

2008

Lee Stevens

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International Independent Showmen's Association

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Recommended Citation

Stevens, Lee and International Independent Showmen's Association, "Lee Stevens" (2008). *Showmen's Oral History Project*. 1.

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Showmen's Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: S59-00001
Interviewee: Lee Stevens (LS)
Interviewer: Andrew (Andy) Huse (AH)
Interview date: December 19, 2007
Interview location: Gibsonton, Florida
Transcribed by: Kyle Burke
Transcription date: February 20, 2008
Audit Edit by: Kathryn Hodgson
Audit Edit date: March 19, 2008
Interview changes by: Maria Kreiser
Changes date: September 15, 2008
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson
Final Edit date: December 29, 2008

[Transcriber's Note: Interview starts mid-sentence.]

Lee Stevens: Okay, sorry for this, man, I have got to quit.

Andrew Huse: (laughs) All right. Well, it's December 19, 2007. My name is Andrew Huse and I'm here with Lee Stevens, member of the International Independent Showmen's Association. He's been kind enough to sit down with us and share some of his memories and some of his life story. So, thanks for being with us today.

LS: Thanks, Andy, thanks for asking me.

AH: Let's just start with some background. Where were you born? Where were you raised?

LS: I was born in Staten Island, New York and I was there until I was about fifteen years old.

AH: When were you born?

LS: Nineteen fifty-four.

AH: Okay. [You were there] until you were fifteen?

LS: Yeah.

AH: Okay now. Growing up, did you ever have any inkling that you were going to be a showman?

LS: I can remember a time when I didn't want to be in front of an audience. And in my particular case, we used to go to Madison Square Garden every year to see the circus, the Ringling Bros. Circus, and I just knew that someday I was going to be there. I don't know [or] doing what, I didn't know—I [just] knew I wanted to be there.

AH: Okay.

LS: And that was all I ever wanted to do.

AH: So what was it about it that appealed to you?

LS: I don't know if I fell prey to what they were selling and I don't know if that is explainable enough but yeah, I just fell in love with every bit of it: the smells, the whole excitement of it, the color, the lights, the sound of the band, the size of Madison Square Garden, the opulence of the whole thing. I just wanted to be a part of that.

AH: Okay. Now what did your parents do?

LS: My dad worked for Procter & Gamble [Company] his whole entire life. And my mom worked for a brokerage firm.

AH: Okay.

LS: And I have a brother and a younger sister. When my younger sister was I guess she was about seven or eight, second or third grade, whatever it was, my mom started working—went back to work. She was a stay-at-home mom. June Cleaver.

AH: But they were pretty far away from the world of circuses and carnivals?

LS: They had nothing to do with it whatsoever.

AH: So tell us about what is it—you said you lived there until you were fifteen.

LS: Yeah.

AH: What happened then?

LS: A little tented circus, which at the time was little [but] by today's standards it would be huge, but back then it was one of the smaller shows, actually played Staten Island. Which I never heard of that because we always had to go to Manhattan and take the bus and the ferry and the subways and so on. Well, a little circus came through—it was King Brother Circus—and I read in the paper the Friday before they were coming that they were supposed to have a tent raising at about six in the morning.

So I got there— it must have been a quarter to five when I got there. Nothing was happening because they had been there all day Friday. They had a long jump in there so they had a day off actually. So everybody was sleeping there was no—and in fact they didn't use a tent because it was in the racetrack. So they worked outside. They just put the poles up for the tent but not the canvas. I was a little disappointed in that.

Then it took me several hours to even get enough nerve to move down to the front row, so they wouldn't throw me out, because I didn't want to get thrown out. About that time another gentlemen came by and he had a whole bunch of cameras with him and he just asked me what I was doing. I said I wanted the job but I was afraid to go down and ask and so on. And he told me his name and well said, "You can come with me and haul some of these cameras. You can be my assistant."

Well, I didn't know what a circus fan was. He was, in fact, a circus fan. But I recognized him because he was a zookeeper at the Staten Island Zoo as well. And that's what he did as a profession. But he was in love with the circus; just didn't run away and join it you know. So because of him, he actually let me hold his cameras and walked me down to the infield and then, in fact, where all the rings were being set up and through the animals and so forth. And I'm sure I was just a wide-eyed goofy kid. I mean, I couldn't take enough of it in.

And so it spread really quickly throughout the lot that this guy was wanting a job here and so everybody in tongue-in-cheek was kind of ribbing me along and as the day went on they just kept on needling, more and more and more. My watch grew stronger and finally, the manager said, "Well, you know, if you get your parents' permission, we'll take you on."

So I had a Schwinn Stingray [bicycle]. It was a candy-apple red, I think it was; candy-apple red was the color. I rode home and packed two paper bags and a sleeping bag. And as I ran out the door I said, "I'm going away to join the circus" (laughs). My mother starts, "What are you talking about? Blah, blah, blah." So the next thing you know I had this big confrontation with my parents out on the sidewalk. So finally, my dad said, "If he wants to go, let him go. You know, schools out. Let him go."

AH: So this was over the summer?

LS: Basically yeah. Actually school wasn't quite out yet. It was June seventeenth. It was close enough for me.

AH: (chuckling) Okay. So you remember the day and everything?

LS: Oh yeah. I remember the day exactly. My dad said—him and my mom got into it a little bit so finally my dad said, "Let's just get in the car and take him back. We all end up going back [to the circus]. And my mother just was absolutely distraught. I mean just

distraught. And then I showed her where I was going to get to sleep and where I was going to live and she just fell apart. She just went hysterical (laughs).

AH: Now did you have any siblings?

LS: I have a brother and a sister.

AH: Okay.

LS: Neither one have any interest—

AH: Okay.

LS: Yeah. So anyway I showed her the bales of hay in between the camel and the zebra where I was going to live, and it was pretty much that way. It was that way, but you got three meals a day. And I made thirty-six dollars a week.

AH: Okay. And what did you do? What was your duty?

LS: My original duty was to be a prop-hand, which meant that you move all the equipment during the show. Put the cages up and down—there was no cages there but—move all the equipment for the acts, for the acts to work. And handle the rings and the equipment and the riggings and so on and so forth. As it turned out they were very short-staffed. So I got hired to do that and, in fact, did work that seven-thirty show that night. I had my red coveralls that didn't fit and just generally got in the way of everything. I just didn't know what to do. So people were yelling at me constantly. The audience didn't know it. But I just kept going, you know. I figured that I would get it right eventually.

Well that lasted for about two days and then by the third day there was some more people, for whatever reason—they needed me—I was up early—so they needed me to sit on top of a semi [trailer truck] and start pushing all of the equipment off. The elephant tubs were carried on top of the sideshow canvas. So as the guys were putting the big top up—which I wasn't part of that, the big top crew that were hand-driving all of the stakes in. Was just as they'd do, that the semi drove around and threw off everything that had to go inside the tent. That they could get that way. And then it would go back outside and I had to push all of the bales of canvas off for the sideshow top. And by that time, the poles and stakes were driven for that. Which was not in my original job description.

And then from there—that lasted till about ten in the morning or eleven, depending on the weather and the ground. And then I had to immediately start helping the acts unload their equipment from their own private trailers. And by doing that you end up with usually a dollar-a-week tip. That's what it amounted to. And so that's pretty much how it started. And out of the thirty-six dollars they held back eighteen. They kept that in the office safe, and that was their way of having insurance that you wouldn't quit.

AH: Okay.

LS: And they figured that—

AH: In the middle of a [week]?

LS: Exactly, or of anything.

AH: Yeah.

LS: You don't get that money until the season's over.

AH: Yes. So you were forced to save half of your money, basically. Okay.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

AH: Not a bad thing right?

LS: No, you know even when I think back it wasn't a bad thing.

AH: Well you didn't have to spend a lot of money to live, right?

LS: No, we got three meals a day. One of them, at least, was palatable. All the coffee you needed, all the Kool-Aid that you wanted.

AH: Now one of the meals was what?

LS: Usually?

AH: Yeah. What did you say? Patable?

LS: Palatable.

AH: Oh, okay, yes.

LS: (laughs) That means that it was day-old bologna on stale bread with a jar of mayonnaise or mustard opened and there's flies usually around. It was just—nobody died, nobody got sick—it was just the way it was.

AH: Yeah. You said circus fan, referring to the photographer. A circus fan is someone who is obsessed with the circus but doesn't join, is that it?

LS: Yeah. Today's terms I guess you would call it a groupie or—rock stars have them today. There was carnival fans, there was circus fans, and people that were just enthralled by the whole scheme of things. And they were outsiders yet, but they were on the inside because most of the time, they were accepted by the performers and people and the owners of the shows. Usually they would come around enough that you would know who

they are. And they were very helpful because you would get to a town and you're not sure where the laundromat is, or where a restaurant is, where the grocery store is, or you had no wheels.

Back in the late sixties and early seventies property was getting more and more scarce. Shopping malls and shopping centers were going up so there was less land to put up—you know, a twelve [or] fifteen acre field—to put up a circus. So they would also carry you downtown or they would always be helpful in some kind of way. Always, always.

And they knew that you were confined either by the lifestyle or by the lack of transportation that you were stuck there. And they always—almost always—all of them, always did something to help you. And in turn they were let into the inner circle, see. Or the whole mysterious inner workings. Which is all smoke and mirrors. Yeah. It's just hard working people.

AH: Yeah. Okay. So your original gig was on Staten Island and you worked there and how long did that last before you moved on?

LS: I didn't come home. I didn't start school that fall. And actually while I was there—you know it's hard to become—how do you become a performer when you are a working man? There is—there was then more so than now. There was still a large class system in place. You know and everybody had their station and you were expected to stay there. Well I had to start somewhere but that was not where I was going to stay, at least that was my intention.

And so, I got more and more friendly with the performers. Some of them had kids my own age, so we kind of—in what little free time I had— Cause if I had free time they would always say, “Hey, go get Lee and get him over here. We need to this and we need to do that.” But there was times when I had free time and people saw that and they saw that there was nothing they could do that I didn't want to do. So I guess I kind of earned some respect that way, that [they would say], “This kid isn't just running away,” or “He's not a drug addict.” You know, nothing like that.

AH: Yeah. Now you were talking about smoke and mirrors and stuff earlier. Working in the circus, did it fulfill your expectations? What was different about it then, the life, than what you maybe thought it was? Good and bad.

LS: You know, there isn't a whole lot of bad because the feeling, the emotion I got by watching it was the emotions I got performing in it and probably more so. Even until the day I retired I always hoped there was somebody sitting there that felt the way I felt when I did. And maybe I sparked something in somebody else. And maybe not, but I always had that in the back of my head. Yeah, so that was pretty cool.

Bad things, there's lots of bad things, but what's bad? To somebody who—that's never done it [or] doesn't understand it. To me working in a coal mine is terrible. My grandfather was a captain of a tugboat in New York Harbor—that's terrible. So what I

did wasn't terrible. And whatever sacrifices I made along the way were by my own choice. It wasn't something that was forced upon you. It was just something [and] that's the way it is. And until you moved to the next station, that's the way it was going to be. So how the hell do get from point A to point B? Lots of practice.

AH: Okay. So now how long were you, you know, this hauler of equipment and all this stuff?

LS: Well, it didn't last— (laughs) until the day I quit, I hauled equipment, but it was my own. During the summer months, a gentlemen that was working for Ringling Bros.— Ringling Brothers had just started their clown college and so I thought that was— I wasn't inherently funny, although some people think I am, but it was a way to move from the working group into the performing group.

And I met this gentleman. He came and he was talking to some other people, he was watching the show, and I found out who he was, that he actually represented this clown college and he was actually the dean of it.

And I went and I talked with him as long as I could, until I bored him, until he was blue in the face. And I think it was because he was sick of hearing from me [that] he gave me an application. It was quite a lengthy application. A lot of it was part of a psychological evaluation, which I didn't know at the time. [It asked] "What's your favorite cake? What's your favorite color?"—a lot of weird questions. I guess it was the sixties [that] was like that.

But, anyhow, I filled it out and I got accepted to go down to the Ringling [Bros.] Clown College in Venice [Florida]. And that was it. I mean like, it was just another plateau of cloud nine—

AH: Now what year was that?

LS: Seventy-one [1971].

AH: Oh, seventy-one [1971].

LS: That was seventy-one [1971].

AH: Okay. So then you had started— when did you start that it was what, sixty-nine [1969]?

LS: No. Actually yes. But when I went on the road, it started in 1970 and transpired in seventy-one [1971]. So that's where—

AH: Okay. So you go to Venice for clown college. Tell us about that. What was that like?

LS: Well, there again you're naïve so you don't realize. It was an eight-week course, supposedly, time-wise it was. I had two hundred dollars and a bus ticket from the port authority on Forty-First Street to Venice, Florida.

I had no idea what was going on. I knew that we were supposed to have some kind of communal living and what there was [was called] pods. Kind of like a college dorm. There was a community living room and kitchenette and then the two bedrooms of each apartment. Little place called the Venice Villas. And I think it's still there. It was an old-time Florida little vacation spot. And actually it was quite nice. We stayed there, and I think it was twenty-five dollars a week.

AH: Especially after sleeping between bales of hay. It was kind of nice, huh?

LS: Yeah. Very nice. It was twenty-five dollars a week per person. So I had the two hundred [and] my father sent me another hundred, about a week after I was there, my mother sent me another hundred.

AH: Okay.

LS: You know? You got to eat, you got to do things.

AH: Oh yeah.

LS: But it was great.

AH: And it was a lot cheaper than college too.

LS: Oh yeah. What they were doing—the gene pool of clowns—and also the clowns at that time were well into their sixties and seventies. There was nobody to back that up and Ringling Bros. carried so many. And it was a great publicity ploy. So they put this clown college together. And they gave you a crash course on their type of clowning. They didn't teach you how to be funny. They taught you how to be on their show, how to do clown gags, how to apply make-up—the real basics of it. How to become an individual character. And they did a lot of character study, they really did.

They tried to have a make-up that would suit you for— They didn't tell you what to do but they would kind of guide you to help you be more prominent under a make-up. You know, it's one thing to wear make-up, but if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. It's not a mask—i.e. the movies and all that [in which] it's mostly a mask. But in real life it's not. It's just an extension of who you are. And it's pretty cool.

You learn the old tried-and-true gags. And they pushed you—I mean, I already juggled and things like that— most of us did, a lot of people didn't. And so they tried to find where your skill level was, how athletic you were. And I was in pretty good shape. I was, like, the youngest person. I think there was another girl that was about my age too. You were supposed to be eighteen. I remember that I lied on the application.

AH: How old were you? Were you seventeen then?

LS: I was seventeen.

AH: Okay.

LS: So it was pretty cool. Just seventeen, yeah.

AH: You said some of the tried-and-true gags. Just give us an example of what one of those would have been.

LS: A boxing gag. It's two clowns [with] big, huge boxing gloves and they slap and you've seen that. Washwomen gag. Two guys come out in real over-the-top drag, you know, huge chests and butts and you're washing clothes and one gets their hand wet and flicks and it gets the other one in the eye and she gets pissed off and flicks it back. So it gets real sloppy. It becomes a big water-throwing gag. That's another one.

What else did we do? I am trying to think of big gags. [We did] a lot of smaller stuff. How to control an audience. If you are one guy how do you work in a building with eight or nine thousand people in that corner? So there was simple, simple things but they got bigger and bigger. You blew up a little balloon and you ask the kids if it is big enough. [They say] "No it's not big enough." [I would reply] "You want it bigger? Yeah, you want it bigger." And before you know they are all screaming, "Make it bigger" until it blows up. Usually you'd drop your drawers and roll over. Simple, simple, simple stuff. But it was all good stuff.

AH: Yeah.

LS: There was a lot of big group gags where you would just—I called it the house-builders gag. It was all about slopping, wallpaper paste everywhere and you're trying to fix or paint the statue so you always had different color soaps. Big visual stuff and that was what the Ringling show needed because of the size of the buildings they played.

And, you know, they had all the guys that were really unique in what they did. They were highly specialized and they were known because they had done it for so long that's who they were. For example, Lou Jacobs. You see him on all the old Ringling Bros. posters. He had the big round nose and the kind of egghead. He always had little dog with him. Whether it was Peewee or Knucklehead, he had several. And he did a hunting gag. And the dog was dressed like a rabbit. That's Lou Jacobs.

Otto Greibling was a tramp clown. And his whole thing was—he had a package—a UPS package or whatever—that was special delivery. And the thing was just completely destroyed. And he kept walking through the audience to find out who it belonged to.

AH: Okay.

LS: That kind of thing.

AH: Yeah.

LS: He did a thing with pie pans. He could juggle three pie pans, but he'd walk around slapping them. And they got people to clap.

AH: Okay.

LS: Things like that. It was— Most of that was just people [doing] motivational stuff to get the audience, to keep them interested or get them warmed up for the show that was coming.

AH: This is a good chance for you to talk about what is the role of a clown? You know in a circus or a carnival, what kinds of roles do they play? Because usually there is a couple different—

LS: Well, it is really multi-faceted for that. Because the clown has to be everything. You are supposed to be funny. You are supposed to be endearing to children. That's fine, that's a given. You're supposed to be a fantasy character. You're the antithesis of the man on the flying trapeze. You know he's the perfect body or she's the perfect body and you're not.

So there's a contrast for those people to look better. It's a diversion if something should go wrong. It's a filler if an act is sick, doesn't come, something happens. The clowns go in just to kill time. The show always keeps moving. So, somebody once said, you know, I think it was P.T. Barnum actually, said that the "Clowns are the pegs that circus is built upon," because they are everywhere throughout the show. Even if they are not in front of the audience they are somewhere else, waiting to go on if something should happen a lot of the times.

It's just an art. It's a great art. There's a lot of famous [clowns]. Red Skelton was a brilliant clown. Buster Keaton grew up as a—was excellent clown. Lots of people, if you go through Vaudeville or even through Hollywood, the early days of Hollywood or the golden age of Hollywood, they all had some kind of clowning background. Different levels of it. Danny Kaye was another one.

AH: W.C. Fields.

LS: W.C. Fields was, you know, a real good example. There's a lot of people like that. They just didn't wear traditional circus make-up because of the venue they were in.

AH: Or for someone like Fields, you might only know a couple of the movies and have no idea of all the talent they had.

LS: Right. Of what he did before the—the brilliant juggler that he was. It was unbelievable. He did things that people still try to practice. I mean, he was just that good. As clumsy and big as he looked, he was just that dexterous, you know. Out of necessity, out of hard-knocks whatever it was, sheer determination nevertheless he did it.

AH: So you are in Venice for eight weeks—

LS: Oh yeah. And you don't get a contract with Ringling Bros. So your heart is totally destroyed and broken.

AH: So that's what happened to you.

LS: Absolutely. Because of my naïve-ness—

AH: You just assumed?

LS: Well, no. I am trying to think of how to word this. I was involved in a non-scandal scandal. I actually was defending somebody that maybe I shouldn't have defended. Not that they did anything wrong but they did something was just some kind of impropriety and I was defending them. And I should have just shut up. Nothing would have happened. He got a contract. But I overreacted to what was going on and so they said, "Well, maybe you're not really ready to come on the road."

And I was just devastated. Absolutely devastated. So then I went back—it was about three days later, two days later actually, I flew back to New York. And about a week later I flew back down to Florida. Because the whole show was still on, now the whole show was all, all there.

AH: Oh okay.

LS: And that's where they wintered. So everything was going on—

AH: So you were able to take eight weeks off of the show? Or was it in hiatus?

LS: The show was not back in yet. This was starting in October, the show didn't come in until Thanksgiving or so.

AH: Gotcha.

LS: In fact, when we were pretty much done the show had just arrived. And they had to get us out because the show needed the building to rehearse in. You know all of the publicity, all of the stuff we did was all well and good but it's over, get out. And the new people that got contracts had to have the transition and get on the train and become all involved.

Well, anyway I went home and somebody else was going back to Florida. So I said I am going back to Florida to be with it again. And, in fact, Walt Disney World hadn't opened yet, it was opening that fall. So we went over and applied for jobs at Disney World. But because they were taking the local people first—that was the story we got anyway—that didn't pan out.

Now how the hell do you get from Orlando over to Venice? So we hitchhiked over to Venice and finally got back to Venice. And I did, I got on the property, people knew who I was and then I kind of made enough connections to get on the property and through all the security. And I indeed secured another job. And I got hired on to go in the wardrobe department, which only lasted for about seven hours. Because once the powers that be realized that I was back there again. They didn't want somebody from here that didn't make it here to go somewhere else on the show. And that was a policy back then. If you didn't make one department another department couldn't hire you. You had to be gone.

AH: Okay. Now why was that?

LS: It was just store policy. It was just what they did.

AH: Let me, I'm just going to stop it so that it records what we've done so far—

pause in recording

LS: — I'm glossing over, but Jesus—

AH: Yeah.

LS: It's just stuff you don't think about.

AH: Yeah, exactly.

LS: And as I am sitting there talking to him I think I better not tell him about that but, oh, this happened.

AH: Well, you know, I think we can accommodate that truth here. It's okay. I think that's one of the great things too, about doing this, that for example, well let me pause it for a second—

LS: My lives are in chapters—I guess most people's are but—

pause in recording

AH: Okay. All right, so we're back. So then, you basically then, did you get kicked out of the show because you weren't hired?

LS: Yeah, yeah.

AH: Okay so you got kicked out. So now you're in Venice and you just lost out. What did you do?

LS: Well, through another guy that was on the show, he got a contract and struck up a relationship with some local woman there. So through him, she put me up for about a week or two weeks. Ten days or so. And then that wasn't going to work out. There was nothing to do. No matter how I tried I wasn't going to get back [on the show]. I stayed to keep trying. I just wasn't going to give up.

But eventually— Bill Ballantine was the gentleman who was running the clown college for Ringling Bros.—he called me—got word to me and called me up and we had a lunch. And he gave me information of a circus that was looking for anybody that the Ringling show didn't hire, because they needed clowns on their show. So he passed that on to me. With that, I got some more money from home. I got a plane ticket to fly from Sarasota back to Newark.

AH: Okay. Again for the second time in two weeks?

LS: Yeah. About three weeks' time.

AH: Okay.

LS: So I did a lot of flying (laughs). Well, anyhow, I called these other people for a job and they said sure, they'd love to have you come on, blah, blah, blah. Now, you have to understand that I wasn't too in tune [to] how to read a contract. So they would say that the first contract was eight weeks with an option. And that option can keep going on as the show stayed on. So I just assumed that you signed on for eight weeks at a time. Well it wasn't, it was an eight-week tour. [I had] come to find [that] out; I didn't know that then.

However, so I am on the phone with these people in California and the guy says, "Okay. (mutter) blah, blah, blah. By the way, what's your clown name? What are we putting down here?" And I had no clue. I never thought about it, never had one, didn't think—most people don't have one. Bingo, Bippo, Bleepo—no professional clown [or] very, very few have any kind of stage name that way. At least at the time. They were known by their names. And I swear, I turned around and my mom was washing the kitchen sink [and] counter down with Ajax and I said, "Ajax." And that was it. I became Ajax the clown.

AH: (laughs)

LS: I've told that story a thousand times but it's true.

AH: Uh-huh.

LS: Anyways I ended up flying out to California (telephone rings)—

AH: We want to just stop for a second?

pause in recording

AH: Okay. So now you're going out to California?

LS: Yeah. I'm flying out to California and I get out to—where the hell did I actually go? Actually, I went to Boise, Idaho is where I went, to join the circus. And for the life of me, I got off the airplane and I was looking for the Rotary Inn—

Woman: There's a lady that can't get out of the bathroom. She just doesn't—the door's locked and she can't get it open on the inside.

LS: Oh well. Does she have a pillow?

Woman: I don't know (laughs).

pause in recording

LS: I don't know how you get locked in the bathroom.

AH: Okay. So we're back. You went to Boise?

LS: Yeah, it was Boise, Idaho. I get off the plane and now I got to find a cab. And all I have is a piece of paper that says—what I thought said, when I copied it, Rotary Inn. Well there is no such place in Boise, Idaho as a Rotary Inn.

AH: Okay.

Man: Your umbrellas come in too. They're in the office.

LS: I'll be there. I will be there (door closes; LS sighs). Take three.

So now I'm looking for this place called the Rotary Inn, which there is no place [called that]. I get a cab driver. I don't know what I had. Eighty or ninety bucks with me was all I had. Which was enough back then. And he drove all over Boise, Idaho and finally he said, "I can't even find anything that sounds that way." I said, "I'm looking for such and such circus." And we were stopping at all these motels to find out if anybody from the circus was checked in at these places. Well nobody checks in and says, "Hi, we're the Great Fratinis." They just, you know—

AH: Yeah.

LS: But anyway, you try what you got to try. So finally, all hope was lost, I thought. We go past this place [and it says] Roadway Inn.

AH: Oh.

LS: So I go to the Roadway Inn and said, "I'm trying to find Mr. and Mrs. Reid. Are they checked in here?" [They replied,] "Oh, yeah, we do have a Reid." I said, "Wonderful. Do you have this [other] gentleman [who was a clown]?" [To which they replied] "Oh, yeah. He's here too." This is the place. I said great.

I went and paid the cab driver and he wouldn't take all the money. He ended up being a pretty cool guy. And, so I get a room. So now I call the owners of the show and I say, "Hi, I am on your floor actually. I'm here, everything's fine." And the circus was going to open in about two days now. So I am sure they were kind of panicky. They were providing the housing on the show but anyhow—

We had this meeting. And we all went into the owners' suite. They really liked to drink these people. He was an ex-Vegas vice cop and he married a woman whose dad, actually, owned the show and the title of the show. And [he] made a nice living with the circus in the west coast. So we started having all this little cocktails and cocktails and cocktails. Well then I started telling them about the plane story and the taxi story so everybody's pissing themselves laughing. That was all well and good, la la la, ha ha ha.

Well, now I get—for some reason I go back to my room. I remember that. I go and I have a shower and I'm laying there—I don't know how it happened—but I ended up being—the guy next to—I was next to the people that owned the show. He [the owner] went in [to his room] and he went to do something and I don't know if him and his wife had a fight. All he had on was towel and she locked him out. So he was in the hallway in a towel, banging on the door.

I come running out. And I had my drawers on, I know that, and probably my pajama bottoms [too]. I go to help him. My door slams. So I am locked out, I'm all drunk. He's all drunk. He's banging on the door, I'm screaming for help. That's how I met the owners of the first circus I worked for that way as a professional clown.

AH: Oh okay.

LS: And it went downhill from there. Every day was an adventure with me. It was great, it was great.

AH: So apparently the clowning wasn't just in the circus. It's uh—

LS: No, no it was more—yeah. But it was great. There is people that I met there that I am still in touch with and we're still pretty good friends. And they were like surrogate parents. When you are alone like that you develop relationships. Whether it be the circus or the carnival, it's amazing the kinds of bonds you form with people. Not so much when

you're young, but as you go through life as you go up this ladder that you built for yourself and you just don't forget the people that were there. Fortunately, they live close enough in town here where I can see them on a regular basis. And it is just kind of nice. And they still tell me stuff that I didn't know I did. I ended up— It went from that and then the ball starts rolling—

AH: Now wait, before we go there, I just—I want to know, what was it like just first clowning? I mean this is—bam—you're straight out of clown college basically and you're clowning. Did it take you a while to find your footing or did it seem natural to you? What happened?

LS: For me, personally, I just fell into whatever role I was playing in that particular gag. It really didn't matter. At one point I was Clem McCoy. I was the trick shooter from god knows where—some place in West Virginia. It was this whole character coming out and being a sharpshooter. The blow-off for the gag was, of course, I shoot the other guy's pants off. And it was this whole big contrived thing.

We played a high school. So you go out and now you're in a high school. It's all high school students. I'm not much out of high school so it's already that whole threat level, this age thing. But you're in make-up so it's kind of cool. So we get out there and here comes Clem McCoy, sharpshooting, they were not booing but were really disinterested, you know?

So, in this part of this gag me and this guy who I'm shooting at, and there's also a third person that's handing him the balloons and the stuff I'm shooting, get into a fight. And part of the fight is kind of like this pseudo-boxing gig I was talking about. From that it goes into a long-shirt which is [when] you grab the guy's shirt and you pull it all and it stretches across the building. That type of thing.

So, that's how the gag ends and I pull the guy's shirt off and his pants falls down and then I shoot him in the butt and he runs out of the building. End of gag. At this particular high school we're working we say we're going to have a fight: "I'm going to punch you, I'm going to punch you." The guy in the middle says, "Hold on, hold on." He gets a bell, ding, ding, ding. "Go to your corner." Fine. He says, "When I ring the bell come out fighting." [I say] "Fine."

He rings the bell and as we get together, I don't know what prompted me, I said, "Whoop, whoop, whoop, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. And I walk all the way back to the other side of the ring and I take off my hat and I put it down. And I winked at somebody. So I got all this "Oooo" this kind of stuff going from that little bit of the audience. So ding, ding, ding [he] ring the bell and you go up to the guy, "Oh, whoop, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute." And I go over and I had these big suspenders on and I took one suspender off real slow and I let it drop and I wiggled my shoulder.

Well the place started with the whistles and the carrying on and all that. “Take it off, Momma,” and all this stuff. I must have done eight or nine minutes, just working [this gag]. The other two clowns just sat down. The whole show stopped and I walked up and down that whole front of bleachers and just worked that crowd. And it was, it was great. So I did a lot of that.

AH: Okay.

LS: I did a lot of that. The other people didn’t like it. I don’t think the other two guys weren’t too thrilled because they got the laugh and I wasn’t supposed to. But that’s how it was. So I did a lot of that.

AH: So it was flexible enough that you could kind of interject your own stuff in the—okay.

LS: Why work if they’re not going to be interested in it? I hate that. So I always, with all the acts I did later on, I always worked to the audience and I would suit that audience, whatever I had to do to change to get ’em I would do that.

AH: Okay. So you kind of went in to a little bit of a racy kind of thing.

LS: Oh yeah. And it was cool because it took the corniness—it was corny—but it was my joke now. You know. I wasn’t the one being mocked because [people were saying,] “We don’t want to see the stupid clown. Where is the elephant, where’s the girl?” You know. That kind of fifteen-year-old, sixteen-year-old kid stuff that—

AH: And kids especially can smell a routine right?

LS: Absolutely. Mundane and boring, yeah. Oh yeah.

AH: They’ve kind of seen this before.

LS: Absolutely, absolutely. And that transcends in to anything again too. But I always thought on my feet that way. I kind of made a niche for myself and it worked out fine.

AH: Okay.

LS: And then uh, I’m not jumping, but it becomes mundane, it becomes a job and you do what you can do. And there is highlights and there is low points, professionally but—

AH: And you kept the name Ajax.

LS: Oh, for a long time. For a long, long time.

AH: Okay, so then you’re talking about jumping what’s the next rung on the ladder then?

LS: Uh, well time goes by and I started to want more out of life, want more out of performing. I wanted a little better for myself and I wanted to do more, so I started buying dogs and training dogs. And I've had rabbits. All clowns have some kind of little animal. But I started getting dogs.

I knew what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to do this big dog act. Because there was a lot [of] fine dog acts so I took what I liked from the best of those and I wanted that to be my starting point and go beyond that, for myself. Because you have to remember that I wasn't born in the business. So no matter where you go, every time you're on a new show, if they don't know you, you constantly have to prove yourself cause you have no seventeen-generation lineage, you know? Well guess what? Somebody, seventeen generations ago, left home and had to start somewhere. So they are just living off of his laurels. But somebody had to begin it.

AH: Well, is it kind of hard to rise above or to make a really big name for yourself as a clown? I mean it's—

LS: As a clown?

AH: There is a lot of clowns, am I right?

LS: Yeah, there was a lot of clowns and you have to remember that there isn't just one circus that you're traveling with. Back then there were many, many circuses. Every shrine date—one producer, he might have had twenty-five weeks of shrine dates here and he had thirty weeks on the east coast. Sam Paulo's show had two tours: a western and an eastern tour.

There was a lot, a lot of places to work. You go back—compared to nightclubs there was time you could go into a nightclub act and you worked the cheesy ones and you could work your way up and all of a sudden, you know, the next thing you know you're on the Hollywood Palace somewhere.

The circus was the same way. There was the little tiny, small shows where the quality might not have been up to snuff or there was little bit older performers that couldn't work in their prime anymore. There was always a place to work, to learn. Which was cool. There isn't that anymore. That's gone.

AH: It's all just high and—

LS: There's nothing, in the middle. There's so few shows anymore even on the road circus-wise. The public might think we're going to see the Big Shrine Circus. Well, that's fine, that circus used to be ten-day circus. Now it's in three days and they do four shows a day and you're out of town. It's just not the same. And nothing is the same. Times change. But back then there was a lot of places to go. A lot of places to make mistakes. I never really got fired or quit anywhere but a lot of other people did. And well they said,

“We’re leaving, we don’t need this.” And they go find another circus and they [go] get hired. You can’t do that anymore either.

Also at this time frame, I was at the peak of the beginning of the end, of the great performers. Or, or—there was a lot of great performers, but maybe [there was] more publicly recognized performers [then]. There was some names that if threw [them] out the public, to this day, knows who they are. But the legend lore and all that. But they were all still working. So I got to see that. You know. And, like said, I was already at the beginning of the end. So, I had a good career doing that. I got these dogs and I kept building it and building it and building it. And people would say, “What are you doing with that, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

AH: Before we finish up with the dogs, what about that contract was amiss? You said you thought you were signing on for eight weeks, what happened?

LS: Well, okay. Well it was, in fact, an eight-week contract. I thought it was going to be for the entire season. And it would be in eight-week increments. Not so. The show only lasted seven weeks and [then] it folded.

So now I was stranded on the west coast and there was another little chapter. So you opened another door.

AH: Well—

LS: The guy that was the ringmaster, which he never was a ringmaster, was actually a guy from Sweden who did an aerial act a big high aerial act that worked fairs, mostly, and uh his wife. He wanted to retire. [He] knew I was young enough and dumb enough to go ahead and learn his role in the act so his wife could still work and he wouldn’t have to anymore and he could just manage it and take the money.

Well he convinced me to stay in California. They lived in Toluca Lake. I got an apartment. It was eighty-five dollars a month, in North Hollywood on Laurel Canyon Boulevard. And I never saw apartments like that ’cause what it was was just a motel. In California then— to me that’s a motel with a glass door and there’s a pool in the middle. Being from New York, an apartment is an apartment but this was a motel. But that’s an apartment in California.

Anyhow, so I stayed there for a while until I realized this was not going to happen. I was working during the day at a gas station across the street from where I lived pumping gas. You still got tips from doing windshields and stuff so I saved enough money to get the hell out of Dodge and get on the plane and go.

AH: Okay. And were you joining another show?

LS: Uh, actually I went back to New York because it was too late to get on another show already.

AH: Oh okay, so it was [the] off-season.

LS: Right.

AH: Okay. Gotcha.

LS: When the hell was that? That was probably—that was like in July. It was in the summer, July or August when I got back to New York. The other shows leave in March at the time. So they were all gone and booked. So there was not much you could do.

AH: Okay.

LS: So that's kind of— So I started juggling in the nightclubs in New York. I knew how to do fire eating. Whatever I could do to be in front of an audience I didn't care, I did it.

AH: Okay.

LS: And that was fun.

AH: And that just gets you through until the next season.

LS: Just gets you through. Yeah. And it just fulfills the need you got to have to be out in front of somebody. And I did that too. So did that too. Just got through.

AH: Okay.

LS: Where are we going from there?

AH: Well, you talked about getting into the dog act.

LS: Right, right. And there was some other little shows I was on in between because it was all—I tell you every single day could be, you know, a chapter of a book or enough to start a movie. It really could. Because nothing was ever the same every day. Different people, different characters, different situations, different things.

I had developed a drinking problem at a very early age. So that was already, not affecting getting work, it was affecting me being able just to survive. And so I had a fondness for alcohol and uh—

AH: Well that seems to be a—one of the commonalities among people in the business. Am I right?

LS: No, no. Unh-uh. Maybe it would be the commonality of what you perceive the working man to be, or the support— But nah it's really not. It's just—I absolutely firmly believe that you are predestined to be an alcoholic. And that's just the way it is. You

know? The minute I tasted it, I loved it. It didn't matter. I loved everything about it. I loved the feeling, the atmosphere, the whole social thing, to smoking a cigarette, all of it. All of it went hand-in-hand. I just kept crossing the line into "Well I'm not going to do that again, that won't happen again. And you have no control of that. So this was all coming into play.

AH: Now uh— But how many bars to have in this complex?

LS: In this one?

AH: Yeah.

LS: Six.

AH: Okay. Now, do you attribute that to this is the people's down time when they're here so that they just celebrate and—

LS: Nah. It's just, hey, we're just working people, you know? We work hard, we play hard.

AH: I understand.

LS: The number of bars is mostly to accommodate the number of people that come, so you don't have to wait. And it's our place to party.

AH: What good is a clubhouse if you can't party there?

LS: Exactly. You go the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] there's a bar.

AH: Oh absolutely.

LS: Any private club, the prominent feature is the bar. But anyway it just like—

(both talking at same time)

AH: Well I'm just saying— We touched on that.

LS: Yeah. No, no it's ironic. I haven't had a drink in a long, long time.

AH: Really?

LS: Yeah. Since 1976.

AH: Wow.

LS: So I am not doing it anymore.

AH: So you actually quit kind of early then?

LS: Yeah. Yeah. I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. I couldn't—I wasn't going to go anywhere. I knew what the stigma was about it. I just had—I did a lot of dangerous things to myself. I never harmed anybody else, I would never cause—I didn't drive at the time, nothing like that. I was just really on a path of self-destruction. And uh, I just didn't want to go there anymore. Didn't know what to do.

AH: Well is this about the same time that you are getting the dog act together? Or was it already going?

LS: No, this was kind of the same time.

AH: Okay. So you're kind of having a break with that because obviously you need to have some discipline and some self-control if you're going to handle all these dogs, right?

LS: And my drinking started out of my frustration of—this is the excuse I'll use—or it became real prominent or when I lost control—was out of the frustration of things not happening fast enough. Basically is what it was. [I was saying,] “I have been doing this for X-amount of years. When are they going to like me? When I am going to get accepted? What do I have to do to prove myself?” That kind of thing. That's only, in retrospect, one of the reasons, I'm sure. I know that had a lot to do with it. Just the frustration, the loneliness I felt. Me, not everybody else, but me. And the way it affected me.

AH: And you liked it?

LS: I loved it. Oh, I loved it. Everything about it. You walk into [somewhere and someone says] “Have a drink.” You walk there, “Have a drink. Would you like a drink? Can I buy you a drink?” I mean, it all goes with it.

AH: Yeah. Well, it's been over thirty years now. Is it still a struggle?

LS: No. No. It hasn't been for quite some time.

AH: Okay.

LS: Ah—there was—while I was building the dog act I just immersed myself, for me, into AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] so much so that I was going to four or five meetings a day sometimes. I just spent my—I made my new social life was the people at the AA meetings. I didn't know why I was going, didn't have nothing to relate to them, didn't understand what they were saying, it just killed time for me not to drink. I would always leave feeling good. I never left feeling, for me, feeling bad or—I just didn't.

AH: Okay.

LS: So it worked. And I knew—and I did it twice. I went through the detox twice. And I'm not talking about Betty Ford where you have pillows and sheets. I am talking about blood and guts, five-day detox. I was just not fun. Maybe that's why it stuck. Now they are country clubs by comparison.

AH: (laughs)

LS: Yeah. Well—that's my opinion. If it works, it works. But anyway, we're getting away from that.

AH: But now you're in a position to where you can start your dog act. Let's talk a little bit about what that is. Let's get at least into the dog act. What kind of stuff are you doing? What kind of dogs, first of all, are you dealing with? And then you talked about [how] you sampled a bunch of other different acts to start yours. So talk about of what [it] consisted of when you started your act and then you started adding your own twist on things. Let's talk about all that. Let's start with the dogs.

LS: Okay. Basically, I started with poodles. I wanted poodles in this whole drying out process; I started working at a dog grooming shop for a few bucks. I thought it was pretty cool, learned a lot and I knew I had an edge because most people that are dog trainers or circus performers don't do that. They do it first and then they try and learn later. Or they just don't have time, or whatever reasons.

So the poodles never really look like poodles, very seldom, to me. There was a handful of acts that worked in Vegas—in theater mostly, stage-acts and club-acts—that had the luxury to have the money to take them to a professional groomer. So they always looked like they were supposed to. But I just saw a niche that if could fill that if I could have a presentation more than a trick—I wanted a whole overall effect—that's where I wanted to go. That would take me somewhere. That was my goal. It wasn't to train a dog to do a somersault or ride a bike or whatever [it is], you know, that they all do or they can do. It was about the whole presentation. So three dogs wasn't enough, five dogs wasn't enough. Metal seats wasn't enough.

I ended up with thirty-one poodles at one time. Standards, minis and toys—all three sizes. And they all had their individual mirror ball that they sat on. Which, my opening of my act was this big build-up. Blah, blah, blah. And this little dog just walked out in the dark. There was no announcement, there was just music. And he walked up and he walked up the ladder and it was all chromed in rhinestone and he jumped in my arms. And then I would turn and all the lights would come on, all the dogs would be sitting up with the mirror balls turning.

Well the dog on the ladder is always everybody's finish trick. So I opened with it. That was my first trick. Stuff like that.

AH: Nice. That way you got their attention right?

LS: Right. And then as soon as the lights came up and all the other dogs were all sitting up, and they were all turning on the mirror balls.

AH: These were basically on disco balls then?

LS: Yeah, all disco balls. So the whole building was a-twinkle. That was a whole— What do you have to do after that? Waste five minutes and take a bow. I didn't do that, but that's what you could have done.

AH: Yeah, but what did you do to eat up that five minutes though?

LS: I did a lot of things. I had dogs that worked on trampolines. I did a lot of hind leg walking dogs. They were able to jump over hurdles, under hurdles, some comedy stuff. I had a dog that rode a motorcycle. Dog that rode a skateboard. Jump rope. Just things like that. But it wasn't just— It wasn't so much the tricks the dogs were doing, it was the way I was trying to present it and the way the dogs looked. That was where my hook was. That was where I was trying to go.

There was another act years ago that did some great tricks, but the dogs were impeccable, their props were impeccable, the people were spotless and just impeccably classy people. It would be— I don't even know what a comparison or metaphor would be but they were just—

AH: Well, the clowns rely a lot on props and on uniforms and all this stuff and the make-up. It's about the presentation; they could do the same gag in regular clothes.

LS: I wasn't wrapped up into the training part of it because anybody could train anything if they put enough time into it. So, to me, like I said, you needed enough tricks in the act to qualify to make in an act, unique. But what I saw was that the presentation was lacking.

For instance, I was on a show—I worked eight weeks and it was the closing. It was the end of the year. I had finished another tour and had eight-weeks open. I was visiting some other friends. I was putting more dogs in my act— A circus came through, a huge tented circus. It's huge! It had five rings, and five rings of everything at one time. It was really big. But it was a mud show. Still qualified as a mud show—in a tent on dirty lots and so on.

We went to visit [and] I had all the dogs with me in the camper and I let all the dogs out to go the bathroom, and everybody came running over. Oh my God, they had never saw dogs that looked like that. Well that's a long-standing joke with me and one of the other girls that was there because she had to deal with all the mud and the Georgia clay and all that constantly. I had come off of a squeaky clean farm in Indiana, where I was staying,

so all my stuff was impeccable. And uh, I knew what was coming and they [the dogs] were washed and shaved and clipped before I left, knowing that.

So anyhow, to make a long story short, all these people gathered around [and said] “Oh, my God! They’re beautiful! We’ve never seen dogs like that. Do they do anything?” I said, “Yeah, they do a whole act.” [They said,] “And they look like that? Oh, my God! What are [you] doing now?” I said, “Well, nothing.”

Well everybody starts talking and so the owner of the show comes over, who was a complete character unto himself, and he says, “I hear that you’re not working.” He says, “Well they got to eat whether you’re working or not.” I said, “I know.” He said, “I can’t pay you nothing.” I said, “What is nothing?” It was meager. So he said, “I’ll fill your gas and give you three meals a day and X-amount of dollars if you want to come with us.” He said, you know, “We’d like to have you.”

So then we jabbed back and forth and we teased each other a little bit. And of course I was going go. Why not? Well I went. The point of the story is that, on this show, as much rain as it had, as much— There was a lot of rain that season. Everything was really hard to keep clean. It was just hard. It’s a hard life.

But when I worked in the mud I had white boots; I had white pants; I had a lime green, canary yellow [powder blue] jackets. All heavily rhinestoned, no sequins. I had more stones on one of my jackets than the whole entire aerial ballet did. So, I mean, that was my thing was to go for the flash and to go over the top. So I developed this whole big thing, it was like the Ziegfeld of the Cornfield, or Liberace in the Woods and all that.

But a circus fan came up to me and says, “How the hell do you have those white pants on with all this dirt and mud around and there’s not even a paw print on your pants?” Well, I had seventeen, eighteen pair of pants. I never wore them twice, but I washed them so I was always— Whatever had to be white was white. To the point that my boots were white milking boots instead black fireman’s boots. Everything was white. And that’s how—that’s kind of— When those people realized, when they saw and mentioned it, it just made me go that much further the other way. People do notice. And this whole Lee Stevens persona started to develop that way.

AH: The Lee Stevens persona? I like it. Okay. So that’s the— It’s all about the presentation. It’s over-the-top. You’ve got your rhinestones. What else? What else is the Lee Stevens persona?

LS: Oh, ah, just, at the time it was all extravagance. You know? It was just over-the-top extravagance, for the situation. And it didn’t matter to me. Because they still paid their ten bucks, eight bucks, six bucks, whatever it was. It’s not their fault it rained. Everybody has mud show, or rainy day wardrobe. You go to a little tented circus, if it’s raining, there’s no sequins, there’s no rhinestones, there’s no feathers. It’s just store-bought leotards, if you’re lucky. And dirty black pants because of the mud. But no, unh-uh. And so I always made sure [that] I always stood out no matter where I was.

AH: Yes. Well, and it gave you a chance to stand out even more, right?

LS: Yeah. So it was a good calculated risk. But I listened to people, you know?

AH: Yeah.

LS: It goes back—my vanity as a trainer was never threatened. There was a lot of animal trainers [that were like] (in accent), “We are the animal trainers.” That’s it. No one looks at me; they all look at my animals. They don’t look at me.” [But] yeah they do look at the fat guy back there. Yeah they do. So I wanted to whole picture to be right. And I wanted it to be what I thought I remembered. That’s what it was. You know there’s a— [Federico] Fellini made a movie called *The Clowns*. That whole movie is based on what he thought he remembered. There’s in three or four stages. As a little boy, it was bizarre, scattered, and was terrible. Horrible! Nightmarish stuff. Because it is!

Well, I never thought of that. I wasn’t clowning anymore so [I thought] “Oh, my God— Did I do that, scare the shit of some kid like that? Holy Christ!” You know, you get hit in the head with a sledgehammer, this isn’t—you know—

AH: It’s not [a] joke for a little kid.

LS: It’s not the mask. (laughs) You know? But anyways, that type of stuff.

AH: So the film was broken up into several parts and then it treats the clowns differently as he’s getting older?

LS: Well, yeah. It went into this part where—if you understand the movie—it was his remembrance as a child of what clowns did. Then it became in the middle part what clowns were in his middle years. Then he started interviewing the old clowns that he remembered as a little kid and they were all dying. And then at the end of the movie there’s a funeral for clowns, performed by all the clowns. A Fellini-esque type of funeral. Which was—

AH: Bizarre.

LS: Most of the clowns died in the funeral because they were trying [to] make a funeral. (laughs). It was, you know, Fellini.

AH: I see. Interesting.

LS: Yeah, yeah. And there’s some little vignettes he did of some very famous clowns that were dead that he paid homage to, which was very nice. And he had their family members— Anyhow, I got a little esoteric.

AH: Oh, no, no, that's fine. I want to tie up a loose end with the training. You said you did the training yourself with the animals?

LS: Yeah.

AH: Okay. But you said initially that wasn't your big focus because it was on the look, right?

LS: Well, I mean you have to train. And you have to have enough substance of trained tricks, if you to call them, behaviors, in order to present to a public. Everybody has a little dog that sits up and begs for food so your circus dog has got to do something. It just takes more time and more patience but it's like I said, my dogs did a lot of things. They didn't do some really powerful stuff, like some other people, or what the norm was back then. Let me put it that way. I didn't have back-somersaulting dogs, and there was a lot of other people that did. And that was their big finish and that was all fine and well and good, it's just to me it was just a dog act. I wanted it to be a nine-minute experience. Even if you didn't like it, that's what I wanted it to be.

My hair was bleached snow-white. Everything was—you know—it was exceptionally long. It had all this stuff going on, all this French lace. It was over-the-top. It was just another character. And which was fine, because everything I've done in my whole life I got to be somebody other than myself? So my running, I'm still running— That's kind of cool.

AH: Well, at what point did you meet your wife?

LS: Oh—

AH: Because I know that's a story worth telling.

LS: We're going to jump some decades.

AH: Oh, okay, this is much later then?

LS: Well, not much later, but it's later.

AH: Okay, all right. Well let's not jump ahead then. So you have the dog act and at this point, this was—was this your staple then?

LS: Oh, yeah.

AH: For most of the rest of your career?

LS: No.

AH: Okay, it wasn't.

LS: No. I had several opportunities at different times which— My desire was still to get to the Ringling Bros. Circus. I still wanted to be there in Madison Square Garden. So that underlies everything I've ever done. Doesn't mean it was going to happen but that was my [goal]. What could I do to be more fitting for that show. Also, Las Vegas was still very prominent. There was still a lot of acts in Las Vegas. It was probably at the pinnacle. You know. It was in the transition of the boys and Howard [Hughes] and all that was still going on. Or a lot of that was still going on.

So Vegas was still alluring and very enticing. And as it turned out with the dog act, it was too big to work in Vegas. Because they need you to work out in the apron, so they could change the sets for the production numbers. Well who the hell thought that? I thought I was a production number. You know—so that wasn't going to happen. But anyway, just different things happened.

Ann Corio had a big burlesque show, *This Was Burlesque*, and it was a resurgent of burlesque. Ann Corio was in the same vein as Gypsy Rose Lee. Maybe a little more regional but Ann Corio was a very famous stripper and she took the revival show out and I was going to go with them as a novelty act with her. Which was kind of flattering. At one point negotiations began with Liberace's people. I know he saw footage of the act and he loved it. It was that type of act. It was very Liberace; it was over-the-top. Even parts of it I used his music and stuff like that for certain things in the act. You know, we used canned music—tape, at the time, or records. Not every circus had a band, or every nightclub. That's where it was going, the dog act.

Ended up going into Canada. The Ringling Bros. of Canada was Garden Brothers Circus. Wonderful people, great people, still are. And fortunately Mr. Garden was— He liked the art of the art. He appreciated all the daredevils and all that, but he liked the presentation. And he booked his acts that way because it separated him from the other shows in Canada. So he was the one who had everything. And [he] gave you the right floor space, the right lighting, therefore the better— and it was spotless clean—so everybody was lifted up. It was a nice place to work. And I was there with him for about three and a half years. And it was because of him and where and how I met my wife are all kind of tied together. There was [a] big bareback riding act on the show.

AH: Okay, actually before we go I just want to pause it and save it because—

pause in recording

AH: All right, so then we're in Canada, Garden City right?

LS: No, Garden Brothers Circus.

AH: Garden Brothers, sorry.

LS: It was and still is the largest show in Canada, the most prominent. Anyhow, there was a big, uh— I'll have to go back and forth. I had my dog act and I just began a baboon act.

AH: Okay. So this was with baboons?

LS: And still the dogs as well.

AH: Okay.

LS: Over the course of time, I went with a smaller show that had the luxury really, as horrendous and grueling a schedule it was. We worked probably forty-four weeks a year without a day off. So it was seven days a week, two shows a day, like that. Most of these all took place in different schoolhouses all through the South and the Midwest. Which there was a lot of shows that did that. Or played armies and so forth. Smaller shows.

This particular show, the manager of the show was an avid Vegas visitor and he wanted to bring a Las Vegas style circus to all of these smaller venues. And, in fact, he did. He had, at one point, the largest band other than Ringling Bros. He had the largest permanent band. Ringling Bros. might carry five pieces and they would augment. This guy had eleven pieces all the time. And they were all Berkeley students. Nobody was over thirty. These guys were, oh, A above C and all this fantastic music. Six spotlights in a school gymnasium, it was very high-tech for what it was. And I fit the mold that he wanted which was great and as well as the other acts that were there.

So that was good, and that gave us all a vanity point where we were all trying to one-up each other. Either with the crowd, or with a piece of equipment or a new costume, whatever it was. It was very good for all of us. And we've all gone on to do other things, which was how it was meant to be I guess.

But anyhow, I was with this show and I was able to get two little baby baboons. They were actually it was a research facility was being closed down and the animals were all being dispersed or euthanized. Another animal person found out about it and actually in fact got half a dozen little baby baboons out of there. Little, they were small, they were weaned but they were young, under a year old. And I was able to get two of them. And I wanted to do the baboons when to opportunity came. Everybody had chimps. And it was just a standard thing—you buy a chimpanzee to do an act. Nobody wanted to work with baboons because they are unpredictable, and all of that. They are a lot more primal than a chimp. You know a chimp could learn something in a week, a baboon might take six months. Not because they are stupid but because their whole bodies are built different. It's just all of that goes into it. Anyhow, I don't want to into the whole—

AH: No, it's interesting. It's—

LS: Well you know the whole—whatever you want to call it.

AH: Digression.

LS: Digression, or you know, what came first the chicken or the egg? In any case, I chose baboons. And there was only one other person at the time that was doing it. Very well, and always was the epitome. Anyhow, that gave me another watershed to try and get to that plateau. But I had the little, I had the baboons and I had the dogs and I had an opportunity to go to Canada. That show closed. We were down for four or five weeks. I went up and did winter dates on Garden Brothers. Met Mr. Garden, his family and there was an immediate bond there for whatever reason. Mostly out of a mutual respect thing. He had taken a personal liking to me and always had me in the center ring. Things like that. [He] knew how to stroke my ego. In turn, he knew I was giving the best performance he could have. And he did that with everybody, not just me. He was very good at that, he was a good people motivator.

Anyways, there was a big bareback riding act on this show. Now my wife comes into the picture, she worked at an animal park up in Canada. This particular riding act had been there that summer, in the summer months. She got to know them. I knew who they were but I never worked with them. Hence, comes me into February now up in Toronto and Montreal and they're on the show. My wife flew birds of prey; she was a falconer, still is. And one of the people in the riding act, the main rider, her mom died and she had to leave. So my wife, growing up on a farm in Canada was a (inaudible) jumper all her life, Prince Phillip Cup Games and all this stuff. So she just filled in for the riding act. And they developed this friendship to this day. So I'm there, this riding act—my wife comes—this girl comes at the time and she comes to visit the riding act.

Well as it turns out, I knew who she was because we had laid off at this park in Canada in the middle of blizzard, and Garden Brothers always provided for the animal acts when there was any kind of time off or a week open, he'd find a place to go where there was plenty of electricity for the heaters and so forth, and water. And that was a priority, still is. People with the animals need the most. Anyhow, I had seen her there and had made a joke to the bear trainer that was with us and I said, "You know, I need to marry a girl like that. Someday I'll find one. A girl just like that."

And she was a mess; she had an old green army coat on covered in falcon shit or whatever because that's what she did. Anyway, lo and behold—this is months later—here comes this girl to visit and so more people in this riding act, it was eight or nine or ten people, had quit. So they were missing people contractually. So I said, "Oh, hell, I'll jump in." Hell, I have got nothing else to do. I do the dog act and the baboons weren't working there yet, they were still too little. [So I said] "I'll jump into that."

Well I did and I had driven back to my mom's place in New York, my dad's place in Staten Island. Saturday before Easter they give me a call and say, "We need you in the act, we're going to start." And I know we open [on] like Tuesday. So I had to leave right then and there, drive all night. Easter Sunday I arrive in Erie, Pennsylvania in the middle of this horrendous blizzard, had Easter dinner and the we all had to ride these horses

down the street about three miles. I was scared to death, I never rode a horse in my life. Never. They didn't know that. I was shitting my pants all the way there.

Finally we get into this big old barn, half the roof was missing—snow—and they have a ring set up. They take all the blankets off the horses and there was four horses in the act, so they said, “Okay, this is what we do, this what we do, and now we're going to do this.” I said, “And what do you want me to do?” [They replied] “Well, you're going to do that. I just said. It's called a fork jump, it's very simple.” It wasn't then.

So I said, “You'd better show what that means.” And he said, “What do you mean show you?” And I said, “Well, I work for Tommy Hanneford and he's Irish and you're all Italian, so I don't know how the Italians do it; that's different and I learned that way. So you better show exactly how you want me to do it.” Well, the guy showed me and I said, “Oh my God. There's no way I could do this. No way.” Now I don't know what I am going to do. I just drove six hundred miles to Erie, Pennsylvania—whatever the hell it is, three hundred miles.

So he says, “Okay, you go.” And I said, “Well wait a minute.” He says, “Wait for what?” I say, “Let me take off my coat.” I take off my coat. I did the same gag I did twenty years before. Now I go out, and the horse goes around, and I say, “Wait a minute. Stop the horse, stop the horse.”

“Now what's the matter?” [I say] “I have got to take off this sweater.” I went into this whole big routine and it ended that I had a pair of tights on and a little pair of ballet slippers, you know? And the guy is standing there with his mouth [open] just shitting himself, the whole family they're all at that. [They say] “What the hell?” I say, “I don't know I'm doing. This is what you dress like in the movie. Here I am.” I said, “Show me what to do, I'll learn how to do it.”

Well, my wife was already there with them and she come down to help them. The long and the short of it was that there ended up with six people on the back of the horse and two chimpanzees. They had a chimpanzee act as well. So it was the five of us on the horse. Roger, who owned the act, would come up and lay across our shoulders and then the chimps would climb on top of him until we had this whole big pyramid on top of this horse. And my job was to hold the tail of the horse where my wife sat, on the tail bone, on the crack of her butt, so that she had a seat to sit on. Because she was actually off the horse. And that was how we met.

And the chimp was gay so the chimp hated me because it was in love with my wife. And it was probably a ninety-pound chimpanzee. With all their teeth, they had everything—it's a big animal when they don't like you. Let me tell you.

AH: So this is a female chimp that's in love with your wife?

LS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Judy and the Chimp. Keenya. Her name was Keenya.

AH: So that made the working conditions a little more difficult?

LS: It made it very tough. Because the minute I would go there— The chimp was the last person up and on the way up she would either bite me in the leg, bite me in the thigh, (interviewer laughing) bite me in my hand while I'm holding my wife up, bite me in the shoulder, and not break the [skin]. Not, not where she was trying to kill me. She was letting me know. Here I come, I don't like you and I am going to get rid of you no matter what.

AH: Now were you already attracted to your wife at this point?

LS: It was just beginning. Yeah.

AH: Because maybe the chimp was—

LS: Oh, yeah, she sensed it.

AH: Yeah, it was wise to this. Okay, so that was an interesting gig to say the least. How long did that last?

LS: Not that long (laughs). Because there was another family that came up that at one time did a bareback riding act and two of their kids filled in. So it might have lasted, oh I don't know, maybe a month.

AH: And then you just went back to your dog act and your baboons?

LS: Yeah, I was doing my own thing. That was enough of that.

AH: But by this point you had worked with the lady who would become your wife.

LS: Yeah, with Judy. And we had already developed at least a social relationship. We were just going out. Nothing hot and heavy, nothing like that. No real time alone. In the barns where the animals were or stuff like that.

AH: Okay.

LS: But it all happened [in] Niagara Falls.

AH: Okay.

LS: I don't know what I did. I hurt my back or I hurt something. And I had— I was actually buying this big stereo with this other girl and I couldn't carry it all home and I saw Judy at the mall so I asked her to help me carry the stuff. She didn't think nothing of it really. And I thought, "This is pretty cool. She's not even jealous of this other broad, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Well the next thing you know, I see the other broad out and I said, "Do me a favor. Would you rub my shoulders? My shoulders are really killing me."

Well, then it got to be from that point on that we started just spending more and more time together. We were married seven weeks later. Twenty-two years ago.

AH: Now this didn't really please her parents as far as I remember you telling the story.

LS: Well— Yeah—

AH: Tell me a bit about her background and how the Lee Stevens persona didn't win over her parents so much.

LS: No, no. And it wasn't so much a personal thing it was the initial shock of my daughter's going with the circus. I mean what do you— You know you're in the middle of university and she's supposed to go to med school and she's supposed to do this and supposed to do that. So everybody thought. And then I came into the picture and destroyed that whole picture.

So yeah, it's um— Where should I start? Well we ended up— She left with me in May. The show closed and she decided she was going to stay with me. And fortunately— Once again, I like to spend my money and she didn't—so she had money and I didn't. So I had some more dates back in the States. We called them spot dates. Three or four days here, two days there.

We had to go to Yale University. They were doing a big charity event, a circus there. So she came with me to help assist me. She [had] never did it. She had never worn high heels before. So the first time she put them on, before we got from my trailer to the arena she had already broke one heel off, by the time we got to the ring she broke the other heel off. So she did the first time in her life, the act, with a pair of high heels with no heels. Standing on her toes so that she didn't look stupid. Trying not to cry, just embarrassed. That whole thing. It was great, it was great.

So then, we went on this little tour, and we ended up in Erie, Pennsylvania. I don't know if I told you this [about] when her parents first came?

AH: Yeah, now wait, before we—

LS: We weren't married yet.

AH: Okay. But before we go here, I just want to back up for a second. What was it like for you, having someone on the show? Had you ever had someone on the show with you before?

LS: No.

AH: And what was that like?

LS: Well, that's not totally true. There was a guy I met in AA and about the first year out, he came with me. I didn't have a license and he drove the trucks and all that. Yeah, he was there for about eighteen months.

AH: So he actually went on stage with you too?

LS: Yeah. But he stayed in the background, but yeah. Helped me get all the dogs on their seats and all that stuff.

AH: Okay, gotcha.

LS: But nothing prominent.

AH: Well it sounds like her role was little more out in the front.

LS: Well, yeah. I was just, I had these other ideas of grandeur you know what I mean. So, and not taking into consideration that she had never done it. Well, I'm the kind of person, just throw me out there and I'm gonna do it. That doesn't mean that everybody can.

AH: Yes, of course.

LS: Well I didn't realize that she wasn't one of those people that couldn't. Not cause she couldn't learn. She had never seen the circus that much. The only circus that she saw was that little stunt up in Garden Brothers, actually so.

Well anyway there was enough other girls at this particular place that all came to her rescue, calmed her down and talked to her [about] how to hold your hands and a lot of that. I took a piece of plywood and put a chalk line on it and made her walk back and forth in high heels until she learned how to walk in high heels. It was kind of like Pygmalion almost. I hate to put it like that and she would kill me.

AH: (laughs)

LS: But yeah, it was kind of like Eliza Doolittle. It was a lot like that. It was just as a metaphor it was like that. Transforming her from this farm girl, into a star of the circus in a very short period of time. At least to the audience's perception. But everybody liked Judy. Everybody still likes Judy. She [is] just that kind of person. She is, she's good.

Anyhow, I had—it was a semi for all intents and purposes—and it had living room slash bedroom up in the front. The beds, the couches opened into the beds and so on. So now her parents are coming to visit us. Now they're Mennonite by religion. They're not Amish or they're not anything like that. But when you say Mennonite, most people know that that's the Amish people, you know?

So I had the guy with the bears was behind me and the guy with—in front of me—the guy with the lions was behind me. And I made the guy with lions back up little bit, I

didn't give him too much grief. But the guy with the bears, I just ribbed the hell out [of him]. I said, "You have got to move up. They are coming down and they got the horse and the buggy over the border, they can't use a phone so that the other person that is with them had to call, I said that it's getting cold and they are going to get here and will need a place to get the horse in." I said, "Can you move another ten feet up?" Now I'm telling this guy with this whole semi who's got eleven bears with him, all the caging, all the trappings that went with his stuff and he had to move it all. So my wife's—or my girlfriend's parents can come with their horse and buggy with the triangle on the back. Which happened to be, you know, a Lexus, but we don't have to get into that.

(both laugh)

Anyway they pull in and here they come and I have to say he got me good. I took—Judy's parents, who I had just met right there as they got out of the car. [I said] "Hi. I'm Lee. I'm so and so. It's nice to meet you." And they're looking around at everything and they're trying to put on a brave face. You know, because whatever their kids did they supported a hundred percent. They just didn't know if they wanted—if this was—why she was doing this, I'm sure. So now we're inside my living quarters, my semi, and we're sitting on the sofa—we had a sofa down below as well, and a table.

I'm getting ready to make coffee and there's a pounding on my door, and they open the door and it's this other guy with the bears, Jimmy. Who was another guy with all this bleach blonde hair, but he's this huge big man. He looks like a pro wrestler. And he says, "Oh, I heard that the in-laws were here." And he says, "I just wanted to meet them." Her mom instantly says, "No, I don't think they're married." And he says, "Oh, well they should be. They sleep up there together. They use the same bathroom," and he went on and on and on (laughs).

And he just turned and walked out and closed the door. The four of us sat but there's nothing to say. Didn't know what to say. It didn't bother me as much; I didn't know these people so I didn't know where it was going to go with Judy. But anyway, they got over it. They got over it.

And then we actually ended up getting married not too long after that.

AH: Okay.

LS: It was a disappointment for my wife because it wasn't, we decided on a Saturday night to get married Monday morning. There was no plans made, we just did it. And we got married between shows in Baraboo Circus, in Baraboo, Wisconsin, so that was kind of cool. And all the acts on the show brought something from their act to use as part of the ceremony. And it was just really cool.

AH: Okay.

LS: The downside to that—more so her than me—was [that] she didn't tell her parents, didn't invite her mom. Her mom didn't get to plan for the big white wedding and all of that. And that's still a regret of my wife's. Not that she married me, [but] that she excluded her family. And I had a hard time understanding that because, "What do you mean?" I have been on my own for so long—I love my family, don't get me wrong—but they didn't make my decisions and I came from a very blue collar, rough and tumble, New York neighborhood, where you just did your own thing. We all love you anyway, it's good. She walked in, you accepted, that's it; sit down [and] eat. Okay, that's done. But I guess that other people in the world don't think that way. And her parents were very stereotypical Ward and June [Clever], very much so.

AH: Okay.

LS: They never held it against us, but it bothers my wife more than anybody else.

AH: Now I imagine that your parents' reaction was different.

LS: They were thrilled. Oh, they were thrilled. Somebody married him, thank God!

AH: Had they given up on you?

LS: I am sure they did it several times. Yeah. I was just out there.

AH: Yeah.

LS: I was out there. So that was—they were thrilled, they loved her the moment they met her. It all worked out really well.

AH: Okay, so this seems like a good place to stop for now. And if we can get back to the history of the carnival and wrap up the rest of your life as well next time?

LS: There's a whole lot more.

AH: If that sounds good?

LS: Yeah that's fine. That's fine.

AH: Yeah, that sounds great. Okay.

LS: I mean there's going to be—

pause in recording

AH: (laughs) [Talking about the date LS was married] Yeah that was eighty-four [1984] or eighty-five [1985]?

LS: I think it was eighty-five [1985].

AH: Well, you said twenty-two years now.

LS: Yeah, so go back—

AH: That would be eighty-five [1985].

LS: Because my son was born in eighty-six [1986]. She wasn't pregnant. She got pregnant a year after we were married.

AH: Okay.

LS: We got married July—July 30th. And he was born July 10th, the following year.

AH: That's respectable (laughs).

LS: That was, well, yeah. It was good, it was good.

AH: How many children did you have?

LS: I have four. We have two sons, to Judy and I, and we adopted two girls.

AH: Okay.

LS: So we did that—we've had the girls almost eight years now. One is nine—no, that's not true [we've had them for] seven years. One is nine, and the other one is fifteen going on forty with the brain of a two-year-old.

AH: (laughs)

LS: It's a father's lament.

AH: Yeah, certainly.

LS: It is. It's difficult.

AH: Okay.

LS: But yeah, it's been great.

AH: Okay. Good. Well then we'll pick up in the mid-eighties next time then.

LS: That'll work.

AH: Okay.

End of first interview, Second Interview starts

AH: Okay. So, it is December 26, 2007. I'm here with Lee Stevens again and we're going to pick up where we left—

LS: Ho, ho, ho.

AH: (laughs)— we're going to pick up where we left off which is [when] he met his wife and got married.

LS: Is that where we left off?

AH: Yeah. We left off with the biting chimps and all that stuff and your seven-week, whirlwind romance—

LS: Yeah, pretty much.

AH: And um— So what happens and how does life change—? And, oh, yeah, actually, one of the last things we talked about is [how] you brought your wife into the act—

LS: Right, right.

AH: So tell us about that, how did your act change, your life, et cetera?

LS: Well, everything changed. You know, everything. Your life changes overnight and then you're responsible for somebody else other than yourself and your animals. And then, integrating her into the act was a whole 'nother challenge as well. I was the alpha male in the act and I had all female baboons. So actually, until the day we retired she was still about three down on the pecking order of the baboons. So she knew her place.

AH: (laughs)

LS: And it's much easier to work an animal within their limitations than trying to have them up, live to your expectations. It just works out better. Baboons are very tight knit society; they are very troop-oriented. And they have a very tight hierarchy. Rather than try to fight that all the time, just find your place within the group. It worked for us and that's what we did. It was successful—

AH: So what was her role in the show then?

LS: Originally, she was just the ta-da girl.

AH: Yes.

LS: I kept her back X-amount of feet just to keep her out of harm's way, till the animals got used to her being there and so forth. And it's another female and they're very aware, primates are very aware of other females, regardless of their species. Actually, they all started cycling together. So that came into—that was an issue.

AH: Okay. (chuckling) Baboons and humans.

LS: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Well, that was never a problem when I was there.

AH: Yes, of course.

LS: Well, obviously. But it worked out okay. And then—like I said—she was like, for a long time, she was about number four. And that was okay.

AH: That was underneath you and the two baboons then?

LS: No, I was never in the equation because I was the only male, so she was fourth down in the line of baboons. As far as um—they tolerated her eventually cleaning them and feeding them and just being around them and talking to them. But she couldn't touch me; she couldn't have any contact with me. Because they took that as [a] threat and her trying to move up the line, so therefore, the few times that she thought she could, she couldn't.

AH: Okay. And what was the reaction like? Was it violent?

LS: Oh, it was just pandemonium! Oh yeah.

AH: So what would they do, I mean? Would they attack her directly or did they throw things?

LS: No, because like I said, she was never really in harm's way that way. It was a lot of screaming and a lot of yelling, throwing stuff, pounding. Signifying, you know, a general dislike for her. So it didn't take her long to figure out, about the second time she decided this is not the time to discuss anything about family or business. When it came time to do the act, we just did the act. And kept that in focus, which is hard to do. Because you still have to get from point A to point B and then from point B back to point A again. Whether it's walking or whatever but—

AH: Baboons are very vocal animals, right? I just heard something on the radio about these husband and wife teams studying these baboons for years, I guess, and all the different vocalizations they make and things.

LS: There's a whole form of communication, which they do quite a bit of. Then again, you have to understand that people that study in the wild—when you have fifteen of them in a controlled environment and you're there twenty-four-seven, I mean. That's a little more in-depth study. It's easy to sit in the woods and watch a monkey take a crap out of a

tree, but now go up and clean the crap. That's the next thing. So they both have their good points. I guess.

AH: So basically what this meant then was, that you're saying, that you had to segregate the rest of your life out of the act?

LS: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

AH: Strictly business, when—

LS: Only business.

AH: And this is not just the act, but anytime you're with the animals.

LS: Anytime: feeding, cleaning, practicing. You just have to devote all of your attention to what you're doing at the time with the animals.

AH: And how many baboons did you have total?

LS: We had fifteen at one point.

AH: Oh, you had fifteen?

LS: Uh-huh.

AH: So she was fourth in the fifteen?

LS: She was fourth in the original seven.

AH: Okay.

LS: (laughs) Yeah, and she never lost that place because, as we added more animals in and we acquired several babies and stuff, she became the mommy to the babies. And, in fact, that worked to her advantage in that respect because she became more of the barren nursemaid of the group, you know? And there is always an aunt in a group that either loses a baby and they let them come and be nursemaid and babysit. So in the baboons' psyche she kind of fulfilled that niche. But with the other three above her—

AH: That is quite common in baboon world, right? Because a lot of times males kill females, the kids, so that they can sire their own children.

LS: That, and especially the males, they'll eliminate any other male competition.

AH: But you just dealt with females, right?

LS: Well, we had several males over the years. And it was more or less to prove a point and the point was that it couldn't be proven.

AH: What? That you can't really use males?

LS: Well, you really can't mix the two sexes. In fairness to the male, the sex drive and the whole dominance is so ingrained and such a part of their psyche that they can't cope with any kind of upset that way. And the females were always torn: Was it me or [was it] him? So it just, rather than put all that stress on the animals—they didn't need it—it wasn't going to add to the act. It just became a personal thing that I was going to prove that I could do it. And it didn't even last that long; it just wasn't necessary. And fortunately at the time there was still a lot of places where you could transfer animals and transfer ownership of animals.

AH: Yeah, I was curious about that. So are there people that have all-male acts?

LS: There was one.

AH: But that doesn't work as well as using all females?

LS: Oh no, no, no. It was a female that had all males. And there again, you use the sex drive and all this—you use all their instincts. You could use it to your advantage or to their disadvantage. Either way how you look at it. It works quite well, especially with baboons. Chimps are a different matter. They're a totally different species, a different way of thinking. Yes, they live in families and so on, but it is not as primal as a baboon group is.

So this very good friend of mine, she had a spectacular act. I mean it was spectacular. Nobody has ever done it, nobody has ever done it since, [and] nobody will ever do it again. And she had animals, that would just— She had every species of baboon that there was to have: mandrills, geladas, drills. And her stuff, she had gotten it from out of the country so even with the SSI Stud Books, and all that, and the zoos. They were drawing semen straws off her baboons because it was introducing a whole new gene pool. As well as my females, I pulled a lot of my females from overseas. I just happened to be overseas and I brought them home with me. So therefore, once they got it through all the quarantine and so on, it was [a] whole new strain. It was just better for the gene pool.

AH: So how would they draw upon your females? Would they impregnate them or get eggs or what?

LS: They would try to take eggs and it really wasn't working as so, you know, what I ended up doing I placed four—I had fifteen or sixteen actually altogether—I placed four with different zoos, and it just gave them another female. And then they could split it.

AH: You mean like when you retired you gave them to different zoos?

LS: No, no, no. They were still young.

AH: Oh. Okay.

LS: They were two-year-olds; one was three-years-old.

AH: So do you tend to use younger baboons in the acts?

LS: No. It's just easier to start with a baby and integrate them. You have got to be mommy and daddy. You have got to build a trust; you got to build a bond. They need a lot of securities. Otherwise they, mentally, they grow up very unstable, for lack of a better word. Therefore, if they are unstable, they are not trainable. I don't want to force it; I didn't have time. It wasn't a dominant thing with me. It was a social interaction between me and them. They wore little costumes, they wore little things; it was colorful. That was so the audience could identify what animal was doing what, it wasn't for any—any reason other than to make it a little more commercially valuable to the public.

AH: Okay. Let's talk about the— (both talking at once)

LS: Because you have to separate, I mean. I did a lot of things that I am proud of with the animals, but you still have to make a living to support the animals. People aren't just sending you checks for a thousand dollars a week. It would be nice, but it doesn't work that way.

AH: Okay. So describe the act to us then. We talked about the poodle act and the different things they did, the disco balls, and the ladder and stuff. What kind of stuff— How would your baboon act go, typically?

LS: In a nutshell, it was very athletic. It was very fast. They are very fast-moving animals. So I tried to keep the speed up that they were comfortable working with. It gave them less time to look around and be distracted. And it stayed within that group, in the parameter of, particularly either a stage or a circus ring; that was their whole world, they controlled everything in it.

For instance, a prop guy couldn't come across the line and try to pick something up, or help me. They weren't going to have that. They know, from the time they were infants, that that was their safety zone. That's where they belonged. And nothing belonged in there but me. Well, then came my wife. I had to work [in] that. And that took about two years to get her comfortable and them comfortable. She was fabulous. And at the end, like I said, she could care for all of them. She couldn't tell them what to do, but she could care for them. So that was unique dynamic there.

AH: All right now, what about this athletic stuff? Try to give us an inkling of what we are looking at?

LS: Lots of somersaults, lots of jumping—long jumps, lots of climbing. I had almost like gym hanging over the ring, and they would climb and do all kinds of different things on gymnastic type of equipment. Then we had the standard, they rode scooters, motorcycles, bicycles. Which for a baboon is not that easy to do.

AH: Yeah.

LS: Their coordination is not—there again, it's not an ape, it's not a chimp. You could teach a chimp in two weeks to ride a bicycle—at least with training wheels. A baboon it takes you six, eight, [or] ten months just to get them used to peddle a bike, a stationary bike. And then you have then you have to get them to where they can put the wheel down and actually get mobile and then they have to steer it. So now they need their eyes, they need their coordination with their hands, plus their feet going. So it's a little more challenging that way. Can they do it? Yeah, it just takes longer. And you can't make a mistake. You really got to let them go at their own pace. Because if you try to push them and they get a dislike to it, they just turn off. It's not going to happen.

AH: It's over. Okay.

LS: So it there was a lot of difficulty. It was patience, it was more patience than anything.

AH: Yeah.

LS: And the outcome— Nobody sees that, which is fine. And me and this other woman that had the males, I mean. She went through the same thing—it was just [that] they're a lot bigger and she went through the same process. So we wouldn't tell each other what we were doing, but we would kind of ask backhanded questions and see if you were gonna get the answer. It was just a professional thing.

AH: Yeah.

LS: She was out—she was working before I was. So it was just— And there's still like the competitive threat to each other.

AH: Kind of a friendly rivalry?

LS: Ironically, we both ended up being on Ringling Bros. together. So it was, yeah, it was thrill for me.

AH: Yeah.

LS: Like I said, I was probably more commercially successful than she was, but as a trainer or on the inner-circle she—like I said, there'll be other people that work with female baboons but not with males like she did. It just won't happen. She was one of a kind. So it was pretty unique [that] we worked together and we're still good friends. We

were friends before that as well. So it just [was] a professional rivalry, yeah. That's a good way to put it.

AH: Yeah. Okay.

LS: [We] never had words. But you know— Someone would tell me, "Oh, she said this," or did that or that she's working on this. And then someone would tell her that "Oh, he said that and he's doing this." That kind of stuff.

AH: Uh-huh. Okay.

LS: We both worked with a jungle theme, heavily themed jungle. Mine was uh—I did a lot of black light stuff; for a while it was all fluorescent. We used to call it the K-Mart Jungle.

AH: Okay. (laughs)

LS: For lack of a better term. It was fun.

AH: Yeah, a lot of respect there obviously. Okay. All right, so you got the baboon act going [and] the wife brought into it. Did she ever deal with falconing or equestrian stuff again?

LS: Uh, no.

AH: Okay.

LS: Horseback riding a little bit, yeah. We put together a horse show that traveled with the carnival and fair circuit [to] jump ahead a few years. But yeah, I drew on that expertise of hers. I had certain ideas and she had to come back and tell me why they wouldn't work. Which, my ego didn't like that all that much. So after she proved me right, it went her way. Mostly for aesthetics or just combining different kinds of horses and things. It was good; very successful.

AH: Okay. But there was some give and take there between you and the wife?

LS: Yeah there was— Yeah. Artistically, she let me be. Usually I have a pretty good eye for what color looks good, what type of music to use. It goes back to, really, how I used to feel watching different acts. You know, if the music didn't grab you, you usually weren't interested in the act.

AH: So what kind of music would you use typically?

LS: For the baboons?

AH: Yeah, let's talk about the baboons.

LS: We used a lot of [Carlos] Santana.

AH: Really?

LS: Yeah.

AH: Okay.

LS: One piece was on the *Abraxas* album.

AH: Okay. I'm familiar with that vaguely.

LS: Okay. Well if you take it, instead of having electric guitars and all that which is what they used mostly, we had two or three drummers—conga drummers—and then ten or twelve horns playing the guitar leads. So it completely changed the sound. The melody line was there. If you knew the song, you knew what it was. But then you start putting the jungle beat behind instead of this heavy driving—

AH: Yes, rock—

LS: Two beat things. Yeah. So it was just taking a piece like that and working it. It was a good piece of music.

AH: Now was this a band that you shared with other acts?

LS: Circus bands.

AH: Okay.

LS: And as live music started to dissipate with the circus, like anything else, times change and expenses. I was fortunate enough that I worked with a big band at the Shrine Circus. And we went in between shows. And they recorded the whole score of music for me.

AH: Oh great.

LS: I mean I had it all written. But they went and they played it all. We recorded it all. So I still have the masters, which is cool. So at least when we had to work with tapes I had the sound I wanted with the beat I wanted, and therefore I got used to working with it.

AH: And what kind of music would you use for the equestrian shows then?

LS: It varied. We used some very heavy classics. Yeah there was some— we opened with some classical stuff which was really pretty and then we went with the theme from [*Star Wars*] Darth Vader.

AH: Oh yeah.

LS: And we had a big, black Friesian horse. And the girl that rode it was excellent and the horse was a real aggressive, hot-working horse. Lot of snorting and a lot of that. So the music just brought that much out. And it worked out great. For the Arabian horses we used *Lawrence of Arabia* theme. People don't really know what it is but it was a melodic, whispery theme to it. And he worked free, he had no harnesses on, so he got to work the whole arena and it was the pretty girl with the pretty horse and blue lights and so on. We tried to make it emotional. Rather than, you know, an entrance of the gladiators, lion tamer type thing.

AH: Yeah, yeah. Well and that Vader thing is instantly recognizable too.

LS: Everybody knows what it is. So they know, it's dark; it's powerful. It was really powerful. So the horse did the marches and this horse would pound the ground; it was usually right on the beat of the music. The girl was very good at riding to the music. And that worked out good.

AH: Was there still a live band playing this? Or was this in the recorded age?

LS: No. This was all recorded.

AH: So in the eighties, by the time you get to the eighties, you're looking at more recorded music then.

LS: Yeah, oh yeah. Almost exclusively. Except for some big Shrine Circus.

AH: So when did the live stuff peter out? Was that during the late seventies or—?

LS: No, it pretty much it was in the eighties [1980s], mid- to late eighties [1980s] it was really when you noticed it was gone. Everybody had—some cheesy little shows had turntables, they were that backward. Some had reel-to-reel and then they went into all kinds of digitalized music, it all sounded like a synthesizer, it was all monotone—everything was monotone. Some shows tried that and it didn't work and they had live drummer play with it, and it didn't work.

AH: Yeah, that's rough.

LS: It's like anything else; show business is always gonna to bob. It's gonna to do what it can to survive.

AH: Well it's much better to record the live thing than to have it programmed—

LS: Yeah. But not everybody thought of that.

AH: Yeah.

LS: So it was just—most people could care less. They just— It's all about them for the moment.

AH: Well, they're not thinking about the audience and that seems like something that you constantly went back to was your experience as a spectator. And [asking yourself] "How would that grab me?"

LS: Well, that's how I did it. And to this day, if I do something it is still that way. Does it make it right or wrong? No, it just makes it right for me.

AH: Okay.

LS: And I still do that. I produce a circus here at the club. I do different things—different events here and still always put myself on the other side looking in. How would that look? Is that going to blow somebody away? Is that going to surprise somebody? You know, is it going to set a mood? Whatever.

AH: Okay.

LS: It works for me. I can't speak for other people. But it seems [that] I have been successful so—

AH: Yeah, yeah. And you're not using that canned music. Let me um—I am just going to pause this—

pause in recording

AH: Okay. So let's pick up then. We talked about some of the fundamentals of the act and we covered the baboons. So let's pick up then your career starting with: you're married, you were working with the Garden Brothers for a while. What is the trajectory of your career now? Let's try to start with the wife and get you to Ringling.

LS: Okay let's see, I got married. We talked about that.

AH: What's her name again?

LS: Judy. And so we're with—we went back with Garden Brothers again, which was nice. We were featured again. And we went out to dinner one night with a bunch of people. And we were talking about different things that you don't see anymore. And one of them was a sea lion act, seal acts. That was just a thing of the past. In fact, there hadn't been one on the road for about fifteen years at that point. Sixteen, I think.

We just started talking about what the possibilities were and actually the Garden Brothers said, "If you can get it all together— if you think you can do it, I'll front you the money."

Because I said it was going to be extremely expensive between the equipment, and the trucks and the pools, the salinators and the chlorinators and all that. So he said, “If you think you can do it, I’ll back you.” He says, “I’m not giving you nothing until it’s ready to go, but if you get it lined up we’ll go.”

So we left with that thought and it was probably whatever it was, September, middle of October, and we came back down [to] the States and we were doing some fairs and things like that and just happened to be—I had started doing the paperwork with the government to get the permits for the sea lions. And as it runs out, at the time, there was no permit. So the permit that I had from NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] was hand-written. Which was pretty nice. I still have it. It’s framed.

But we had to through the USDA, the Department of Ag [Agriculture]. It just kept whittling down. So it took, the whole process took right about eleven months and a week before we finally got the first okay to start [and]to go ahead. It wasn’t the finished product but it was, “Okay, we’re going to let you do this. But, we are going to watch what you are doing.” Which worked out fine because I would rather do it step-by-step. So every time we made a move, I would call the inspector and they would come and inspect and make sure it was up to their satisfaction. They, in turn, had to go back and check with their people and they discussed [it and said] “Okay, we’ll let you go with that.”

But it seemed that every time that they thought that you were going to throw a curve, there was always a way to circumvent it and get around it. So I just persevered. And it became a thing that this was going to happen one way or another. And it did.

AH: So then you have a sea lion act now?

LS: Yeah, but there was more to it (laughs). It wasn’t that easy.

AH: Yeah.

LS: The equipment was the easy part. Now you have to get the sea lions. So according to the permissor they had, you could only use beached, stranded or orphaned sea lions. Most facilities have some type of program for that. But, that is not their main focus so there is a lot more surplus unused, unwanted or thrown-away babies—not by them but by nature—that they could even hope to care for or rescue. And that’s how I got my first set of sea lions. They were actually beached and I don’t know what happened to the parents. There’s no record of what happened. They were little baby sea lions on a beach in California.

The Sea Lion Rescue in California had them. They in turn placed them at Sea World San Diego for an interim and they were in little holding pools. And I flew from Fayetteville, North Carolina out to San Diego. Now you have to train them. Well, I found an old gentleman that was still alive whose name was Fuzzy Plunkett.

AH: Nice! That is a carnie name, huh?

LS: No [he was a] circus guy.

AH: A circus name.

LS: His family, the Plunkett family, were like third-generation at that point, not necessarily circus. They did tab shows and rep shows. So if you're familiar with that.

AH: Now what's tab and rep shows?

LS: You know they were, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

AH: Okay.

LS: They did shows like that. They did legitimate plays. In between scenes of the plays the family would come out, and they all played musical instruments. So it was a variety show and then they go back to *The Drunkard* or whatever type plays it was back then at the turn of the century. Melodramas. Most of them were melodramas. Simon Lee Greenmill, all that stupid stuff but—at the time, it was very metropolitan, I guess. So they did that, and that's where they were from. But as those type of shows and entertainment dissipated—because they could all play— They were all acrobats. They all had to learn how to juggle. So they ended up going into the circus.

They were a big, big family. Still a big family. But this one guy, Fuzzy was very good with animals. He was very clever. He had great ideas. They did great tricks and he was not a braggy kind of guy. He was a very low-key guy. But he was brilliant and I saw some old movies of what he had done with sea lions and seals back in the forties [1940s]. And back then they lived in bathtubs, you know. The animals were fine. The public has the perception of [the film] *Free Willy* but it is not necessarily so all the time. Depends on the [animal]. Anyhow, I'm not getting into all that.

AH: (laughs)

LS: More animals die with people trying to help them than if they just didn't help them.

AH: Yes. Okay.

LS: Or leave other people that know what they are doing—propagate and help them.

AH: Exactly. You get amateurs in the mix and they don't know what they are doing.

LS: Everybody's a want-to-be doctor.

Ah: Well, if someone tries to adopt a hurt squirrel, the squirrel dies.

LS: Yeah, yeah. So anyhow I contacted him and he thought I was just pulling his leg. He really did because he hadn't thought about doing that since he had retired. And when he retired from the sea lion business and dog business he actually went and worked for the Lone Star Brewery in Texas.

And the owner of the brewery had hunting dogs—gun dogs—that Fuzzy started training. Before long, he became like a pseudo-personality at the brewery and he would always have the dogs on exhibit. And for a while he had a group of Dalmatians on a pumper fire truck and the dogs put a [burning] house out. They would come, they'd pull it in, they'd pump it, they'd bring the hoses out. That kind of thing. And he did it for his own amusement just because he could. He had carp trained to jump through a hoop.

AH: Carp?

LS: Yeah in the pond.

AH: The fish.

LS: Yeah he'd walk to the end of the pier in the lake that's at the brewery to this day and he'd call them up, they would come up. He'd throw some bait down and then he would hold a hula-hoop out and they'd actually jump through the hoop.

AH: That's something.

LS: That's well documented too. So he is that kind of guy. So this was definitely a challenge to him was to get him to come teach me to train sea lions. And, in fact, help me train the sea lions.

AH: Okay.

LS: So my whole thing was just to pick his brain until there was nothing left to pick.

AH: Sure.

LS: And he knew that. And his sons were involved in the business. They were all professional people in different places.

AH: Well, once again, this [was] almost something for his own amusement too.

LS: It was, it was.

AH: Let me just uh—I want to—

pause in recording

AH: So tell me then—

Man: You're good for a while. [You've got] at least a half hour.

AH: All right so—so tell me then, is there a big difference in training a seal than training say a baboon or a dog? I mean, obviously there's going to be differences with all of them, but—

LS: The concept is the same.

AH: Okay.

LS: You know? You have a behavior that you want an animal to do; what's the easiest way for an animal to accomplish that? So, the differences are the sea lions, pinnipeds, have no fingers. They pretty much have a jointed hip, so they're mobile. They can walk, but—a dog can jump. Seals can jump to a certain degree, sea lions actually. Yeah, so you are only inhibited by the body, the restraints of their body. They are extremely intelligent, very intelligent. They can be extremely aggressive. We had four and two of them we would go swimming with, so it was fine. Two of them we couldn't. That was their turf and there was no—no matter [what]—and they were little and they weren't going to tolerate it so.

AH: So what would they do to let you know?

LS: Oh, they'd come and they'd bump you a couple of times and then, you know, you get a warning. If you're stupid, you don't take the warning. Yeah, if you're going to hit me, I'm out.

AH: Yeah.

LS: You won. Because—have you ever seen a sea lion in the water? You ain't going to catch him; you can't move. Yeah, you don't see him coming either.

AH: Yeah, okay.

LS: No, it was enough.

AH: So—

LS: And they're very vocal if you go up inside the tanks, you know, you have to pitch—I mean, we had a forty-eight foot semi and a twenty-two foot length pool in there, actually it was twenty-four altogether. And then the whole resting area was, there was shelving where they could come in and out of the water at will.

AH: Okay.

LS: So that was their domain. You didn't really want to cross that. Even to go in to clean them, they had no problem. They could open the gates. They'd come down. They could climb down a ladder and I had a little holding area where they could go up to the side and I could go up and clean out the tank and the pools and so on. But uh, they didn't want you in there if they were in there. And that's okay, that's their place. And if they don't feel safe, there again you have an animal that's not going to work. It causes all kinds of stress that they don't need. I always thought I did pretty good at trying to eliminate as much stress as I could off of them. Even people have a certain limitation as to what they can take. And a lot of it, you have a lot of acceptable stuff. It's just the way it is.

AH: Yeah well, you know, another way of saying that you're not trying to stress them out is that you respect them. You respect them their space, right?

LS: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, they're not living with me in my house trailer so I'm not going to live with them. That's their house trailer. That's their place.

AH: So when you were on the road was this lit inside or—?

LS: Oh, yeah, there was twelve-volt. Everything was one-ten, plus we had generators. And fortunately, contrary to what people think, sea lions don't live in the water twenty-four [seven]. They're not fish. Actually they probably spend as much time out of the water, or more so, than they do actually in the water.

AH: Yeah.

LS: You know? And so yeah, that worked out fine. So [when] traveling, everything was air-conditioned when it needed to be; everything was heated when it needed to be. Contrary to what people think, they don't live in the North Pole. They live in California. That's why they are California sea lions. You know, they are very temperate animals.

AH: Do you know where in California they were picked up from?

LS: I don't, I really don't.

AH: Okay.

LS: And they never gave me that information. I don't think it mattered.

AH: No, no, not especially. I was just curious because I've seen seals in California. So yeah—

LS: Yeah, yeah. Well, if you go to San Francisco now they are destroying the docks.

AH: Oh, is that right?

LS: Oh, yeah. You can't even get to your boat half the time. You've got the big bulls laying up on all the piers, on all the docks and it's— They're so over-protected anymore. They are just over-protected. And they got lumped into a group that needs protection but everything in that species doesn't necessarily need protection. And that's a good example of it.

AH: Yeah. You can just think about the alligator here in Florida. Twenty-five years ago it was in trouble. Now—

LS: Right, right. It's a nuisance again.

AH: It's not trouble at all. Yeah.

LS: If you leave nature be like that, usually you will find out that it is going to be over-populated again. Like I said, we can get into a whole discussion about that—with deer and all that—but it's still—

AH: Okay, so now we are—

LS: So anyway, we got these sea lions.

AH: We are taking you on the trajectory, yes, and now you have got a sea lion act.

LS: So what happened was—I kept several of my favorite dogs from the dog act, and I sold the act as an act to another fellow that was getting started. Which actually that gave him his foothold in the business and he had—the dogs we already probably—most of them were seven, eight, nine years old at that point. So he got another good four or five years out of the original dogs anyway. And they started getting old. A lot of time what I did when my dogs got older is we would place them with older people. Cause they weren't used to families. They weren't used to little kids. And there was always an older couple, an older woman that wanted a poodle, so it just worked out great. So that was a good thing.

So the dog act went and we had to make room for the sea lions.

AH: Okay. So now you've got baboons and sea lions?

LS: Right.

AH: Okay.

LS: Right. We went off our merry way and we did that for several years. And what happened is [that] one of them had a type of feline leukemia, unbeknownst to me. One of them is up in Niagara Falls right now.

AH: Now what animal [was this]?

LS: The sea lions. And another one—we had just gotten home off the road here in town and I drained the pool and I went to—I think I went Brandon to Home Depot. I don't know what I was buying, something. And while I was there one of my neighbors called and said you better come home right away, Judy's all upset in the yard. Well I said, "What happened?" blah, blah, blah.

In the meantime, we had already had a son; our first son was born. So I didn't know if something happened to the baby, if something was going on. Anyway, I got back and she [Judy] was distraught and one of the sea lions was in the bottom of the tank and she was just barely breathing. She wasn't moving. She was just barely breathing. So then where do you take a sea lion?

So fortunately we went over to St. Pete and they were real good over there. Turns out she had a whole belly full of coins.

AH: Oh, wow, really?

LS: Yeah. Not from us.

AH: Yeah, obviously.

LS: Because we didn't have her that long. She ended up having some kind of toxic reaction to this stuff. It enlarged in her gut. And there was no saving her. So that was terrible. It was really bad. It was really, really bad. And the vet, he was brilliant. He tried everything; he really tried. And he knew he already, they x-rayed her and said this is—

AH: Are these coins that would have been thrown in the pool during the act or—?

LS: No, that happened before we got her so I'd rather not say where she came from because it doesn't make them look good, but accidents happen. And in any case, that's what happened. It was pennies or some nickels—so wherever she was before I got her—the public had access to do stuff like that. And being a baby it didn't know any better, it just picked up the—

AH: It saw something, shiny thing, and thought it was a little fish or something. Yeah.

LS: Right and since they don't chew anything, you know, they just pick it up and swallow it. So before they can tell they don't want it, it is usually too late.

AH: So it's probably a long time in the gut where it was uh—

LS: She wasn't that old. She wasn't even two years old. She was a newer one that we had just gotten. But anyways, that was pretty devastating.

AH: Yeah definitely.

LS: It was bad. It was bad. And then it was shortly—it was about a month later that the other one—she wasn't acting right and it ended up that she had— It's kind of like parvovirus. Even though they are vaccinated for that, mine were anyway. It was not parvo but it was a parvo-type virus and there was no way—there was just nothing to clear it up. So we lost her.

In the meantime, I had a contract with Ringling Bros. when I had the sea lions so I had to call them and tell them I couldn't make it.

AH: Oh no. So this would have been your first chance to work with Ringling?

LS: First chance.

AH: Oh (sighs)

LS: And I thought, oh that was the end of it. I thought [that]—I knew that between the baboons and the seals that would be my ticket to the big time but it wasn't meant to be. So like I said, I called the Ringling show and told them flat out what was happening and at one point they said, "Come on, it's okay." You know, do this and do that. Wait another month before you tell me you're not coming. We plan on you coming."

Well, in the meantime then I found another sea lion, actually at Busch Gardens. Busch Gardens doesn't actually own the animals that were there performing. They're leased out—leased in. So I contacted the owner of those animals and he said that there was a surplus animal that they weren't really using there. She was very timid; [it] wasn't what they wanted to do. So he said, "If you can do something with her that's fine. We'll work out a deal." Which was great.

So every day I would drive from down here up to Busch Gardens and practice with her and practice with her and practice with her. And, for whatever reasons, I came in one day and she was gone. And they had inadvertently—I trained her and they sold her to somebody else is what happened.

AH: Agh (sighs).

LS: Not Busch Gardens but this other private owner.

AH: Yes, this other owner. So really it wasn't meant to be this first time [on Ringling Bros. Circus]?

LS: It just wasn't going to happen. It just wasn't going to happen. And then, lo and behold, we had one chimp. We had a seven-year-old chimpanzee. So I had the sea lion and the chimpanzee and we did an act with them two for a while. Where he was— We had him dressed like a captain, an old time sea lion act. And he would throw the ball and

she would catch it. And things like that. It was cute [but] it wasn't what I wanted to do. It just wasn't going to work.

I ended up taking her [the sea lion] and actually she's in Gulfport, Mississippi. She's still there. She's part of their shows at this aquarium over there. So she has done real well.

AH: Nice.

LS: She's done well. And I warned them. I said, [that] because I had her trained to do a lot of climbing and there again with the sea lions, we did a very retro-type sea lion act. And uh—they all [sea lions, that is] balance a ball, but ours climbed ladders and they did hand stands and walked on their front flippers and things like that. They were really agile.

So I said, "You're going to make sure, [that] if you put her outside, to make sure there is a cover at night because she'll actually climb a chain link fence." Well, more than once they found her working in the parking lots, you know what I mean.

AH: (laughs)

LS: I mean, she was confined to their area, but she wasn't where she was supposed to be. And she was an aggressive animal so it took some time to get her back where she needed to go. So they had their hands full, but they worked it out. It was just another step.

AH: So what happens now? So the sea lion act is defunct?

LS: Yeah. It was. In a matter of two and a half or three years it was there and gone. Unfortunately.

AH: Yeah. But you had some time on the road though, in the interim. You had two years or three years?

LS: Yeah. We did a—

AH: Okay, all right. So you got some payback for the year you put into getting the act together.

LS: And by the time we came home—it was just before the sea lions had all the trouble with them, getting sick and stuff—we had just made our last payment back for the initial investment.

AH: So you broke even?

LS: Yeah. Well actually no— Yeah, I guess you could say that.

AH: Okay, okay.

LS: They got all their money back that they had invested—for the equipment, for the trailers, like I said.

AH: So it wasn't a loss anyway?

LS: No, no. It was for me personally but financially, no. It was a strain on the marriage? Yeah you bet [it was]. Anything new like, when you work with your wife twenty-four seven—you know? She's your partner twenty-four seven—

AH: Yeah. Let's talk about this for a minute. I mean what are—

LS: Well, most normal families the dad goes here and the mom goes here. Now all these women have careers all of a sudden. Not all of a sudden, but everybody wants to have a career, you know? Some women are meant to stay home and raise their kids. Not day care. That's another—I won't get into that. However, if you have a legitimate career, I guess—I don't know.

But anyway, the male and female usually depart for eight, nine, ten, twelve hours a day. They come home, somebody cooks or usually nobody cooks anymore. So everybody goes down and they got out to eat, they come home, they watch an hour of TV and then go to bed. Maybe they have sex, maybe they don't. If they're lucky [they do].

AH: (laughs)

LS: —And, you know, it's five days a week that way. Saturday comes [and] the woman has to do everything she didn't do all week. The guy's out; he doesn't want to do nothing.

We didn't have that. We had twenty-four seven.

AH: Yes. And when you're dealing with all these other animals, like you said, that obviously puts some strain on it. Suddenly she's in a pecking order with baboons—

LS: Right.

AH: And you're busy with the sea lions.

LS: And now, by this time, we had two boys. Two sons.

AH: And that must have been very stressful for her because obviously the—I mean [that] I am assuming that the burden of the boys fell on her.

LS: Well, yeah, I don't breast feed (laughs).

AH: Yeah well of course.

LS: Yeah, it did, and she was extremely maternal. This is still in the circus. So in the circus—and the carnival is the same way—but in the circus there's more time so you have more people that are there. There again, all the females are always gathered together. And um—there's always five or six babies' strollers by the bandstand and who's ever not working is standing there with the babies. If that parent comes out, you take it back to your trailer. So it was a constant shuffle of baby buggies backstage for the circus.

AH: So but you have a support system there?

LS: Always.

AH: Which, without it, it would have been impossible. Am I right?

LS: Well, and there's other people that have done it alone. There's times when you are alone.

AH: Oh yeah.

LS: On the carnivals it ended up that way. We had—since all that happened— How much time was that? (pauses to think) About five years and another set of kids come. So the baby now is just nine. But by that time we were on a carnival.

AH: So the other set you are referring to is the adopted daughters?

LS: Right, the two girls. Right. Michelle was nineteen months old. So you are traveling with infants again but now we're on our own because we are the entertainment on the fair. So that support is not there. Because the dynamic is different on the fair; everybody is working all day long. With the circus you have between shows and so on. But it's not the same with the carnival. There's a lot more hours involved, working hours involved. So, therefore, you are segregated most of the time.

AH: So, is that because everything at the carnival is going on simultaneously? It's not a linear—?

LS: Exactly, cause it's all happening at once and most of the families— That's not to say that we all don't know who each others' kids are. You are talking [that] all the kids are seven, eight, nine [or] ten-year-olds. It's a lot different than infants. So the older sister had to watch the little one while me and Judy were on stage and there was a certain part of the stage show where I was doing most of the talking and so Judy could come out the back without the audience [seeing]. There was like an apron where they couldn't see and she'd sneak out of the trailer, check on the girls and make sure the girls were okay, [and] come back on. And then Judy did some of the act. At that point I'd walk back out and make sure they were okay. So until Michelle was old enough to be put into the show, which there again, now you have got a built-in baby sitter.

But as twenty-four—I mean—you're living in a—we had a relatively large house trailer. We had a fifty-foot house trailer. Two bedrooms, it had five slide-outs. It was like an apartment on wheels. But still, we had set times to eat. We cleaned together; we did the animals together; we practiced together. You have to set it up. You have to set it down. We had two trucks and trailers at that point for the one show. And then we had, then we built a Wild West show, so that involved another two sets of truck and trailers. And another group of people that we were paying to work it. Then we started producing shows.

AH: Okay.

LS: And that kind of gets us up to where we—

AH: Okay. So, so—

LS: We finished the circus; we did the whole circus thing. Okay. And [it was] the thrill of my life. We were there six years with Ringling Bros. Affiliated with them for six years so it was great. I loved it. It was a dream come true. I'd go back tomorrow.

AH: So it was everything that you had dreamed of really and more?

LS: And more.

AH: Really. So tell us about the *and more*? I mean what—first of all wait— Let's go back to Ringling. I want to finish up a couple of domestic things first.

LS: Okay, all right.

AH: So first, how do you make a marriage work like that? I mean obviously it's a lot more difficult. There has got to be probably some more give and take and compromise between you two than with a typical couple who is diverted from each other a lot of the time. How—and if you can try to sum it up for us— What are the things, like, if someone else was going to attempt to do this, what would you tell them?

LS: Don't do it (laughs). But if you are bound and determined to do it, you know, first of all, you need a strong marriage. You have to love your partner. Irregardless, you have to love your partner first and foremost. And you have to know where to draw the line. I'd come in screaming and yelling about something that was wrong and—I hate to admit it and I hope she never hears this—most of the time it was my fault. But it was her fault for not—for letting me—you know what I mean?

AH: Okay.

LS: I had to blame somebody.

AH: (laughs)

LS: And usually it was nothing and the more I think about it now the more I haven't done it. For instance, there's a big, big crowd and all of a sudden you know for a fact that there's several other people in the audience that [are] in the business. So don't want to even take a breath out of sync. Every movement—at least it was for me—you could count my steps and I would retrace my steps almost identical. [The] animals had all the freedom but I always kept the same; I just worked the same way. I worked to the music; I had a set dialogue and things like that.

So if something—if my timing was off—and it might have been unnoticeable to anybody, but if my timing was off, I would wait for her to either pick up the speed or slow me down. And always—she was always doing something, thinking about doing something else. It didn't work out that way. So therefore, it was her fault.

AH: Okay.

LS: It's just the way it is.

AH: So you started that thought by saying “you have to know where to draw the line.”

LS: Yeah. And to draw the line is to not let stuff like that come— By the time you get from the stage area or the ring—by the time you get to the house-trailer, the discussion has to be over. You need to settle it between there and there. No matter what the distance it needs to be settled. You don't bring one [work] into the house and you don't bring the house out to there. That's how accidents happen.

You know? Listen. It's inevitable that you are going to have an argument with your wife or vice versa domestically in the house. You have to clear your head as you're walking out the trailer steps putting on your costumes. It has got to end because it transpires back into the animals again—especially if you are working with potentially volatile animals or potentially volatile animals. You have got to stop that.

So it's a lot of discipline— there was for us. There was for us. Because ultimately, the product is what's paying you. The product has to be steady. It has to be the same all the time. And we did that. We found our place of lines in the sand. And, after the act or whatever, you could come back and start the fight again. Women don't forget. By the time I'm done, okay, it's over. Then she'll start in.

AH: Yes.

LS: Just the needling and whatever.

AH: Okay.

LS: But and, like I said, that's normal, but you have to know where to stop it. You just do. Whether you do trapeze, helicopter pilots, parachute people—anybody that's doing

something that's high-risk. You have to stop because you have to stay focused. Even divers, whatever. People get hurt because they lose focus. And a lot of good circus people have gotten injured [or] killed by losing focus.

pause in recording

AH: Okay.

LS: And Judy was and still is extremely maternal. The children always came first. Before me [or] before anything, the kids came first. So I had to learn to deal with that. And that's fine—share my time. You're supposed to be the adult so you're supposed to be able to figure that out.

AH: Yeah. Well, she had to deal with her own pecking order when she came into the marriage. So you eventually found yourself in one too.

LS: Unfortunately yeah. Thanks for bringing that up to the forefront. That's exactly what happened. Yeah, that's exactly it.

AH: And how much of it is—whether it's from your point of view or from Judy's—how much of drawing the line and saying, “Okay, I've said enough”? Or how much of it is telling her, “Cool it. I can't take any more”? Or is it both?

LS: I'm a screamer and had the baboons longer than I had her. So my thing is: he who yells loudest shuts up the conversation. I usually didn't win, but I did for the moment. I was a yeller and a screamer and a door slammer and all that. She was absolutely not that way. And then she would just pick a time and make you feel like a real piece of dirt.

AH: Yeah. Of course, to remind you of your folly.

LS: Exactly. And now— We just talked about it yesterday when we had people for Christmas—and people that know us were there so they know. They've watched us grow over the years, you know? So it's funny. So they said, “You guys don't do that anymore.”

AH: Well you're not much of a screamer anymore?

LS: No, no. The pressure is not there. It was my own pressure. It was the pressure I put on myself. Going back, not being born into the business, with me I always had this chip that I always had to prove [myself]. You know? And uh, I guess that transpires to a lot of different occupations but in the performing arts, in particular, it's one thing to be the son of Clark Gable—you're always going to suck because you're not Clark Gable. And you have to accept that. But Clark Gable had a start. So Clark Gable—I don't know if that is the right metaphor but, like I said, not coming from a long family lineage I was always trying to prove my worth.

And then you come to find out that you don't have to—you can stop doing that now. You've done it. It doesn't come that quick but over time you start to realize wait a minute; wait a minute, what's around me? I am one of three primate acts left in [the] North American Continent. All the other ones have fell by the wayside. Apparently, I must be doing something right. And there's a feeling of satisfaction.

AH: Well and as we were talking about Ringling—I kind of brought us back to the domestic stuff— But if we could try to conclude for today here. You got to Ringling and you were kind of like—and then you started producing shows and then yada, yada, yada. And that brings us up, more or less, into the present?

LS: Well yeah. I could fill in a lot of the holes.

AH: Yeah, well, and we will. This is going to end being a three-session interview, I think, to do it justice.

LS: Okay, okay. Yeah, I mean—

AH: Because we are going to talk about some fundamentals of the circus and carnie life next time too.

LS: Yeah, there's a lot of differences and a lot similarities. But it's apples and oranges. They're both fruit but they're apples and oranges.

AH: Yes. So you're producing shows and helping other people bring off their own shows at that point.

LS: Well I had a pool of people that were getting a little bit too old for what they were known for doing— High wire acts and things like that. And they were not doing that anymore. So they were still excellent performers. They still had the desire to go on the road and be in front of an audience and so I just started calling people saying, "Hey I'm putting this together. Do you think you would be interested in doing that?"

Most of the shows I built around the skills that they [already] had. They might not have made a living with them but I knew they could do [them]. Because we all multi-task. Between the riding act, the seal act, [and] the baboon act, I did the flying trapeze. I did aerial acts. You know I clowned. I juggle. Whatever it took to get the job done. And most performers can do that. I played five instruments and it's all self-taught because—

AH: Well, it sounds like that is one the real universal experiences of working in a circus or, you know, that kind of situation is that you have to know a lot of different stuff. You have to be flexible and you have to be able to take on opportunities as they come, right?

LS: Exactly, exactly. Yeah that's pretty much the way it is. Not everybody did that but I was like a vacuum I wanted to know it all, [to] learn it all, [to] try everything. So it worked out well. Like I said, I didn't have a family to teach me how to do all these

things. So I had to keep getting myself adopted by different people through different periods of my life. When I tell you that everyday could be a chapter of a book, it could be. Because the circumstances around one day would take six interviews to fill.

AH: Yeah I mean we could do—

LS: We might get to one or two of those. (laughs)

AH: Yeah [we could] do a day in the life.

LS: A day in the life, yeah.

AH: Okay. Of Lee Stevens, Chapter One, Chapter Two— The Baboon Years. Okay. But um— All right, I guess we'll conclude here for today.

LS: I hope it's what you're looking for.

AH: Oh it's great. Thank you very much.

End of second interview, Start of third interview

AH: All right, this is Andy Huse again. I'm here with Lee Stevens. It is February 15th, is it? [We are] here to conclude, or at least wrap up, the portion of Lee's story that he could tell.

LS: Yeah.

AH: So we left off and the seal show had run its course and you were kind of settling down. Tell us what— let's pick up— and what year was this that we left off at? When was the seal show done?

LS: Uh, I guess it was the late-eighties.

AH: Okay.

LS: And I don't remember if we had gotten to the Ringling show yet. If we had discussed that.

AH: Actually we did get into the Ringling show. Let's recap a bit. Yeah, in a nutshell—

LS: Well, I was contacted by the Ringling organization. Actually, Kenneth Feld himself called personally and was booking my acts. I had the baboon act and the sea lions. We were supposed to go the following year to Disneyland for seventeen weeks, I think it was, and then from there go to Japan—Tokyo, Osaka. It happened that that winter when I got home, is when I lost the first sea lion. So we kind of went through that. So it just didn't work out. I was pretty devastated.

Well along the course of the way things worked out I had this other one sea lion. Busch Gardens had several surplus sea lions. Those shows are all owned by a corporation from California. They [Busch Gardens] don't actually own the animals. (coughs) But they had some surplus animals that weren't trained. The head vet said I was more than welcome to go down, pick one out and if it worked out we could make some kind of financial arrangement, which we did and I started training it and so on and so on. It was fun. And then through a fluke—I had the sea lion just about ready to go into the act and for some unknown reason I went in the next day and it was gone. They had sold it to somebody else.

AH: After you had trained it?

LS: Well it wasn't finished but it was sea broke. I tamed her down, you were able to touch her and pet her and things like that. So yeah pretty much. That's just the way it goes. I'm not a corporation.

AH: I remember that part.

LS: So anyways that didn't work out. La la la. And, lo and behold, I called up Mr. Feld and told him that there was no way I could go on his tour or fulfill the contract. And that I wasn't going to come with anything less than what should be the quality of the greatest show on earth. And he kept making sure that's what I wanted to do and I flat out said yeah. I waited all my life to be there. You know? If I don't go, it's not going to be because I don't want to be there, it's because I know that it's not good enough and you won't be happy. And I plan on staying there a long time.

AH: Yes.

LS: And uh, he thought that was pretty admirable of me just to be that honest because most acts would try to do it and just fluff their way through. And I didn't. That's just how I am. He said, "I just can't believe that somebody was doing that and turning down the kind of money that you're talking about. But trust me we'll do business sometime in the future." And it was about four months later that he called me back and we made the deal for the following year, which turned into a six-year run.

AH: Yes. And now what show as that?

LS: That was Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus.

AH: No. I mean what show were you—

LS: I was on all three. I am the only act that ever worked for all three units. You had a gold unit, the blue and the red.

AH: Now what are those, I don't understand: gold, blue and red?

LS: They are three completely different circuses. They are all Ringling Bros., but they are all different. What happens is each production runs in a two-year cycle. So, for instance, this year at the fairgrounds the blue show just opened. Well, that's the show that is going to be on the road for the next two years. The red show comes in next year and it will be all new. So every town they alternate so it's never the same show twice. Or three times now actually.

AH: Yes. So you were in for all three rotations then and that was your six years—three two-year [tours]?

LS: Uh-huh.

AH: And then what was the show? Were they sea lions again or?

LS: Just the baboons. Actually the first two tours were just the baboons. And then we had to skip a year, actually miss a year to get onto the other unit. So we went up into Baraboo, Wisconsin. And we—we didn't lay off. We worked up there all summer. And while we were there we put together another pony act with miniature horses. So we had twelve miniature horses. And then in turn, [we] went back because the show that we were going back to was—the whole theme was children. It was all “Children of the Rainbow,” “Children of the World.” So we had all these little miniature horses and I had them trained for people to ride, they pulled stage coaches, plus they did an act. So they were—through all the spec and production numbers my ponies were in all those numbers with the kids. So that was kind of fun.

Lo and behold, I thought I was be there forever and, as things—corporations change, and his ideas change and whatever— They did away with all the privately-owned animal acts at the end of that tour.

AH: So they only wanted acts that they owned.

LS: Animal acts that they owned. Right. Because they keep scaling down the show. It is a shadow of what it used to be. When I was there I think there was still two hundred-plus performers. I don't think there's forty on the show now. Maybe forty. So it's a big, big change. Whatever works for them, that's fine.

But knowing that we weren't going back, we knew—I don't remember when it was—April, May. You know that you're not going back the following year. That's when I decided to go back into the fair market. And I started building stages for the fairs. That's how they got the Baboon Lagoon.

I came home. I made a deposit on the fellow in town here that built trailers. And he never built on like I wanted, but he was more than capable as a craftsman so he did it. So he finished it all off while I was gone. And it really worked out well.

AH: So okay. So while you were still on the road, he was working on your stage. So that when you were done, it was ready.

LS: Yes, yes.

AH: Very nice.

LS: However, me not realizing how the entertainment worked on the fairs. See, you don't necessarily work for the carnival. You work for the fair committees so it would be the State of Florida if I did, which I did, the Florida State Fair or whatever state fairs I worked on. But usually you are six months or a year ahead in booking it. So when I got off the road I wasn't going right back to work again right away. Which was fine. We went out on a little small show and we were just treading water, making money. Kept paying to build this other stage. Buying more equipment. So by the time the fall came that was it—we were ready to go back out again.

And then we started the Baboon Lagoon show. And that was the first one of its kind. It was probably the biggest traveling stage, mobile stage in the country and it just set a new—I have to brag—it was [a] new watermark for people to come to. And it was a good thing. It was a good thing.

And we kept the family together. What we did—we took a basic animal act and we cut out a lot of the stuff that was unnecessary from the circus act and we did more of a family adventure and it was a half-hour show. And the whole thing told a story. My boys were little. I think they were seven and eight or eight and nine. So they became Stanley and Livingston. So they were the comedy relief. And they came out like two old English explorers with the monocles and the whole thing. They hated it.

AH: Oh, really?

LS: Oh, they were mortified; they hated it.

AH: What, were they dressed up like they were on a safari or something?

LS: Yeah, yeah. Everything was oversized: big, oversized canteens; big, giant mosquito nets; big, giant pit helmets and they had big insects stuck to the side of the thing.

AH: Now did they have speaking roles?

LS: Yeah, yeah. Everybody had to talk.

AH: But they were playing older people.

LS: Right.

AH: Okay.

LS: That didn't work out. That only lasted for about three or four spots.

AH: What do you mean, the kids being involved?

LS: No, the kids were involved but they wanted to get out of the old-man clown kind of stuff. So we kind of scaled it back a bit.

AH: So what? They didn't like the outfits? Is that it? Or just the whole bit? They just didn't like it.

LS: They didn't mind it. They were both like pre-puberty, so they were going through this whole little macho-shit attitudes. And they would see girls in the audience and they felt stupid. It was that kind of thing. But they did it and they did it well.

AH: Now did they object to performing altogether?

LS: No, no.

AH: They just didn't like that particular outfit.

LS: Because they weren't themselves. And they were never not themselves.

AH: Oh, okay.

LS: Even before, on the Ringling Show and other places, they were always themselves.

AH: They were always just a guy their age?

LS: Yeah, yeah. And now you're playing a character so now you're bending their rules a little bit. So they didn't appreciate it.

AH: So that didn't last. You didn't make them do that.

LS: Oh, they did it, not to the extent that they were doing it as far as the look and the wardrobe and the lines they said in they show. We just kind of scaled [it back] so that it wasn't so corny for them. Or they didn't feel so corny. I overproduced it, let me put it that way. It was overproduced.

AH: (laughs)

LS: So much as they had to wear tights under these big, baggy shorts and they had all black wool sewn to it like leg hair and stuff like that.

AH: So Lee Stevens does everything kind of larger than life.

LS: Until it bites me in the ass.

AH: Yes (laughs). And that was a little too big for the boys.

LS: But they did it and we handled a lot of animals. What they did— I'll tell you what their main purpose was and when you dissect it. We had the baboons on stage, my wife and myself. The kids never came near the baboons. They just weren't prepared mentally to be able to handle that. And there is always an element of danger still involved. It's still a primate. Primates usually don't like anything smaller than them or anything that they perceive to be weaker than them. So knowing that you just don't put anybody in danger or stress the animals out. It works both ways.

So we wanted to integrate— We had a [African] Serval cat, it's like a miniature cheetah, because it was a lot of education too. And I think we had only one of two in the country that actually was on a leash and performed. It lived in the house; it was like house cat. It was a great cat. But in any case— So the boys were on this whole big safari and it had this whole special music so when the audience got familiar with it, every time they heard this music they knew that Stanley and Livingston were going to come out.

AH: Okay.

LS: You know, so Stanley and Livingston—the first thing they did [was] they'd come out and they'd bring this big kettle, like a voodoo kettle. And you had to [be] politically correct so, you know. And it was a magic illusion is what it was. And the cat was already in the kettle. Well, [we'd] open and I used to say, "What is that?" And they'd say, "We're on a safari." I'd say, "What are [you] hunting for?" I forget the whole lines.

AH: So you would ask them this as the emcee?

LS: Because they interrupted the show.

AH: Oh, oh.

LS: This music would come on and all of a sudden here they'd come out of the corner. And they walked around the whole set.

AH: So the animals would be performing or something and then all of a sudden they would burst in with this music.

LS: And they came out—like I said—they came out from behind the whole set and walked up a set of stairs up on the apron of the stage. And just stopped everything and they put this big pot down, you know. Oh, the first thing they did—let me back up—was um, no it was the cat. The cat was first. Anyway, you open the lid and I'd say, "What's in your voodoo pot?" And they say, "I don't know, we just found it in junk." I don't know—whatever the line was. They didn't like it anyway. So I open the lid and it was this piece of leopard skin and it was cut out like a cat. And I said, "What is that?" And

one of them would say, “It’s a flat cat” or “A cat with a flat.” And we went back and forth on that, play on words.

I said, “Well how are you going to fix it?” Well, actually Stanley says, “We need to fix it.” And I say, “How are you going to fix it?” So Livingston says, “I don’t know; do you have any ideas?” And they do this little Abbott and Costello “Who’s On First?” thing. And then, while they’re doing that, I go back and I come out with this big pump. So it was like a clown gag. It was a big oversize pump. I said, “I have an idea,” and they said “Oh, yeah, that’ll work.” So one kid took it and pumped and the other kid held the air hose next to the thing. When you opened the lid out came the cat. Ta-da!

And then Judy would talk about the cat and explain it to the audience what it is. It’s full grown. You know. For every big cat there is a miniature cat in the wild. And basically there is. And his name was Zulu so I say, “Say goodbye to Zulu.” Zulu went back in the pot and the boys would take it off.

The second time they would come out, they would do the same thing—interrupt and it was big round zebra thing and “What’s in there?”—and they had fishing poles, big, big, oversized fishing poles. And [I would say] “What are you guys doing?” [They would say] “We’re going fishing.” “What do you mean you’re going fishing?” “We’re going fishing.” And I said, “What are you going to use for bait?” And one of them would say “Worms,” and I’d say, “What kind of worms?” And the other one said, “Jungle worms.” And I said, “Jungle worms? What’s a jungle worm?”

And then he’d go open the pot, the little one, and the snake would come out. We had a twelve or thirteen foot boa constrictor. No, it was a python. And he’d pop up and then Judy would take that and talk about the snake and so on and so on. And then, she’d say “You know what? This is a great opportunity for a picture. Why don’t you put it on and show the boys and girls how you take your picture?” So and then one kid would put the snake around him and the other took a picture. And then [to the audience] “If you’d like to have a photograph with whatever the snake’s name was, after the show we’ll be right out here and we’ll be happy to help you.”

And then was the end of the commercial. We’d finish the act and we’d end up with the motorcycles and all the lights and fog. Thank you very much.

AH: Now the baboons were on the motorcycles?

LS: Yeah.

AH: Yeah okay. Now I saw a picture of your act and you and Judy were in it, both decked out, full regalia. And the baboons were in tutus. So was that a different show?

LS: Nope, same one.

AH: Okay. But they actually wore these kind of dresses kind of things?

LS: No, no—

AH: It wasn't really even a dress, it was like a—I don't know.

LS: I'll tell you exactly what it was. In Japan they tie everything. Everything you buy they tie with string—well, they don't have string over there, there's no lumber. So everything is synthetic and they have this flat stuff that looks like two-inch ribbon with cellophane. And when they twist it, it makes a rope. So I bought a roll of this stuff one day, just playing with it. And I could weave it through a piece of cord and it would—I don't know how to explain it— But it would hang down. I would have two pieces hanging down like necktie and if just pulled and shredded it, it would shred. So I ended up knotting this stuff across these pieces of rope and it ended up making these colorful—it was just like a ruffle [is] all it was.

AH: Yeah, it was like this ruffle skirt.

LS: Uh-huh. And the reason for that, basically, was so that the audience knows when they're looking at something it's not the same. They have an idea of what's going— They're all different colors. So they know that this baboon is doing that, that baboon does this.

AH: It was a way to give them a little identity.

LS: Yeah, I wasn't trying to make them people because I would try to keep it as undressed as I could. However, all that color just added to what the animals were doing.

AH: Absolutely. Okay.

LS: So it worked out. Especially when they were doing all the flips and the somersaults.

AH: Yeah, well you'd keep track of one and the one in the pink is now over on this side of the stage.

LS: Right, exactly.

AH: Yeah, okay.

LS: The one in the yellow did this, the one in the blue worked on its hands. The one in the pink did all the flips. The one in the green climbed the tree. So it was more for the public then. It's nothing that—

AH: Did it help cover up their pink derrieres?

LS: No, they wore a panty.

AH: Oh, they did? They wore an underwear type of deal? Okay. So that people didn't have to see that.

LS: It's pretty nasty.

AH: (laughs) Yeah, it's pretty crazy.

LS: There's nothing pretty about a monkey's ass. (both talking at once)

AH: Well, especially the baboons.

LS: Yeah especially the baboons, right.

AH: They're very um—

LS: Especially the females.

AH: Yeah. What, do they get very colorful back there?

LS: Yeah, that's a nice way to put it.

AH: (laughs)

LS: It gets very fleshy and swollen. It's just unsightly.

AH: Like when they're in heat and stuff. It gets out of control, I bet.

LS: Which is every month.

AH: Like people.

LS: Just like people.

AH: Except they tend to show it a little more.

LS: Well, my wife did it one way and they did it another way.

AH: So do they actually bleed?

LS: Yeah, oh, yeah.

AH: So the panties came in handy for that as well.

LS: Uh-huh, uh-huh. None of my animals were ever surgically altered in any way. They had all their teeth. I never had anything castrated or—you know?

AH: Yeah.

LS: If they didn't want to be there—I never had to force any of the animals to do anything. If you just take your time with it. And then it becomes a group and I have always left with—speaking for myself—my baboons always lived in a group. Always. They slept separately, they ate separately, but all day long they were together. So they managed, they had their own pecking order. And I worked within that. Rather than trying to— It just makes life easier.

AH: Rather than impose yourself.

LS: Yeah. You don't have to. You don't have to.

AH: And that's one of the things that really came through, in all the conversations that we've had, is this kind of underlying respect for the animals and for— Well you always say that you don't want to stress them out.

LS: No.

AH: And it's just, you know, not only pragmatic as a business decision—you don't want to have a bunch of stressed out baboons—something embarrassing would happen. But on the other hand, it's just more humane.

LS: It makes life easier.

AH: Exactly.

LS: And people think, they get this whole thing with this [the baboons are] exotic and they live in the jungle. Yeah that's all true to a point but it's no different— What I did was no different than you owning one or two dogs in your house. If you have more than one dog—one of them is a dominant dog, always. Well as long as that dominant dog knows the rules of the house they won't tolerate it. It keeps the other dogs in line. It is that simple. So to cut through all the work— You watch the *Dog Whisperer* (show on the National Geographic Channel on television), it's no different. Put yourself in the animal's place. That's all you got to do. And then you eliminate all this wasted time, all this frustration.

You know what a primate is capable of doing. You just have to direct it. I never even had to tell them what to do. I mean, we just worked. They knew what came next. And many times I would forget something and then another would just come off its seat and she was already going to do something because I screwed up. They know. They know. And, sometimes they work fast and sometimes they worked slow. It was no big deal. It just didn't have to be. I had enough of them. I had enough color, enough flash. I knew what I had. I knew I was one of, at the time, two people that even had any kind of group of monkeys that large. In front of an audience or even living together and living among them.

AH: So what about today? Is there anything comparable today?

LS: No, nothing.

AH: Are there baboon shows that just aren't as big or are there just no baboon shows that you know of?

LS: I know that there is one other person and they have a whole different array of animals and they have one baboon.

AH: Okay.

LS: And there's a guy on the west coast that, he was—I don't know—he was just starting well actually when I was just kind of getting out of it—or maybe a little sooner. And he's done quite well. He's done a lot of movie work and stuff, but nothing with a group. It's all been one-on-one. Which—and that's fine too. The guy's very good at what he does. And he has some beautiful, beautiful animals.

AH: So are there advantages of working with a group? I mean, obviously it's harder and more work but—

LS: Advantages monetarily?

AH: I mean obviously you are going to have a bigger show. But what I mean is as far as training and the animals kind of keeping each other in line and things like that.

LS: No, because the training—I dissected it and I learned by trying to watch what other people did and figuring that I didn't like what was going on. Not that there was abuse or anything, it just—it seemed that it was taking them too long to do what they had to do. So I said this is not the right way to go about it. For us, we got them all when they were very small. We became the surrogate parents and that's how it started. And then it was all just little basic behaviors, just like teaching a baby. I would open—I would bring them in the house. They'd be in the house with us. When I'd say "Give me your hand," I mean give me your hand. Give me the other hand. Give me your foot. Give me your other foot. They had to surrender their extremities because in the wild they don't do that. Because the minute they are being held, they are defenseless.

So the first they had to learn was that nothing was going to happen. It's okay. So it is contrary to what their natural instinct is. And it just takes time. Some of the baboons took a week and they didn't care; some took three months. It was just every day, okay here's that, give them a little treat. That's it. There was no training involved. Until they were probably close to three years old, at different times, before I even put a trick on them. Because the tricks were easy. Once they knew—

AH: Yeah, they could do the trick right?

LS: Yeah, they could do it. You had to just help them get through it whatever it was. If it was riding a scooter they had to use their feet, they had to use their hands to hold on they had to use their eyes to see and they had to use their body weight to steer it. So it's a lot of coordination. They are capable of doing it. If you do it in little baby steps it just—all of sudden it's just there. It's just there.

AH: But that first stage is the surrendering the extremities. And then what is there something in between that and the tricks themselves?

LS: No, it's just every day. It's just every day. They are part of the family. Not all of them—we never put all the babies together with all the older ones just so they wouldn't get hurt. Because that's a natural thing. It's going to happen. You have to know that and not put them in a situation like that. And, if they were scared, they knew they had to come to me. Which worked. So I just thought like they did and I used it against them when I needed to.

AH: Okay.

LS: If that makes any sense. There was a lot of jealousy in them. So if I didn't like the way one was doing something or acting or she was getting a little too pushy I always had my two key baboons. I had one that would do anything for me and I had another that wanted to do anything but the other one wouldn't let her. So I had them both going. And there was many times where they were both being stupid and I would say, "Zsa Zsa, go take care of so and so," or whosever name I used. She'd go in; she'd jump on her, thrash her about a little bit. Put her in line. And that was that. So she kept everybody in place.

AH: So the baboons themselves kind of governed each other.

LS: Absolutely, absolutely.

AH: At your behest.

LS: Contrary to what years and years ago most people did. They kept all the chimps solitary. Everything was always, you know, they didn't want to have—I think people didn't understand that with a group it's not so much that they are going to attack you in strength. It's not about that. It's let them be who they are. And you have to find your place in that.

AH: Yes. And we talked about that with Judy especially.

LS: Yeah, yeah. I'm repeating myself but it goes back to that.

AH: No, no, no. It's all linking together. That's the idea here too is that if we breeze through in an hour we're not going to connect those dots.

LS: The hardest thing—I could tell you it sounds sarcastic or cynical—the hardest thing that we did on the fairs when we had the Baboon Lagoon show, which was a thirty minute show, was for the baboons to stay put for thirty minutes or twenty-seven minutes. You know what I mean? Because their minds are constantly going. So they want to do this or they want to do that or they see someone in the audience. They see this; they see that. So you have to be constantly watching over your shoulder either reassuring them or going back and saying “Break it up. Quit being stupid. You [are] going to be out of here in two minutes. Shut up.” You know?

AH: (laughs)

LS: And you talk to them like they’re people. And I think I told you this too— A lady got very upset with me for standing there just cursing and screaming and yelling at the baboons one day. Well she wrote this big, long letter [about] how disgusting it was that I was using this vile language on these poor helpless animals. They don’t know what the hell I’m saying! It’s the tone of your voice.

AH: Absolutely it is.

LS: And the monkey that screams the loudest gets the banana. So it’s the same thing. If you just relate it to like everyday issues it takes the mystery out of it. And that’s with any animal, training anything.

AH: Oh, sure. You curse at the dog; the dog doesn’t care.

LS: Yeah. Everything was born in captivity so it wasn’t like we were going to Africa and shooting the mother and taking the baby. I mean, that makes a good movie. It’s just not how it is.

AH: Okay. So let’s talk about—you get through your twenty-seven minute show, your thirty minute show—what is the first thing the baboons want to do after the show? I mean, when you say “Okay. Go do what you want do,” what do they do?

LS: Basically the first— Well, I can tell you step-by-step. As soon as we go out the back, I just let them go. They jump back up into the truck. They’d all go into their own boxes. And then they’d all stand there and turn around and put their back feet out, up on the ledge, and wait for me to go undress each one. And I had to undress each one the same every day because I—Zsa Zsa had to be undressed first.

AH: In the order—

LS: Their pecking order. So the lowliest of their low was the last one for everything.

AH: Okay. So they would sit there and put their feet out and you would just pull off the skirt and all that stuff.

LS: It was easy. Everything I did with them we'd dress from the back. So it was just easy for them. They'd just stand there and wait for you and they'd pick their feet up and pick the other foot up. They can dress themselves if they wanted to. But anyway, I'd take all their costumes off one at a time, talk to them, pet them, love on each one of them. And that's all they're waiting for. After that they'd all stay in their boxes. Now all the doors are all open and then they were inside one big enclosure. So it was all separate boxes inside of a big one—not a box but a— They had the whole—

AH: These kind of cubbies like?

LS: No. I mean, they were all fairly good-sized cages. They were all fiberglass cases and they all had mesh fronts on them. So they could all see each other at all times. They could all talk together because they were all opposite each other.

AH: Oh, I see.

LS: There was never like they were all down on one side. No, they were all facing each other.

AH: Okay, and they could see through the walls into the other [cages]?

LS: Oh, yeah. They could always interact, they always knew what was going on. They could talk to each other. They talk a lot. And then so anyway I take the last costume—

AH: And this is the grunting and stuff that you were talking about earlier.

LS: Oh, yeah.

AH: That's their communication.

LS: And a lot of foraging. So the last thing I would do is I would take off the last costume. I'd be putting the costumes away or washing them if I had to wash them if they had an accident or whatever. They'd just sit there and wait for me. Then I'd take some sawdust and put it on the floor and I'd take peanuts, I'd take sunflower seeds, grapes, and mix it all up into saw dust and just throw it on the floor and they'd go out. And I had a big mesh door that I closed. It was pretty—it was open. They could reach out and do what they wanted to do. But I'd close it and they'd all sit there and I'd say, "Okay, Zsa Zsa." And Zsa Zsa would go down first and she'd grab whatever she wanted to grab and then one by one they'd all come out and they just did their own thing.

AH: So they would grab stuff and what and eat it there or take it back their box?

LS: Oh, no, no. They'd sit there and stuff their faces. They have big, huge pouches on their faces. So it's just like they put it all in there and saved it for later.

AH: They just kind of shoved it in.

LS: And then they'd do that for a while and I'd go in and I'd get changed. Judy would get changed. We'd get changed. Then we go back out to the truck again and then we said, "Okay. Everybody back in the house." So everybody would go back to their own house. And then I always gave extra stuff to the ones on the end. But I couldn't let the other ones see me doing it though.

AH: Oh.

LS: In case they didn't get anything.

AH: Oh, okay. So the lowest on the pecking order might get a little extra something?

LS: Well, yeah. She always got at least what the other ones got. Always.

AH: Yeah, okay. Just to make sure that they got fed too.

LS: And that's just the treat stuff. They always ate in the morning, in the afternoon and at night. They got three meals a day. We'd give them oranges, apples, cucumbers in the morning say. In the afternoon they got peanut butter sandwiches. And then at night they had a prepared monkey biscuit. Purina used to make it. Anyways a prepared monkey diet, they got that.

AH: Sounds like a better diet than a lot people eat. (laughs) With all the fresh produce and everything.

LS: Yeah. They got lettuce and grapes or whatever. Vegetables and fruits, and this other stuff.

AH: So they liked peanut butter, huh?

LS: Oh, yeah.

AH: All right so um—

LS: So anyway we went from that and then we had this big Baboon Lagoon show and then we built—the next show we built was Wild West Follies. There was friends of ours that were retiring from the circus, but they were too young to retire. They just couldn't physically do a high-wire act and stuff like that anymore so they would practice whip-cracking and things for a long time.

So I built another show and I knew what they could do, so I built it around their skills. Added to it. Added some magic stuff to it. Added some more kiddy—it was more of a kiddy show. They had some puppets and some animatronics in it that interacted with the characters onstage. That was the Wild West Follies. That went well.

Then I built the All the King's Horses. We had Friesians, and Lipizzans, and Andalusian stallions. And then I hired part of the Herman family out of Myakka. And they came and presented that show. And then I had, after that, frog jumping championships, which was a guy that was trying to market this Callibaris [Calligaris frogs] Frog Jumping. Well, we ended up making this whole big swamp set and he came looked like Justin Whatever-his-name from New Orleans. The cook. He had the big overalls—

AH: Paul Prudhomme?

LS: No, no, no, no. He was a chef. This guy was a cook—an old good ol' boy chef with the big bib overalls. And he used to always drink his brandy when he was putting it in the—

AH: Oh, you're thinking of the "Woo-wee!" I can't remember.

LS: Justin something. [Wilson]

AH: Yeah. I know who you are talking about.

LS: That's the guy. So this guy did a show on that with that kind of character.

(A child enters and begins to talk to LS and AH)

LS: Hello.

Child: Whatcha guys doing?

LS: I'm talking monkeys.

AH: (laughs)

Child: Well, why you guys talking in here?

LS: Because we're on the radio—we're talking on the radio.

AH: You're on the radio now.

LS: Uh-oh.

AH: Here, we'll pause it.

pause in recording

AH: Well, okay so—so what is your role with these shows? You've got all these other shows going on are you managing the shows?

LS: I owned them. I produced them. I built them. I paid for them.

AH: Yes.

LS: I promoted them.

AH: Okay. So by this time you had enough capital to put together other people's shows? People—

LS: Yes. People started calling me saying, "Hey, I could do this and do that. Can you build something for me?"

AH: So you would build it and then you'd actually— Would you book it too and everything?

LS: Yeah, oh yeah.

AH: So you managed the whole thing? Okay. And how long did this go on? How many shows do you think?

LS: Oh, I don't know. We did it for thirteen years.

AH: Okay. So it was probably quite a few different shows.

LS: Yeah. A lot.

AH: So what was that like? I mean, did you have a show going on at this point?

LS: Uh-huh. We were still working.

AH: You still had your show going on. So you were just piggy-backing other people's shows with yours?

LS: Not always. Sometimes none of us ever worked together at all. On the bigger fairs [it was] like we were selling a package. They would take the Baboon Lagoon, they would take Wild West Follies and maybe the frog show, depending on what their budget was. So I had a show to fit every kind of budget there was. The baboon show and the horse show were the two most expensive and the horses by far. To feed and transport, shoe—I mean there's a lot of expenses with it. Especially horses like that because they were all high-dollar horses. Yeah it was good. It was nerve-wracking. I only had two heart attacks before it was finished.

AH: (laughs) Really?

LS: Yeah.

AH: So wait, now this last [heart attack] was the third?

LS: Yeah. (chuckles)

AH: So it was stressful. How was it stressful? Obviously having your own show has got to be pretty nerve-wracking but then you have got this other stuff, what—

LS: Because I was trying—in my mind—I was trying to bring a cut above to the fairs. I got into to it because I saw so much mundane, unprofessional [shows]. Truck drivers who go out and buy six pigs and call it a pig race. That kind of thing. It was just really schlock. And for some reason the fairs accepted it, because I don't think they had a lot to choose from. And it was like anything I did—I found a niche or I saw something I thought was lacking and I tried to fill the void. And that's really what happened. It wasn't that I was a genius or anything like. Maybe I was because I knew what I was looking for. I knew what they were looking for and I knew what they didn't have.

AH: Well and it's also—I mean, was there an idea that these really schlocky shows you're talking about are kind of giving a bad name to—

LS: No, I never thought of it like that. I was offended, as an entertainer, to see what people— how people perceived themselves to be as entertainers. I mean watch um— What the hell show is it? With Simon [Cowell] and all—what show was that?

(phone rings)

AH: Oh, *American Idol*.

LS: Yeah. You watch that. Look at the auditions. Okay.

AH: They think they're good.

LS: Hello?

AH: (laughs)

LS: And some of them get pretty upset because they think they're good. Well, they're not good. And Simon tells them they're not good. Usually it's up to him. But it's the same thing and there was a lot of that.

AH: I could stop if you need.

LS: No. I turned it off. There was a lot of that. Are they bad people? No. Did they know they were bad? Probably not. Did they the fairs know that they were good or bad? Not really, because it became so mundane for so long—

Child: See you later!

AH: Okay, bye-bye.

LS: Talking monkey. I mean there was—don't get me wrong—a lot of excellent stuff. But some of it is all on the west coast. A lot of the fairs overlapped. But, by and large, a lot of it was schlock. It was just— No money invested. It was all about how I can take all the money and not give a dime back. And with me—and I'm still that way—I just do what I have to do. Whatever. I don't care what it costs. And I really don't give a whole lot of thought of what I am going to make back. I just know that, if it's a good product, it's going to make it back. And thank God it's always done that. It just has.

AH: And that's one of the big themes throughout this talk too is “the cut above,” you know, of making sure that you have got a quality something to put on the road.

LS: And it's also a curse. It is. Because now that I'm retired from show business, as far as actively traveling, well I own several other businesses. And as either a retailer or a—I suck.

AH: It doesn't work as well.

LS: No, because— It doesn't for me because I am too honest. I didn't realize how corrupt the rest of the world is. When you're living with a circus or a carnival you're always accused of that. So, therefore, you're always overly cautious not to ever give anybody any cause—I was anyway—to say that. Especially if you got to talk to me then you know this guy's okay, he ain't like that. It's not like the movies; it's uh—these are real people. So I was always very cautious.

Even when I owned a florist [shop], you know. I used to do a lot of funeral work. I'd got out and buy fresh flowers that morning. Nobody does that. All the florists—just so you know—sell you last month's, last week's flowers. They're going to get thrown out tomorrow anyway. So, as long as they're a little fluffy, they cut the dead off and they keep sticking them in to get rid of it. I never did that. Because when my flowers started getting old I took them to the nursing homes and stuff in Sun City and just gave them to people. So there goes my profit. So I'm not a good retailer. That's what I meant when I said that.

AH: Yeah, so that kind of work ethic doesn't translate well into the retail world.

