

CWM Audio 9

Joanne Wilson Interview, July 22, 20145

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

- Speaker 1: 1930 ...
- Pete Shrake: This is July 22nd, 2015, at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center at Circus World Museum. This is an interview of Joanne Wilson, Scott O'Donnell is conducting the interview.
- Scott O'Donnell [00:00:30] Thank you, Pete. Well, I am completely privileged to be here, this afternoon, with Joanne Wilson, of the multi-talented, faceted, extremely circus-centric Wilson family. I guess my first question is, I sort of have an understanding of your family, but I would love to hear it from you, and I'm sure all of our listeners will too. Tell us about the Wilson family, origins, and your siblings, and all the great branches that you all diverted to, and brought under the big top.
- Joanne Wilson: Wow.
- Scott O'Donnell I know, it's a big question (laughs).
- [00:01:00]
- Joanne Wilson: Yeah. Good thing we have all day.
- Scott O'Donnell Right?
- Joanne Wilson: My parents actually, my mother's aunt, her father's sister, married Bud Anderson, and that's how she wound up in the circus, she was not a circus person to start with. She came on the show as a showgirl, this is what I've been told, and I've seen pictures. She came on the show as a showgirl and her sister, her and her sister. That's where she met our parents, no, that's where she met our father, sorry.
- [00:01:30]
- Scott O'Donnell Mom's name is?
- Joanne Wilson: My mother's Connie, Constance Wilson. Her name is Constance, but no one ever called her that. I guess we didn't even know that until much later. My father's parents came from the circus, but we don't know too much about before them. They were ... all we can say is we think they come in from Canada, maybe from England. But we can't be sure because they never told us anything, they kept it quiet, maybe they thought they were committing a crime or something.
- [00:02:00]
- Scott O'Donnell Uh huh.
- Joanne Wilson: My grandfather had a brother in the States that we never knew about until we were adults, and he lived in St. Petersburg, across the bay from us.
- [00:02:30]

- Scott O'Donnell Still very close.
- Joanne Wilson: Never did see him. So my dad was an only child, and he grew up on a circus. He tells us that he was born on the train, going through Detroit, Warren, I guess that's close to Detroit, Warren Pennsylvania.
- [00:03:00] I don't even know if he had a birth certificate until later. I don't know, we've never seen one.
- [00:03:30] So he grew up with my grandparents on these million shows, until he got to the Bud Anderson show, which was then my mother's uncle. He married my mother, actually, I gotta tell you, this is a part. My father married my mother's sister first. They had a little girl named Penny. My mother's sister was killed in an automobile accident. And so there was this little girl, and my mother was there. Supposedly my mother and father fell in love and got married. That was the first of the kids. We didn't even know that until we were adults. Penny did know it.
- [00:04:00] They started having kids, which would be Trudy, myself, Linda, Donna, and finally little Dime, our brother. Our brother was born in Austin, Texas, and when he was finally born, everyone knew how bad my dad wanted a boy, he was in the show doing a clown gag and the announcer came over the mic and said, "Dime, you have a boy." That ended the clown gag.
- [00:04:30] Anyways, we all grew up in the circus, we were show girls and we were taught to do juggling and rolling globe acts when we were young. We're all taught to do the aerial work, production numbers for the shows, and we also participated in some of the clown numbers.
- Scott O'Donnell Cause mom and dad were clowns, right?
- Joanne Wilson: They were clowns, and sometimes, the number would call for a little person, and there was no little people on the show, so we would be put in a costume and I had to do the firehouse. I had to wear a nightgown, climb up the ladder inside the firehouse, jump into the round net, canvas net, I guess, and then run out.
- [00:05:00] My sister Linda did the reducing machine. She'd wear the girdle, I didn't have to do that one.
- Scott O'Donnell (Laughs)
- [00:05:30] Then we had a comedy act called Jargo, which my dad named it Jargo. But it was a giraffe, and the person in the front of the giraffe held the long pole to hold its head up, and the person in the back bent over and held onto the belt of the person in the front. And then we would do a comedy number and just do what he told us to do. I always wound up being the back end. John Harry worked in it one time too. I think he was the back end too.
- [00:06:00]

Scott O'Donnell Was there always a front end? And you guest-starred in the back end?

Joanne Wilson: No I was permanently back there, I was never in the front. But the older sisters got the front, Trudy, Penny. By the time it got to me to go in the front, I was old enough to get married and I was gone.

Scott O'Donnell Sure.

Joanne Wilson: So, he's continued. He still did it on the Vidmill Show.

[00:06:30]

Scott O'Donnell Your dad is also one of the, I think, one of the last clowns, and arguably the best to ever do a table rock. [crosstalk 00:06:38]

Joanne Wilson: Definitely.

Scott O'Donnell Which is kind of a, lost art form in our business.

Joanne Wilson: Right. We've been putting some pictures on, of him doing that on Facebook, and people are looking at them totally amazed like, "Wow that's great", because nobody does it anymore. It's very hard to do and if you don't know what you're doing you always get hurt.

[00:07:00]

Scott O'Donnell For those that might be listening, can you explain what a table rock is?

Joanne Wilson: Okay. My dad had five tables, and they had pipe legs. He would stack the tables up during a comedy number. He would climb up to the top of the tables with a bench. Set the bench on the very top. And then he would go up there and sit on the bench, and start rocking the tables back and forth, and back and forth, and there would

[00:07:30] always be a clown sitting behind the tables, close enough that if he toppled over, he would get in trouble.

[00:08:00] My mother was that clown, often, and several other clowns did it. He would rock it until finally it would go over backwards. And he would have to clear the tables, do a back somersault and be up to his feet. He was very good at it. He only got hurt one time, and it was a slippery stage, and he really didn't want to do it then, but they assured him that he would be alright, because they knew what they were doing. It slipped out from under him and he broke his jaw, which is minor compared to what could have been.

[00:08:30] So there have been several people that try it, but a lot of people try it with step ladders, and everyone that I know of that have tried it, have broken their wrists when they hit the ground. For some reason they always break their wrists, and they don't do it anymore.

 I know there was one other man, long time ago, that did it with tables, but I don't

- [00:09:00] know his name. I can't remember. So my mom used to do trapeze, even to where I can remember. She fell and broke her leg, and she didn't do it anymore after that. So I never actually saw it.
- Scott O'Donnell She just clowned from that point on?
- Joanne Wilson: Right. She started clowning with my dad. She was Willie the clown, and my dad was of course, Dime. Now there's a story, how he got his name.
- Scott O'Donnell I was going to ask.
- Joanne Wilson: [00:09:30] On the show when he was a little boy with my grandparents, before we ever were thought of, every time he'd get ten pennies or two nickles, he would run to the front office, and ask them to change it for a dime ... they would see him coming and they would say "Here comes Dime!" And that kind of stuck with him. And so being such a unique name, I think he actually had it changed to Dime at one point. His name is Gilbert, Gilbert ... E, but right now I'm not sure what the E was for my dad. [00:10:00] But my grandfather was Gilbert Ernest Wilson. And it was always G. E. Wilson. I can see it written, right now, I can see their handwriting, writing that.
- [00:10:30] So my grandmother was a trapeze performer, and she wound up, later in her life, working with dogs. And her and grandpa had a dog act. He was a drummer, and he would drum on the shows, and he clowned. Oh my gosh, we have albums, of pictures from them in the '20s and '30s. Unbelievable pictures, and the trucks, and the vehicles, they're awesome. I think my nephew, David, has them right now. I'd like to get some of them here. Trudy's talking about something I got. They worked with Tom Nix all the time.
- [00:11:00]
- Scott O'Donnell Wow.
- Joanne Wilson: He was just one of the crowd. My grandmother has pictures of her and Tom Nix together, hundreds of them. [crosstalk 00:11:21]
- Scott O'Donnell Was she circus, did they do any vaudeville in the off-season, or any [crosstalk 00:11:26] musicals?
- [00:11:30]
- Joanne Wilson: Oh yeah. They sure did. In fact, they did the vaudeville in the off-season when my dad was young, but then it overflowed into us. When we were kids, there was no vaudeville then, but my dad would book schools, and on our way home from the season, we would stop by towns along the way and do a show, our own show at the schools. And work our way home that way. I remember (laughing). [00:12:00]
- Scott O'Donnell And home for the Wilson family is?
- Joanne Wilson: Gibsonton, Florida.
- Scott O'Donnell Is that a town richly associated with [crosstalk 00:12:09]

Joanne Wilson: It's called Showtown USA.

Scott O'Donnell Yeah?

Joanne Wilson: It originated from a man named Gibson who owned all the land there, and he wanted to sell it to show people who could have a place to put their riggings and their equipment that they used on their properties, without having anyone fussing about it. Because some neighbors don't want to see a Ferris wheel or an elephant in their neighbor's yard. So this way, the show people could have anything they needed for their job in their yard, and there would be no restrictions. And that has remained like that till now, and it's still in the process of being a show business zone. However, a lot of people move in that aren't show business, and they're kind of like, "Umm." But the show people have held their ground, and when it comes to the commissioner's office, they line up down the steps and down the streets, to get things back to the way they should be.

[00:12:30]

[00:13:00]

Scott O'Donnell As they should, home is home, for sure.

Joanne Wilson: Yep.

Scott O'Donnell So your family, each sibling sort of did many things over the years.

[00:13:30]

Joanne Wilson: Right, as we grew up, the first one to get married was ... Trudy I think. And of course, we had an act together. There's the thing, there was five girls, and we had a juggling and rolling globe act together. We started out with two girls, that was Penny and Trudy. And then I got old enough to come on the road, and then I was in the act. Then Trudy got married, but she was still on the same show, so she was still in the act. And then Penny got married, so she was out of the act and we had to bring another one, Linda, she came into the act. So now we had three again. And then, when I got married, Donna came into the act, and it was Linda and Donna. Same act, just different people.

[00:14:00]

[00:14:30] So Trudy got married first, then Penny, Penny went off to the Pollack Brother's Circus, and worked for Barbette. Barbette was a choreographer for Ariel. Actually Barbette's one of the famous choreographers in the world. If you look him up on the Internet you'll find a lot of things about him. He's training girls for the circus, aerial dancing. Penny worked for him for a while, with him, because she was on the same show with him.

[00:15:00]

[00:15:30] Then I got married, and my husband was a flying trapeze artist. I went into the flying trapeze, I had already done some aerial, and I had already worked with him in the circus because they needed a girl in the act. Trudy was working in the act with my husband and Billy Woods, and she fell from her trapeze act. She got bruised, but she didn't get hurt, but she didn't work the next day and so they said, "Joanne, you have to come up and help us." Which I did, and then the next year I married my husband who I had already worked with. And we started an act with Billy Woods

and Tony Steel. We went on Pollack Brother's Circus.

Scott O'Donnell What's the toughest part about being a flyer?

Joanne Wilson: Putting up the rigging.

[00:16:00]

Scott O'Donnell (Laughs)

Joanne Wilson: The flying act is one of my favorite acts that I've done, that and the liberty horses and the elephants. I love what I do now, but those acts are just so much fun to do. And we did that for a long time. Let me get back to Linda ...

Scott O'Donnell And what was the name of the flying act? You remember?

[00:16:30]

Joanne Wilson: The first one was the ... oh my goodness, there was Billy Woods, Pee-Wee, and Tony, so it had to have all three names ... maybe it was just the Flying Steels, I don't know. I can't remember that one. But right after that, Billy Woods and Tony went to Europe, and we were sitting there with a rigging and we're like, "What are we going to do?" We didn't want to go. So we got Ray Valentine, who is known Slick, and we put an act together with him, and we didn't even miss a date. We went from California to Harlington, Texas, on the way through Houston, we picked him up, practiced two days, and went right in the show.

[00:17:00]

But that's how circus people are, if you can do it, you can do it with anyone.

Scott O'Donnell Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joanne Wilson: So then Linda, get back to the sisters. Linda, was a horse nut, and she married a man who had riding act horses. They eventually got Lippizan horses, and they eventually became Herman's Royal Lippizan Stallions. They toured the USA with 15 stallions and they did a show like they do in Austria. It was beautiful, and she learned to train those horses, which is a difficult training procedure. Oh it's not so difficult, you just have to know what you're doing. Nothing's difficult if you know what you're doing. But she had to learn the right way to train those horses, and she did. She's one of the top trainers in the world, actually. And then she had four girls, they're all still doing horses.

[00:17:30]

[00:18:00]

[00:18:30]

[00:19:00]

Now I've gotta get back to Donna now. Donna's our youngest sister. She married a man who was a clown, in the beginning. He was not a circus man to start with, but he joined the circus with Rex Young ... floundering the shows. They met and got married, they raised a family, but they did what we call a cradle act. And that's two people that goes up on the rig, and then he tosses her around doing flips and toe hangs and whatever. And spins her around by her neck until she can't see. Yeah. Okay, so they had a daughter, and a boy. And both of them were in the show business.

- [00:19:30] Then we have the last one, my brother, who ... he started working in the circus as a clown with my dad. He helped me with my cradle act one time, when my husband had to do another job. He got married and he ... no, first he went to Vietnam. I think he wasn't married when he went to Vietnam. And he did a tour over there, and when he came back he joined the circus again. That's where he met his wife, Helen, who's father was a high wire performer, a very good high wire performer, very thrilling to watch him work. Did you ever watch Trisca?
- [00:20:00]
- Scott O'Donnell Mm-mmm (negative)-
- Joanne Wilson: Oh my god. Scary ... even if you know what he's doing, he would scare you to death. And you can read about him online too. He had about 16 children, because he lived in West Virginia in the hills.
- [00:20:30] And she was one of them, sweet little girl. And then they, mind you my dad had five girls, and then a boy finally, and that's when they quit having children. And then my brother, his first child was a girl, and then he had five boys. How ironic. My poor dad. [crosstalk 00:20:44]
- Scott O'Donnell Yeah, that's like the dyslexic version of your family.
- Joanne Wilson: Yeah.
- Scott O'Donnell He would love that.
- Joanne Wilson: So he ... he was in the circus for a little while after he returned from Vietnam and he married his wife, and he finally decided to go and live in West Virginia with her and just kind of stayed there. So we don't see much of him.
[00:21:00]
- Scott O'Donnell So flying trapeze, you're going to pick up at your flying trapeze. What was the next thing that you did? At some point you make the transition from aerial to animals, in your life.
- Joanne Wilson: Right, okay. So we did the flying trapeze for quite a while, and then we learned the two people cradle act, something that we could do by ourselves, without any partners. Because in any business, the more people you have the less money you get. And we were looking for something we could make a living and ... get a home and ... So we went off on our own with the cradle act. And of course, I loved horses and I wanted a horse so bad. Oh wait a minute, go back, I was ... (laughs) Okay so my husband and I didn't get along after a while so we split. And I wound up marrying another gentleman and I had my daughter, Miss Kim Sue. I didn't get along with him at all, so that was about a year, and we split.
[00:22:00]
- [00:22:30] So I raised Kim in the circus. But back to the animals, whenever I married him, that's when I started my dog act, because he didn't do anything that I could work with him. He did a single, sway pole act. So I started my dog act then. And he helped me, he bought me a dog that was trained already, for the high dive. That made me really get with it. I had been training my pony and my dogs in the

- [00:23:00] backyard for a while, and then he bought that one for the finish trick. So I had an act. I opened in Omaha, Nebraska in the Biggest Shrine Circus, and they worked perfect, perfect. I couldn't believe it, cause I wasn't what we would call a professional trainer. But I trained those dogs, it was six white Spitz and a white pony, and I made a white costume, and put little red trimming on the props, and went ahead and did that.
- [00:23:30] I was so pleased with myself. I had those dogs for a long time. But when they start getting old, you have to change ... can't always find a Spitz dog. So I had to wind up getting a different kind of dog, and for a while I had six Spitz and a different kind of dog. It wound up where I had a bunch of mutts. As they get older, everything changes. But they're really good dogs. All the mutts are probably smarter than the purebreds when it comes to training. And when you get them from a shelter, of course, they're real grateful for having a place to be.
- [00:24:00]
- [00:24:30] I used a dog and pony act for a long time. And then, I got back with my husband, the first one. And he was working with some elephants, like, how did that happen? From flying trapeze to elephants. (Laughing)
- Scott O'Donnell It's a good question, how did that happen? (laughing)
- Joanne Wilson: Judy K. That's how I got involved with elephants. Cause when I joined him back with my dogs, [crosstalk 00:24:42]
- Scott O'Donnell Came with him.
- Joanne Wilson: Yep, and he had the elephants there.
- So we were booking the dog act and the elephants, together. We did okay. I loved the elephants, boy. That's why I say, one of my favorite acts to work.
- [00:25:00]
- Scott O'Donnell And why, what's unique about working with an elephant?
- Joanne Wilson: Cause elephants are really smart, and they pay attention, they listen to you, they're eager to please you. You don't have to do anything but just tell them what to do.
- Scott O'Donnell You've been blessed to work with Asian and African elephants over you're [crosstalk 00:25:28] long career.
- Joanne Wilson: Right, that's [crosstalk 00:25:29].
- [00:25:30]
- Scott O'Donnell What would the difference be between the two [crosstalk 00:25:31] working?
- Joanne Wilson: Well there's the thing. Everyone always said African elephants were impossible. I'm like, wow, I didn't even think they were pretty at first, because I was listening to everybody. And then, when the opportunity came where I had enough knowledge

to train an elephant, you couldn't get an Asian elephant, at all.

