

AMERICA WORKS

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

EPISODE 1: BARBARA MILLER BYRD, Circus Owner. Hugo, Oklahoma.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: Welcome to "America Works," excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project. This episode of America Works features Barbara Miller Byrd, the third-generation owner of Carson & Barnes Circus, a family-run circus based in Hugo, Oklahoma.

Librarians and oral historians Tanya D. Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University, interviewed Ms Byrd about her family's circus, about working in a circus, and about Hugo, in southeastern Oklahoma, which is famed as the "wintering over" town for Carson & Barnes and other family circuses.

Interview:

Barbara Byrd: I'm very, very proud that we just completed our seventy-fifth tour, seventy-five years of doing this all over the United States. And, actually, there's never been a family in the United States that has continuously owned a circus in the United States for that length of time.

I'm third generation. My grandfather owned the hardware store in the town, and he also owned what was called the Opera House, and traveling shows used to come and perform at the Opera House. Later, they converted it to a silent motion picture theater. And during the time when they would be re-reeling the reels of film, my father and my grandfather would perform on stage with little dogs and ponies to entertain the people, while the reels were being changed. And then my father would sell popcorn, and that's kind of how they got into circus business.

And they started traveling around Kansas within a fifty-mile radius, doing little shows typical I guess you would call it a dog and pony show. My grandfather, he wasn't like a flashy guy. He was very quiet, kind of unassuming, a small man, but he loved dogs, and he loved ponies. And my father was about eight years old, I believe, when they actually started doing these little shows.

My mother and father met at a barn dance, they married when she was fifteen and he was sixteen. And they went with the circus.

She learned to perform, and she loved it. And she loved the circus as much as my dad did and really devoted her life to the circus. It was his passion, but it grew to be hers.

Juliana Nykolaiszyn: Well, how did your family come to Hugo?

Barbara Byrd: My family came to Hugo in 1941. In traveling they met a man named Vernon Pratt, who was an influential businessman here in Hugo. Mr. Pratt talked them into coming to Hugo with the promise of free water for the animals... so they did come to Hugo.

And then they bought the farm across the street from where we're sitting today. My grandfather moved into the little house on the property, and the elephant got a barn. So my mother always joked and said that the elephant had a house before she did.

Juliana Nykolaiszyn: What is your earliest circus memory?

Barbara Byrd: Really my earliest memories are of riding the pony in the—we called it a spec. It's short for spectacular, but it's really the parade that happens during the performance of the circus.

And so when I was about five years old, I learned to do a little—it's called swinging ladder, and it's the first thing that all the little girls in the circus learn to do. It basically looks like a trellis ladder, but it's hung, and it has a little loop on it, and you swing back and forth and do little poses on it. My mother was the swinger, and my little dog used to come in the ring with us and watch me go back and forth.

But it was a wonderful life. And maybe some people wouldn't think so, but the circus is a wonderful place to raise a child. And looking back now, I realize how magical it was and you got to travel everywhere and be applauded for doing a silly little trick, with your dog watching you, in the center ring.

Tanya Finchum: You started with swinging ladder. What are other acts that you may have gravitated towards as you were growing up?

Barbara Byrd: Well, I was the owner's daughter so I usually did anything that either no one else wanted to do or that maybe someone broke their leg and couldn't do. But I always say I was kind of a jack-of-all-trades. I wasn't very good at any of it, but I did it all. So it's a very varied list. I rode the elephants, and I rode dressage horses, I worked ponies in the ring, I used to collect tickets on the main gate. I wore a pumpkin head. I progressed onto the concession department. I made cotton candy. When I graduated from high school my parents decided that it was time for me to move into the office.

One year, after I was an adult, our cook quit, and I was already married to my husband then. And so we went into the cookhouse, and we cooked in the cookhouse for about three weeks. That's one of the hardest jobs on the circus, is trying to make one hundred, two hundred people happy with their food every day, and they're usually not.

It's not just a circus, its many different types of businesses put together. It's a trucking business, it's an animal business, its entertainment, its concessions business. Everyone that travels with the circus is not wearing that spangled costume in the center ring, but they're just as important as that performer in that center ring.

Last year we purchased two thousand dollars' worth of fuel to pump into our generators and our trucks. All that as to be taken care of on a daily basis. We have a mechanical crew that travels along with us. They follow up with the wrecker and the tires and everything.

I think the media in this day and age kind of use the circus in a negative light....And it really drives me crazy and if they only knew how organized and orderly a circus is, they wouldn't even think about using that in the terms that they're using it today, because there's nothing chaotic or disorderly or unorganized about the movement of a circus.

Juliana Nykolaiszyn: The logistics...

Barbara Byrd: Oh, it was mindboggling. You know, the armed services actually went and studied...Ringling Brothers when they were under tent to see how they did what they did, because Ringling Brothers, in its heyday under the tent, had two thousand employees, and they had five hundred horses. They traveled by train, but they moved this huge colossus thing in a very orderly and organized manner.

But it's extremely hard work, and you have to love the circus and love what you do or you couldn't do it. It takes too much out of you physically, emotionally. And that goes down to the working man that's driving that stake in the ground or the guy on the flying trapeze that's completing the triple. They really have to like what they're doing.

Juliana Nykolaiszyn: What are some of your current challenges as an owner?

Barbara Byrd: We don't have quite as many performers as we used to. We've condensed it down to a one-ring circus. I often wonder what my dad would think of that because he was a dreamer, and he always wanted the tent so big that you couldn't see from one end to the other. And he accomplished that.

So I think the challenge nowadays is to get the kids away from the computers and all that and to get them to the circus. Because once we get them there, they have a great time, they have fun.

Tanya Finchum: Any wisdom or lessons that your parents passed down to you that just really resonate with you today?

Barbara Byrd: They were hard working people, and they loved what they did.

And they tried to give people good value for their dollar, and they appreciated that people worked hard to earn that money to come to the circus.

Circus is a positive word, and it's brought joy and entertainment to millions and millions of people all over the world for centuries.

I know that my father would just be so proud that we're forging on, that no matter what it takes, we're going to keep this operation going...

...It's quite an amazing operation, it really is.

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You've been listening to Barbara Miller Byrd, the third-generation owner of Carson & Barnes Circus, a family-run circus based in Hugo, Oklahoma. She was interviewed for the Library of Congress's Occupational Folklife Project by librarian and oral historians Tanya D. Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

To hear the complete interview with Barbara Miller Byrd, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife.

On behalf of the Library's American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC.