

CWM Audio 77

Peggy Williams Interview, August 8, 2018

Interview Transcript Part 1-1

Scott O'Donnell: [00:00:00](#) We're gonna start this again. This is Scott O'Donnell on 08/08/2018 with the great honor uh, of interviewing Peggy Williams, a 50 year veteran?

Peggy Williams: [00:00:12](#) 48.

Scott O'Donnell: [00:00:12](#) 48.

Peggy Williams: [00:00:13](#) I tried. (laughs)

Scott O'Donnell: [00:00:16](#) 48 year veteran of-

Peggy Williams: [00:00:17](#) 48 years with Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey.

Scott O'Donnell: [00:00:18](#) Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Peggy Williams: [00:00:20](#) Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: [00:00:20](#) That's uh, a profoundly wonderful journey and you can imagine in 48 years worth of, of life story, that we're gonna have a dynamic, uh, oral history today. So Peggy Williams, welcome to the Robert L. Parkinson Library here at Circus World. It's a great honor to be with you. And I would love to start off with, Peggy Williams. Who is Peggy Williams? Where are you from?

Peggy Williams: [00:00:43](#) Okay, that part's easy. I do remember that (laughs) okay because here I am back in Wisconsin visiting my family. And I was born in Madison, Wisconsin and, um, was here in Wisconsin until I finished my four years of college at the University of Wisconsin, so that's-

Scott O'Donnell: [00:01:01](#) And what was your degree in? Where did you think you were gonna go in life?

Peggy Williams: [00:01:04](#) Well, well, golly, isn't that fun. (Laughing).

Scott O'Donnell: [00:01:06](#) (Laughing).

Peggy Williams: [00:01:08](#) First I start out in, um, occupational therapy, and then I went to, uh, ended up in speech therapy at the University of Wisconsin in

Madison. And, uh, when I saw that little article in Parade magazine, it was two paragraphs and it said, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College is now accepting female candidates for the class of 1970." And, you know, the campus I was going to was in the middle of protests, riots, tear gas, National Guard occupation, bombings, and all that stuff from the Spring of 1970 was a very turbulent year on the, on the campus.

- Peggy Williams: [00:01:48](#) And, I was so happy, uh, at the end of that semester to go to something that could be a little more fun and also enhance what I knew about ... I was, my, my specialty was going to be deaf education. And I thought who could teach me better to speak with my hands than circus clowns, who speak to audiences without a voice.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:02:11](#) Right.
- Peggy Williams: [00:02:12](#) So, uh, I was so excited to, to get accepted, I didn't get a chance to audition to go there because they didn't audition in this area up here in Wisconsin. They audition in major cities, you know, Chicago, LA, Boston, New York, and Orlando, and Atlanta, but they didn't audition up here. So I wrote out my application and Mr. Ballantine, Bill Ballantine, was the- the director of the, of the Clown College at that point in time. I think he might have been the dean. I'm not sure when the title switched, but anyway, he was, uh, he was in charge.
- Peggy Williams: [00:02:46](#) And I, um, I have to, I have to share how I knew I got accepted because I worked at the bookstore on campus at Madison campus, University Book Store, which had all and this was, this was like late summer and all the freshman were in town. And they were looking for the books for their classes, especially the Shakespeare area. And, I was stocking books into the Shake-Shakespeare section. And, um, there was a pole in the aisle way between the two book aisles and on it had one of those telephones with those curlicue things that reach about 25 feet if you really put it straight. And, I got paged to answer the phone which I was surprised at 'cause I normally didn't get phone calls at work. But, it was from Bill Ballantine, who had called the bookstore 'cause I had to put down, if I worked, where I worked, and could I, if I was chosen could I leave my job. Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:03:45](#) So, so I went to the phone and pushed the button and said, "Hello, this is Peggy Williams." And he said, "Hi, this is Bill Ballantine from the Clown College and how do you, how would

you feel to know that you're one of the first females selected to actually go to the Clown College?"

- Peggy Williams: [00:04:02](#) And I went, "Really?" And, I didn't have a pen or paper or anything to write anything down on. But here's all these freshman around me, and I have a little name tag on, and they're trying to, waiting in line to ask me about where to find, you know, Romeo and Juliet. And I (laughing) ... who knows. Years later, I found them and they were elephants, right?
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:04:19](#) Yeah, right.
- Peggy Williams: [00:04:19](#) But, but, no, back to the story. And so, (laughing) Mr. Ballantine was talking to me on the phone and I said, "I- I'm taking from a ... I'm at the bookstore working right now." And he said, "Yes, I knew. That's why I called you there 'cause we'd like to invite you to come to Florida and be in the Clown College." And I went, "I'm gonna be a clown!" And all the freshman are looking at me like, you know, just like, really?
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:04:46](#) Uh-oh.
- Peggy Williams: [00:04:46](#) 'Cause it wasn't why they weren't getting books in the Shakespeare section. Anyway, I was so excited and I said, "I know I have your number at home. Can I call you back when I get home? I need more details. I don't have a pen and paper." So all that worked out. And I got the Greyhound bus within weeks with my footlocker stuffed with my stuff I thought I would need, a little, itty-bitty sewing machine; my guitar, which I ended up selling to another clown (laughing) 'cause that's what clowns do when they need money. And, so, that was it.
- Peggy Williams: [00:05:20](#) I got on a Greyhound bus and I went down to, uh, to Venice, Florida where the Clown College was currently being held at that time. And, um, I knew nobody. I was never a performer on stage. I was always involved in the backstage stuff, props, curtain pulling, uh, stage sets, all that stuff, wearing black. I was one of those. And I became a brighter color (laughing), um, at the Clown College and I just, I just thought, "Wow. This is a hoot." Because nobody knew each other. The students came from all over, really all over the United State and Hawaii, and we had 36 students, and 12, 12 of us got hired.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:06:07](#) And who was the faculty the year that you were there?
- Peggy Williams: [00:06:07](#) Oh, we didn't have many. Um, Lou Jacobs, he was always there. So, little did I know-

- Scott O'Donnell: [00:06:13](#) For those who might be listening, who don't know who Lou Jacobs is ...
- Peggy Williams: [00:06:16](#) Lou Jacobs is one of the most famous clown faces in the entire world. Um, he worked for Ringling Bros. a- approximately 60 years, give or take, and he started, uh, in another profession in the circus. Uh, he was contortionist and did other things, and then he added clowning. And came over to America, and then he continued with his contortion work. And one of the greatest little contortions, which truly is a contortion, he had this flat that was shaped like a keyhole, and he'd go through the keyhole and that was amazing. But a little later in the show, you would see him come out of the smallest car.
- Peggy Williams: [00:06:53](#) And I was so excited. I didn't have a contract at that point in time, but he was like the master teacher 'cause he was so patient and he kept saying to people, you know, "Slow down. Slow down. You only get so many heartbeats. You know, spread 'em a little." You know, 'cause we were like very frenetic in our behaviors as clowns, and he tried to slow us down. He called us spaghetti 'cause it was like throwing spaghetti at the wall and see what they laugh at, right? He said, "Slow it down. Take it easy. Bring 'em in on the routine there. Bring 'em in on the routine."
- Peggy Williams: [00:07:28](#) So, he ... there are some hand signals that he used to show us a difference between, um, doing it in a crazy way and doing it in a very, a way that's very efficient with the amount of energy you use or, with your hands and your body to tell a story to the audience and bring them with you to the end of the story. And so, he was a great teacher. Very thick German accent back in the 70s. He always kept that German accent. And, and, um, you know, with every performer you meet and this continued for so many years for me on a, uh, for 48 years actually, I kept meeting new people from different countries. And they all had a different reason why they loved being in America.
- Peggy Williams: [00:08:09](#) And, one day I found out why la- Lou loved being in America, outside of its opportunity for everybody who comes here, and he finally became a citizen and all that good stuff, and got to vote and all that good stuff. But, I said, "Why don't you, why don't you talk as a clown?" He, he wasn't a mime by any means at all, but he was a clown who didn't require yelling at the audience to have them understand his story.
- Peggy Williams: [00:08:33](#) He did it all with his hands and his little dog and some very simple props. Like, uh, the hunting gag, you know, he had the shoulder bag, and he had the little dog dressed up like, uh, a

rabbit, and- and the gun, and, um, the rabbit was always pulling tricks on him. His very talented dog ... he had several dogs and, uh, Knucklehead, was the dog that I was used to working with and Pee-Wee was the offspring of Knucklehead years later, you know, as dog generations go. And he did the same routines that his mother had done. So, Pee-Wee was- was really cool.

Peggy Williams: [00:09:08](#) But, anyway, so Lou, um, was a great teacher, and he taught us really big gags. You know, with the, like the baseball gag was a standard. The dentist gag, all these things that required a bunch of people in 'em and, and a lot of different parts and roles that you had to learn how to work as a team, and work with props and not hurt each other with moving props around. You had to be very careful at, when you're swinging a hammer, not to swing it the wrong way. And when you're doing slaps ... He did a lot of slaps. Um, I never saw him do a ton of falls. He had done so many in his life, but he was passing that, that great art form on to the younger ones who- who, it was easier for us to get up (laughing), I guess.

Peggy Williams: [00:09:50](#) So we did slaps and falls, and I had a particular challenge with that because none of the guys ... there were six women in my class and 30 men, and none of the men wanted to hit a woman. And I was appreciative of that as gender difference, but it didn't help my slapstick at all (laughing) because it was hard to find someone who would really want to practice. 'Cause 'cause in slapstick, if you really do it right, it looks like you're getting hit, but you're not even getting touched. That's the trick with slapstick. It's a presentation and I wanted to perfect that. I thought it would be funny, you know, if, if a woman would get hit and hit back harder and make the clown do a 1-0, 1-0-8 or that's a, kind of a flip that they do. And I don't do 1-0-8s. I'm not an acrobat. But we had some very acrobatic clowns and, uh, they really got into, like in the boxing gag and things like that.

Peggy Williams: [00:10:45](#) So, Lou was on the staff. Danny Chapman was very helpful to me. He was an older clown who had been a- an aerialist prior, and like so many people in the circus, they become a clown after they're finished with their primary role, right? Because your body does start changing how it reacts to constant, um, usage. You know, like flyers always get issues with their shoulders, it seems because they're yanking on them all the time when they get caught in the air and all that stuff. So, Danny Chapman was amazing and he had all kinds of little pocket magic and little, like the, um, the dancing cane.

Peggy Williams: [00:11:20](#) And he had all kinds of little things that would be good for hospital visits, which we were required to do and we had the

opportunity to do that, visit hospitals and schools, libraries, and all that stuff. Even in Clown College, we were the guinea pigs and they wanted to see how we worked with children or people who weren't so able, right? How did we react to not being understood by people who were foreign or, uh, kids being reticent to meet a clown and that's more common now than it was back then. But, um, so we would go to like the local hospital and visit the, it wasn't the children's ward, but it was a regular adult ward. And so, you'd get all kinds of experiences when you do that, right?

Peggy Williams: [00:12:03](#) So, Danny was really helpful to me and especially the third day, um, of Clown College, it was about, was it nine and a half weeks, maybe 10 weeks. I'm not exactly sure how many days, but that's how many days in classes and performance and audition at the end it took. But the third day in Clown College (laughing), we had two of those little acrobatic mats that fold like an accordion, and I did a cartwheel, and I went off the mat, and I broke my foot.

Peggy Williams: [00:12:30](#) And, so, Mr. Ballantine told me, "Well, we're gonna have to send you home, right?" So, I was almost out of there (laughing) before the end of the first week. I had a plaster cast 'cause that's what they used then. Plaster cast that itched 'cause it was really hot. It was in Venice, Florida in a non-air conditioned building. So, we were sweating all the time and we worked six days a week, about eight in the morning til 10 at night, something like those hours. It was very long and not, not fun for a cast.

Peggy Williams: [00:13:01](#) So, I didn't continue with acrobatics, stilt-walking, and unicycling 'cause I couldn't m- move my ankle. And he said, "We're gonna have to send you home because you can't take all the classes."

Peggy Williams: [00:13:13](#) And I begged, I really did beg 'cause I had given up the first semester of grad school to go and it was too late to get back on that train when I, when I said, "I really wanna learn. I wanna be here. I wanna do whatever I can. Please let me stay." And so I guess he called Mr. Feld, and so the, the answer was, I wasn't gonna be eligible for a contract, but I could stay and audit the course in as much I could participate in a safe manner.

Peggy Williams: [00:13:40](#) So, I did, and what I did was I sat in the seats and I took notes. And, um, I would, I was doing makeup. I was doing all the other stuff that I could do physically, and just dragging this cast around. And, um, I had three-wheel bike with a little flag out the back like the old people, uh, were down there. Very cute.

Little orange, triangular flag so they could all see me and I'm rolling around Venice, Florida on a three wheel bicycle that I rented, and it was a lot of fun.

Peggy Williams: [00:14:10](#) Um, I sat in the seats and watched classes I couldn't participate in, but I also did a lot of things ... We had to make our own costumes. We- we went to the, the Venice, Florida version of Goodwill, which was a- a shop down on Main street which was a- a resale, you know, shop that benefited a church nearby. And we, (chuckle) pretty much got all of our costume pieces from that and remade 'em. And I'm a good sewer at the time because my mother ... Thank you, Mom ... taught me how to sew. So, I would be helping other people's costumes out.

Peggy Williams: [00:14:43](#) We had maybe two or three people in the, in the costume shop to fit 36 people into a whole bunch of gag costumes. And, there some old costumes there from prior years of Clown College, like this big bin, and they were all wrinkled. And so, we were making a few new things, and I was helpful there. So, that was good because they said, "Oh, you're a team player." Oh, if that's what it takes. Give me the needle and thread (laughing), you know. So, it was that interesting thing. So, I wasn't eligible for a contract, but I was able to stay. That was a huge victory for me 'cause I had already ... You know, we had to find our own housing. Um, later years that had a place where everyone stayed. So, we were really kind of on our own down there, you know.

Peggy Williams: [00:15:24](#) From the Greyhound to the taxi to this place that I found I could rent a little teeny-weeny, teeny, and I mean teeny-weeny, I thought it was small till I moved on the train later (laughing).

Scott O'Donnell: [00:15:35](#) (Laughing).

Peggy Williams: [00:15:35](#) Whatever. Anyway, so we go through all the classes. And I developed my own costume, and we got shoes, and wigs, and makeup, and did everything we could. And it came time for graduation at Clown College. And this was like, we'd been together now, sweating daily for two months and a half, right? So, we all knew each other really well (laughing), and I was really upset because I didn't get to do some of the things everyone else was really getting good at. But, I- you just, you have to go with what you have available to you and you have to excel in those areas. So, I got to do a lot of ... Well, if you look at the way the show is structured back then in the clown alley, if there was a female, if there was a clown that appeared as a female in a routine, they were a man in drag. So, my mentors were men in drag. That was cool.

- Peggy Williams: [00:16:27](#) And, you know, my parents were so proud that ... "You're what? Uh, Peggy, what did you say-" I said, "Nevermind, never- ... The g- ... It's like Greek theater, Dad. The guys play the female parts 'cause it was only men for a while, right? And that's all they used to have and now that's, that's why they want girls to wear the lady stuff."
- Peggy Williams: [00:16:43](#) "Oh, okay, okay."
- Peggy Williams: [00:16:45](#) 'Cause it was the woman's lib movement and all that kind of stuff.
- Peggy Williams: [00:16:47](#) So, so we get to three days before graduation, so I got the first three days and the last three days without a cast. Everything (laughing) in between ... um, by the way, those casts will disintegrate if you go in the gulf water and walk around on the sand. They, they ... You see this little, white trail behind you? And I went through three casts. (Laughing). I put a big trash bag on my foot, but it wore out on the bottom. Um, that, I, um, you learn.
- Peggy Williams: [00:17:16](#) Anyway, what happened three days before graduation. Um, my job in the graduation was holding props for other people and standing in a place where I could be in a clown costume and be seen. [Put 00:17:29] a number on me, but I didn't do a lot of routines. But once I got the cast off within three days, I was able to do a really silly ballerina routine with big, foam rubber, long toe shoes. And, um, you'd step on the toe and it would shrink down, and so it was like, my limp, I could disguise my limp that way. And I had a tutu that I made out of that wedding toil. What's that, tulle, I think it's called. And I sat in my seats and made myself a- a little tutu. And, um, dyed some, uh, long underwear pink to go underneath the tutu and that was my costume.
- Peggy Williams: [00:18:08](#) And based on ... Irvin Feld later told me, he says, "Based on my willingness to get out there and do that." That horrible walk-around, horrible walk-around, in my opinion. And he said ... made, made me overlook a lot of things. So, anyway, I get to enter the show. I got one number. I got one walk-around and I was passing in front of him. And you know, who's in the audience? Was one of the Smothers Brothers and Emmett Kelly, and I'm like, "Oh!" And I was more nervous performing in front of them than even, than even Irvin Feld and Israel Feld, who were our judges, along with, uh, uh, Bonnie Feld was there and, and, um, several other ... and Kenneth Feld, of course.

- Peggy Williams: [00:18:48](#) But, um, I didn't have any idea how they were, how they were gonna just d- do things. And so, at the end, after their graduation performance, and we all got a certificate that we completed the course. And it was beautiful because the Director, Bill Ballantine, was an artist too. And he had been a clown in the circus and he had done graduation certificates that are second to none. They were hand drawn, and then they were copied onto parchment paper, and then he hand colored them in in pencil. And I have one of those in a frame at home. I st-, well how long ago was th- ... Well it was what, 50 years.
- Peggy Williams: [00:19:26](#) Anyway, (laughing) um, I was so excited to get the completion thing. It didn't mean I got a contract. It's like going to any college, there's not always a job waiting for you when you're done. But you know when you're done, you get the certificate. Ours was like supersized. It was bigger than a clown shoe. And, and, uh, that was really cool.
- Peggy Williams: [00:19:45](#) So I had my walking papers (laughing) and I had my walking foot. And, um, Mr. Ballantine ... Since I knew I was not eligible for a contract, I was getting ready to go to the Greyhound station that Sunday after the Saturday night performance. Mr. Ballantine came to my apartment in this station wagon that was pretty vintage in itself, and, and knocked on my door and said, "Peggy Williams!"
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:07](#) And I said, "Bill, what, what, what?"
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:08](#) You know, I'm like packing my suitcase getting ready to go, and he said, "Mr. Feld wants to talk to you. So, I'll, I'll come back in 10 minutes and pick you up."
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:19](#) And he was gonna go get a couple of other people. And we were all gonna go to the arena, and sit in the seats, and go up and talk to him one time, one at a time in his office, which had like windows of the world. They had these great ... in Venice, Florida, it had these great windows that he could see what's going on in rehearsal or he could close his curtains and have privacy up there. It was a great office for him, um, for, for that facility.
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:40](#) And, um, I said to Bill Ballantine, (laughing) I remember distinctly, "Oh, I'm not eligible for a contract, so I don't need to go talk to Mr. Feld."
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:50](#) And, and he said, "Y- yes, you do. Yes, you do."

- Peggy Williams: [00:20:55](#) And I said, "Well, I'll, I'll, I'll go and tell him, thank you again, then okay."
- Peggy Williams: [00:20:58](#) Um, but I was really not ... uh, my plans were different, right? So, I was very excited. Uh, by the time we got to the arena and then I went and I sat in the seats with everybody else. They had about five or six at a time, were waiting for their conversation. And, and everybody that came out of that office, they either had a contract or they had tears or smiles or laughs or ... that was before high fives actually. The, whatever the thing was where you slap each other on the shoulder or do some clown wave that was good or bad, right? So, I'm going, oh, he's just gonna say, "Thanks for coming. Bye." So I was prepared for that. And I walked in his office and I, I tried to talk him out of hiring me. I ... He said, he said, "So, we enjoyed the performance last night. We had, um, you know, uh, we- we found a lot of funny things in the show and we particularly were pleased that you were able to do your walk-around." And I'm like, "Oh, my gosh." Because that was, you know, embarrassing. But he- he said "And, uh, actually we- we have for you."
- Peggy Williams: [00:22:02](#) And he ... This paper came out of nowhere. He slid it across the table right in front of me and it was right-side up to me, like he'd done this before (laughing), right? He slid that paper across, and put this most beautiful pen on earth, on top of it. And he said, "We have a contract for you and we'd like you to go on the red unit. And, uh, rehearsals start in ..." Uh, I don't know it was like three weeks or something. Very quick, right? And, and I went, "Oh, but I'm not eligible." (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:22:30](#) 'Cause that was his rules and he says something to me that has never left my mind, he said, "So, you're not eligible?" And I said, "No, from the beginning when I broke my foot, right? So I couldn't do all the classes, so I was not eligible and I was able to stay because I understood that and agreed to that." And he said, "Well, here's what I have to say about that. So business is not a democracy. I own the show. I want to hire you. So, I have a contract." And he shoved the contract (laughing) in front of me again.
- Peggy Williams: [00:23:02](#) Now, my dad, this ... I'm going through my mind here. My dad was a lawyer and he said, "Whenever you sign a contract, whether it's for a loan to buy a video player ..." 'Cause video was gonna be the new technology.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:23:13](#) Hmm.

- Peggy Williams: [00:23:14](#) That was the first thing I ever borrowed money for, was a \$90 video set. "... And whenever you do a contract, let me read the contract first. Just let me see it. I won't stop you from doing what you're gonna do, but I wanna read the contract." He said, it's all hidden in the small print, right? And so, I didn't get a chance to, 'cause I, 'cause, because I looked at this pen, and this pen was so beautiful! It was a thick as a little stogie. It was a beautiful, weighted pen ... I remember the pen more than the contract. It was ... And you put it in your hand and you really wanted to now write with it, right? Not in a scrap paper or some-, I signed the deal, right? (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:23:55](#) And I said, "Okay. Thank you!" (Laughing). Because I didn't know what else to say. And then in the back of my mind, I realized I needed one more roll of quarters to go to the payphone and tell my parents that I signed a contract. So that's another story, but, um, I did, I got a contract against all odds. I got a contract.
- Peggy Williams: [00:24:16](#) I didn't know, I really didn't know that there weren't girl clowns before. I- I didn't really understand the whole focus on gender switches in jobs. And I, it- it hit me head on because I did media interviews when I got on the road at least four or five a week for the first year and a half. It was amazing, and I was unprepared for all the circus history. I wish I'd been here at Circus World studying, but I didn't even know then that it was here, right?
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:24:49](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Peggy Williams: [00:24:50](#) So, it wasn't part of my childhood growing up in Wisconsin. Um, so anyway, so I got on the Greyhound with my guitar (laughing), and all that stuff. And, um, uh, I went up to Wisconsin, and came back home, and showed the contract to my father. And, and actually, no, I went to the payphone first to warn them that I was taking the Greyhound and I'd be home in two days, and could they pick me up at the Greyhound station downtown. And yeah, sure they would. But, and they were excited to see me. 'Cause I was a totally different person after all that experience that I ever would have been because I learned things that I thought were not useful in life; but, we all had to learn them, and I learned things that were very useful in life, and had nothing to do with circus or clowning, and everything in between.
- Peggy Williams: [00:25:37](#) So, and anyway, I got on the phone down the, down the block, there was a payphone on Venice, not Venice Avenue, it was Highway 41. It's were all the clowns would stand in line on Sunday nights with their roll of quarters and do their three

minute chunks at a time, right? Nobody even has this experience anymore.

- Scott O'Donnell: [00:25:56](#) (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:25:57](#) But if we ran out of quarters, we were always bartering with other clowns.
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:00](#) "You have any more quarters?"
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:01](#) "You have any ... Can I borrow a quarter?"
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:03](#) "No, I need it for my call."
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:04](#) "Anyone got extra money?"
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:05](#) (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:06](#) We were all broke anyway. So, uh, I called. And so in my home in Madison was, um, two fl-, two, two stories and basement. So it was one of those beautiful homes that really, really old house like from the 1800s, right? And we had two phones in the home. One was upstairs, one was on the first floor. So, I called, I put the quarters in the phone. I got the little stack of quarters on the little-, close the phone booth, and now I'm gonna tell them that I signed a contract (laughing) to go the road, live on a train to be a clown for "The Greatest Show on Earth."
- Peggy Williams: [00:26:43](#) Now my father was always thinking I'd be professional. So I was gonna be, but that's (laughing) wasn't what he had in mind. He was a lawyer. My mom was a teacher. My brother was in Vietnam as a soldier at that time when I was in Clown College, and I was the family clown. So kinda added a little texture to the family, right? So, I'm on the phone with my mom and dad, and I can visualize them at home. One of 'em is on the phone upstairs and w- with a curly little, little, stringy cord, but they can't reach each other and see each other when they're talking to me, right? 'Cause there was no speaker phones back then. You had to hold it up to your ear.
- Peggy Williams: [00:27:18](#) And I said, "I signed a contract, and I'm gonna make X amount of money, and I'm gonna go on the road, and I have to be back in Florida in three weeks for rehearsals."
- Peggy Williams: [00:27:27](#) And my dad says, "Wait, wait. Hold on, hold on, hold on. You signed a contract?" (Laughing).

- Peggy Williams: [00:27:34](#) And I went, "Yeah. (Laughing). I'll bring it home and show it you."
- Peggy Williams: [00:27:39](#) "All right. All right." (Laughing) I'm sure he was looking for the exit clause, right? (Laughing).
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:27:44](#) (Laughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:27:45](#) But now, he was actually pretty excited for me 'cause I was excited. I wanted to work with my friends that I'd met, particularly the couple that were gonna go to the red unit. I wanted to see how the other ones went to the blue unit. And we'd see them maybe once a year be- because we were at opposite ends of the country, in a rotational basis on the trains. Um, my dad had been in Navy Intelligence and he'd been ships and stuff, in small quarters. He, he knew I had never had that experience before. He was curious about how big the train rooms were.
- Peggy Williams: [00:28:18](#) And of course, there were various sizes, depending on your pecking order in the circus; how long you'd been there, the clout, and how you'd negotiate for space, which is a huge negotiable part at, it- it was at Ringling Bros. And there's a maximum. You don't have pullouts in the side like you do with trailers. You know, you, you get your space and you find out how to live in it, very efficiently. And you find out even with a small room, you got too much stuff, right? You got no belongings at all, it's still too much. So, um, we learned to live in a very, very fastidious way.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:28:51](#) Was it a one or two year contract?
- Peggy Williams: [00:28:52](#) It was a one year contract.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:28:54](#) And were you joining-
- Peggy Williams: [00:28:55](#) With an option-
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:28:56](#) ... a brand new red show or a halfway through a red show?
- Peggy Williams: [00:28:58](#) It was 1971. It was a brand new show. It was ... We rehearsed in 1970.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:29:03](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Peggy Williams: [00:29:03](#) We opened Christmas week in Venice for four days, and then I went on the road, um, to St. Petersburg, Florida in January, first

week of January. And we did a TV special right off the bat. We were ... all of a sudden, all of a sudden, I'm like, "TV? We're doing a TV special?" I've, I've already signed my life away with all that stuff. That small print, right? So, it was customary to do a TV special every years to have a guest host. And we had, uh, a many wonderful guest hosts, Johnny Cash, Barbara Mandrell. Um, oh my gosh, I- I, there's a whole list of them, but, uh ... Dick Van Dyke, when that was a thrill to all of us who are funny people.

Scott O'Donnell: [00:29:44](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peggy Williams: [00:29:44](#) Or with the nickname funny people. That wasn't until 19- ... when was ... well, he was 1987, that was the 20th anniversary, Dick Van Dyke was the co-host. So, we got e- experience with television, late nights, early mornings, production, quiet on the set, we got all those terms from TV which you don't hear, uh, at circus. Then you get holding five, where the production manager holds their hand up with all five digits very visible, meaning the show's gonna start five minutes late. And all those kind of things that, um ...

Peggy Williams: [00:30:16](#) You learn a whole set of words like donniker, and donniker's a bathroom. That's what called bathrooms on the circus for some reason. I don't know the story, I just know that that's what you say if you wanna know where the bathroom is, right? And, um, all, tons of words that are still in my language and I don't even notice them anymore. Probably a few more will pop up here, but, um ... So, I got home. I went to the university, and canceled my semester, and you know, did all that stuff for my personal business, which was very minimal. And then got ready to take the Greyhound one more time (laughing). One way trip to Venice, Florida.

Peggy Williams: [00:30:59](#) And, um, got down there and, um, moved on the train. And I had a bunk. I was in the ... At the point in time, the train had about 31 cars to it. The single females consisted of dancers, a [bal 00:31:14] girl clown, that, that was me. What are we gonna do with the girl? That was me. Um, there was a- a female act was a contortionist, who used to actually warm up in the morning, in the sink, uh, before anybody else got up. She would sit in the sink and do her contortions. Um, uh, that was kinda funny to see. Um, there was a lady from the wardrobe department and she was from the Ward family, from the Flying Ward Family. And now, she was doing wardrobe. Although she used to be a ... she was married to an aerialist and I think she actually did aerial of some sort too. I never saw her when she was a performer. She was a wardrobe lady.

- Peggy Williams: [00:31:53](#) So, we're all on this car together, right? So it's like, a little of this and a little of that. And um, chugging away rail by rail around the country. It was really fun. So, it was also very interesting. They, everybody spoke English on that car, which was kind of rare. Um, and we were all ... I believe everybody was American on that car, which was odd. 'Cause the train was filled with people from all over the world, which is the essence of "The Greatest Show on Earth."
- Peggy Williams: [00:32:24](#) And, um, but it was a bunk with a curtain on the si- on the long side. You- you had, you had your wall with a window, louvered windows and if you opened them on a trip, soot could easily come in onto your, your bed. Um, and those went away in a year. I only was in a bunk car for a year. And they, we retired those kind of bunk cars, uh, one by one as their longevity came to require refurbishment or extinguish, extinguish it from the, the rail supply there. And, so I was only on the bunk for, um, a year, and that was an experience living in that small of a space.
- Peggy Williams: [00:33:02](#) You know these little homes that people are bragging about spending \$150,000 on, the teeny homes? Yeah, they got nothing on us. We'd been there (laughing). We'd been teenier and happier probably too. But at any rate, so I had a bunk and, um, I was, um ... I found out how important space was even when I had bunk because I did so much early morning public relations when the train would get into the next stop. I had to have my makeup and costume on the train with me and makeup, and the publicist would pick me up from the train yards, and go do radio, television, newspaper, libraries, whatever it was, immediately. 'Cause they wanted to do all that publicity early in the week, so people would hear about it and then word- word of mouth would kick in.
- Peggy Williams: [00:33:51](#) So I did a ton of that kind of stuff. So I couldn't put that stuff in my bunk and sleep with it 'cause we had very, very narrow closets, like maybe 10 inches wide that kinda stuck out into the hallway, and, and a drawer. And, uh, what they ... a- another thing that was attached to the wall over our feet that had a dropdown thing where you could write letters, a little chains on the side, one of those old writing tables. And it's called a crumb box.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:34:19](#) (Coughing).
- Peggy Williams: [00:34:19](#) And, um, I don't know why it's a crumb box, but it's c-r-u-m-b and I have no idea why, maybe someday I'll learn here at the museum. (Laughing) There's an ... anyway, that's where the only place you could lock, so that, there was a hasp. And if you

had your own padlock, you could lock it and like keep your st-
valuables in there, which was a dead giveaway where everyone
kept there (laughing) valuables. But that's how it was. And you
know, we lived on, by an honor code there too.

Peggy Williams: [00:34:47](#) But I found out about the politics of space on the train because I
needed my costume, and my shoes, and my wig, and my
makeup kit, and all that. So I lugged that back and forth a lot
from the building. But they gave me the upper bunk from my
bunk. So I could put all that stuff, which was needed for the
show immediately in the next town, right there with me. And
not everybody had that opportunity. So, you know, I thought,
yeah, should I rent this space out or no (laughing)? Just kidding.
It was, it was beautiful that they helped me out that way.

Peggy Williams: [00:35:24](#) And then, the next year I go a small stateroom and by the time I
finished living on the train, 17 years later, I had a quarter car
with a washer and a dryer, a five foot closet, um, built-in
microwave, uh, burners on the, on the counter. Burners, you
know, stove burners and a, um, and uh, an electronic bed that
came on, on cables, on airline cables out of the ceiling. Uh, it
was beautiful.

Peggy Williams: [00:35:50](#) And I had my own vestibule 'cause it was, it was the first
railroad car, I believe in the country, that had a middle
vestibule. And that was an experiment that the Ringling Bros.,
uh, exercised in- in the rail community ... to see, they kept
checking it to see if it changed the torque when the train goes
around curves and all that, would, would it weaken for having
that middle vestibule. The answer was no. They checked it, and
checked it, and checked it. And up until last year when they got
rid of the cars, uh, the train cars, and sold them off in 2017 in
May, June, August, up through August, I think. Um, those
middle vestibule cars were still holding their own.

Peggy Williams: [00:36:29](#) So, I was, I was a guinea pig for that. I was certainly a guinea pig
for the, um, the bed that came down halfway, the loft bed that
came down halfway from the ceiling. And they never built
another one of those either. That was an experiment. It worked
for me and they said it was too much, too much work t- to do as
a pattern. So, 'cause I wanted to leave my table and chairs and
what I was working on on the table that would normally convert
into a bed. They'd take the cushions off, and slide them over,
and put the middle board like on a trailer. I didn't have to do
that anymore. I had table and chairs, and a bed that I could use
all at one time. Occasionally, occasionally, and not all four
cables worked.

- Peggy Williams: [00:37:11](#) So, (laughing) it was, this ... So I went old school, and did the table and chairs. But I had really good trainmasters, as we always did. They were, they held the train together, not with duct tape. They really knew how to fix things. (Laughing). So, anyway, that ... I had a variety of experiences in staterooms and from the bunk to the quarter car, which is pretty much as a single person would get unless they're a ringmaster, trainmaster, or a superstar in the performance part, right? So that was, that was pretty cool.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:37:43](#) I'm gonna take you back to clown alley.
- Peggy Williams: [00:37:46](#) Yeah. Ooh, hoo, hoo, hoo.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:37:48](#) So who is Peggy William's the clown? What kind of clown character-
- Peggy Williams: [00:37:52](#) Ohhh.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:37:52](#) ... did you create? What did-
- Peggy Williams: [00:37:54](#) I had so much fun because I got to, I got to, I got the opportunity to, um, work ... I had a lot of fun, uh, being a lady clown. And, and that was my calling card. I was the first female clown and that's what, that's how they advertised my presence on the show. Everybody gets their 15 minutes of fame. Mine was because I was a female. Not because I was funny or new, new history or anything; it was because I was the first female, uh, that had graduated from Clown College, and gotten a contract, and appeared, and we were, that year, we- in 1971, the red unit played New York.
- Peggy Williams: [00:38:34](#) So there was lots of press, lots of not- notice about female clowns. On the other unit which went out a month later because they would rehearse after us in Venice, Florida. They went out a month later and another one of the six females from my class named Maudie Flippen ... may she rest in peace. She passed a couple of years ago. She was on the blue unit and she was getting equivalent media in the city she was playing. So girl clowns were it, no matter where Ringling, Ring- went.
- Peggy Williams: [00:39:03](#) We were getting the media attention and it really forced you to put together all those wonderful things Danny Chapman helped with. Small little things that you can do because you're, you appear in a lot of places. And you just need every kind of talent you can, and you always need more than you have. And I really appreciated that. Um, so, my opportunity was, I didn't have to

dress in drag. I could do female characters and so there really was no limit to the bucket of female characters I wanted to try.

Peggy Williams: [00:39:38](#) So, one of the early 70s years ... and I wore these things for two years. I can't believe that I survived this. We had a prop maker named George Shellenberger and he was there ever year of Clown College, for 30 years. And he made props to last. They were heavy. They were strong. They were welded. They weren't just hammered together or stapled. They were, they were welded and very secure. He made me a pair of roller skates with six-inch wheels. And they were kind of a skateboard base, and so like a pair of army boots were bolted to, to the, the base of it and then the 6-inch wheel. They were quite noticeable when you see ... and they actually rolled. They were very, they were brand new wheels. It was hard on my legs to do that, but, um, I had to learn really to push the wheels because these were really heavy.

Peggy Williams: [00:40:28](#) And so I wore grandma dress with a fur that bites itself. You know the minx that, that wrap around your neck and bite, they bite each other to hold it together. Um, and it was, um, the year that, um, R- Roller Derby was a big movie, right? And so I had a jersey over my fur (laughing) that said, "Number 10", because that was the number used in the movie, um, for the lead character, who was a female and a very good roller skater for Roller Derby. So I was doing a, a little thing about that and it was really fun.

Peggy Williams: [00:41:03](#) And I did a truck stop waitress who chewed gum way too much. Uh, let me see ... All the female characters, I have a whole list. Um, the truck stop waitress was trying to deliver a meal and I had a tray on my arm that was actually, um, had straps that I could put thr- my arm through because I had to carry it all the way around the arena with my arm out. And I felt like half of a preacher. You know (laughing), I never got my arm down and it, it really had to get built up. Um, and it had plates with little beads in between the plates and the cups and the saucers, so the whole thing was wobbly, and you know, almost gonna fall, although it was all connected. Don't tell the audience (laughing). Don't wanna let them down, but it was all connected. And I was, uh, yelling out an order number to try to deliver this all around the arena and it wasn't going anywhere, right? So, that was another walk-around, the truck stop waitress.

Peggy Williams: [00:41:55](#) But, prior to that, was one of those progressive kind of walk-arounds. That was the deliver part. The order part was, I was going through the audience, "What would you like? What would you like? What would you like? We have a speedy delivery." You

know, and two hours later, here I come with all this stuff. Um, so that was kind of a takeoff on this style of progressive, um, uh, walk-arounds that Otto Griebing was so famous for with the tree that grew and the ice cube that shrunk. Or the package that they, he tried to deliver to Mrs. McGillicuddy on, and never could find her and the strings were coming undone and the, you know, wrapping paper was ... So he had three or four versions of that.

- Peggy Williams: [00:42:32](#) He never delivered the package, the tree, or the ice. The ice melted. It was a huge pincer like the old iceman cometh thing, and a little, teeny-weeny, um, ice cube at the end 'cause supposedly it melted. So, the prop department made all those props for that. I was very happy to have such an excellent prop maker. Even are, everything was really quite sturdy and heavy because it lasted. And we were in charge of our own prop, uh, maintenance on the road, so we would have to pay or- or whatever, whatever maintenance was ... when something started falling apart we had to fix it on the road. I learned a lot about that kind of stuff.
- Peggy Williams: [00:43:11](#) Um, let me see, other, other walk-arounds and gags, um ... oh my gosh, I wanted to be in the clown car. In the clown car. Not the routine, but I wanted to be in the car so much. And I, I got a lot of pushback for about three years. "No, we're not putting girls on our laps in the clown car 'cause you know, it's tight in there." And if there's room left over, you put another dwarf in there, right?" So, it's tight in there, no matter.
- Peggy Williams: [00:43:40](#) We had a, a car with a hatchback. I think it was maybe a Datsun. We had 17 clowns in there. I mean, they did extra, heavy-duty, um, suspension in it. Took ... I, okay, took all the seats out, right? Except for the little stool for the driver, and we had popup props in there that we'd sit on when we're in there. And then the people that are still in the car after the first person gets out ... there are some people that are outside the car, opening the door, shutting the door, reacting to each other, but inside the car we were blowing up beach balls. We were on compressing popup props. We were maneuvering to be the next one out the door and you just, we just that (laughing) ... You know, I finally got in that car after about three years.
- Peggy Williams: [00:44:25](#) I lobbied to be in that car. You know, (laughing) I guess I'm really glad I did, but it wasn't all about that. It was really tight in there. Your face is in someone else's armpit. You know, you know, exchanging all these body positions, and, and doing your things on a cue, on a music cue to make sure you get the popup

suitcase out the right door for the right person to grab, right? So, it looks like more than ever could have fit in the came out.

- Peggy Williams: [00:44:53](#) And so many people ... it was always in an interview, they would say, "So there's a hole in the floor where the clown are coming from the basement, right?" And I said, "Yeah, it's the same place at where some of the elephants come from." You know, I mean, there was no hole in the floor. It, we were working on concrete every single day. Our legs knew that. There was no hole in the floor. We were scrunched in there together. And it was really, really nice to be one of the first people out the door 'cause if you were the last person out the door, you were squished the longest and you made the most props. And so the "First of May's" got in the back, but I couldn't get in there for three years, so I wasn't a "First of May" anymore. So, (laughing) I didn't have to be in the back.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:45:32](#) So there's one of those circus terms, like donniker.
- Peggy Williams: [00:45:36](#) Oh, absolutely.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:45:36](#) What is a "First of May", Peggy Williams?
- Peggy Williams: [00:45:37](#) Okay. A "First of May", um, is ... and there's, uh, several stories about how this term came to be, but "First of May" is like a rookie on the circus. As a "First of May" clown if you did a soap gag, where you had to whip up soap with an electric drill, and soap, and water, and buckets backstage. And it was like a bakery gag that goes crazy or a soap gag, um, where you- you have a big mat out there, and there's like liquid soap on it, and you slide across in your costume. And it's lots of slapstick. And things go wrong and everybody gets soapy. It could be a cafeteria gag that we did.
- Peggy Williams: [00:46:15](#) A "First of May" is a rookie. And it's a "First of May's" job is to clean up after (laughing) all those gags. That was one thing. And so you, you kind of got the jobs that no one else wanted or they've already done for a couple of seasons, and you got to, you got to be the one, right? I missed that, I missed that part in the clown car because it took three years for them to think, "What can it hurt." Now we have three girl clowns in the alley. Every year we added another girl clown in the alley.
- Peggy Williams: [00:46:41](#) So, my second years, um, of that same production, Barbara Nadel, who was in the class of 1971 at Clown College, came and joined. And she was a very physical comedian. And, um, so she got a lot of slaps and ... by now, by now, everything that they

were teaching us a Clown College was true. When you do slapstick right, you don't hit the person. So you can, you can do slapstick with a female or even, uh, a- a female who's wearing a generic costume that, that isn't particularly male or female but just generic. So all that kind of, all those barriers kind of broke down. So-

- Scott O'Donnell: [00:47:20](#) Speaking of barriers, let's back up to what was your one like when you showed up at clown alley and it was probably predominantly male-
- Peggy Williams: [00:47:27](#) It was all male. (Laughing).
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:47:29](#) ... and here comes, Peggy Williams, bright and shiny from Clown College-
- Peggy Williams: [00:47:33](#) I was, I was right from the Midwest.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:47:35](#) ... The first female-
- Peggy Williams: [00:47:35](#) Eh, yeah! Wee!
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:47:35](#) ... What was that vibe like? The, the welcome into Clown College, the-
- Peggy Williams: [00:47:38](#) Well, you know, even in rehearsals I had some issues because they didn't know how to, um ... They, the production staff had a- a- a variety of ways that they addressed me. So, our director was a Broadway stage director, named Richard Barstow, and he would direct the circus, and the movement, and the animals, and all that. And he was a bit eccentric as you would expect a Broadway director might have certain things in mind that, that might not work well in the circus. But he found a way to make them work well or not so much and we'd get rid of those props or whatever. But, um, he, he would say, "Okay, all the girls go to ring one."
- Peggy Williams: [00:48:20](#) 'Cause those are the rings numbered one, two, and three, and two was the middle ring in those days. It became Center ring later and then many times we had no rings at all. Later on as the shows and the production developed, we didn't have a ring out there at all times. We had it one that came down from the ceiling during a portion of the show for, uh, animal acts, and, and some other things. At any rate, we had three rings back there when I was clowning. The whole time I was clowning, we had three rings.

- Peggy Williams: [00:48:47](#) And, um, the interesting thing that he said, "Clowns, uh, uh, a- all the girls on, on ring one." So I'd go to ring one and he'd say, "All the clowns in ring two." And I'm sitting there with the dancers and the showgirls, right? Showgirls were the ones that wore the really big, extravagant, heavy show costumes, but they didn't necessarily dance or do the aerial web, which is, uh, an aerial act that you climb up a rope with a hand loop at the top and you do aerial ballet with some, some person at the bottom holding it tight so you can work with that rope. So, it was interesting to see, uh ... I was sitting with the girls and he called all the clowns to ring two and this particular time it was for choreography. S
- Peggy Williams: [00:49:30](#) o, I was in the wrong ring. "Uh, girl clown, girl clown." He didn't call me by my name for probably two weeks. He knew my name, but he, he didn't give me the honor of calling me by my name for about two weeks. "Girl clown, you're supposed to be with the clowns."
- Peggy Williams: [00:49:48](#) "I didn't know."
- Peggy Williams: [00:49:49](#) "Next time, girls in ring one. Clowns in ring two."
- Peggy Williams: [00:49:52](#) I go to ring two because I'm a clown. It was for costume fittings. Oh, no, no, I have to do mine when the girls go. So, I was confused about which role to answer to for quite a while. And then they started calling me, girl clown. All the clowns including the girl. And so, that, that, and then, and I didn't have a dressing room because the- there's clown alley, but no girls are allowed in clown alley back then. This changed so drastically in the last couple ... oh, my gosh ... So, there's clown alley and then there's the women's wardrobe where all the dancers would dress.
- Peggy Williams: [00:50:24](#) And I was, nobody in clown costume having, uh, you know, that powder on your makeup's supposed to go in there 'cause it was loaded with sequins. And that powder tarnishes the sequins even in the air when it lands on it and it rubs on it, it tarnishes the sequins. I was not allowed in women's wardrobe in costume and makeup, and I wasn't allowed to change my clothes in clown alley (laughing). So I didn't really ... I remember on building I had a, I, my dressing room was, I had to grab my costume, um, and take it to a public restroom and change (laughing), at which point this little girl, with her mom in the bathroom, going, "Mom, there's a clown in there!"
- Peggy Williams: [00:51:02](#) "Oh honey, no, don't bother the clown. We're just gonna use the bathroom."

- Peggy Williams: [00:51:05](#) "Mom, there's a clown in there!"
- Peggy Williams: [00:51:06](#) "And, okay honey, we'll wait."
- Peggy Williams: [00:51:08](#) So, I'm, I'm behind the door changing, trying to zip myself up into this beautiful costume. That only lasted for about a week and I told, I told the manager, I said, "I need a more secure place. People are lining up to see who's in those shoes when I come out of the restroom. It's not right." So, they, they took a curtain and put it across the corner and I had my trunk and a curtain and, uh, a small, little wardrobe thing. And I'd run my, I'd shuttle my costumes back and forth to the ...
- Peggy Williams: [00:51:38](#) Finally, I got a wardrobe box where I could hang my costumes in and close the doors and lock it. And that became girl's clown alley because we had then the second year two girls, the third year three girls. We had up to five girls in the alley, so we had three wardrobe boxes. And we had our own little adjunct alley, which really made it easier on the boss clown to give us instructions about, you know, meet and greets, and PR opportunities, and all that. He'd come ... Fussy Little was our boss clown in those days. And he was a whiteface, kind of a standard whiteface, um, in the, in the style of Harry Dann and the, the bald head and the small red cap and stuff. And, uh, very-
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:52:19](#) And you chose to be a whiteface as well.
- Peggy Williams: [00:52:20](#) I chose to be a whiteface. Almost everybody in my class was a whiteface. Uh, I'd say 70% of the clowns in my Clown College class was a whiteface, which means a base color on your face was white and then all the accents are done in red and blue and black and a few colors. And some people went to yellow and green too. And I don't think yellow works so well, but you know, from a distance. But that's all, that's all ...
- Peggy Williams: [00:52:46](#) But the other clowns were Auguste, which meant their base color was more of a flesh tone. And whether they were light, light skin or dark skin, it was a flesh tone. And then all the accent makeup was put on in the red, and black, and blue, and you know, maybe every now and then, some green.
- Peggy Williams: [00:53:02](#) And then there was one guy who really, who really went crazy, he was a blueface. And, uh, [Monty Hollowman 00:53:08], he put blue all over his face and his ears, behind the neck, and the whole thing, and then his accent colors were red and white and black. And, um, he was very unique 'cause you'd line up all the

clowns, and wow, that really stuck out. It didn't photograph so well. Um, just in black and white photography, it just came out dark gray. You know, and so, it, it didn't, I don't think it served him well for photography, but he was unique in his costume and makeup. And you know, you gotta keep trying stuff. So-

- Scott O'Donnell: [00:53:41](#) Was there ever a point in the early years, where you were like, what am I doing? I could be home in Madison-
- Peggy Williams: [00:53:47](#) (Laughing).
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:53:47](#) ... being a speech therapist. Is all of this worth it?
- Peggy Williams: [00:53:50](#) Uh, you know what I thought I had those thoughts and then I thought, what would a, what would a first or second year speech pathologist be doing, uh, today in, in the speech lab? Okay, I'd be dealing with one child at a time, probably children because that was my specialty. And I'd be in a little room for an hour for each kid with probably 10 minute breaks in between those hours, and I, so I'd maybe see six or seven kids a day. And I would be working on lisps that, you know, kids that lisp or that had some kind of deformation or had cancer or had real struggles with speech or stuttered or what- whatever.
- Peggy Williams: [00:54:33](#) And, all that is really super valid and that was my goal, and, I said, "I'd be in a little room with a one-way mirror and it would be like captivity." 'Cause I entertain 10,000 people at a time now and my world got so opened from meeting all these people, learning these languages. I didn't really learn to be ... What I learned was how to listen to people try to speak English in a foreign tongue and I'm really good at identifying people now. "I can see you're from Bulgaria, aren't you?" Or you're from, you know, I don't speak their language. I understand their English very well.
- Peggy Williams: [00:55:10](#) And the best ... So I, so I- I never would have survived for long 'cause I enjoyed so much the largeness of the circus, and the traveling, and the falling asleep Sunday night totally exhausted from a long weekend, maybe a six-pack or a nine-pack which is ... A six-pack would be three shows on Saturday and three on Sunday. A nine-pack would be three Friday, three Saturday, three Sunday. And once we did a- a 12-pack which was a three on Monday too, in Madison Square Garden, and that's hard on performers. You forget what show, what numbers you've done, and what show. It's just too many back-to-back shows 'cause the shows are like a totally of maybe three hours with the pre-show, and the, and the time you're in the show. So, but we tried it and we- we found out that people had a tendency to forget

things or just kind of get into such a rut that they didn't have time to really focus on artistry as well.

- Peggy Williams: [00:56:03](#) So they didn't do that very often unless business really demanded it. And that was cool. So, I do not regret not going back to get my Master's. I only had one year left. I do not regret going back so soon to the campus because it was still pretty volatile, pretty political, and pretty anti this, anti that. It was, it was women's rights. It was, um, a black, um, the- the black movement. It was the, um, anti-war movement. I mean, all these things were colliding on the major campuses. It was a period of unrest and I wanted, I wanted focus and rest moving forward with my career, so I chose the circus (laughing). It doesn't make a bit of sense right now when I say this. Yeah, because it's catastrophic, uh, energy and color. It's wonderful.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:56:59](#) And did the circus get to play Madison in your early years?
- Peggy Williams: [00:57:02](#) The ... oh, this is so good that it did. This is so good that it did. Okay, my dad fought in World War II. He was in the Navy. He was very attuned to the Red Scare. Okay, whatever that means to the people from that generation. What it meant to me was, he was afraid I was ... Okay, so the majority of the cast in my first couple of years, were people from the still existent Iron Curtain. They were from behind the Iron Curtain. We had a lot of Bulgarians, probably 25 Bulgarians in the cast. Romanians, Polish, Czechoslovakians, or w- which was called that then, not now.
- Scott O'Donnell: [00:57:37](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Peggy Williams: [00:57:38](#) Um, Hungarians. And um, it- it was too early in the circus history for Russians and Chinese, but we had all these European, uh, communists, uh, countries represented in the cast. And then, the clowns were pretty much American. The dancers were pretty much American and the staff was pretty much American at that time. So, I was surrounded by the people my father had learned to fear. And he, I- I told him, I said, "Hey, there's the Bulgarian guy that sits in the dressing room and he, he, um, he does, uh, he works leather with tools and, and makes beautiful, um, art in leather valises and stuff. And he does that, you know, custom for, for spare change. He does it for, you know, 'cause he's talented."
- Peggy Williams: [00:58:21](#) Another guy was a woodburner. All he needed was a woodburner. All he needed was an electric plug and he could do a woodburning thing. These artistic people from Poland and, and Bulgaria. I was totally amazed at their ingenuity and their,

their work ethics were unbelievable. And so I was telling my dad about all of this, and he said, "Eh, not so sure." He just, his experience with communists in World War II was not my experience with those who were raised under communism in 1970.

Peggy Williams: [00:58:52](#) So, we played Madison that year. We played the Dane County Coliseum. And, um, everybody liked Madison because it's fun here. You know, Madison's a fun place. Dane County Coliseum, this was the bonus, already has barns, so they didn't have to put up the canvas tents to house the animals. And so they could just walk 'em in and, and, and deal with the elephants, and the horses, and the zebras, and the llamas, and camels, and even we had a giraffe, and all the fuzzies, you know, alpaca. And we had an emu one years, and that was just a mistake. Anyway, (laughing) not reliable performer. Inventive, creative, curious, not reliable.

Peggy Williams: [00:59:35](#) At any rate, so my brother, who is now by this time, home from Vietnam and made it safely, thank goodness. Um, he had a friend who had a backyard on Lake Monona, which is very near the, um, Coliseum. And they arranged to have a brat fest in the backyard of this guy's house that the cast could walk to from the building. And I think we had about 80 members from the show. I don't think it was all 300 'cause the train crew doesn't get to go to things like that. I mean, they, they go to bed early 'cause they get up early and all that.

Peggy Williams: [01:00:09](#) But, um, the performers, by and large, came over and then we arranged to get rides home for them. 'Cause the bus driver was invited (laughing), and so we had the bus. And, um, they came over and we introduced them to bratwurst, Schlitz beer, which is I don't think is made any longer, Chief Oshkosh, and few other beers. And I'm, I'm not a beer, but I know these beers were all made in Wisconsin. And I know they never had them before and they really didn't have brats either.

Peggy Williams: [01:00:42](#) So, my dad got to meet some of the people that were very, very, struggling to learn English. They really wanted to learn English when they were in America. And my dad talked with some of them and he was so impressed with their characters and their, you know, their graciousness, "Oh, thank you so much. This doesn't happen very often that we have a, you know, h- party after the show in someone's backyard by the arena."

Peggy Williams: [01:01:04](#) And it was just very unique. And after that, he was fine. He said, "This is an opportunity. You gotta stay there if you can. If you

want to. If you like it. If you love it. I don't care how small your train car room is (laughing). You're gonna need to stay there. This is great for you." It was 'cause I was no longer depressed about the campus.

Scott O'Donnell: [01:01:21](#)

Right.

Peggy Williams: [01:01:21](#)

I didn't wanna spend time there yet. Later on, I actually went back to school and finished the two course that I, that I had an incomplete in because of the ... all of the TA's went on strike my senior semester too. So everything wasn't done right. It was just crazy. And, and so I resolved that and actually finished and got my diploma in 1989. (Laughing). 20 years it took me to get those last two courses down 'cause I was on the road. And we didn't have internet and all that good stuff, what we have now. Now you could do that in a heartbeat. You know, with Skype and internet, and whatever, but no, we, I struggled to finish. I really wanted to finish that degree. So, so that's, um, my parent's ... you know, first I signed the contract and then I was working with-