[00:26:00] So if you wanted to have an elephant you would have to take an African. And when I got my little boy elephant, it was just perfect timing. I wasn't doing anything else, I didn't have any dogs. I was helping my sister on the Vargas Show, because she had just had a baby so I worked for her for a while. And then an opportunity came up to go on a show with an elephant, a baby elephant, and I thought, "I could do that if I got an elephant."

[00:26:30]

[00:27:00] So I found out that Urgenshortz in New York had one baby elephant left. And I already knew him, so I called him and I asked him what kind of a deal I could make to get that little baby elephant. He said, "Well this is a male." I'm like, "I don't care." And he says, "You can have the elephant and pay me as you work. Every week you work, you pay me so much money." Alright! And he brought the elephant to me, didn't even have to pay for that.

[00:27:30] I was in Cape Gerardo with Dave Hales, which everyone knows Dave Hales around here. I had been working with his little elephant for a while. They brought the elephant to me at Dave's, and we unloaded him into a nice big pen. And I went to town starting to train him. I think Trudy and Bill, my sister and her husband were there, at the time. I did all the work that I wanted to do with him, inside the barn. And then the day came when I needed to take him out of the barn, and go for a walk. So I put a rope on his back leg and a rope on his front leg, and I asked Trudy and Bill to hold the back rope, because he was little and we might have been able to hold him.

[00:28:00]

He didn't try to do anything, he just walked so nice with me. Out to the outside and then back inside, and we did that every day until he was fine. But most people say, women can't train elephants, and you don't want to deal with a male elephant, and you don't want nothing to do with an African elephant. So I did the three sins.

Scott O'Donnell You proved them all wrong. (Laughs)

[00:28:30]
Joanne Wilson: Yeah. And I worked that little boy for quite a while, five or six years, but then, you have to be smart, and I said, "What am I going to do with a big, full-grown, African male elephant?" He probably should be at a zoo or some place. So that's what I did. I got a female and traded him off for the female. That's heartbreaking for me, because I loved him, his little mane was snuffy, he was a sweetheart. He followed me around like a puppy dog, I could turn him loose and go in my trailer and wash dishes, and he'd be right there.

[00:29:00]

But, the reality is, you have to do the right thing. So I got the little female, and she was so smart, I did a good thing. I said Dave Hale, "Would you like a little elephant on your petting zoo for six months?" And he said, "Ah, let me take her."

[00:29:30] Because I knew, that if this little elephant was seen by thousands of people, under the conditions loading and unloading, that she would be like a perfect little

elephant when she came back. They weren't going to try to train her, or do anything with her, just load her and unload her, and let people look at her. And the noise from the crowds, all of that would be instilled in her already. And then I would start with her.

[00:30:00] He brought her to me in Sarasota, at a big festival. I unloaded her out of his truck, and walked her to my truck, and I hadn't seen her in six months, she was a perfect elephant.

[00:30:30] So then I started training her, and they learn quick. I used treats, carrots, and dog food, so that they get one little piece of dog food, which is about half an inch thick, and they do a back somersault for a piece of candy. So I never had to do anything bad to her, she just learned because she wanted to, and she liked her little carrots. I had her for a long time. She got bigger than me, way bigger than me.

[00:31:00] Then I got older, and I'm thinking, I'm by myself with this little elephant, my daughter had gone off and was off on her own, and here I am with an elephant traveling the country, driving her, washing, feeding, I trimmed her nails, I did everything, but I'm getting older, and do I want to do this?

[00:31:30] Then I decided no I didn't. She got a nice home, she is in California and she does commercials with a safari park type thing. I see her on the commercials all the time, she's a sweetheart, they love her to death. When they came to get her, I was out doing a school show, so they come to see her doing a school show. And I brought her in and I turned the water fountain on, and she got a drink out of the water fountain, and I took her into the gym and did her show, and brought her all out and showed them all the extra things she did. And they said, "We'll take her right now. We'll take her." And so they came and got her later, after I was finished with the season. And they say she's been a perfect elephant and she has a good home, and I know that so I don't feel so bad.

[00:32:00] From there, I had already gotten my poodles, I was still working the elephants. I thought, "You know, I should probably have another act ready when I don't have the elephant anymore." So a friend of mine, Evie Carole, great lady, she had some poodles in her trailer, and I told her I was looking for some dogs to start training. And she said, "I've got them come over and look in my horse trailer." I went over and there was four ... four ... oh yeah I said, "I don't want too many, I don't need too many, I'm just going to do it with a few. Maybe three or four." She said, "Come and look in my horse trailer."

[00:33:00] So I went over there, and there was four white standard poodles but they were young and they were half-grown. Like, oh my goodness, poodles! I had one poodle, and you have to trim them and cut them and wash them and ... it's a never ending job.

