

CWM Audio 70-13

Alice Clark Brown Interview, July 22, 2017

Interview conducted by Nancy Davies

Nancy Davies: Nancy Davies, Ringling history interview on Saturday, July 22nd with Alice Clark Brown. I'm here with Alice Clark Brown. Alice, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you did on Ringling and when you joined?

Alice Brown: I joined Ringling Brothers Circus in 1971, and I had been an usherette here in Chicago [inaudible 00:00:32]. We worked all the venues around Chicago. The amphitheater was one of the venues we worked. This year when the circus came through town, it was so whimsical and magical to me. It just capture my imagination. I wanted to audition and join the show. I auditioned, and luckily I'm so happy that I was accepted into the show, and I left Chicago, took the CTA train to the O'Hare airport, and ended up in the winter quarters, at that time Venice, Florida. There I was taught by the famous Antoinette Concello-

Nancy Davies: Oh really?

Alice Brown: -how to do the aerial ballet along with all the dances at that time. We had to do the aerial ballet and we had to ride the elephants and be in the production numbers. I learned to do that, and it was kind of scary for me because I was afraid of heights, but I had to get over that so I could stay and live on that train. I loved living on the Ringling Brothers Circus train and traveling from one city to another. You know, you spend a week or maybe less or more in one town and you wake up in the next town. It was just wonderful. People waving at you from out your window or from the vestibule. I used to love to catch the breeze on the vestibule in the train.

Of course, I loved the pie car.

[00:02:00]
Nancy Davies: What did you love best in the pie car?

Alice Brown: Oh, just basically I guess the pie, but aside from that I used to like to get up early and have breakfast. At breakfast time a lot of what they call working men were there. People who worked on the train and worked on keeping the circus going. Some of them were older men who reminded me of my father. They had wonderful stories and they would have breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the pie car. That was one of my favorite things. I really liked traveling from city to city all over the United States and in Canada and just not staying any place too long. I really liked that.

Nancy Davies: Did you have a favorite city?

Alice Brown: Actually, the one favorite city to travel through, not to live in, but to travel through,

[00:03:00] was New York, because we were there at the time I was there for a whole month. At the time, the Knicks were winning, so we got a lot of days off, because we would go dark when they had to have a playoff. I was able to see so many shows, so much Broadway. I used to like to go to different attractions in different towns and visit the museums there. Went to the Smithsonian in Washington DC and different museums from around different places and that type of thing.

[00:03:30] The Queen Mary, my friend Susie Quinn, she showed me ... She was another dancer show girl, and she showed me around where she came up and that included fisherman's wharf and oh my goodness. Chinatown in San Francisco, the Queen Mary in California. I combined my stunt with the circus with a lot of sight seeing. I enjoyed the cuisines in different places. I enjoyed the seafood in Boston. I think we would play Boston for two weeks. I learned how to ride the L-system there and I

[00:04:00] just have so many pleasant memories of not just being in the show but outside of the show and having access to all the things that different towns had to offer.

Nancy Davies: Now, how old were you when you joined?

Alice Brown: I was 19.

Nancy Davies: 19, and then you're having all these great experiences.

Alice Brown: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Davies: Was this just a completely different world to you of people from all different countries and languages?

Alice Brown: Yes. I had gotten used to seeing the different circus people when I was a charrette, and all the different languages and accents. What happened was as I say when I took the airplane from O'Hare, it had been winter in Chicago, wintery and cold and snowy and around Christmas time, so then when I landed in Orlando, I saw the palm trees before getting the connection there to Venice, Florida. I had only seen palm trees in movies and in pictures. To see Christmas trees in Florida weather, it just seemed so strange to me. Christmas was just very different that year.

[00:05:00]

[00:05:30] Yes, it was different in that way. I remember how Harold Ronk, he was our ring master, and he would always announce that we were a united nations under the big top. I always thought that is so cool, because so many of the cars on the circus train, when you would pass through to go to the pie car, you might pass through the Romanian car, the Hungarian car, the Polish car. They would be someone cooking and you get all these smells from the different countries. It was very exciting. It was very, very exciting. Yeah. Just great.

Nancy Davies: You have great memories. I can tell, this big smile on your face. Do you keep in touch with people from when you worked there?

[00:06:00]

Alice Brown: I keep in touch with Susan Quinn. She was there for a year, the first year I joined.

Mrs. Concello had made us roommates at the hotel that was while they were getting the train cars ready that year. We stayed in touch ever since. Yes.

Nancy Davies: Tell us about working with Mrs. Concello.

Alice Brown: Oh, she was wonderful. She would have you start low before you climbed way high to do the aerial ballet. She would start you out low with all the different tricks, and if anybody wants to look at the movie 'The Greatest Show on Earth', they can see Mrs. Concello. There she is with Betty Hutton, and Betty Hutton is one of her dancers doing the web, except that Betty Hutton in the movie had graduated to be an act. She had her own trapeze act, but there's Mrs. Concello. You can see some of the girls there in the tent, because they were still in the tent back then in the 50s.

[00:06:30]

[00:07:00] That movie which then restored and Betty Hutton, Mrs. Concello and some of the famous circus legends are still in that movie in the tent. Fast forward to when I was there in the early 70s. You have Mrs. Concello, and every morning we would start with the web. Before we did any of our dance numbers or anything, and she'd go, "One, two, hold your keister in now. Hold your keister in. Three, four, five, six." We would learn all these elaborate tricks. Up, up, up, up higher until finally we were at the oh so high in the arena. Then, we would do our tricks, except I was kind of afraid of heights. It took me awhile to really get into the trick up high.

[00:07:30]

[00:08:00] Mrs. Concello said, "Now, if you don't learn these tricks, girl, we're going to have to send you home." I was like, "Oh no. I can't let that happen." I started practicing extra hard until finally I did the tricks along with all the other girls way up high, no problem. We were all in unison, and it was a wonderful thing.

Nancy Davies: What else did you do? Did you ride elephants?

Alice Brown: Yes. Yes, in this picture I was just showing you, the elephant is doing a head stand, and that was a hard trick for me to learn, because if you're not careful, you'll topple right over the elephant's head, because it's ridiculous how the gravity works, you know? This was kind of like a rodeo in a way, the way they could come out really fast. The number was called 'The Cakewalk Jamboree', and the elephants would come galloping out. Then, they would come into all the rings and fill them up. Then, they would stand on their hind legs, so you were on the elephants, and you were way up high, because they're standing up on their hind legs.

[00:08:30]

[00:09:00] Then, a few of them went through the head stand, like this one, which meant from way up high they would topple down and do their head stand. You had to just stay pinned on. I had noticed other circuses where the girls held on, but in the blue unit you could not do that, because our tricks were so hard to do. You had to let go. I had to learn how to let centrifugal force work with that so that I could stay on and never hold on, never never. I did well with the head stand. As you can see-

Nancy Davies: It's a beautiful picture.

Alice Brown: -it looks like I'm defying gravity.

Nancy Davies:

Yes.

Alice Brown:

Yes.

[00:09:30]

Nancy Davies:

Now who was the elephant presenter, trainer, at that time? Do you remember?

Alice Brown:

Yes, that was Gautier.

Nancy Davies:

Okay, and was he the one who taught you how to ride?

Alice Brown:

Yes. Axel Gautier, and before him there have been the legend ... What was that other guy's name? I just can't remember, the one before him. There had been a legendary ... Hugo Schmidt. The first year I joined, this was later when Axel was the one training people, Axel Gautier. Yes, there was other legends still there when I was there. For example, there was Otto Gribling, a famous, famous clown was still there. He had an act in the show. Trying to think of some of the other ... I know on the red unit, because I was with the blue unit. On the red unit, I think that Dolly Jacobs' father, I forget his first name.

Nancy Davies:

Lou. Lou Jacobs.

[00:10:30]

Alice Brown:

Lou Jacobs, yes, he was still there. On the red unit was Gunther Gable Williams. He was the wild animal trainer. On my unit we had Charlie Bowman, who was also the stage manager and the tiger trainer. There was still so many legends from so long ago. Antoinette Concello, that type of thing still continuing when I was there.

[00:11:00]

Nancy Davies:

Did you realize that when you joined, the people you were meeting, that they were these circus legends?

Alice Brown:

Yes, the more I heard about them. Initially I didn't. Well, for example, our choreographer, Richard Barstow, oh he was incredible. He was quite a character, let me tell you. He's also the choreographer for 'The Greatest Show on Earth' movie. He never let you forget that he was a choreographer for Judie Garland's ...

[00:11:30]

What was that movie? Then, Barbara Streisand or somebody did it.

Nancy Davies:

Oh, a star is born?

Alice Brown:

A star is born, yes. He was the choreographer. He never let you forget that. He had been the choreographer for the Latin quarter. He was such a character and so exact. I didn't know him or why then, but one of the things that attracted me to the circus was the sense of magic and whimsy, because Barstow was old school. He would have these melodies that just were so engaging. They would just kind of make you feel like a child, like I think he wrote 'May All Your Days Be Circus Days'. [singing 00:12:10]. You know, and he just had this sense of nostalgia and sweetness that

[00:12:00]

[00:12:30] just sort of took you over back then. He would choreograph everybody so precisely and make it look like there were so many people in that arena. We had quick changes. Sometimes it really reminded me of a Busby Berkeley movie. It really did. Yeah.

[00:13:00] I remember a finale one year, all of the dancers went up on these silver moons. They were crescent moons, and now every time I see a crescent moon in the sky it reminds me of finale. We had on these moon girl costumes and silver lamey, and we had tambourines with multi-colored tassels. It was just beautiful.

Nancy Davies: How long were you with Ringling?

Alice Brown: For three years.

Nancy Davies: Three years. Let's talk about your first day performing in front of an audience. Do you remember what that was like?

Alice Brown: For a circus audience, our first performance was always in winter quarters before we played the state of Florida and then spread out all over the United States. I remember that it was so exciting, because we had been rehearsing for a month. We wanted everything to be perfect. I knew that we had a whole year to go of performances and that soon enough we'd even be playing Madison Square Garden. I knew that in October we'd play the amphitheater again in Chicago. Also, every year we had a television show that was broadcast. I don't know which network broadcasted. One year the host was Cher. Another year the host was Flip Wilson, the comedian. Another, I think, I can't remember. There was a famous comedian at the time named Shaun somebody. I can't remember.

[00:14:30] I tried to find these on the internet, but I can't find them anywhere. They were network, big special productions that were on television every year. I will always be grateful to Kenneth Felt, because when I was joining the circus, I had everything planned. I had signed the contract. I understood the contract and everything, but then when it was time to go, I'm thinking oh my goodness. I forgot to budget the fare on the airplane, so I called him up and I said, "Mr. Felt, I guess I'll just have to wait until next year, because," and then he said, "Well, if we fly you in, do you promise to let us take it out of your paycheck, even your rehearsal pay?" I said, "Oh yes. Yes."

That happened. To me, that was magical.

[00:15:00] Nancy Davies: It allowed you to go and [crosstalk 00:15:03].

Alice Brown: Yeah, so I'll always be grateful for that. Yes.

Nancy Davies: You danced.

Alice Brown: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Davies: You rode elephants.

Alice Brown: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Davies: You did aerial work, so you did the web?

Alice Brown: Yes. The web.

Nancy Davies: Anything else?

Alice Brown: Also, I did PR. I know you said you were in PR.

Nancy Davies: Yeah.

Alice Brown: [00:15:30] Yes. I was on the Barbara Walters show. I'm sorry, the Today Show interviewed by Barbara Walters. I have a picture right here of that. Me and two other girls from the show.

Nancy Davies: I bet that's something you never thought of when you joined the circus-

Alice Brown: Right.

Nancy Davies: -that you'd be interviewed by Barbara Walters.

Alice Brown: Right, and I was interviewed by Phil Donahue along with Tito Gayona.

Nancy Davies: I love Tito Gayona.

Alice Brown: [00:16:00] Yes. Tito Gayona, and Charlie Bowman was on that. We were the three I think. Tito Gayona and myself and Charlie Bowman. We were interviewed by Phil Donahue, and there's a picture.

Nancy Davies: This is wonderful. You brought along some of your programs from that year and this great article about you.

Alice Brown: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's me and Barbara Walters.

Nancy Davies: You're beautiful. Look at this.

Alice Brown: Here's Barbara Walters in the picture.

Nancy Davies: Look. How fun.

Alice Brown: Yeah.

Nancy Davies: What was ... You were talking about the show that year?

