

CWM Audio 70-3

Interview with Eryn Dewey and Brett Goertemoeller July 21st, 2017. Part 1

Interview conducted by LaVahn Hoh

LaVahn Hoh: Today is July 21. I'm LaVahn Hoh I'm doing the interview, and I will have the interviewees identify themselves.

Brett: I'm Brett Goertemoeller, originally from Vermont, now living in Minnesota, and I was the chief mechanical officer on the blue unit and the train master on the red unit.

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Eryn: My name is Eryn Dewey. I am originally from Minnesota, now living in Minnesota, and I was a teacher originally on the blue unit for not two, maybe three months, and then transferred to the red unit and was a teacher on the red unit for three years.

LaVahn Hoh: Alright. I'll start with you first. What dates did you begin with Ringling?

Brett: I started in March of 2013, and I ended in September of 2016, excuse me, 2015.

LaVahn Hoh: 2015.

Brett: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: Okay, and you?

[00:01:00]

Eryn: I started December ... December? It was right after Christmas of 2012, and then I went until October of 2015.

LaVahn Hoh: So let me start with this. What was entailed with your jobs? What did you do as a train master?

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Brett: As the chief mechanical officer, I was responsible for everything on the inside of the train. Electricity, power, water, air conditioning, heating, light bulbs, everything like that. As a train master, I was responsible for the entire train and the moving of the train from city to city, place to place, around the country.

LaVahn Hoh: So did you keep ... You obviously had contact with the individual railroads then?

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Brett: Yes, sir. Yeah, I had to, on a daily basis, I was on the phone with the railroads coordinating either the city I was in, or the next city, or sometimes three or four cities in

front.

LaVahn Hoh: Okay. School teacher.

Eryn: School teacher. Yes.

LaVahn Hoh: So talk about that.

Eryn: I think in the years, the recent years, it has become a much more rare phenomenon to have a school on a circus. Ringling was so large. There were a lot of families that traveled with the show, so we had, at any time, between 12 and 25 kids in grade school, grades K through 12. Their parents were performers, so we had the ring master's children, the tiger trainer's children, the Emelins, which was the ... They had the poodle act, on the red unit. We had their kids in school. And then just children of the concessions, or show management. A couple general managers had their kids in school.

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When the kids weren't in school, they would be in the nursery, which ... So-called "nursery," but the nursery actually went from almost birth until age 11, you could be in the nursery, so we would have school in the evenings while the performances were going on, but school was only a four hour block, and then the kids, we would pick them up from the nursery and then drop them off at the nursery after school was done.

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LaVahn Hoh: So I have a couple more questions then. One, how did you deal with the different languages that are certainly the "United Nations" of the circus? And, it seems to me, I read somewhere that there was an affiliation that you have to go through, a school that you get the materials from, and they send it back?

Eryn: Yes. I would say that probably 80 to 90 percent of our kids were bilingual or English was not their first language. Most of them, though, did speak English. We had ... Some of the issues were some of the kids would come to us from other countries where, if their families had been in circuses, especially from Latin American countries, the kids just wouldn't have been in school at all. So we would get kids who were, maybe, eight, who had just never been to school, so we would have to basically start them in kindergarten as an eight-year-old and try and get them caught up to grade level.

[00:04:30] Just working with the challenges of English language learners, there's always issues with reading. So when we had books that were assigned, we would do a lot of audio books, that they could listen and read along, so if the reading was too difficult, they could at least hear it. A lot of them spoke and understood English, but maybe their reading was something that they weren't familiar with. In my time there, we only had one pair of kids that came to us speaking no Engli ... Just spoke Spanish. And, again, we started them in kindergarten and first grade, I believe, and kids are remarkably resilient. They learn very quickly, so they fit in well and got caught up fairly quickly.

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[00:05:30] The program that we used was a homeschool curriculum called Calvert. Yup. The teachers, we would modify it a little for our students. A lot of things were not necessary, I suppose I should say. With a four-hour window, especially in the older grades, they just

have a lot of content, so you have to choose either you're gonna have school go longer, or are you gonna cut some things out. So some of the arts things, we did give our kids as just optional. They could take them home and look at them if they wanted to, but it wasn't part of their daily curriculum.

[00:06:00] So as teacher, what I did was, at the beginning of every week, I would go through all of the lesson manuals for the kids, and for each child, I would create a list of here's what you need to do today. You're gonna do these pages in math, you're gonna read these pages in your story, answer these questions, so that the kids could work independently through their work. And then I would bounce from kid to kid giving a spelling test, explaining a science concept, again, doing grammar. They had to do grammar, sentence diagramming, which was pretty hard for non-English speakers. So I could just bounce around the room then while the kids mostly worked independently.

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LaVahn Hoh: So, I'll come back to you, I just have a couple questions on that school. The show is out for two years. So in the two years' time, how many grades would they go through?

Eryn: It's more than two. If they did a lesson every day, they could get through more than two years, which was helpful because we didn't take breaks at all, so there was no summer break or winter break. When the show was in winter quarters, we still had school every day of the week. So we could, for the students who had come to us late, it made it easier for them to catch up to grade level, but some of the students that had started in kindergarten when they were five would be in grade four a year or so early just because of the pace of school.

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LaVahn Hoh: So why did you want to join?

Brett: Just like a lot of people who joined the circus, I had a life reset in 2013, and it just seemed like a cool way to get a new start.

LaVahn Hoh: What was it like when you ... How did you get involved with it? Did you interview?

[00:08:00]
Brett: Yeah, I had a young guy who was working with me named Kyle Stockman, who I was bringing along in the railroad community in New England, and he was looking for a railroad job just to get out of New England and see the country for a little while. One of the railroad websites that I frequent popped up that Ringling was looking for car mechanics. I said, "You should take this. It'd be a good idea." He got on the show, and then he was always trying to tell me, "Oh, Brett, you should come and hang out on the show with me." And they finally had an opening in management where the salary was enough that I could consider it, and Joe Colossa, the train master on the blue unit at the time, called me and interviewed me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to come and work. So that's when I hired out on the blue unit as chief mechanical officer.

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LaVahn Hoh: So what was it like when you arrived, and were there any surprises or things that you hadn't expected?

Brett: Well, growing up where I did, and just with the routing of the train and everything, I had never been to the Ringling Bros. circus. I had never even seen the circus train, so when I hired on, the very first time I'd ever seen the circus train was when I pulled into the train yard in Baltimore, Maryland. And I took a look around for a minute, and I had that brief shock of "what did I just do?" as I'm unpacking my car into this insanely small room on this mile-long train. Basically I got involved because I had a friend already on the show who wanted me to come down.

LaVahn Hoh: What was a day like for you?

Brett: Well, it depended upon whether the train was moving or whether it was stationary. I'm assuming you're asking as my train master duties?

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Brett: When the train was just stationary, we would get up and have breakfast and be at our morning meeting by 8:00 AM, and then we worked 'til 4:00 PM every day. And when the train was stationary, we were responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of everything on the train. Stock cars, container cars, flat cars, coaches, anything that needed to be done in performers' rooms, so basically, I was like a big apartment complex manager, only the apartment complex moved. So I had to have the railroad side of it as well, but we ... A normal day was 8:00 to 4:00, changing brake shoes, checking wheels, looking at undercarriage, inside, outside stuff on the train.

[00:11:00] When the train was moving, there was really no normal day. It depended upon where we were going, how long the train run was and everything like that. The big thing is, as a train master, you really ... You catch little power naps here and there when you can, but you're up the entire time the train is moving.

Eryn: Hey, you should talk about your, basically, starting Sunday morning. What you're-

Brett: Yeah, so, starting Sunday morning of a day that we were moving. We didn't start 'til 10:00 AM, so I'd get up at 10:00 AM, and then once I was up at 10:00 AM, I was up for the duration because I would cut the guys loose at about 2:00 to go and take a nap, but that's when I did all of my meeting with the railroads, scheduling my crews, calling and reminding, and all that kind of stuff. And then we would have our call about two hours after the last show started. Then we would go out to the flat cars, get everything ready, set the ramps, get everything ready to get wagons, and then when the last show started to finish up, they would start to send us wagons. And as the wagons hit the deck, we would start to build loads and shove the loads down the flat cars, and how fast it happened really depended upon how quickly the building got us wagons.

[00:12:00] Eryn: Yeah, how far away the building was.

Brett: Yeah. All that. There was a lot of variables that were so far out of my control. It was at times very, very stressful. So we would get the train loaded, then I would release the crew to go back and go to sleep, and then I would have to block the train for the way

that I needed my wagons in the next city.

[00:12:30] If they were facing the wrong direction, I would have to take the wagons and the flat cars out to what we call Y, which is where you can actually turn things around, turn the flat cars, and then bring everything back, get the animal cars all put together, then put the coaches all back together 'cause very rarely were the coaches all in one solid line. Normally, because of space constraints, we had to break them all up. So then I would have to put them all back together, put the animals together, put the flats on with the containers, then do all of the federally mandated brake testing, and the crew briefings, and deal with the railroads with the locomotives and everything, and then get on the road.

[00:13:00] But once that happened, then I had a radio, and I was in constant contact with the dispatchers and the locomotive crew so I could keep up to date on where we were and how we were making out. Because if we were late, I had to call the general manager and the tow trucks and everything in the next city to let everyone know that we were gonna be late because everyone is sitting there, literally waiting on the train, and tow trucks aren't cheap, so ...

Eryn: Well, and I remember times where, if a dispatcher was busy or just decided not to really move us, they would stick us in a siding, and we'd be sitting there for a couple hours. And then you would have to start making calls to supervisors and supervisors' supervisors and-

[00:14:00] All: Supervisors' supervisors' supervisors.

Eryn: And then you would get to a point where you started playing the animal card, which was my favorite.

Brett: Yes, the animal card. They would start just complaining about me wanting to move, and I would be like, "Look, I've got live animals and elephants on the train. I have a finite amount of fuel, I have a finite amount of water, and I have a finite amount of food. You can't just keep me here. I gotta go. I have to go right now." So I wouldn't play the animal card all the time, but I would play the animal card when it was starting to get to a point where I really have to move sometime very soon if I'm going to make this schedule.

[00:14:30] The making of the schedule ... You'll hear circus people and train masters and train crews talking about, "Aw, I came in a few hours earlier," or, "I was a few hours late" ...

[00:15:00] The circus train master really had no control over that. The dispatchers and the railroads had all the control on whether you would get there early or get there late. There were things you could do to help the situation along by getting ready early and getting out early if you could, but there was always a few runs that were just horrid.

[00:15:30] And Joe Colossa and I were train masters during the recent real big uptick in freight traffic in the United States. So the railroads were clogged as it was, so they didn't really have a lot of room for us. So we had to try to weave our way in and out of all of their priority stuff because we weren't exactly a priority to them.

LaVahn Hoh: I remember in the town that I was living in, in Virginia, that the circus train would do a water stop there.

Brett: Yes.

LaVahn Hoh: Do you want to talk about how long did they go before they did a water stop or-

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Brett: It was based on mileage and also the time that the animals were in the stock cars. They weren't really allowed to be in there more than, I think, 36 hours was the longest they were allowed to be in the cars. So, if we were making long runs, you know, 1,200, 1,300 miles, there would always be at least one water stop in there someplace. And all a water stop was, we would literally pull in, let the animals off the train to go walk around for a little bit, muck out the cars, refill the water tanks, and get out and go.

[00:16:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah, that's what I remember.

Brett: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: For both of you, at the beginning of your time, I guess mainly for you because he's kind of answered this, how did you feel? Were you really comfortable? Overwhelmed? Shocked?

Eryn: I think I had a kind of different experience. I started on the blue unit, and I was excited.
[00:17:00] It was an adventure. Again, you sort of show up. For me, when I first got to the train, they had me come right after Christmas, but they didn't really tell me that nobody is there until after New Year's, almost. Well, I guess, not after New Year's, 'cause New Year's we went down to Miami, but ...

[00:17:30] So, my first week on the circus, I just was in my room. I didn't know where I was supposed to go. I didn't know where Pie Car was. I didn't know when it was open. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to meet with somebody, so I just kind of waited, and waited, and waited, and waited, and then finally people started coming back from their vacations, and I went and got my paperwork done. But yeah, I was very excited.

And then the first train run was from where the train was parked in Tampa down to Miami. First train roll's always a lot of fun. The first school that I was at, the teacher and I didn't really see eye to eye. I'll wait for him to empty the trash.