[00:33:30] And she says, "Oh no, you gotta have these dogs. I'm gonna give you a good deal on them." So I wound up with those four poodles, took them to my house, and then because I still had the elephant I was working quite a bit. From home I would go to

- [00:34:00] Miami every weekend and do different publicity things. I said, "Evie could you train these for me? Stay here on my property and get them started. And then when I go on my next season they'll be at least something ready." So she did that, she trained the four, and I went to the flea market in Sarasota, circus flea market, and there was a kennel, I saw this kennel over there. And I saw a sign on it that said \$65. I told the man, "That's a little high for a kennel, because I was looking for kennels too." And he said, "Look inside the kennel, it's not the kennel it's what's inside."
- [00:34:30] And I looked and it was a black standard poodle, which is why I couldn't see it, it blended right in. He says, "You've got to have this dog!" I said, "No, I've got my dogs." Anyways, the poodle came home with me, and the kennel. So that made five dogs now. So now that made it good because I made a pyramid out of the bench they sat in, I had four on each side and the black one sat in the middle, kind of pretty that way.
- [00:35:00] So I started working with those five. The next year I thought okay, I've got five, let's make this just a little bit bigger, we'll take two more, put one more on each end. Actually, the seats that I was using had three and then the bench in the middle. The bench used to be where the pony put his feet. So that way I filled up the seats. So now I got seven dogs working, and we're working everywhere and I'm clipping poodles and washing poodles, and clipping poodles and washing poodles, it never ended.
- [00:35:30]
- [00:36:00] The next year, Ms. Evie came through my property, she drove in one driveway and stopped for a minute, then drove out the other one. And when she left there were three standard poodles standing there. That's ten dogs now. I didn't need ten dogs, but okay. In order to add those other two dogs I would have to put two separate seats, which I did. And I trained all three of them, and I kept one for spare. She actually never had to work.
- [00:36:30] By then, I called it Joanne Wilson's Fabulous Broadway Poodles. Actually, Lee Stevens named that, named it for me. Turned out to be really good, because they were. It was a beautiful act, what Evie had started and then what I finished with them. It was a beautiful act. And I took them to Puerto Rico twice, I've been everywhere in the United States with them.
- [00:37:00] I worked one show, a big date. They had never seen my dogs work. They had a dog act on their show, but they were adding acts for this particular date. So they said, "Joanne you're going to work down on the end ring." Okay. So I was down there, there was a pole in the middle of the ring from the flying trapeze. How do I work with a pole in the middle of the ring? But we did it, we worked around the pole and we did our act. We got paid and we were happy.
- [00:37:30] I went to work for them a few weeks later and another date, and I set all my stuff in the end ring ... behind the end ring, because that's where I worked for them before, and I was ready with my dogs in the wings, had my costume on. And one of the prop men came to me and said, "You're working in the middle." And I said, "No, no I'm working on the end ring over there." "No, you're changed, you're in the middle

- [00:38:00] now!" I'm like okay, I guess I'll just go where my props are. Because they had not seen the act until that first time and then they were embarrassed so they said [inaudible 00:38:05] beautiful, other people had like three dogs, so really, if you're putting something together you kind of have to make it look the biggest, most amount of dogs in the middle and the smaller amounts on the ends. And that worked out good.
- [00:38:30] They said, "Can you open in the dark?" I said, "I would really rather come in in the light, because these dogs all follow me in. And when we get to the ring they all run in ahead of me, and then they go to their seats. It's exciting." "Oh. Oh. Okay. Do whatever you want." So we waited till the lights came on and we made a grand entrance. And that's how we did it.
- [00:39:00] I worked those dogs for twelve years, and they're big dogs so they only live about fifteen years. As they started passing away, which was very sad, I wrote a poem about that too ... I started working with just whatever was left. Actually one dog got old before he went out of the act. He said, "I'm not leaving." He'd come with me every time, sit on his seat. He would come out when he thought it was his turn,
- [00:39:30] he would come out and I would have to take him back and say, "No you don't work, just sit there."
- [00:40:00] We got it down to about four dogs left, and I didn't work them anymore. I just let them stay in the property with my sister when I was out on the road. Actually that's when I kind of retired. I kind of decided maybe it would be a good idea to stay home for a little while, since those dogs had all gotten old and I didn't really want to do more poodles because ... Vickie Hanaford said to me, "I can't believe you traded the elephants for poodles, this is more work than the elephant ever was." I said, "Yeah it is, but I can leave them and go to the store, I can go to the movies." With the elephant I was 24 hours with the elephant. And I didn't mind that, but there comes a time when you'd like to go to the movies sometimes and you can't do that when you have animals like elephants. The dogs you just close the door,
- [00:40:30] and they sleep on the couch or wherever and you can go somewhere.
- [00:41:00] So then, whenever I thought I was going to be home, I got a call from a Broadway stage show called Will Roger's Follies. The producers actually called me, and I don't know to this day why, how they knew who I was or anything. And they asked me if I would come on the show. What? They explained it but I knew about the Will Roger's Follies, and I knew what it was about and how you had to ... perform on the stage. So I said, "Okay, I think I'll do that." And I didn't even have an act. But I did have a bunch of little dogs that were trained and working. I think they had been
- [00:41:30] working. They sent me a video of the act that had been there before, and I matched it. And off I went, back on the road again.
- [00:42:00] That is over two years, but it's one year of work. Starts in late 2005 and ends in late 2006, I think those were the years. Then I went back on the circus, with the dogs. I ... got a call ... let me see, yep. Got a call from the Fabulous Palm Spring Follies in Palm Springs, California. You have to be over a certain age, which I'm not going to say, to work there. So they said, "Are you that old?" And I said, "Mmm, just." And

[00:42:30] so they said, "Okay will you work there?" and I went and did that, that was another year, and one year into the next year. Those are theater years, they don't run like the circus they run like theater. So I started that year in the circus and then I went to the Palm Springs Follies.

[00:43:00] And then after that, while I was at the Palm Springs Follies, I got a call from the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang ... one of the associates had been with Will Roger's Follies, so he said, "Oh I know some dogs. Call her." I wound up with Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, my dogs did not do their act there, they were little actors in the show. For

[00:43:30] me, it was kind of neat because I could go in in my pajamas if I wanted to, because nobody ever saw me, I just brought the dogs in, set them up on the stage and they did their thing and came back to me one side or the other. Okay, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

[00:44:00] Then I guess I went back on the circus, because now I'm on the road again. What did I do? Chitty Chitty Bang Bang ... Mark and I guess ... oh, Hannaford, I went on the Hannaford Show for two years. I went to the park for two years and the Hannaford Show for one year. The last three years, I think I was in Minnesota, right

[00:44:30] over here, with the Jose Cold Show, doing my dog act. And I had a little pony with me and did the pony act. And then my husband died, so I said, you know what I gotta go home. But that doesn't stop me because I'm training a little dog act right now, for my granddaughter to work. I'm gonna stand behind her. Oh Kim is not going to be happy (laughs)

Scott O'Donnell [00:45:00] You mentioned a while back, about things looking pretty. And your name that, I and I think the entire circus industry associates with wardrobe, that's another chapter to your life that you have costumed and outfitted, designed and sequined circus acts for ... decades.

Joanne Wilson: I have made [crosstalk 00:45:18]

Scott O'Donnell If you need a new costume -

Joanne Wilson: I have made thousands of costumes [crosstalk 00:45:21]

Scott O'Donnell Yes.

Joanne Wilson: [00:45:30] I made a list, they hand me the speaker for the CSFA meeting at Sarasota one time. So I went and found all the receipts for all the costumes that I could find, and I had 500 names. Every one of those people had multiple costumes, they didn't just order one costume they had multiple. I would make costumes for troupes, individuals, some people I was just the only person who made all of their costumes. [00:46:00] And I could do that while I was working in the circus and doing my dogs, doing the elephants. I was sewing all the time, I raised my kid under the sewing machines. I'm still sewing, I make all of my daughter's wardrobe.

I didn't start out doing that, because her mother-in-law, they had costumes and they have a specific type of costume they use for the unicycle act. It's a Czech

[00:46:30] traditional costume. And so I would repair some of those, and then I thought, you know, I think it's great to have the Czech traditional costume, but these are modern days and this is the circus, so maybe we could make something that's just a little bit more modern but still kind of leaning towards the Czech style.

[00:47:00] Her husband is from the Czech Republic, he's American, but his parents are from the Czech Republic. So they're proud of their heritage and I agree, but I thought, let's just try something a little bit different. That was the aqua costumes that they wore today. So we got a little bit closer to something a little different. Then I made the white ones right here at Baraboo, two years ago. Those are a little bit back to the Czech style, because they have patterns of where they put the rhinestones, and they stick to that. But I changed it a little bit and I changed the girls' costumes a little bit.

[00:47:30] My granddaughter's in the show, and I made all of her little costumes. Here in Baraboo, while I was visiting two years ago. She's still wearing them because she's still a little bitty thing. And my grandson, he's growing taller and taller, I keep letting his pants out all the time. He doesn't get much bigger around, but they wore this costume out because they sit on unicycles, and the unicycle wears out the pants.

[00:48:00] So I'm constantly making my son-in-law new pants. Yeah I make a lot of costumes, but I don't even think about that I forget, cause it's kind of like waking up in the morning for me. I'm doing it right now, over there in my trailer, fixing a new vest for Vincent. I've been here three days and I've already almost finished that vest. And changing some costumes for Kim.

[00:48:30] We were talking earlier about they have five different colors, and I wanted to change them, give another color, but I couldn't figure out a color that my son-in-law would be good with. He looked like Big Bird in a gold one I made one time. So I said okay we've got to find something.

[00:49:00] So you suggested orange, and I went and told him and he said, "Yes! I want an orange costume!" So orange it is. Tangerine, we're going to do tangerine. So the next costume will be tangerine.

Scott O'Donnell Very nice.

Joanne Wilson: Harness for the horses, I make that too. I made all of the elephant headpieces and leg-bands, and always put a little bow on their tail. What else did I do? I made all my sister's costumes, Donna. She would trim them all. Trudy could sew her own costumes but I sometimes would help her with the design. Of course I made all my own.

[00:49:30] Scott O'Donnell What do you think makes a good costume?

Joanne Wilson: Well, flash for one thing. I mean you're coming to the circus, you want to see something exciting, colorful, shiny, and covering up the parts that should not be

- [00:50:00] showing. With myself, I knew when I was getting older that I should make my sleeves longer, and I wore a dress that covered my backside and still short enough to show my legs, because as Mr. Mark at the Fabulous Palm Spring Follies says, "Your legs are the last thing to go."
- Scott O'Donnell (Laughs)
- Joanne Wilson: So my legs were very nice, and I could show them off, but I didn't want to show off anything else. You gotta be smart with costumes. The public is sitting there watching you, and they don't want to see your butt sticking out.
- [00:50:30]
- [00:51:00] I have my own patterns and make my own patterns, actually. I'll change it, if it doesn't work out, I'll change it for them. And they have to be comfortable in them. Boy, my grandson ... "Grandma, this doesn't feel right." So there I go, changing it. (Laughs). Violet, my granddaughter, she's happy with all of her costumes, she's a little fashionista and everything I make for her is just, she loves it.
- Scott O'Donnell So I've got to ask you, you and your family have worked on probably over 100 circuses if I look at the lists here. The circus you were on, that stood out, that was like, you know what, they were all good for certain reasons, but was there a producer or a circus that really sticks with you? Like that was a great show. And that converse, that you've seen a bazillion different acts ... what's the one act that you saw that went "Wow!" That you would have to go see or you would enjoy seeing year after year.
- [00:51:30]
- Joanne Wilson: Well first off, there's two circuses that I loved more than any other circus. I've been on big shows, little shows, indoors, outdoors. I've been on TV shows, school shows, every kind of show that there is, I've been there at least once. I went with a show in 1986 I think, that I had never knew about, I had never heard about it, I didn't know they had such circuses anywhere. And it was Jim Normark All-Star Circus.
- [00:52:00]
- [00:52:30] And I was there for eight years, I loved every minute of it. They were so ... good to the performers, we didn't want for anything, we had everything. They found campgrounds for us if we weren't working. They paid for the campgrounds. That was in [crosstalk 00:52:52]
- Scott O'Donnell And you said circuses like that, for those that might not know what Normark's show was? [crosstalk 00:52:56] Tell us a little about Jim's show.
- [00:53:00]
- Joanne Wilson: That would be what is called a school show, however it wasn't for the school. They just rented the school gymnasium and then they would advertise. And if they used the school band or whatever projects they had at school for their sponsors, then of course they would get part of the money for bringing the circus in there. But it was a school show, and it was run so perfect that everything just flowed.
- [00:53:30] After that, I had the elephant then, and my daughter actually started her career on that show. She was a little skinny girl, come to stay with me for the rest of her life

[00:54:00] actually, out of school. She watched the girls dancing until she wanted to dance with them. She wanted to go in there and dance, so she would practice with them, every day they'd go and practice she would go, and she did the numbers. And she said, "Mom would you ask them if I could work next year?" And I said, "I don't mind if you work, but you have to ask them. You have to go to them, and be a business-lady and tell them what you can do, and audition for them if you have to. Get your job." And she's like scared but she said "Okay." And she did that. She went and talked to them and told them what she could do, and they said, "Well how about if we let you do one number." And they hired her, but by the time the rehearsals were over she was in every number plus the magic act.

[00:55:00] And the next year she'd been learning trapeze since she was five years old. I had a trapeze hung inside my trailer for her to play on when she was a baby. And she played and swung, and my granddaughter's doing the same thing, we have one in their trailer. She learned tricks that some adults do that are pretty good. So the next year on that show, she said "Mom I want to do trapeze." I said, "Talk to the man. Talk to the boss." And boy, he was all for it, and there was a special rigging that someone had that he thought she should have and he bought it for her. It went up hydraulically, it went up in the air after she put her hands on the bar, and she would do her act up there and it would come back down and set her off on the ground. She practiced and practiced and she learned a beautiful act. I made her costumes for that act, and when she opened in Sarasota, of all places, her hometown, I was a nervous wreck but I just gritted my teeth and I pushed the button for her to go up. And pushed the button for her to come back down. And she nailed it. Perfect.

[00:56:30] And she's been the circus queen ever since (laughs) and they call her the Circus Queen here, so that goes over big with everybody. Anyways ... the next show that I really really liked was Billy Martin's All-Star Circus. Cole All-Star.

Scott O'Donnell Mm-hmm (affirmative). Cole All-Star.

Joanne Wilson: And I was with him for about fourteen years. A couple of years I wasn't there but then I was back.

Scott O'Donnell Another school show.

[00:57:00] Joanne Wilson: Another school show. By the time I went with him I had just the dogs. He did a summer show under a big top, and he had seen me work in the Black Tie Dinner in Sarasota, and my act was perfect by then.

[00:57:30] Then out of the blue, I got a call from Jose Siguera to go to Puerto Rico. Like woah! This is alright. So I went to Puerto Rico, but I guess just before I went I got a call from Billy Martin, and he said, "Would you like to come on this summer?" Big top tour. I didn't know who Billy Martin was then. I said, "Yeah, yeah that'll do alright." So when I come back from Puerto Rico, which, by the way, I closed the show in Puerto Rico with the dog act. Normally they save the big act for the last, and I said,

- [00:58:00] "Is this the big act in this show?" It was. It was ten dogs, ten doggies in there.
- Come back and did the tour with Billy Martin and it was fabulous. He is a very good manager, he knows how to treat people, he knows how to talk to people, he knows how to square things, he's just an excellent producer.
- [00:58:30] And I stayed with him, oh ... yeah. That was in the summertime. Well I had had my fill of wintertime back on the Hubert Castle Circus. I drove a big semi-trailer and we'd go over mountains in the snow, and blizzards and one time we were going up a mountain and the wheels started turning, and my husband had a truckload of elephants in front of us and he was stopped. And my wheel started spinning until I couldn't go up anymore, I'm sitting there and I said, "What am I doing here in the wintertime?"
- [00:59:00]
- Another time in the wintertime I was driving along an ice-covered road, and there was a little car in front of me, kept putting its blinker light on, gonna turn somewhere, but never did turn and he'd take it off, and then he turned it on again and then he'd take it off again, finally I guess I just got to where I wasn't looking at it anymore and finally he stopped like he was going to turn. It was a little Volkswagen, I still remember. When he did that I had put my foot on the brake too hard and my trailer, 40-foot trailer, spun around and came up beside me, and my truck turned and I was facing back the other way on the other side of the round, which didn't have any ice on it, and that's why it stopped so perfectly. And my husband was right behind me with the elephant truck, and he looked at me, and he picked up the CV and he said, "Are you okay?" (laughs)
- [00:59:30]
- I said, "I think so." And that car was nowhere around anywhere, I don't know where he went, how he avoided getting smacked by my trailer as it came around. But that's when I said that's it, I'm not coming up in the wintertime anymore. This is it, I only do summer shows.
- [01:00:00]
- [01:00:30] When Billy Martin, when I worked his show, he asked me to come on the fall tour, which then would be in the school buildings, and I said, "Billy is it cold? Is it ice and snow?" "Ohh, sometimes, but not bad." I said, "Billy I don't want to." So he talked me into it anyways, and I had a big fifth-wheel trailer then, and a big truck and so I said, "You've got to take care of me if I come. I'm not going to go sailing across the highway to make it there just for the show." He goes, "No no no no, we're very careful, we'll watch out for each other." So okay, I went with my big truck and trailer, and I thought that was that. And then he said, "Will you come on the winter tour?" I said, "Are you kidding, with this truck and trailer? No!" Now people don't turn down work, but that's how scared I was of the wintertime.
- [01:01:00]
- [01:01:30]
- He kept talking to me until I finally said you know what, maybe what I'll do is I had a fifth-wheel truck, so I'll have a little box made and put over the fifth wheel, and make a little living for the zenith. And that way I can come with just the truck, I'd feel safer with just the truck. So that's what I did. I called my friend in Florida, Johnny Weldi, he had the box ready for me when I got back, put it on my truck. A friend of mine came over to help me build the inside of it, to make a living quarters.
- [01:02:00]

I went on his show and I stayed there forever, with that truck and box.

[01:02:30] Why did I ... oh! Okay in '98 I said I would like to just kind of retire, maybe go home for a while and just stay there. So I said goodbye to everybody and I went home after the season, not thinking I would go back again. I was going to sew costumes for everybody, and I had a shop set up at my house. I was going to have this big business going, and that's when Russia opened up and said, "Take all our circus performers." And they come here to the United States, wearing unitards and painted, and they were pretty, but they weren't what I did. And everybody thought, "Oh that's easy let's just get those." And pretty soon a lot of people had unitards and luckily I think they've seen the light, now they're going back to the nice, pretty, shiny, colorful costumes. But it kind of put a dampener on my being home, because I couldn't make enough money if people didn't buy my costumes. That's when Will Roger's Follies called and I said I'm on the road again!

[01:03:30]

[01:04:00] And I haven't been since then. Well when my husband died, we were on a show in New York and I guess he died doing what he loved to do, the circus. So really, it was a good thing, and there I was with a truckload of dogs and a route to do. So I called my sister Linda, and she came up and rode with me for the rest of that season.

[01:04:30] That's when I came over to Baraboo to visit my daughter, she was here in '13. I was only going to stay for a few days and go home (laughs). Seven weeks later, I went home. Actually I went to Dellivan. And that's where the Dancing Horses Theater is, and I sewed for her for three weeks, my sister-in-law, I went up there and sewed for her. She likes the bling, she likes the colors, she likes the fancy stuff, so we were having a good time. Then we went home and I stayed home last year ... nope. I wasn't home that long before the same producers that did the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang called me and asked me if I would do a Christmas story with two bloodhound dogs. So that's what I did. I found two bloodhound dogs and I trained them to do what they wanted and we went on the tour, it was three months out.

[01:05:00]

[01:05:30] When I came home from that I started building, I like to build things too. So I was rebuilding my bathroom in my house. I had to take everything off the walls the floor, everything, and start over. And then I built a deck outside the back, I'm very proud of it, I'm going to show you a picture.

Scott O'Donnell (Laughs)

Joanne Wilson: Then I thought, I want to go see my daughter in Baraboo again. But I don't want to leave my little doggies there. I had sold my big truck, my big trailer. I had a little bitty pickup that wouldn't take two dogs in it. And what would I do with them when I got here? So I said I got to get a little trailer, and I decided on a little cargo trailer to build a little house inside of it. Tiny home they call them now. And I did that and I got to build enough to where I could come up here. Here I am.

[01:06:00]

Scott O'Donnell Perfect. Last question, favorite act you ever saw?

[01:06:30]

- Joanne Wilson: Okay favorite act. Well, the Quazar's Hall. Not because she's my sister, but my sister Trudy did an act they called it a rocket act, and they would go eighty-feet up into the air with this rigging that spanned forty-foot and my sister would be in the rocket, which later they changed to a saber jet. My brother-in-law would be on the other side on a trapeze. She controlled the speed they went around, they went around in a circle. And she could control firework and smoke, whatever they needed.
- [01:07:00]
- [01:07:30] They would go up dressed in complete outfits with caps over their head, you couldn't see their hair, and after they were up there and after the first trek, they would take their suits off and have their circus costume underneath. And my sister had three-foot hair, red hair, that came out of that hat and flowed. The audience just went nuts when they saw it, it was awesome and very dramatic. She would fling herself out of the rocket and go underneath it and do her tricks, toe hang, she'd do one toe hang going around, I don't know what speed, but too fast to be doing a toe hang. In order to get down from there, they would have ropes coiled up and they would put the coils between their knees and they would just start letting a coil out as they'd go down, it was awesome! It was awesome! And she said that was her favorite part of the act, going down on that rope, the way they've, you've seen it right?
- [01:08:00]
- Scott O'Donnell Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- [01:08:30]
- Joanne Wilson: The music was really exciting. That would be probably my favorite act to watch, but believe me I am a circus fan, my daughter says, "My mom is a circus fan, she likes everything, she applauds for everything, she loves it." But I do. To not applaud for an act that is working is disrespectful for one thing. Even if you're paying to go in and see a show, you still should apply for the act that's working. And you can't not like it, they're all great. All acts are different, types, people, style's different, they have different wardrobe. But I say, well there's got to be individuals everywhere, otherwise this life would be very well.
- [01:09:00]
- Scott O'Donnell Alright great, and it's anything but dull thanks to you. Thank you for joining us today.
- [01:09:30]
- Joanne Wilson: Thank you for having me.