- Alice Brown:
[00:16:30] Yes, and other girls with me on that show. There was Ellen Charles and Patty Paulson, who became Patty Popinska. Yes, she's not in this picture, but she was on the show, and there I am. Yes. I did a lot of television and radio, and a lot of people were excited because I was one of the first blacks to be in the Ringling brothers circus.
- Nancy Davies: The first?
- Alice Brown: I was the first one with the blue unit.
- Nancy Davies: Oh wow.
- Alice Brown: Yes.
- Nancy Davies: That is quite a history.
- Alice Brown:
[00:17:00] Yes, and before me there had been Jackie. I don't remember her last name with the red unit. Of course, the King Charles troupe, they've been there in and out ever since until they ended in April. The show ended. They've been in and out of the circus. They were the first black act, and they were there before me by a few years.
- Nancy Davies: What did you think when they finally hired Jonathan Lee Iverson?
- Alice Brown: I thought that was wonderful, just wonderful. Yes.
- Nancy Davies: It was time.
- Alice Brown:
[00:17:30] Mm-hmm (affirmative). I credit the Felts for that, because I think the King Charles troupe who came a few years before me, myself, Jackie, and we started when the Felts were there. I think they must have been pretty good guys.
- Nancy Davies: Did you have ... Once you were hired, did you have some more interaction with Kenneth Felt over your time where you got to speak to him?
- Alice Brown:
[00:18:00] You know, you just there all the time. You say hello and stuff like that. He compliments you and says you're doing a good job and wonderful things like that. I really just thought that was great.
- Nancy Davies: What are some of your favorite memories from being on the show?
- Alice Brown:
[00:18:30] I guess like I say the train, because you know, I remember hearing people talk about how so many black people came to Chicago via the train. The great migration, and my father always claimed that, "Yeah, I hoboed from Mississippi to Chicago on the train." I thought gee, you know, when I was a little girl I would love to go around places on the train. I would love to be able to just hitch a train. Finally, I was able to. Oh, and another thing that influenced me was when I was a little girl I used to watch circus boy on television with the young man who became part of The Monkees singing group. He was the start of a show called 'Circus Boy'.

- [00:19:00] I used to really admire him riding that elephant. A lot of things, but I think another big thing that influenced me was literature, because my favorite poet was Langston Hughes. I would read his biographies when I was a girl about how he had become a sailor and he would go from place to place. I was thinking gee, you can do that. You can really do that. You can get a job some place and they will pay you. I felt like sometimes I should be paying the circus. No, they were paying me to go from place to place, and winter quarters, when we first opened in winter quarters, and we moved from Venice. I was told, "You'll be passing through pastures with oranges that you can reach right out of the train vestibule and grab one," and you sure could.
- [00:19:30]
- Nancy Davies: Really?
- Alice Brown: You sure could. I could grab a fresh orange.
- Nancy Davies: Did you?
- Alice Brown: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.
- Nancy Davies: It sounds like to me that the number one reason you wanted to audition wasn't necessarily performing. It was so you could live on a train.
[00:20:00]
- Alice Brown: That was a big part of it. Yeah, a big part of it, and loving the music that they chose at the time. I remember I was watching the red unit when I was a charette, and they had finale, and the theme was 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head' sung by Harold Ronk, or I think it was the red unit, so it was the ring master at that time over there. It wasn't Harold Ronk. The girls came out in they're dancing costumes and they had their tutus on and their little umbrellas sequenced. They were dancing to that with their feathered hats. Then, you had some girls in the rings, and they were on the big balls, like polar bears, with these white, furrowing lumps on, and they were balancing on these balls.
[00:20:30]
- [00:21:00] It was just so exciting. Another number had the ringmaster was singing 'Oh You Beautiful Doll', and the girls were dancing to it. Suddenly in their right hands these marionettes appear that are about half their heights. Marionettes are dancing with them and doing the kicks with them. They were choreographed to do all that. There was a lot of whimsy. I used to love watching the red unit at that time. That's when I decided. Oh, also Gunther, he was still the Gunther Gable Williams. He had such a magnetism, almost like the Michael Jackson of the circus, you know?
- [00:21:30] He just almost glowed. Then, when I got cast, I wasn't on the red unit. I was on the blue unit, and that was where Charlie Bowman was with his elegant animals. He had the white horse liberty act and the tigers act. Also, he was the ring master. You are always on your toes around Charlie, because you had to be there right on cue and be ready. Yes, there was a lot of reasons that I joined the circus.
[00:22:00]
- Nancy Davies: Tell us about Harold Ronk.

Alice Brown: Oh, Harold Ronk. Yes, he was the ring master, and he had this beautiful baritone voice and a very lolting quality about it, a very friendly, warm quality about his voice. I just loved hearing him sing when we'd do our dances. We had dances with themes like, let's see, I remember the cakewalk jamboree because when I wasn't riding the elephant I was a dancer in that line, the cakewalk jamboree. They would just fuse different songs together and just make them sound really cool and really kind of jazzy, you know? Then, the next year, because we had two years when we'd do the same show, because the red unit and the blue unit would crisscross each other so that every audience would get a different show every year. The next year we did a new show, it revolved around the Charleston and that whole era.

[00:22:30]

[00:23:00]

We had the most precious costumes, and we were doing the Charleston. Everything that was [inaudible 00:23:06] well researched. They researched each show, and I can tell that now looking back, because the way they threaded the songs together. Every song fit the era. Every costume did as well, and we had these beautiful flower costumes, and all the steps were authentic all the time and yet intricate. Yes, there's so many thing. I remember also we had a number called 'Spectacle', and we would always bring children in from the audience. Then, we would do a quick change and come right back out. I remember I would go from being an attendant in a beautiful, pink costume getting the kids out of the audience and I had big, old bow. The girls who did that number had big bows in our hats.

[00:23:30]

[00:24:00]

When we did our quick change, our costume changed completely, because we had to run backstage and run back out. Then ... Oh no. I remember what happened. We did change our costume then I think. Anyway, this one clown called the cotton candy man would come through. He would take the ribbons out and put cotton candy hats on us. It was just ... You had to see it to understand how magical it looked. It really enchanted children. They went right around in the carriages. I have one picture that my friend Susie had taken a picture of me in the Queen's court, Cinderella's court.

[00:24:30]

[00:25:00]

Cinderella had on silver and blue and she was on a float with white horses pulling her. Prince Charming was on that float, and behind her were six attendants. Each of us attendants had the same dress on, except ours were silver and pink with pink hats. They were just beautiful. Everything was hand sequenced for example. Back then, those costumes were \$1200 a piece, those dresses. Everything was form fitted just for you. Our designer was named Don Foote. Yes, I think that was his name. We even had a shoe designer. I forget his name. At first, we had different shoes to match every costume. We had a different color. Then, they changed it to just beige shoes for the costumes, because we had a hard time with all of those quick changes, like having to change the neck piece and everything.

[00:25:30]

The gloves, we had long gloves for many of the costumes, because some of our costumes were bound. It was just wonderful. A lot of the acts also were drafted into dancing along with us girls too just to make it look like more people.

Nancy Davies:

Talk about being out there dancing, you know, maybe you have a six pack weekend

- [00:26:00] or more if you have the three shows also on a Friday on occasion. What did that do to your body? Was that difficult because you're on the hard floor and up and down on the ring curve?
- Alice Brown: I was told when we were dancing. I remember there was one girl who would always say, "You know, we're going to pay for this when we get older." No, I haven't had any problems. We had the dancer heels on. I haven't had any problems from that at all. There was something else I was trying to think of to say. Oh, I remember almost everyone in the circus, they had these amazing physiques, because for me, I had to get that upper body strength, so I was highly toned and very looked like I had been ... I don't know. Just doing it all my life as a result of climbing that rope every day and doing all that we had to do. Everyone had these athletic bodies.
- [00:26:30]
- [00:27:00] Everybody looked so beautiful from all over the United States. They were all so toned and just had great muscle tone and that type of thing. It was just everybody looked like they were off a set of a movie I thought. That's what it seemed like to me.
- Nancy Davies: What did Ringling Brothers mean to you?
- Alice Brown: Oh, it just means following your dreams. Following your dreams and be willing to learn. I had to learn a lot. I didn't have as much training as some of the people. I remember when I talked to Mrs. Concello and I said, "Oh, Mrs. Concello I would love to audition," and she said, "Well, you know, we had auditions a few weeks ago, but you go ahead and audition for me. I will see what you can do." I auditioned, and it was kind of hard, because I didn't have a lot of dance experience. There was one girl who was with the show, and her name was Michele Graves. Bless her heart.
- [00:27:30]
- [00:28:00] She was with the show, and she had noticed me auditioning, so she said, "Listen." She didn't even know me. She said, "If you'll come in to work as an usherette early, I'll come in to work early too." She was a dancer. She said, "I'll come in and I'll work with you on the steps. Then, you can ask Mrs. Concello to audition again." That's exactly what she did. That's exactly what that Michele Graves did. I was able to pass the audition and ended up in winter quarters in Venice, Florida. Mrs. Concello said something to me that I thought was very special. She said, "You know, you remind me of me when I first started."
- [00:28:30]
- Nancy Davies: Oh my goodness.
- Alice Brown: She said she had not meant to go into the service. She was going to go and be a nun.
- Nancy Davies: A nun.
- Alice Brown: That's what she said. I don't know. She never told me, but something about her saying that to me just I felt was very special. Yeah. I guess she saw that I wanted it the way she wanted it. Maybe that's what she meant.
- [00:29:00]

- Nancy Davies: Now, as I'm from Chicago, the amphitheater, I said it right. It is the amphitheater. Sorry. My mind just went blank there for a second. I heard stories about it, but it was already gone by the time I was doing publicity for Ringling. I've heard stories, especially at the end, that it was dark and maybe at the end it was, but there are a lot of fond memories I know people have of the amphitheater. Kind of describe it, especially when the circus was there. What was it like to have it in that building?
[00:29:30]
- Alice Brown: Well, when the circus was there, you know, the amphitheater was a very interesting building. I'll talk to from the point of view from an usherette. They would have things as varied as the circus. They would have the rodeo. They had the Rolling Stones there. They would have conventions there. They had operation bread basket before operation push, and you know, just a lot of conventions and big arena style shows there.
[00:30:00]
- Nancy Davies: How many would it seat?
- Alice Brown: I'm not sure, but the picture of me here on the elephant, it has the amphitheater in the background. This was an afternoon show, so it's not a lot of people right there.
- Nancy Davies: Oh wow.
- Alice Brown: Yeah, before McCormick place it was our big arena.
[00:30:30]
- Nancy Davies: What was it like to play there, to go back after having been an usherette and now you're a performer?
- Alice Brown: Oh, it was wonderful, and Chicago really embraced it, so I was on AM Chicago, which is now Windy City Live. I was on Chicago PM at night. My mother and my sister were invited on television, and my father, but they were shy, so they let me be the show person in the family, but my sister did come on television with me. Her name is Anna Clark, and we were on Chicago at night, and I did a lot of radio, WLS, and oh my goodness. I can't remember this famous broadcaster, his name. We did WCFL, just there was just so much publicity all over the United States. It was stunning to me. It was stunning when I climbed down from the web on opening night here in Chicago. I climbed down. I just want to style. Like everyone I climbed down. There's all these cameras all on their knees and taking my picture as I climbed down.
[00:31:00]
- I'm like, "Oh my goodness." Yes.
[00:31:30]
- Nancy Davies: What did Ringling Brothers, that time with them, what did it teach you that you just still to this day-
- Alice Brown: I liked that slogan of theirs, "May All Your Days Be Circus Days", because I think people should have that feeling of being able to go from place to place, that things are accessible, that what you want is accessible if that's what you want and that
[00:32:00]

[00:32:30] what it really means to me is that life will always be like a three ring circus. Even today, I do things in multiples, like right now I'm still creative. I'm working on a music act singing and playing piano. I write plays and poetry. I'm always involved in ... I've done plays, done theater. I'm always involved in something creative. I think, well it must be because life is still like a three ring circus to me. There's one picture.

Oh, here's a picture of Harold Ronk, our ring master.

Nancy Davies: Oh yeah. What a great program to have. Oh my goodness.

Alice Brown: That's a polish [crosstalk 00:32:54] there. Yeah. I think this broke through the thing.
[00:33:00] Yes, it's got wonderful pictures in here.

Nancy Davies: May I ask why you left the show?

