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

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with Thomas Sink, who is better known to his many fans as “Popcorn the Circus Comic.” Unlike most of the other workers in this series, Popcorn was actually retired when he did this interview. He was interviewed by Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn of Oklahoma State University for their AFC-sponsored project “The Big Top Show Goes On.” In addition to Popcorn, their wonderful project highlighting “Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent” documents numerous jobs and the occupational culture of America’s last traveling circuses.

For more than thirty years, Popcorn entertained people, young and old, throughout the Midwest. He speaks about how his love of his profession, the rush he would get when audiences applauded, and his pride of being part of the circus community, was balanced by the hardships and challenges of being constantly on the road.

INTERVIEW

Popcorn: I was born at a very early age somewhere in the East and I wanted to be a magician. I always hung out with men’s magic house, but then I seen you had to carry all these props. (Laughs) So then I “lucked in.”

Anyway, I started out on spook shows where the theater would bring in the horror movies in black-and-white, and then magicians and the hunchback and the head-chopper and all that. I started on spook shows with Phil Chandler. Number one in clowning: you need a good announcer, yes. I became Popcorn. And if you ask anybody within six miles, they don’t know my name.

Interviewer: How did you come up with the name Popcorn?
Popcorn: I stole it. (Laughs) Yeah, from a guy named Popcorn, and he was not a clown. And it’s a catchy name. They’ll always hear it.

Interviewer: What drew you to clowning? What made you want to become a clown?

Popcorn: Never, never, never. I never thought I’d end up in the business, and I spent thirty-some years there. I had a knack, that’s all I can tell you.

I consider myself the last of the old-timers.

Interviewer: You get tired of being on the road?

Popcorn: Too old. “I’ve fallen down and can’t get up!” (Laughs) Seriously, I used to tell them before I retired that if I drop dead in the ring, make it funny and get me out of there. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Well, during one show about how many times would you change costumes?

Popcorn: Maybe three. Yeah, maybe three. Because you kind of wore the same costume for each thing, but you had to change. You’d change a hat; you’d change a vest.

Interviewer: Just a little different. Well, when you’re performing, are you paying attention to the crowd?

Popcorn: I pay attention to everything. The crowd, how they’re moving, if it’s not going over—“we’re going to cut it short”... Get in and get out. I had an outline of everything I did, but never rehearsed. The first show was a rehearsal. After that, then we’ll figure it out. I’ve been in the Kennedy Center, the old Cincinnati Gardens, Tom Snyder, Captain Kangaroo, Bozo --almost made the Kiss tour, almost.

And clowns in the old days, there used to be thirty, forty clowns on some of these shows and then the shows got less. When I started, there were around a 150 shows on the road. I think now, there might be ten, fifteen at the most. And all of a sudden, you had nowhere to go. The clown alleys got less and less. In the old days, every clown had a character, like the cop and the buffoon and the pretty one. But that all disappeared.

It’s a neat life. You either like it or you don’t. Some joined the circus and lasted three, four days. Some of them might have made it three weeks. They come and go, and I have no idea why I ended up there in the circus. I think I felt—I loved the audience. It was a challenge. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Is it hard to teach somebody how to clown?

Popcorn: Yes, they’ve either got it or they don’t.

Interviewer: When did that, did you speak or was it all pantomime?
Popcorn: Oh, no, no. I’d pantomime... but that was, “Step right this way. Have your ticket ready.” They already turned their ticket in. (Laughs) I loved the audience. I liked the smell of the big top. Yes, and I got accepted in a very hard business and did it for thirty-some years. There’s nothing better than the smell, the roar of the crowd—if you can get them to roar.

Interviewer: Did you ever get injured?

Popcorn: Only by stupidity or over confidence.

Interviewer: Shot out of a canon?

Popcorn: I slid down the barrel one time and I said, “No! No! No!”

Been in two or three tornados, a hurricane. I’ve worked muddy lots and gotten stuck in the mud during the clown gag, and they’d have to come out and pull me out of my boots. And I...“Get my boots!” Mud shows, that’s why they’re called mud shows.

Honk, honk, honk! (Imitates knocking) “We’re going to move!” And then you’d go off in the darkness, and then you’d see the sun come up and then there’d be thunder and lightning. “Oh God, another muddy lot!”

Interviewer: And how would you know where you were going?

Popcorn: You would get a little route slip, for those that could read, but you followed the arrows. A lot of times, you didn’t have to think because they led you right to the lot.

Interviewer: Would you ever get lost?

Popcorn: Oh, yes. Other shows would change the arrows. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Well, when people think back to Popcorn the Clown in his heyday, what do you want people to remember?

Popcorn: He was kind of funny. (Laughs) Really! I made it somewhere where you don’t make it much. And why, I have no idea. The mud, the rain, the snow, the sleet, the hail, the wrecks. “Did we blow the arrows? Damn! Got to turn around!” (Laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.
NANCY GROCE (HOST): You’ve been listening Thomas Sink – also known as Popcorn the Circus Comic--who was interviewed by Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn of Oklahoma State University for the American Folklife Center’s Occupational Folklife Project.

To hear the complete interview with Mr. Sink –as well as some very bad jokes and more road stories -- please visit: www.loc.gov/folklife, or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project. This is folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, thank you for listening to America Works.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov