

CWM Audio 70-19
Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Homecoming
(Employee Reunion)
Group Interviews, July 22, 2017
Session 4A

Interview with Janet Madsen Vickers, Sharon Sellitto, and Christine Seylier Duke
Interview conducted by Zoe Nissen

Zoe N.: My name is Zoe [Nissin 00:00:08], today I'm at Circus World, it is July 22nd-

Speaker 2: 22nd.

Zoe N.: -2017. I am conducting an oral history with the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Zoe N.: Yes.

Speaker 2: Employees of.

Zoe N.: Employees of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus. Today we are with-

Christine: Yeah.

[00:00:30]

Zoe N.: Sorry, if you can introduce yourselves, say your job, your unit.

Sharon: You should close the door.

Zoe N.: Years.

Speaker 2: I can close the door if you like.

Zoe N.: Yeah. So, your name, your job, what unit you're with and what years you worked with the circus.

Christine: Okay. Yes, I'm Christina Schuyler Duke, and I was with the blue unit, and it was as a show girl. Doing the web, riding the elephants, and dancing. That was in the year 1974 and '75.

Zoe N.: Okay.

[00:01:00]

Sharon: Sharon Sellitto, and I was a show girl with the blue unit, the good show. Learned web and did web for each of the shows and the choreography, all the dance numbers.

Janet:
[00:01:30] I'm Janet Madsen Vickers, I was dancer, dance captain, school teacher, assistant performance director, and whatever else they needed from '79 to '87. Blue unit.

Christine: Yay.

Janet: Yay.

Zoe N.: Great. Thank you. So, I guess, to start off, why did y'all want to work for the circus?

Christine: Okay, well I had been dancing professionally. I lived in San Francisco and was with a ballet company and then went on to Reno and Lake Tahoe, and we were together.

Sharon: Christina and I danced together.

[00:02:00]

Christine: We both auditioned at San Francisco, so it was mainly we just wanted to continue our dancing career and this was a great way to do that. So, we auditioned and then they called us probably about four months later. We joined the show in Jacksonville Florida.

Sharon:
[00:02:30] They called on a Monday and said, "We need to you be in Florida on Friday to start learning the choreography." I wasn't even in California. I was in New York, and Chris called and said, "Where do you want me to throw your stuff? Because we have to be in Florida on Friday."

[00:03:00] I was in New York with my boyfriend at his brother's wedding. This is an aside. He was getting, "Oh a wedding, and you and me." Chris called, and I said, "I won't be going back to California, because I'm going to Florida on Friday to join the circus."

He's like, "Well, what about us? You know? Everything we've talked about." I was like, "Joe this is not Bob and Ted's circus. This is Ringling Brothers, and bye, I'm going." That was that.

Christine: You did marry him later.

Sharon: Yeah, he waited. He waited.

[00:03:30]

Janet: I was in Chicago, dancing professionally. Same thing. I had been a school teacher and left teaching to dance. It just took over my life and actually I was taking some day classes with Lou Conte Dance Studio in Chicago, and a whole group from Ringling, two of whom I met this morning at the parade by the way, which is funny, came over and were taking dance classes. It was almost the end of the season and they said, "Oh we gotta get out of the circus. We need to get some other dance job. We need to just get ourselves going."

[00:04:00] I says, "Well, did you hate it?" They said, "No, it was the best job we ever had in our life." I thought, "Oh, you're leaving it, but it was what you loved and the best job you ever, in your life?" It made me curious.

They talked me into going to the auditions. I was a little luckier than you two. I got a call actually a couple days later-

Christine: Wow.

Janet: -but with six weeks notice. Actually, no it wasn't even a couple days later. It was a few hours later-

Sharon: Oh.

[00:04:30]

Janet: -with six week notice, so I had plenty of time to wrap things up and be organized. My parents, at first, were nervous because they didn't understand that this was Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey. I mean, we were working with people who were on postage stamps in their own countries.

It was a very fine, fine place to work. They thought it was going to be tawdry and miserable or something, and they were a little scared. Of all people, my great-aunt was the one who said, "If she wants to go, let her go." I said, "Well, what made you so passionate?"

[00:05:00] She said that she had won a dance contest to go to Hollywood when she was my age at that time-

Sharon: And didn't do it.

Janet: -and her parents talked her out of it, and the second runner up was Ginger Rodgers.

Sharon: No way.

Janet: So, that could be one of those family myths. I don't know. But anyway, that story helped me get to Ringling and of course, fell in love with it.

Sharon: Oh my God.

Zoe N.: Oh my gosh, that's amazing.

Christine: Yeah, that is. That's neat.

[00:05:30]

Zoe N.: So what was it like when you first started? Like your first couple days.

Christine: Well, Antoinette Concello, who was one of a flying trapeze artist, and she was the one that was training the show girls.

Janet: I don't know, did you adore her as much as [crosstalk 00:05:42].

Christine: Oh yeah. She was so sweet. Yeah, I think, you know, learning the web, and we had about two weeks, because the show was already in progress, to learn the choreography. Actually, we were with the red show the first week or so training with them where [00:06:00] Antoinette was to learn the web act. Then, we went on to the blue.

Sharon: When we were learning web, it hurt so much that at night we would sit-

Christine: Oh, stretch.

Sharon: -and pull on your arms, because otherwise, your arm would just go like this and we'd be like ... Oh my God. For a week at least.

Christine: Yeah, we were dancers, but I did gymnastics in the past, so I had some.

Sharon: Oh my God.

Christine: Still, yeah.

Zoe N.: But doing that all day every day.

Christine: Yeah.

Zoe N.: It's a different life.

[00:06:30]
Sharon: It was hard. I mean, it was such big fun.

Christine: The first couple of weeks. Yeah.

Sharon: It was hard.

Christine: We were challenged.

Sharon: Oh yeah, and we had to learn the entire show, not just the web, but the entire show. All the choreography in two weeks, because we had to meet the show in Jacksonville and start like that.

Christine: Yeah. I don't know, how long did you train when you came?

[00:07:00]
Janet: I felt glad to learn the web, because by then I got to learn the web, but then they decided not to do it in the show.

Christine: Oh.

Janet: I was glad I got to learn it.

Sharon: Yeah.

Janet: So I would practice back stage every now and then, whenever they would have one set up and just keep the skill up a little bit. Then, kept hoping they would do it, but then they never did.

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: They didn't do it.

Janet: Training, since it was a revised show, it was a little different that year, because we had only two of the dancers that returned. Remember me telling you about that large group at [crosstalk 00:07:27]?

Sharon: Oh yeah, oh my.

[00:07:30]

Janet: They had to train us almost as if it was a new show because there were so many new girls.

Sharon: Oh, gosh.

Janet: Fortunately I learned really fast, and actually that was one of the things I loved about being dance captain was getting the new girls at the beginning and getting the new girls in throughout the season and seeing how fast we could work them in. That was one of the fun things too, because when you do the same routine over and over, sometimes it gets a little repetitive.

Sharon: Oh sure. Yeah.

[00:08:00]

Janet: The years we would have this cracker jack groups that would come in and so I would teach them the alternate parts, because I'm very often on the hip drum track, the sides would mirror each other. I thought it was good for their brain if they were used to being here, then take their counterpart, you know?

Sharon: No, that is a good idea.

Janet: Then, switch them around so they could keep a little fresh. What was your original question by the way?

Zoe N.: You know, I just wanted to know how it was for you when you were starting.

Christine: When we started.

Janet: If you don't mind, I was going to share about that first day.

[00:08:30]

Zoe N.: Please.

Christine: Yeah.

Janet: I don't know, I was from Chicago and it was cold, and one of the coldest seasons ever, and snow and it had been below zero for about 10 days straight. That's like below zero here in circus world, you know? Doesn't happen that often, but it ended up, after I left, with 60 days straight with that extreme cold. I get out of the plane in Sarasota, and it wasn't like any plane I'd ever gotten out of before, not that I'd gotten out of that many.

[00:09:00] You don't go into the terminal directly. You get off the plane and down the little steps and you walk across the airport.

[00:09:30] Then, into the terminal. It was fog, and there were these giant, gray pelicans. I'd never seen a pelican, and it was a whole different world. To me, that was the strange part, but got on the bus with a trunk and a suitcase. I had my sewing machine, and got to the train. That felt like home immediately. Just the minute I grabbed that handrail on the train and started pushing my trunk up, and it just felt like home. The same thing walking from the train, because I was curious that very first day and walked from the train down under the palm trees, which were very strange too.

[00:10:00] Walking along the canal to winter quarters, and where we would be rehearsing, and just thought this is home. The arena was home. The smells were home. The feel was home. It just felt so right. I thought it would be scary, but it was just so right, you know? How every now and then in your life you think, yes this was the right decision.

Christine: Yeah.

Sharon: Yeah. Oh yeah.

Christine: Comfortable doing that.

Janet: What was strange to other people didn't feel strange, but what was normal to them, to me was strange. Anyway-

[00:10:30]

Zoe N.: Yeah. Let's see. I guess do you have a favorite story that you want to share from your time working with the show?

Christine: I'll think about it. Have you guys got one in mind? Favorite story.

Sharon: You have to come back to me I think for me. I mean, I wasn't ready for such a general [crosstalk 00:10:52] story.

Janet: I'll kind of go. When we're on the road ... Well, I'm starting to speak present tense. Okay, when we were on the road, we would often think not about time, but about place, and so when somebody would say, for example, "When's your birthday?" You would say,

[00:11:00]

"Oh, New Jersey, or wherever." You would give a place instead of a name sometimes and just think that way. When you ask the question, I thought of a place. I thought of Norfolk, Virginia, and my memory's long gone, but it could be wrong.

[00:11:30] There were two particularly memorable things that happened, very, very different things, and I believe both were in Norfolk. The first had to do with the weather. A blizzard hit while we were there, and we had a three show Saturday, and it was really, really difficult to get from the train to the arena. Being a Chicagoan, I just bundled up and walked along with a few other hearty souls, but most took the bus, and we were literally going through, it seemed like, a blizzard, so we did our first show, and it was rather thinly attended, because people couldn't get through.

[00:12:00]

[00:12:30] We kept expecting it to be canceled because of the weather, and no, they didn't cancel us, so we did our show in front of this audience. Then, time for the second show. These people that were there couldn't leave. They couldn't drive, so they stayed, and our show didn't get canceled, so we did our second show to very much the same crowd. They were just allowed to stay. Not only that, but by that point, the Red Cross had opened up the same building for any stragglers that couldn't get home and needed a place to go. We were with stragglers who were coming in, and the Red Cross people were there, and we were performing to this really unique group.

[00:13:00] We were thinking okay, what's going to happen for the third show, but I think by the third show they decided since the governor had closed the roads and told people to keep off that the better cancel the third show. That was Norfolk, but also ... I'm chattering. Another odd thing, and again, I could be wrong on the town, but the dressing rooms for the dancers were a little bit ... I keep saying dancers. Showgirls, dancers. I was told that Kenneth Feld wanted his show to be a little different than Irvin Feld's show, and Irvin had liked that showgirl look, that elite, polished, paradeable cross between a New York City ballerina and a Las Vegas showgirl look, and that Kenneth wanted a little different look, so he wanted more of a dancery dancy person.

[00:13:30]

[00:14:00] Often his dancers were gymnasts or tap dancers as well as ballet or jazz or whatever. I don't know what your training was. Anyway, that is totally off the subject, that dancer/showgirl ... The dancers' makeup dressing room, not the one where our costumes were, but when we would relax and put our makeup between numbers or fix our makeup, was very close to the entrance where we would all enter for the show in front of the audience. It was an unusual treat, because it was an actual dressing room with table down the middle and mirrors and tables around the edges and mirrors.

[00:14:30] It had a rectangle shape, and at the far end of it was a real true bathroom with multiple stalls and sinks. It was actually a two entrance bathroom, so you could walk in one door to get into this makeup dressing room. It was a very wide, double door, and go down one side through the doors where the sinks were and through another little door where the toilets were, and then walk straight back another door. It was quite a unique dressing room, and I'm going into all that geography of it because the unusual thing that happened.

[00:15:00]

We had gotten several baby elephants from some place, and they were learning the

[00:15:30] routine. They weren't doing much yet, just kind of walking around doing spec. Then, they had learned to pull a small wagon during spec. They were enjoying themselves, but still they were young enough, you know, under five. Again, maybe even under three. I can't remember their age. One got a little confused and it came into our dressing room, and it's looking in the mirrors, and it's looking at us, and we're looking at it and thinking this is interesting.

[00:16:00] It walked right on past, didn't bother any of our makeup, didn't bother any of the mirrors, walked into the one door where the sinks were, walked through into the bathroom and back out, except for one small detail. The door between the sinks and the toilets wasn't wide enough for it.

Zoe N.: Oh no.

Janet: It kept going, and it was just like something out of a cartoon where I mean, I think I even got a photo of this someplace where here's the door straight, and then suddenly there's a little C in the door, a little backwards C in the door where the elephant went through and widened the door to fit itself. Those were two of the more memorable thing. Long story, but two of the more memorable things. Does that help you remember any memorable things?

[00:16:30]

Sharon: Our baby elephant, little John, was half the size of the full grown elephant, so we never had anything like that happen. Although, did you ever have any boy elephants in your show?

Janet: Oh yeah.

Sharon: Oh my God.

Janet: Buckles did. Axel didn't want the boys, but Buckles had a male. Yeah.

[00:17:00]
Sharon: I mean, in the acts? We only had little John because we had the Momma, so he would be the last one around, you know, tail to trunk.

Janet: Oh, he had a grown ... He was one of the few trainers that would work with him.

Sharon: You know, it was a little boy, so when he'd go around the curve-

Janet: Was Buckles there when you were there?

Sharon: Huh?

Janet: Was Buckles Woodcock the trainer when you were on the show?

Sharon: No, I've heard, but no.

Speaker 2: No.

Janet: I could be wrong, but [crosstalk 00:17:25].

Sharon: Anyway, there's a reason they don't have little boy elephants in the act, as you might be able to imagine.

Janet: He had [inaudible 00:17:31].

[00:17:30]

Christine: One story I remember is the super dome in New Orleans. They had just built that, and Ringling Brothers was probably about the third thing that performed in the super dome, so that was really exciting, this brand new building, but it was so huge. I mean, you were performing, and the people were still at least 50 foot away from you, the front row. Then, the seats went up forever.

[00:18:00]

Janet: They weren't even sitting in the seats. They had the seats going halfway through to close it in a little bit. It still seemed like where are you?

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: Then, as a special thing for the opening of the super dome, with our show, Felipe Petit, who was a high wire artist, he walked the entire length overhead of the super dome every show. It would take him 20 minutes.

Sharon: Pocket bell's cannon and D with all the lights out except for two spot lights and the birds would be flying around. We would run all the way across the thing, and all the way up to the top of the super dome so we could watch him do it eyeball to eyeball. Then, we'd have to run all the way back down and quick change clothes for manage, or whatever.

Christine: He was a delightful person.

Sharon: Oh my God. Wonderful. That was exciting.

Christine: [00:19:00] He was really a neat person. Yeah. 20 minutes of the show added on. Every show he would do that and walk back. He was such an adventurous person, and one night he went out and he was walking on the outside of the super dome. He would just climb or get on any building obviously or high wires and walk. He was a very adventurous little Frenchman.

Janet: Oh my goodness.

Christine: He was fun.

Sharon: It was fun.

Christine: That's kind of a story I remember, playing the super dome and-

Janet: That had posh dressing rooms with rocking chairs in them at that time. It was very nice.

Christine: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:19:30]

Janet: Most of the dressing rooms were poles with blue curtains strung between them.

Christine: Right, around.

Janet: They would make up right there.

Christine: Yeah.

Sharon: The first time we did the show, so the first time I did web in the show, and that was 30 feet high maybe?

Christine: 20, kind of depended on the building.

Sharon: 20 to 30. Yeah-

Christine: How high we were up.

Sharon: Sometimes, actually, we'd hang upside down and it was like if that was a fair building,
[00:20:00] you could take your web center's hat off his head.

Christine: Yes. They weren't as high. Yeah.

Sharon: That was funny, but I went upside down to do the ankle hang, which is at the end where they spin you and everything, and I forgot. I was so nervous I forgot to put my safety down on my ankle, so my foot was just, you know, windling around in that, and the people on the ... Antoinette, because she came because we were her new girls-

Christine: Right, [crosstalk 00:20:28].

[00:20:30]

Sharon: -and all that. They're all yelling, "Safety, safety." I'm up there going, "Wonderful. Wonderful." Oh my God. I was so scared afterwards, but not when it was dangerous. It was funny. It was ... Oh my God.

Zoe N.: How funny.

Sharon: I know. Too nervous to be safe. I'll try it my way.

Janet: Oh, that's so funny.

Zoe N.: You made it through. You're still here.

[00:21:00]

Sharon: Yeah. It's a new act. Flying, starts out over here and ends up over there.

Janet: Antoinette almost couldn't help wanting people to learn, learn, learn and grow, grow no matter what. She really wasn't doing the audition. Actually, by the time I was running dance auditions, she was just an occasional guess, but we kind of revered her in a way. I felt so lucky one time in Madison Square Garden. She was visiting and the publicist came and said, "Would you do something for me? It's Antoinette's birthday today and we'd like to give her a large stack of red roses. Would you mind doing it?" I'm like, "Yes. What an honor."

[00:21:30]

Sharon: What an honor. Yeah. Oh my.

Janet: It was such a treat.

Sharon: Yeah.

Zoe N.: Wow.

Sharon: It's just terrible, though, when you're in the midst of all that, because we were talking the other day that when we started, John Ringling North was standing there next to Irving and everything. I mean, come to the shows all the time. Did we go, "Excuse me, Mr. North, could we possibly have a picture with you?" No. Did we take a picture with Antoinette? No.

[00:22:00]

Janet: Didn't think about it. No.

Christine: Yeah.

Sharon: Oh my God. Now, [crosstalk 00:22:04].

Janet: It's just part of the day.

Christine: Well, and cameras weren't as accessible. It wasn't like you were carrying your cell phone around-

Sharon: Oh no, not like that.

Janet: Yeah, that's true.

Christine: -like snapping pictures today.

Sharon: Still, just it makes you wonder.

Christine: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah, it is interesting to look through people's photo books and see who had photos of what, and I know I'd only had photos of the show from when people from the red unit came to visit and took photos and then mailed them to me. Otherwise, I [crosstalk

00:22:30].

[00:22:30]

Sharon: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Christine: You wouldn't.

Sharon: Yeah. I went out, because this was the beginning of-

Christine: Like the VHS-

Sharon: -VHS tapes.

Christine: -recorders?

Janet: Right, yeah.

Sharon: And you can go to it. It was like oh my God. You know? I mean, it was such an exciting thing, but nobody had anything. Nobody had a camera. Nobody had ... You could go and rent one, so I went and rented this huge stinking camera.

[00:23:00]

Zoe N.: Yeah, you [crosstalk 00:23:04].

Sharon: Yeah, the size of the chair, and I didn't know that, you know, like a camera when you take it this way ... I didn't know that if I did it this way and took a movie it was going to be that way forever. I only did that when we were backstage, so like the King Charles trope has all this [inaudible 00:23:24] stuff. It's so funny. I do have me doing web because of that, because I rented a camera and then got somebody to take a movie of me. Otherwise, nothing.

[00:23:30]

Christine: No, you don't [crosstalk 00:23:41].

Sharon: The Flying Gaonas, the trapeze artist in our show, the catcher I think, offered to take pictures of us, so he [inaudible 00:23:51] some beautiful web pictures from that. Otherwise, nothing.

Christine: Yeah, didn't happen.

Janet: By the time I got there, the show actually bought one of those cameras, and I ended up using it quite a bit, because the clowns needed to learn the choreography for spec, or when new dancers came in. What I did instead of trying to get somebody who knew that part to teach me that part so I could then teach it to anybody new.

[00:24:00]

Sharon: Yeah, no, that's a good idea.

Janet: I sat out a couple of shows, filmed, and then I would just study the VCR in my training room on the runs-

Sharon: Oh no, that was great.

Janet: -and learn the part and learn King Charles parts.

[00:24:30]
Sharon: If you rented it in some town, you had to take it back to that town before the train pulled out.

Janet: Yes.

Sharon: It wasn't like you ... It was you had to ... And we had no cars. I don't know how I got any of it. Anyway, I did somehow. Thank God it was fun.

Janet: The TVs were, we considered it really lucky if we had a little TV with a VCR.

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: Little bit different.

Sharon: Pulled down the sink in your room and put the TV on that. God, there's that. I had this
[00:25:00] boyfriend who came to the train, because we were in roomettes, which were four by eight?

Janet: Six foot four inches long by 42 inches wide.

Christine: 42 inches wide.

Sharon: So you had to stand up in the hallway and reach up and pull your bed down into the other wall and then get back in. Then, you're in your bedroom. Then, in the morning you got out and then you put your bed back up and you were in your living room. They had a tiny little couch, a sink, and-

Christine: [crosstalk 00:25:22].

Sharon: -a tiny little closet. This fellow came to see me, and he looked around, and he goes,
[00:25:30] "Wow. I see now since you live here on your birthday somebody takes something away from you instead of giving you something to have more room." It was so [inaudible 00:25:40].

Janet: We got to Hershey, Pennsylvania, and we were-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: -right by the park. It was kind of funny, because people were going through and playing the different arcade games and winning stuffed animals and winning bigger stuffed animals and winning bigger stuffed animals. Then, when it was time to go, they went
[00:26:00] back and said, "Can I trade all my giant animals in for teeny, tiny ones?" I think the vendors thought we were crazy.

Sharon: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Christine: We had no space.

Sharon: It's true.

Christine: I did have a fold up bicycle. Bicycle that folded in half-

Sharon: We each had a folded bicycle.

Christine: -that I would keep on the train and stuff, and then when I got into town that I could ride and get around. I did have one of those.

Sharon: [00:26:30] Boulding took care of the train would put them underneath for us so we didn't have to try to sleep on that too in our tiny, little rooms.

Janet: I had mine hanging. It was a full size, and I had a hook on my wall and just hung it above my bed.

Christine: Oh, okay.

Janet: That was when they changed the rooms around so that instead of a fold down bed we had the table and seats, and the table would fold down. It was after you left.

Christine: Oh. Yeah.

Janet: We got a-

Christine: Updated those rooms.

Janet: -general manager in who was a former mechanical engineer, and he said, "What would you like?" We had a tiny sink.

Sharon: Are you serious? They said, "What would you like?"

[00:27:00]

Janet: I know. Isn't that amazing? He actually asked, and I said, "Well, we probably want a tiny sink-"

Sharon: Who was it?

Janet: -"still in our room." Bob McDougal-

Sharon: Oh.

Janet: -is what my memory says. Again, my memory could be wrong.

Sharon: Yeah.

Janet: He asked, and we said, "We want a tiny sink still in the corner, and it would work best to have the table and the seats actually storage boxes, and then the table would fold down during the night time and become a little bed.

Sharon: It was still a roomette.

Janet: It was still roomette, yeah.

[00:27:30]

Sharon: Oh, no, you know, the red show. They gutted that car and made all the show girls stay in the same stinking car.

Janet: Yes. Yes.

Sharon: Awful. I'd a killed myself. It was a, "Oh, so you can have a shower." Well, I'll be dirty. I want a roomette. I want to be able to close the door and say, "Adios. Get out."

Janet: We often left the doors open-

Zoe N.: Have some space.

Sharon: Oh, we always had them open, but-

Janet: -and chit chatted all over the place.

Christine: As soon as you-

Janet: Wanted to be able to close them.

Christine: -got to town, you wanted to be in the parade and ride the elephant or do something when they took [inaudible 00:27:56] to the building, number one so you could find out where the building was at. On the second thing so you could take a shower. You had to get to the building right away so you could take a shower and know where it was at.

[00:28:00]

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: No, it was some of the act people did have showers in their larger rooms.

Christine: Larger ones, yeah.

Janet: I think we had more people on the blue unit. Somebody explained that to me that we had more people, and so we had fewer people with the large rooms. We-

Sharon: You had to have a roommate or a family or something when we were there.

[00:28:30]

- Janet: Yeah, my first night ... Actually, my first few weeks I was with another roommate, Kitty. She was adorable. She was so unique. That's the thing is I loved the variety of people we would work with.
- Christine: Yeah.
- Janet: I'm a little more tomboy, and she was this delicate, vivacious with a little pony tail and almost 50s circle skirts and tiny little earrings and scars always just so. It was kind of fun. She had already picked the lower bunk, so I dragged my trunk up the stairs. I got to tell you about what happened with people about five years after that, but dragged my trunk up and my suitcase and she says, "You get the top bunk," so that first day I wandered around so much I get back late, and we had been told to bring clothes and whatever else we needed, but they would have bedding for us.
- [00:29:00]
- [00:29:30] They had clean sheets and clean pillowcases, but no blanket, and here I was on the top bunk, and the air was on. It was blasting, so I was pulling clothes out all night long trying to hide under all my clothes, because it was freezing. Next day, I went to the store and got a blanket. Then, I found out I could have just asked someone on the train. Years later, when we didn't have quite so many people all coming in at once, a couple of the train crew, they had a new girl coming mid-season, and they were saying, "Could you check and see if her room's right?" They had even gotten a little jelly jar and put some flowers on her little table to make her feel welcome.
- [00:30:00] Her special blankets and sheets-
- Sharon: No way.
- Christine: Oh my goodness. How nice.
- Sharon: No way.
- Janet: Yeah. It makes me wonder with the young ones that we saw this morning from the 90s and 2000s what it was like for them their first day.
- Christine: Sure, it'd be interesting to see. Yeah.
- Sharon: Well, the most fun, besides partying through the train, and of course we loved the pie car, that was just a few cars down from us.
- [00:30:30]
- Christine: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Sharon: There was pie car John and Betsy that worked in there. Betsy was married to Schwartz, who kind of ran the train. [crosstalk 00:30:41].
- Janet: So many of the same people were there when I started, but it did change after that a little bit. It's interesting.
- Sharon: Yeah, well they'd been there forever.

Janet: Yeah.

Sharon: I was trying to think about how many tables there might have been-

Janet: Oh.

Sharon: -in there.

Christine: About eight. About four on each side.

[00:31:00]

Janet: Enough to have good card games and good social environment and eat.

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Zoe N.: Important.

Sharon: And it was cheap.

Janet: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sharon: Just fun and good, but we mostly had fold up chairs, and when we'd pull out, we were always sitting on the vestibule to watch the world go by always, because we went where roads didn't go, so you were going to see stuff nobody else was going to see, and it was just so fun.

[00:31:30]

Christine: Yeah.

Sharon: So fun.

Christine: Colorado, the antelope I can remember. Wyoming-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: Oh yeah.

Christine: -antelope running.

Sharon: Kansas, the Sunflower State.

Christine: Fields of sunflowers.

Janet: Oh it was so beautiful.

Sharon: You could see like 100 miles in every direction. It was nothing but sunflowers. It was just amazing.

Christine: Yeah, seeing the countryside.

[00:32:00]

Sharon: Of course I took pictures, but of course since it was the pioneer days, they're in black and white.

Janet: Yes, or [inaudible 00:32:04]. Since then I've taken the California Zephyr, the Illinois Zephyr-

Christine: [crosstalk 00:32:09].

Janet: -the Southwest Chief for different rides, or from Chicago east a little bit. It feels the same, but for one thing, I took the cheap route and just sat in the seats, didn't take the roomettes. The one thing that I think all these poor people don't get to have that open vestibule, because that was what connected us with our beautiful country-

[00:32:30]

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: -was leaning over that vestibule. The top, it had Dutch doors. The top would open and the bottom could stay closed and just see the world go by.

Sharon: It was just fun.

Janet: It would stop in a small town. We'd visit with people in the small town.

Sharon: Oh yeah, we'd just sit there with our arm over the side-

Christine: Yeah, going through town and people would be there waving at the train.

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: It was funny, because many years later, one of my nieces called from Springfield, Illinois, and she says, "The train's parked by our house. The train's parked by our house." I said, [00:33:00] "I'm so sorry, but it's not my train." She was so excited.

Christine: One bad thing, standing out watching the country go by, and we were in Illinois luckily, because that's where my parents lived, so-

Janet: I didn't know that.

Christine: Yeah. Peoria, Illinois. Someone threw a rock at the train-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: -and it hit me in the side of the head.

Sharon: Oh, yeah.

Christine: Knocked me out.

Sharon: Yeah.

[00:33:30]

Christine: They had to stop the train and let me off. Then, I had to try to contact my parents to come get me. I was off the show for about three days with a concussion.

Zoe N.: Oh man.

Christine: Yeah, so I went home to my home doctors and family for three days. Then, we ended up going back into Idaho is where I came back, but yeah, what a freak thing. Those trains are going along, and somebody threw a rock. I still have the rock.

Janet: Oh my goodness.

Christine: I do-

Sharon: Now, the one thing-

[00:34:00]

Christine: -because it was on there, and I-

Zoe N.: Yeah.

Janet: Sometimes if the train stopped it wouldn't stop for long. Sometimes it would, and sometimes it would stop to fill with water for the animals, because they didn't care if we ran out of water. We had to take care of ourselves.

Sharon: That's what I tell PETA. We traveled with a vet. We did not travel with a doctor. We traveled with a vet. Yeah.

Janet: Sometimes people would put the bottom door of the vestibule open and put the stairs down and get down and walk around and just stretch a little and enjoy the air. Once in a while, the train would start up, and you'd see all these people running to get back on the train, because if you didn't get back on the train, they weren't going to stop for you.

Sharon: No.

Janet: It'd just keep going.

Zoe N.: Bye.

Sharon: Really, when they would stop to water the animals, it was in nowhere, like top of some mountain.

Janet: Yeah.

Sharon: If it was at night, we would, like in a short trip, everybody would get beer and wine. [00:35:00] Throw the food out of their little refrigerator and put beer and wine and stuff in it. Then, we would party through three or four cars. I don't think we could go much further than that. Then, Gary Sully, Charley Baumann, the tiger trainer, and Araceli was our really good friend.

Christine: Show girl, yes.

Sharon: She was a show girl. They had a whole car down here, so we would jump up, get up off the vestibule, slam the thing back in, and then run down there. Then, Charley would have to put up with all of us until the train stopped again.

Christine: Until the next stop.

[00:35:30]

Sharon: Oh my God. It was fun. Then, we played Madison Square Garden. There was a birth. One of Charley's tigers gave birth to twins, which they named Bonnie and Clyde. We were there awhile, a week or two at least after that, because we played the Garden for five weeks, and then she rejected them, so Araceli and Charley took them to their train car and were bottle feeding them.

Janet: She did that on more than a few. Oh my goodness. 24 hours a day she's feeding and feeding.

[00:36:00]

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: We'd go down and play with them.

Sharon: Since we were such close friends, "We're coming down and feeding them tigers." We'd go down, and oh my God.

Christine: Play with them.

Sharon: And feed them. Then, you'd have to ... I would never forget the ... They'd run their belly, and they go ...

Janet: Oh yeah.

Zoe N.: Oh my gosh.

Sharon: You'd do it, because that's what their mother would do. I'm telling you, fell in love. Oh my God, it was such fun.

Zoe N.: Oh man.

[00:36:30]

Janet: She'd sometimes bring them into our dressing room in town just again, to share the

feeding duties of a baby, and they'd make that lovely sound.

Zoe N.: Oh my gosh.

Janet: One kind of grabbed my fish nets, and of course fish nets, you take good care of your fish nets. You stitch them, you mend them, you make them look good all the time.

Christine: Because Mabel wasn't going to give you a new pair.

Janet: Right. I couldn't help it. I thought, "Oh," it grabbed, and I just let it play for awhile with my fishnets. I thought okay, a little extra stitching time here. I mean, how many times
[00:37:00] can you say a baby tiger's playing with your fishnets.

Zoe N.: Yeah.

Janet: You just let him.

Sharon: That was fun.

Janet: On the train, somebody had gotten down to go to one of the private cars that you couldn't get through. Then the train stopped and they decided to run back to get to their own, but the train started going, going, going, and this person's-

Zoe N.: Oh my gosh.

Janet: Barry Lubin, Granny the clown, oh my goodness, he had a good heart. Was he there when you were there?

Christine: No.

Sharon: I don't know.

[00:37:30]

Janet: Anyway, he ran back to his train room, and he runs back to the vestibule, and he throws money some over, and he says at least the person could get a bus to the next town or something. I thought oh, that's so sweet. He's the one that thought to do that. The person says, "Thank you, thank you," and they're running, running, running. Well, the train stopped a quarter mile later and stayed there for hours.

Sharon: Oh no.

Janet: We didn't know that, so that's why I thought it was so sweet that he thought to do that.

Christine: I can remember many times, because you never knew what time the train was going to
[00:38:00] pull out on closing night. When they'd get loaded up or when they could leave. I can remember many nights, or mid-mornings, or early morning running to catch the train. Yeah-

Sharon: In clogs.

Christine: -and jumping. Yeah.

Sharon: That was the hard part. We shouldn't have been wearing clogs-

Christine: Jumping on a moving train.

Sharon: -on train tracks anyway. We'd be running 90 mile an hour in clogs. We used to jump off the train. When it would slow down, we would-

Christine: Yeah.

[00:38:30]

Sharon: I have no idea, because obviously we had no phone, so tis nothing around, and we would make some plan. "Oh, we're going to Illinois. Your brother can pick us up at some ... We would-

Janet: Or look there's a pay phone-

Christine: Just jump off.

Sharon: It would just slow down and-

Janet: -on that building. Yeah. Go.

Sharon: I have no idea. We'd find each other, but holy cow.

Zoe N.: Yeah, I bet traveling that way, you had to be really, you know, on top of yourself to get up there.

Sharon: Big fun.

Zoe N.: Made it happen.

[00:39:00]

Janet: Most of the arenas used to have pay phones around the edges, and there'd be times, like Sunday night, you want to call but you want to make sure you don't talk too long because there was a line waiting to use the phone. Then, everybody still needed to get back to the train before it-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: That was a little different pre-cell phone.

Sharon: Right.

Janet: Much different.

Speaker 2: [crosstalk 00:39:15].

Zoe N.: Okay, so should we swap out?

Speaker 2: Questions? I think we'll start wrapping up, because the battery's running a little low on the camera.

Janet: Oh, okay.

Zoe N.: Yeah.

Sharon: We didn't make it very far, did we?

Speaker 2: You told lots of fantastic stories.

[00:39:30]

Zoe N.: Yeah, so I guess just to start wrapping up, you've kind of shared this a little bit already, but what kind of work do you do now that you're not with the show any longer?

Christine: Okay, when I left the show, I opened a dance studio. Went back to Illinois and opened up a dance studio, got married, raised four kids. Then, I continued teaching exercise, like where old dancers go, to arthritis class, so for OSF hospital I coordinated the arthritis and multiple sclerosis exercise programs and taught there for 20 some years. I just retired last January. I still teach.

[00:40:00]

Zoe N.: Oh, congratulations.

Christine: Yeah, so I still teach yoga, but now I'm just kind of traveling and planning on moving, my husband and I, to Colorado soon. Yeah. Probably stay with teaching yoga.

Sharon: Skiing their lives away.

Christine: More mountains to climb, more adventures to come.

Zoe N.: Yeah, excellent.

[00:40:30]

Sharon: Hmm. I quit because I was in love and got married. That lasted about a year and a half, in Chicago though. Anyway, then I moved back to San Francisco. I still have always taken dance and worked out. I worked in victim's rights for a long time in California just

[00:41:00] [inaudible 00:40:54] victims and a lot of work like that. I'm a landlady. I go, "It's Leona." We have houses and stuff. I love doing that.

Janet: I used to worry about clowns or dancers who had no idea what to do besides that, or if they left the road for love and didn't have anything else to do. I did, I would worry, where are they going to go? What are they going to do? I was fortunate because I already had my degree and had already had the experience in the public school

[00:41:30]

classrooms, but even then when I left, and I knew I needed to leave for a variety of reasons, the transition is odd. It was an odd transition the first time I resigned an apartment lease, you know, stayed the same place two years in a row, because there's a little vagabond in all of us that makes us love the show anyway.

Christine: Oh yeah, true gypsies.

[00:42:00]

Janet: Yeah. We love that place to place. I was able to teach, but my first job was going to be just a two year gig, and part time ... Well, partly dance and partly English. That was the reason I was hired for that two year gig, because they didn't know too many English teachers who were also professional dancers, so I got that first job because of that. Then, I just kept going in the education field and loved it.

[00:42:30]

Sharon: I loved working with the animals part of the circus, so when I went back to San Francisco, I volunteered at the zoo there for 10 years, and I'm also very involved with the good side of the humane society, not that harassing side humane society in Ohio.

Janet: Oh, I should say too I got married eventually, but took my time, because I always
[00:43:00] worried about, again, the people who married on the road but didn't know the way each other were off the road, unless they were planning on staying on the road. I waited until I was thoroughly off the road mentally, and then met the right man, six children, 11 grandchildren.

Christine: Six children.

Sharon: Oh my God.

Speaker 2: Great.

Zoe N.: Yeah.

Speaker 2: Well, I guess I'll ask you any parting thoughts? Anything you think people should know about the circus that might not be visible to the public eye?

Zoe N.: Yeah.

[00:43:30]

Christine: It's a great family. I mean, just think of the friendships and that we still have. There's [inaudible 00:43:33] of showgirls we stay in contact with, just the family that you are when you're there.

Sharon: Yeah.

Christine: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Janet: The support system, so I was thinking some of the train crew caught me downtown in

[00:44:00] one town. They said, "Two of the younger dancers are off on their own. They might not realize they shouldn't probably be in this town on their own." I said, "Well, where are they? Let's go get them." It's just always this watching out for each other. Also, I was kind of a private, quiet person, but it's such a community that it brings people out to get to know each other and the train yards became a community barbecue place or visiting place, birthday parties, christenings.

Christine: Well, the different cultures. I mean, you know, the Bulgarians, the Hungarians-

Janet: Yes.

Christine: -the different languages.

Janet: Yeah, the languages, yeah.

Christine: Yeah.

[00:44:30]

Sharon: My dogs understand a few words of Bulgarian that I still ... Honestly. The other thing, though, about the circus is I've gone to some village council, city councils that are trying to ban circuses with animal acts and all that. They have total misinformation, and the

[00:45:00] information from PETA is totally misleading, and-

Janet: We appreciate the concern, but some of these animals, it would have been like forbidding us the opportunity to be in front of a group, an audience, and perform. The animals, oh, I'm thinking Rome the elephant, or Becca, another one of the elephants. That audience was there for them. I just happen to be a little aside on the back of the elephant, and they were bowing, and they were happy. You know, there's these wonderful stories about one of the elephants was not well, and the handlers and trainer wanted her to rest, so they weren't going to let her do the act.

[00:45:30]

Oh, this one makes me sad even to think of it. She's down alone in her ring, and they're just going to stand there, but she wanted to be there, and she just started doing the act all by herself.

Zoe N.: Oh funny.

Sharon: Oh no.

[00:46:00]

Janet: She wanted to. It's her crowd. It's her place.

Sharon: Yeah.

Janet: To take that away from these animals, I mean, there's nobody with a bull hook telling her to do it.

Sharon: No.

- Janet: It's what they love, like what we love. I mean, an elephant's a very intelligent animal.
- Sharon: It's a lot similar.
- Janet: Yeah.
- Sharon: You know, they clap for us doing a trick. They clap for them doing a trick.
- Janet: Yeah.
- Sharon: We're all going, "Yeah, I like it. I like it."
- Janet: [00:46:30] The horses think this is for me, not for you. They always think this is for me, not for you. I'm sure it's not true of everyone, but they don't make ... I mean, it's like Charley Baumann said once that somebody says, "How did you get that animal to leap? How'd you get that animal to turn?" He says, "I watched its behavior before and that animal liked to do that movement. The other animal liked to do that movement." That's how he chooses which one would do what, or shows.
- Sharon: Once after I left the show and I was married to that wonderful man in Chicago, and-
- Janet: Chicago's a great city. I got to tell you. [crosstalk 00:46:58].
- [00:47:00]
- Sharon: The show came and we had Charley and Araceli over for dinner, and before they left, Charley had my absolutely, totally useless wouldn't do anything cat sitting there going ... and rolling over. Dinner. That was a couple of hours.
- Janet: He always said he was better with animals than people.
- Sharon: [00:47:30] I had a money making cat. Then, after Charley left, it was back to would you mind waiting on me, you know? That was it, but while Charley was there, he would do anything for him. It really is a lot of love. It's not meanness. It's not cruelty. Maybe some other countries, maybe South America, but that's not what we're talking about, and that's not what they should be talking about.
- Janet: [00:48:00] It can vary. Like Kenneth Feld got two of those elephants that had the big stark and ran on the side because I think it was Axel Gautier asked him and said ... I don't know the whole story, and it's somebody else's story. They probably know all the details better, but we ended up with them on our show because some of our elephant people felt they weren't being properly treated elsewhere. That's what's sad to think that some people don't understand the personality of the animal and the need of the animal and how the animal got to be there.
- Zoe N.: Yeah. How are we on battery?
- [00:48:30]

Janet: Probably gone.

Speaker 2: Battery's actually still running low, but it's holding on.

Zoe N.: Okay.

Christine: I think another great thing was definitely the travel, being able to see the United States and Canada is where we traveled to. The amount of people we met along the road, stars from New York.

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: Paul McCartney and-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Christine: Oh yeah.

Sharon: Cher was our guest ring bearers.

Janet: Henry Wrangler, [crosstalk 00:48:53].

Christine: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:48:53] Johnny Cash, all the different stars that would come back and be part of the show. You would get pictures with them.
[00:49:00]

Janet: As people.

Christine: Maxine Andrews of the Andrews sisters. I mean, that's going way back, but we got pictures with her, so we have pictures with these people, so just good memories of people you met along, not the stars, but also just other people we met along the way as you're traveling.

[00:49:30]
Sharon: That came out of nowhere. It's just that we're so proud to have been part of it, but I'm certainly still shocked to find out, you know, that it's [inaudible 00:49:42] it's the end of it. I mean, really, no more. It's just overwhelming, because it was an honor and a privilege, and it was just so fun to make it perfect, because regardless of what Kenny Feld, like Irving Feld, like selling, and we sold. It was just so fun. Always they kept four of the best seats empty in case the Feld's showed up for the show.

[00:50:00]

Janet: If they showed, they would be there before the show started, and they would stay way until the end, almost as if they felt that it was rude to get up and leave until it was over.

[00:50:30]
Christine: Even though they'd seen the show any time.

Janet: Yeah. I was lucky enough when my knees were shot and I was going to no longer do that and I switched to admin, Kenneth asked if I would sit with him and take some notes at

one show. There was Nicole next to him, and she was probably about eight or nine at the time, and she was giving me some pointers that she wanted me to add notes to about what she thought of the popcorn.

Christine: Okay.

Janet: [00:51:00] This I must say, the Feld's knew how to run the business end of it, because we wouldn't have really known that. They knew how to run the business, and they knew how to make the tough decisions and make things happen. That was amazing that they made it become the circus it became and that they kept it going as long as they did, and they tried everything to try to make it work.

[00:51:30] Even though we're broken hearted that it's gone, I almost saw it coming because of the changes in the culture and the environment and the elephants. That was ... I don't know, I kind of thank them. There we go again.

Christine: Right, but think of Ringling Brothers ended, but look at what you have right here in Baraboo.

Janet: Oh yeah.

Sharon: Oh, this has been amazing.

Christine: The circus still lives.

Janet: There are so many other circuses-

Christine: Ringling stuff.

Janet: -too. They're finding a way.

Christine: There's many others.

Janet: [crosstalk 00:51:46] coming back. The archives here, and the history here, and the people.

Christine: Exactly.

Janet: And this town, just the whole mentality, this town too.

Sharon: To me-

Christine: Embraces it, yeah.

Sharon: And overwhelmed with-

Janet: Yes, to raise it, to cherish it.

Sharon: -everything about it.

[00:52:00]

Janet: So the little kids that were playing in the ring-

Sharon: Oh yeah.

Janet: -just a little while ago, and I said, "No, style and smile at the end." The next generation can enjoy it too.

Christine: Right-

Zoe N.: Yeah, I did want to ask-

Christine: -carry on.

Zoe N.: -how do you see sort of just the culture of circus performance evolving?

[00:52:30]

Janet: I thought it was interesting, the comment at this show that was done for us, that the young people ... I think in my grandkids, they're gamers and they see that they're physically beautiful. Even the children today that are so inundated with games and TV and reality shows and whatever, when they see, they know the difference even if they don't know they know the difference. That's why I hope people will continue to do web or the horse acts or an elephant here and there doing something wonderful or any animal or any human doing that extra little moment.

[00:53:00]

I think the next generation deserves to see that it doesn't all have to be mechanical, but I also hope that they keep ... I thought too ... I'm talking too much, but the names. Now, they didn't used to put the dancer's names in the program, but now they put everybody's name at the back of the program-

Sharon: Oh, really?

[00:53:30]

Janet: -and what they do. They often have the dancers' pictures, and I know I was delighted after years to see my picture in the program with my name under it.

Christine: In the program. Yeah.

Janet: You know, it's not like a major act, but I love some of the storytelling of the circuses, but I also love that children in the seats of any age, whether they're 90 or five, associate a human being with what they're seeing in front of them. I think that's-

Christine: Definitely.

[00:54:00]

Janet: That's again, what I feel is happening here at Baraboo and a few other places.

Speaker 2: All right.

Zoe N.: All right.