Alice Brown: I left because I wanted to pursue more creative things. I even got a passport thinking now I'll just go to ... Everything seemed simple to me then. I'll just go to Europe and maybe I'll get with a small circus, and you know, that type of thing.
[00:33:30] Then, my mother had a stroke. Then, I married this wonderful gentleman here. Then, we had children, so then we had the small children and my mother had a stroke then, so my father got sick. I just decided to just stay creative and become a temp job person and take care of my family and raise my kids. That's mostly what I did. I went back and got my BA in English in 2005, because my mother said when I joined the circus, she said, "Oh, now you'll never graduate college."

[00:34:00] I said, " Oh, Ma, some day I will." She had passed when I did, but I did. Yeah.

Nancy Davies: When you heard that Ringling Brothers, the greatest show on earth, was ending, knowing that this is it, but you have this history with it, what does that mean to you?

Alice Brown: It makes me feel, I don't know, longer, a legend in my own mind.

[00:34:30]
Nancy Davies: I like that.

Alice Brown: I'm actually a legend like everybody who was in the circus now.

Nancy Davies: What do you tell people? Well, when people find out you were with Ringling Brothers, what do they want to know?

Alice Brown: Oh, they always kind of look like, "Hmmm, that's something I never thought about."
[00:35:00] That seems very odd, but now I notice if I show them a visual, like my little circus picture, then they get really excited. They say, "Oh, what was that like? You must have been so brave." Of course, all the animals we know, that the elephants, and all the animals were well treated. We know that, but what happens is there's a vocal people who just make assumptions about all circuses, and even when you see the people who make these assumptions, when you see their footage, those are

[00:35:30] not Ringling pictures, because all of our elephants had the symbol on their butt, you know? This vocal group, they're the ones who get the voice. Well, we know that our elephants were well treated, all of our animals.

[00:36:00] The thing about the Ringling Brothers' elephants were when Axel Gautier was training them, Donna Gautier and he had these small children. The elephants would play with those children like they were their own kids. The elephants also had a community. They were all just buddies and stuff like that. I remember one elephant I used to really like to talk to was named Iggy because Iggy seemed to respond, and the elephant that I rode most of the time was named Pootsy. I remember the Elvis elephant was named Targa, and I can't remember all the elephants' names now, there was a baby elephant at the time named Karen after Kenneth Felts' first child I think. I'm not sure. Yes.

[00:36:30] It was just really an exciting time. Even many of the animals traveled by train. Some people, they chose to travel by trailer. That was called going over land. If you took a break from the train and took a trip by car or automotive it was called going over land. Yeah.

[00:37:00] Nancy Davies: Did you ever have any witness or have any crazy experiences? I'm thinking there's some crazy clowns who probably were around.

Alice Brown: I can't think of any crazy experiences except I was surprised in the south when I first went down south. I noticed those confederate flags and the John Birch society signs. I thought, careful, be very careful. Sure enough, there were places there in the south, a couple of places, that wouldn't serve me, you know?

[00:37:30] Nancy Davies: Really?

Alice Brown: Just a couple of places. You know, things like that, but in the circus it was the united nations under a big top. That's the beautiful thing, you know? We were from all over the United States, and we all got along.

[00:38:00] Nancy Davies: How do you want people mostly to take away about Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey? Now that it's over, the legacy is what?

Alice Brown: The legacy of ... Oh my goodness. That's a hard question to answer. Hmm, what is the legacy? The legacy is to stay in touch with that child within. Always stay in touch and always have a sense of adventure and humor and optimism, because it take optimism to join the circus, and it takes a lot of discipline to be able to adopt that lifestyle and so I think it's just yes. Stay in touch with that child within. That's the legacy of Ringling Brothers Circus.

[00:38:30] Nancy Davies: That's a good legacy.

Alice Brown: Okay.

Nancy Davies: I also want to ask a little bit, since I mentioned clowns. Talk to me about the clowns. You had, it sounds like ... I forgot who the ... The name just escaped me.
[00:39:00]

Alice Brown: Otto [inaudible 00:39:01].

Nancy Davies: Yes. Otto Gribling on there, and did you get to spend some time? Were you interacted with them a lot?

