Davies: So, this was never on your radar? Never something you thought in your life time would see?
- LaVahn Hoh: Never. I never thought there would be a day in which there would not be the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. To me that's older than Coca Cola and baseball. That would stay forever. America's living treasure? All these wonderful catchphrases? Greatest show on earth? Why should we get rid of all of that? Well, it happened. And I went through a whole boat load of emotions. You could ask my wife. I was angry, confused ...
- [00:32:00]
- Mary Francis: Sad.
- LaVahn Hoh: Sad. Really sad. I started thinking back in my memories about the show and how grateful I was that I had a little piece of this. So then I would go, okay you experienced it. And then I went, no. I can't experience it again. What am I gonna do next February, March, or April when they would come to Richmond? I was looking forward to it. And I would put it on my syllabus, we're going to the circus. So, nothing. Then we started hearing about the other dominoes that started falling. The Clyde Beatty Cole Brothers Circus, or Cole Circus, and no longer Clyde B. Cole circus bit the dust. And The Big Apple. We were at The Big Apple last year. Or was it two years ago?
- [00:32:30]
- Mary Francis: Two years.
- [00:33:00]
LaVahn Hoh: Two years ago. And the place was packed. I'm going, what is this all about Elfy? Why are these shows just falling down like dominoes? And then recently Carson

and Barnes. I just couldn't wrap my head around it. But, it's happening to other ... NASCAR, they're going down. Their attendance is falling.

Nancy Davies: I didn't know that.

LaVahn Hoh: [00:33:30] So, what's going on? Is it these little smart phones? Where people ... "Why should I go to a circus, when I want to know what a circus act looks like I'll youtube it." Why sit there and pay the exorbitant amount of money. And I think it was David Tetrault that said yesterday that he sat there and there was a father and a couple children sitting in front of him. Father was watching a basketball game on his Iphone and the kids were absorbed into the show.

[00:34:00] We went to a 10:30 show which, was loaded with children. And Feld said, that children, their attentions span wasn't good anymore to watch the show. I didn't believe that for a second. And we're sitting there watching this show, these kids were mesmerized by what was going on. It was ... And just think what would have been like if they had elephants in there. It would have been really special.

[00:34:30] So, I feel sorry for the grandchildren that can't go with their grandparents. To say I went to the show in the 50s or whenever, and be able to talk about what ... But, now its just a memory. And I'm happy that I have good memories. And long standing memories of it. But, I'm still sad that it's not continuing. Whereas I think it could have ... I think that there, I'm no expert on what was behind the scenes, and when they tell me 18% of their income was coming from the circus, and I go, "Yeah, what's your point?" You're a billionaire. You have all these other things. The circus supported those things to get them where they are, now why cannot they support the circus?

[00:35:00] Downsize. Get rid of a train. And the train ... Somebody told me that the railroad was increasing their prices.

Nancy Davies: That's what I heard.

LaVahn Hoh: [00:35:30] So, okay. Send it out on trucks. They did that before. After the tent folded, they went out on trucks. Do it again. It's ... I don't know. I still can't wrap my head around it. When we drove over to see those train cars over here and I go, they really don't belong here. They belong with the show, the show should still be out. Should still be on the road. That's where these cars belong. But, at least here they don't have to take the name or Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey off the side.

Nancy Davies: [00:36:00] That's bothersome to me that the people who have purchased it or they've donated. That they have to take the name off. And there's such a history in even just having that with the name on it. And once you take it off, then it's just another car.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah. Did you ever read the contract that people had to sign?

Nancy Davies: No.

- LaVahn Hoh: Oh my gosh. You had to send pictures that you've removed the signs off of anything that's related to the circus. Whether it's Feld or Ringling or Barnum and Bailey, whatever. And if you didn't, there was legal things there. Yep. They were absolutely determined that ... My big question is what happens to [inaudible 00:36:37] that will say there. They'll be building the props and all that for the programs for the other shows. Hank and back Wallace they'll be building the props. So they'll still maintain those ... Clown College. You gotta use that title someplace or you could loose it. Ringling Brothers, that's another trademark. What's he gonna do if he looses it. Greatest Show on Earth. America's living treasure. All those trademark things have to be dealt with.
- [00:36:30]
- [00:37:00]
- Nancy Davies: I wondered, and this pure speculation on my part. I've wondered will they eventually maybe start doing some just merchandising? They tried that, they did some licensing in the last couple of years with some products that I saw on sale at stores that ... But, I was wondering if they might do that just to keep the name? Maybe t-shirts or something? But I don't know.
- [00:37:30]
- LaVahn Hoh: Well, the thing I scratch my head about is that Kenneth, the Feld's, did away with Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey. Yet, he's producing the circus show at Circus World, at John and Mabel Ringling museum. I mean, Kenneth Feld is the producer of Bellow coming to ... So, somebody said, "Well, maybe Bellow's going to do ... " Lanuva is leaving Disney in December, what goes in that building? Well, could it be something that's produced by Kenneth Feld and Bellanoch will star in it. I mean that rumor mill is phenomenal. We should keep track of them. Not that one, nope. Okay. Yeah, this is happening, yeah that. Yep. Just go down the line.
- [00:38:00]
- Nancy Davies: That's typical. We're a big community.
- LaVahn Hoh: Oh, sure.
- Nancy Davies: Gotta come up with our own answers.
- [00:38:30]
- LaVahn Hoh: And everybody's got their own. Oh lets see now, that'll work.
- Nancy Davies: We'll find out when it happens.
- LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.
- Nancy Davies: So what do you feel, boy this is a big question I'm about to ask. What do you feel is now happening, going to happen, with circus in america?
- LaVahn Hoh: That's kind of an easy one. I think it's gonna be the youth of tomorrow. I think the circus schools, the social circuses, the archers in St Louis, the sailor circus in Sarasota-
- Nancy Davies: Smircus.

[00:39:00]

LaVahn Hoh:

... Circus Smircus. There are over 300 of them in this country. That's where I think the direction is going. And it's funny because when we were at the Smithsonian Folk Festival, we sat in on a discussion with performers from some of these ... 17, 18 year old up there on this panel talking about what they're gonna do, where they see the circus going, and that ... And this one was a trapeziste, she's going to college to be an engineer. Well, what is she taking with her? She's taking confidence with her, she's taking how to work with people, how to get along with people, how to trust people. I mean, all these skills in not only the mechanical skills, but the people skills. What they're putting in their head, she's taking with her. And she was so articulate in what she was talking about.

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[00:40:00]

Nancy Davies:

I like the description of the social circus where you have ethnicity from all over the city of St Louis. So, you could have two Muslims coming in and they're going to be under standers in an act. And the person that has to stand on their shoulders is a Jewish boy from some other part of St Louis. Why it's ...

And they have to trust each other.

LaVahn Hoh:

And the trust is there. Absolutely. And that's what they're building with. And say we're all the same. It's just that you might be a little darker skin or who cares what you look like, or where you're from. We're working together on this. And that's where these social circuses are starting. There was also ... We spent a whole day talking about NEA support for developing these things which, will help the circuses in small communities. So, going to Europe, going back to some early American circus. Where circuses where in the town. Not so much in America, but in Europe.

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So, you'd have a school, you'd have a building. And people in that town would go to the circus, then what happens in this country the circus is now coming to that town once a year, every two years. Whereas you have these circuses in your town, you could go to them all year round and see shows. So, I think that's the turn. My other prediction is that I think it's gonna take two generations to get the negative things about circus out of people's minds. Because right now I could still probably name a few people. I can go up and say, "So, what do you think of the circus?" It's all that negativity that's been put in there. And a lot of its been developed by the, for lack of a better term, the terrorists of PETA, and what they have stirred up. And 99.9% is just fabrication on their part. Not knowing what goes on.

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But now, I'll flip that coin over and say, the circus did little to do something about that. Years ago I was on my high horse and say, "You need to talk about how you're handling things." You just can't say we don't mistreat them. Do what they did in London. We were in England rather, we went to ... What's his name ... His name is not gonna come to me right now. They invited everybody to come back and see the animals after the show. They had like an open area you could wander around, you could see them. And what's wrong with that? Get some PR out there. Ringling personal was not allowed to talk to any people that were agitating. You just ignore them. Don't talk to them. Don't get in an argument with them.

[00:43:00] Well, how are you going to educate people if you don't tell them what's happening? And now it's this mysterious thing. I interviewed a young lady who was a teacher, and she said PETA people had these long poles with cameras on them, holding them up so they could look down into where the animals were kept. Take those barriers down, let them see what's in there. It's nothing going on. I spent eight years, nine years, I don't know how many years. I guess eight or nine years. Back in the back area of Ringling. Never once did I see any mistreatment of those animals. I've been on a lot of other shows ... You mistreat an animal, the animal loses your trust.

[00:43:30] Now, if I said circuses never mistreated their animals, I'd be lying through my teeth. I mean, there are some early documentation of Ben Amber, how he got his cats to perform and it was fear. But, you can't do that now.

Nancy Davies: No, it's when you know better, you do better.

LaVahn Hoh: Absolutely.

Nancy Davies: And, in just like in everything. In this country we've progressed in this country past a lot of ugly history. The circus has too. And that's the shame that you can't hold the history accountable for what's happening today because that doesn't happen anymore.

LaVahn Hoh: Right. But, it's really too bad that early on ...