Alice Brown: Yes, yes. Their space was called clown alley, and they were all just ... I remember Steve Smith. He started around the same time that I did. We were just all so young and together there. We had great times. I wanted to be a clown for awhile. I don't know why I didn't just try it. Again, that was a whole different discipline. I really admired them a lot. I admired clowns a lot and even thought about becoming a clown myself.
[00:39:30]

Nancy Davies: Oh, who was boss clown?

Alice Brown: Oh my goodness. Levoy Hipps, the stilt walker. Yes.
[00:40:00]

Nancy Davies: Now, the group of women when you started out who were dancers, did that mostly stay the same through your tenure there, or did you have quite a few people new come in?

Alice Brown: Well, when I joined, there were a lot of veteran dancers still there, like Charlie Bowman's wife was named Ariseli Bowman, and she had been there since the tent shows. The elephant trainer, his wife, Donna Gautier, yes, Axel Gautier's wife, Donna Gautier, had been there since the tent shows as well. Our dance captain, Norma, she was from England. Her friend, I can't remember her name, but she married the general manager, Morgan. I can't remember her name. She was from England also. They had been there since ... You have to remember the tent show didn't end until maybe the late 50s.
[00:40:30]

[00:41:00] I was there in 1973. They still were beautiful and they still were dancing. Yeah. Someone named Betsy, and then there were us newcomers as well, people who had come before me and who came after me. I think in one of the group shows there's two girls who came the year I left. They're names are Sharon and Chris. Yes. Tonight here in Baravue at the show, we're going to do one last rowel. We're going to have a chorus line for the fundraiser that you're having tonight. I think that's exciting. We had a rehearsal yesterday.

[00:41:30]

Nancy Davies: Yay. You get to perform again.

Alice Brown: Yeah, here's the hat. They gave us a hat so that we could all be uniform.

Nancy Davies: That's wonderful. I was going to ask you as you've gone to ... I'm assuming you've gone ... That's so cute. Gone to other shows of Ringling over the years. Have you just wished you could be out there?

[00:42:00]

Alice Brown: Yes, I used to, but you know what? I still kind of miss Mr. Barstow. I'm very ... Even when I sing, I still sing a lot of the standards. I enjoy watching the show. I really enjoy watching all the excitement, all the action. I may be kind of sad that they had to cut down from three rings, because that was exciting. My children, when they used to go to the circus, they were always amazed. Yes, I long for the good old days of the circus, and I used to really miss it, but no. I've made peace with the fact that it's done. Ringling is done.

[00:42:30]

Nancy Davies: Here at the Ringling Brothers homecoming, have you seen other people that were on the same show as you?

Alice Brown: So far I've just seen three, just Steve Smith and also the two ladies I mentioned, and so today when I get out to wrangle hopefully I'll see more, because we just haven't really been interacting yet. I didn't make it to the parade today.

[00:43:00]

Nancy Davies: Oh no.

Alice Brown: No, I missed it.

Nancy Davies: Did you get to interact with the other three that you've seen?

Alice Brown: Yes.

Nancy Davies: Was it like no time had passed?

Alice Brown: Right, yes, yes. They still have that presence.

Nancy Davies: Is there anything that you want to share and let people know that I haven't asked you?

[00:43:30]

Alice Brown: Gee, you've asked me so many great questions. It'd be hard to think of anything to add.

Nancy Davies: Let me ask this then. Maybe a final question. Is there a story that always comes to mind when you think about your days with the show?

Alice Brown: Well, I always think about how Mr. Barstow seemed like he was so touch on everybody, but deep down inside he seemed so vulnerable, and that he just had this vision and this mission about his show. That was the choreographer. You know, I think that he was kind of misunderstood sometimes. When he had show, it was just so ... I mean, all the shows ... Don't get me wrong, all the shows were

[00:44:30]

spectacular, but it just drew me in how they had all that nostalgia and whimsy and so many things that were so well researched. Three rings, all at the same time. It was so exciting. Yes. I think that the biggest thing is like me, I didn't have as much dance as the other girls, but I had the drive and the ambition, and I smile a lot. They

like dancers who smile a lot.

[00:45:00] You know, just keep on until somebody listens to you, and if you're willing to learn, yes, you can do it. Just say, "I can do it."

Nancy Davies: Alice, thank you so much for sharing your memories.

Alice Brown: Thank you.

Nancy Davies: I appreciate it.

Alice Brown: Thank you.