LS: No, because retail—little do I know, I know now— We have a grooming shop, a pet grooming shop and it's very successful. And it's very successful because we are that way. We do care. If something is not right you need to tell us so that it never happens again. If it was cut too short, cut too long. And if you don't like us, don't come back. I would rather have you not come back than keep coming back and keep complaining because I'm not wrong then. You are. But you don't think so. So that's still a little more artistic license with that as far as you're still giving your soul or you're creative.

AH: Okay. So let's get you to retirement then. You're managing and owning all these other shows and you said this went on for about sixteen years?

LS: Thirteen.

AH: Thirteen years. Okay and so take us to the end of that.

LS: To the end? To the end we got off the road.

AH: And this is about what year?

LS: (sighs) Two thousand and—what was it?—Two thousand and five? Four. Two thousand and four. The end of two thousand—the fall of 2004. Okay. That was when it was.

AH: So what were the circumstances then?

LS: I already had two heart attacks at that point—I ended up with three, but I'd had the two. So I said—I was going to the bathroom—it was the week before Christmas—absolutely true story. I was looking at the *Flyer*. And I was flipping through looking at trucks, dogs, whatever the hell they have in there. And I saw a little thing that said, "Pet Grooming Business For Sale In Riverview." So I folded a page over, thought nothing of it, walked out—which I don't read [much] in the toilet. It happened to be there— And I threw it on the kitchen table. Well, my wife came back later and she flips through to see what I have folded, out of curiosity. And she said, "What's on this page?" I guess she read it and said, "Did you call about this ad?" I said, "no." She said, "Why not?"

All my life I said that when I retire I am going to open a dog grooming business. It's like that would be the curse. That would be hell. You know what I mean? Really. And I always meant it that way as "I'll never retire. I am going to open up a grooming business." That kind of thing. And lo and behold she says, "Why don't you call?"

So I called and the lady said that it's still for sale. I said, "Where is it?" and she told me. We went right then and there. We made a deal that night [and] paid for it the next day. Started the following Monday and I cancelled the sixteen fairs I had booked for the following season.

AH: Okay.

LS: I filled it in with other shows. And that was that.

AH: So now, before we get there, this was something you had been thinking about for a while, but why then? Why that moment? Your wife just thought it was the right time or—

LS: No she didn't think— No. My life is like a—we're going to through this again in the next few weeks. She just found out yesterday. I just do these things. You know? So my

whole life, it might not come out clear on this collection but, it has always been in sections or stages. You know I went through this period and then all of a sudden—click!—move on and just don't stop. We're going through this again. But in any case, to answer your question, it had no planning really. I had said well maybe someday, but I already had sixteen fairs booked. Well, that's pretty damn good.

And that's just out the gate. That's not picking out the rest of the stuff. And that was just for my show. Not including the other ones. And the other ones stayed on the road. We didn't bring them all home. I just quit our show.

AH: Yes. So in the meantime these other folks are still on the road. You still own their act and all that?

LS: Yeah, yeah. And I just—I don't know why. We went and looked at it and she [Judy] said, "Do you think you want to do this?" I said, "Yeah, let's do it. Let's just do it. You want to quit?" It was like a sign from God. Some people ain't religious [but] I have these big awakenings and I really believe that. Or these doors are opened. Some people take their opportunities. Some people don't. So when you hear people complaining how mundane their life is they didn't have the balls to run out the door and go for it. That's all it is. And I know you pretty much live your life that way too.

AH: Yeah, absolutely.

LS: If there is an opportunity you either take it or you don't. Was it your destiny? No. I think there are lots of avenues to make choices. You either make them or you don't. I'm not saying it's good or bad. You either make them or you don't. You know? I have been very blessed. I haven't made too many bad ones. Most people I know still talk to me.

AH: (laughs)

LS: You know. I've never done anybody dirty in business. None of that. Life's too short.

AH: Yeah. Well that's the way I always describe it is—you look life in the face and you say, "Yes!"

LS: That's it. Yeah.

AH: You say, "Yes."

LS: And I'm telling you—if it's off the record or on the record I'm not telling you what it is—we're going to face that [same thing] within the next ten days. This big life-altering [thing]. Everything. When I mean life I mean everything.

AH: What, your whole life is about to change you think?

LS: Yeah.

AH: Okay, okay.

LS: Again. So it's just another adventure; it's another act.

AH: Well, I won't pry but I'll be in touch. (laughs)

LS: It will be common knowledge in the not too distant future.

AH: Yes, okay. And when we talked—

LS: It's not that it's a big thing. It is a major life-altering change now [considering] where I'm at. But everything I've done was that way. So it doesn't matter. And you know what? If I die, I don't want to die with any regrets. I say it when I speak in public, too. If I'd died opening night at Madison Square Garden it wouldn't have mattered. Other than my wife and my kids, I didn't want to leave them. I achieved everything. And that sounds very gloating and I don't mean [it like] that.

AH: No, no. It doesn't sound that way to me.

LS: Some people get offended that way because maybe they didn't. At that night on opening day at Madison Square Garden when I walked out there with my animals and worked in those spotlights in the building I went to as a kid, waiting to get there, if I died that night I achieved everything. Really. I don't need millions. I have everything I need. I have lots of wants. I want a whole lot of shit, but I don't need anything. I am okay that way. And I am comfortable with myself that way.

AH: Well, you know, when we talked last it was in, oh, I guess it was December 26th.

LS: That long ago?

AH: Yeah. And you were talking about kind of feeling like you were a little bit in a rut—a little trapped. So I'll be interested to see what you do next.

LS: Yeah. So now it's like this renaissance.

AH: And what's interesting about talking to you now is that it's an incomplete story. It's still going on.

LS: Oh, my God, yeah.

AH: And it always will, as long as you're around. Something is going to be happening I'm sure. So we covered a lot of ground. Obviously in all the different sessions we've talked and everything and is there anything that we didn't cover? Is there anything that you want to add?

LS: I don't know. You know it's difficult when you're doing kind of a biography/interview. What might not be important to me might be important to somebody else.

AH: Sure.

LS: I don't know. I know, with all my alcohol problems and things like that and how I dealt with that, that might help somebody. Usually it does, somewhere. Some obscure way. So, if anything comes out of this that way, that would be good. Or anybody that wants to do something, just go for it. Just have the balls to go for it. Don't look back. If you go through life on your tiptoes always worried, then you're going to die that way. You just are. I don't mean being stupid. You only go through here once. Make it as best you can make it.

And, you know, there's ups and down; there's times when you want to pull your hair out. There's times when you don't know how you're going to pay the next bill. Everybody goes through that. Or you're not driving that car because it's too much [for] gas. Everybody's going through that. That's not life. You know what I mean? Life keeps going with what you do with it or not.

AH: Well, I guess, one—

LS: But I don't know, I can't think of any one thing.

AH: Well, that's always the—

LS: I am sure that I'll have lots of regrets if I want to hear this. Why didn't I tell him that? Why didn't I tell him this? But—

AH: Sure. Well, you'll have to chance to look at the transcripts and everything too, to make corrections or anything like that. But one thing, I guess a good way to end too, is the club—the Showmen's [Association]. And I don't know. I am a little confused. There is a Showmen's Association or there is a federation?

LS: Foundation.

AH: Foundation. Okay, okay. Gotcha.

LS: It's just one corporation within another.

AH: Yes. Gotcha. I understand. But the IISA [International Independent Showmen's Association] is the umbrella and everything else [is] under that. But the foundation is what, the non-profit [organization]?

LS: Right.

AH: Yes. Gotcha. Okay.

LS: And we have several— We have a separate charity corporation that we raise monies and give to local charities or local groups that, as long as they're registered charities, we can give them money, things like that. And we do a lot of that. To me the club is like a drug. It just is and it's not always good but it's like a drug.

AH: (laughs)

LS: And it gets to the point where— Even people are saying “Lee's here. He's going to give a talk again.” So, after a while, because you love something so much then you feel like you are going to be counter productive. And I feel that way now. I'm getting ready to step back a bit and not be so much up in front, because you lose your credibility. And I feel that happening.

AH: And you feel [that] everyone thinks you're kind of a broken record or something.

LS: Well yeah.

AH: And I'm not saying about you.

LS: I understand.

AH: I've been in similar situations, so I can empathize there.

LS: And it's not even so much a broken record as it is backing off and seeing if somebody else will pick up the slack and go with it. Trouble is most people don't. So like any group there is a core of us here. There's probably a hundred or less out of five thousand that do 99 percent of the physical work and managing of the properties and stuff. And that's any group. And I'm very happy to be a part of that. I just am. I love this place.

AH: When did you first start getting involved?

LS: Here?

AH: Yeah.

LS: I think it was 1979. Seventy-eight [1978].

AH: Really, okay.

LS: So thirty years. It's a long time.

AH: And you were president a few years ago, right?

LS: Yeah, yeah. And I'm the first circus person to be president of "the carnival club" so I was very honored that I was even thought of and then asked and then pushed and prodded to even go through the chairs and spend a year's salary.

AH: Well, it wasn't without a little controversy I imagine.

LS: Not a whole lot. Nope. Not a whole lot.

AH: Okay.

LS: Maybe the people that aren't actually here. No, I think if you ask most people—I think I did a great job as president.

AH: Oh no, no, no. I am not saying—

LS: No, no, no. But— (both talking at once)

AH: —after the fact. I'm saying that when it first happened—

LS: Oh, yeah.

AH: —there might have been some people going, "Oh, boy, the circus guy is taking over".

LS: Yeah.

AH: And, I guess, this is a good opportunity too. Tell us a little bit about the differences and contrasts, because this is largely an organization of carnies but there are circus people too.

LS: Absolutely.

AH: And I think that a lot of people think that it's all the same world. And they're different.

LS: Very different.

AH: And we touched on it a bit in the interview and could you just kind of explain that for the people who don't know.

LS: Only because I have lived my life in both of those avenues. As much as there is a stigma between the circus and the carnival, it's mostly festered by ourselves more so than the public. Like you said, the public thinks it's all one big thing: "I am going to the circus. Oh, there's no rides here." [or] "I am going to the carnival. Oh, where's the elephants?" And it mixes up [like that].

Basically, the basic difference, whether you agree with it or not, is that with the circus the people on the circus get paid for having a skill, for doing something beyond the ordinary. Whether it be a trapeze or a Gunther Gebel-Williams with his animals, me with my monkeys, or this guy with his balancing act or whatever. Feats of daring, however you want to look at it. The beautiful girls. So you are paid because of those skills and you get paid for doing your fifteen minutes a day of work. That's it.

On the carnival, on the other hand, not there has always been circuses involved with carnivals for a long time, but basically with the carnival it was [a] different kind of entertainment. They would bring you thrills, as far as mechanical rides. Before the mechanical rides, they had all fifteen, twenty, [or] twenty-five different shows. And old people remember. There was very few rides but there was the hula girl show; there was the monkey show; there was the freak show, and then they had little individual freak shows and the lobster-boy show. It was all different shows and they would all vie for your money. And you paid. And those people, in turn, paid to be there. They would pay the owner of the fair.

AH: Yes.

LS: That's a basic difference. And then, nowadays, it's still the same difference. In the circus you pay to see somebody work for eight to ten minutes. Nobody works ten minutes [except for] maybe a cat act. Everybody works seven minutes or less as their act. That's what you get paid to do, twice a day. On the carnival, you get up at nine o'clock in the morning, because it's going to open at ten. So you have to be at your trailer. And it's mobile restaurants. I'll put it back in lay terms: All those food stands are not owned by "the carnival." They are individual business people. They are in the carnival, you know what I'm saying, or they are on the carnival property or on the fair property, but they are all individual businesses.

AH: And they are paying to be there.

LS: They pay to be there.

AH: Hoping to make enough money—

LS: To pay for the rent, to pay for the sewage, to pay for their garbage pick-ups, to pay for the electricity. So it's not any different than renting a storefront and opening a candy store. It's the same thing.

AH: Uh-huh.

LS: It's the same thing. When you make it that mundane people don't want to come. So therefore, the sideshows always got the bulk of the publicity because they were able to talk. There was always something unusual about them, there was always something scary about it, or sexy about it. It was not with the rides, not with cotton candy, or with popcorn or sausage. You know what I mean?

AH: Yeah, yeah.

LS: What the hell is that? So that's why most of the press always went to the most outrageous. It goes back to Ward Hall. He's his own self—I don't know the word—

AH: Self-made man or?

LS: No, no uh—promulgated himself. It's just a built-in story. “Oh, you own a sideshow. You must live with all the weirdoes in your backyard and they live in tents or under your house.” Because you see the movie *Freaks* and you think it's all like that. It's not. Not at all.

But anyway, that's the basic differences. One is a paid entertainer and the other one is there with the games and all that. It's just different. Those are individual business people.

AH: Yes, and I just get the impression that carnies feel kind of unsung, you know? Or there's a little underlying tension there, right?

LS: Because— Yes, in that respect, and it's understandable because when you look at somebody in the circus, “Ooh. Oh, she did a great act. Oh, she did this. Oh, she did that.” Take our circus here. We do it every year. Everybody comes, even the carnival people that come, from the club. They are the first ones to buy the tickets. They sit in the best seats because they are the first ones in line. Because they're in awe of what we can do. And to them, they sell sausage.

AH: Yeah.

LS: You know what I'm saying?

AH: Yeah.

LS: And then the public would always say, about the circus, they are going to see a show. With the carnival is, you know, don't let nobody go. Don't let them go by themselves. Make sure you're standing there with them because the dirty carnival people will come. And why that is, I mean, most of it's through Hollywood and through books and stuff like that.

Listen, on the carnival there is three things that sell, always: sex, gore and danger. And when people feel like they're in danger—somewhat— It's like going to Vegas in the fifties, okay? “Ooh, the mafia is all around me. I don't know who they are but I know they're here. Ooh.”

AH: Or if someone else is in danger like the high-wire act.

LS: Exactly. You look at the sideshows or the headless girl. It always this big trailer with the girl with no head and she is half naked in the ditch. You know, with her bra showing. The crack of her ass is just barely showing. So that's the sex part. You want to go see this—

AH: Well that's sex and gore.

LS: Well that's— Exactly! Because people are intrigued by that. And it's all bullshit.

AH: But that's what gets people in the gate and then in the meantime they are going to get some popcorn and they are going to get some sausage and those things.

LS: Exactly. Those are some differences.

AH: And I guess the food is a little bit different too because—

LS: It's not all the same.

AH: Well, people feel um—

LS: It's the fair food they're going to eat. The grease and the—

AH: Well, yeah. They feel a license to like, "I can go ahead and indulge in this. I wouldn't eat a funnel cake yesterday but I am at the fair today and I am going to have a funnel cake."

LS: Right, exactly. Or [because] you never make one at home.

AH: No.

LS: So that's the basic differences. It's two different—same customers but two different entertainment values. Carnival people work very hard. And I'm not talking about the guys you see pushing the buttons on the rides; they work very hard too. And they might say they're a carnie because they got a job on a carnival. Those are not carnival people; those are not carnies. Most carnies are show people and that's their heritage. And they might have come from the back-end shows. And as they dwindled—well they don't know—they're not going to stay in town. They've never had a nine-to-five job. So they so know they're going to go out and make X amount of dollars with the carnival again.

So it's a whole culture. It's a wonderful culture. Myself—I can liken it to a ride-boy—I shoveled elephant shit. I knew I wasn't going to do that all my life. That's not where I wanted to be. So I did what I did. There's kids that run away and join the carnival. They're not all drug addicts. They're not all tattooed lips and noses and pierced. It's not all about that. The carnival lifestyle is a very forgiving place or non-judgmental place. That's why this whole stigma with the general public has it [exists] today. You know, forty or fifty years ago it was winos that got a job. You got to stay sober enough to do the

job. After the job, if you got drunk nobody cared. You were safe. You were in your place, in your bunk. You weren't bothering nobody's kids. You weren't bothering nobody.

“Where's Pete?” “Oh, he's up in the truck and he's done already for the day.” And you know, Pete will come out tomorrow morning. He'll go over to the pie car, which is where we get breakfast. He'll buy eggs and bacon. He'll eat. And he'll go to work and he'll sweat through it. But he was accepted there as a person. He wasn't judged. That's the main—biggest difference I could tell you as far as what society thinks and what we are.

We're a more open society. We're not so critical of people. We might criticize ourselves, but you prove to yourself that you're one of us and you're going to be all right and you're with it and for it. If something happens you going to be there to help everyone. If a tent blows down, you're coming to help. Once you do that and you prove your worth to the show you're in. We don't tolerate child molesters or pedophiles or any of that crap. No. And we have our own justice for that too.

AH: Yeah.

LS: And we do.

AH: Yeah. What's—

LS: It doesn't matter what it is.

AH: Well, you don't have to give a specific case but—

LS: It wouldn't be any different than any other normal parent. You know?

AH: Yeah, okay.

LS: Let's leave it at that.

AH: Okay.

LS: Or you usually get arrested because one of use will call the [police]. We call the law on ourselves. We don't need that bullshit. And we don't tolerate it. Contrary to what people think. You know it said in the paper the other day—I know I'm rambling—

AH: No it's fine.

LS: “Carnival Worker Shot In Mason City.” He wasn't a carnival worker and he wasn't working at the carnival. He lived in town. He worked—he came and got a job during the daytime at one of food trailers. They all hire day labor. He went home. He went somewhere he wasn't supposed to be and he got shot. It was an accident. It was a drive-by shooting! But it says “carnival worker shot.”

AH: Not as a carnival worker. He was just a day laborer.

LS: But that's the headline.

AH: I guess one thing is, about the carnivals, is that throughout history—just say the twentieth century—they have been outsiders who come to town and they bring things that aren't normally there. Sex, gambling, all these other things; very kind of provocative things. So if you come to a Bible belt town in the South, and you bring electricity, you bring gambling, you bring girlies—

LS: But they only went to church on Wednesday and Sunday.

AH: (laughing) Exactly. The rest of the week they need something to do!

LS: They're all decadent just like everybody else. But your point is exactly right.

AH: It's a lot like gypsies in Europe. They travel through town and maybe there's a few bad apples and things like that.

LS: There always is.

AH: Yes but—

LS: So was [there in] Enron.

AH: Yeah, absolutely.

LS: There's no carnival person that ever did what they did with Enron. Not one.

AH: No, of course not.

LS: If you're going to gamble, which there is no more of anyway, that, that— We're going back decades again.

AH: Yes. Well, I am talking about where the reputation came from.

LS: I'll tell you what's sad. There's laws being passed. They just passed a law in Ohio. It's called The Build-up. If anybody is familiar with carnival games— If there's a water race that holds sixteen people [that] squirt the blue [thing]. Well, [if] there's only three people, you're not going to play for the big, big prize. The guy can't afford it. And he'll tell you it takes this many players [or] that many players for that prize. So say, if you have three people, you get the little prize. Well if you play enough and you win enough he'll start trading it back to you. That's now outlawed in Ohio as a form of gambling. It's retarded.

In Illinois, every carnival worker—and that's a quote—has to be registered with the police thirty days before they come into town. Well, sometimes you don't know you going to be there.

AH: Of course not.

LS: Well, anyway, they have all these laws in place for the carnival people. Now the carnival comes to town and there's a hundred and fifty carnival people. And there's fifteen thousand people in town. How many of those are pedophiles and six bastards? They don't have to get checked at the gate when they come in. They come in there where there is children. It doesn't make sense. And it's just a way of putting a band aid on something that makes a society feel good. That the carnival business is in a real bad way because of people or lawmakers perceived to be as protecting the public. When do people start taking responsibility for themselves?

AH: Uh-huh.

LS: The government is telling us more and more what to do every day. I am not getting political but it's very scary.

AH: No, I think—

LS: Our hands are being more and more tied. There are protocols at schools because now there's people— You want to kill yourself, just fucking shoot yourself. Don't come to school, you kill twelve people, and then kill yourself. Been there done that; somebody else has done it. Do something different. But that's my logic, I don't get it.

AH: Well, you know, they put these people all over TV for the next couple of months.

LS: I have a very good friend who is a broadcaster here in the Tampa Bay, really nice guy. He's really frustrated with his life and what he's doing because he's in show business and he wanted to be a reporter. And he's not a reporter anymore. He's in show business.

AH: Right. It's a dying breed.

LS: You know, it's over. Everything they say is what they are told to say. So whatever way the stations lean is where you're going. That's pretty scary shit.

AH: Yeah absolutely.

LS: Anyway. I don't want to get in to all that.

AH: I guess we have gotten a little beyond the scope.

LS: A lot beyond. I'm sorry. You can erase—

AH: No, no. But it just goes to show you though how deep the carnival is ingrained in society and that, you know, it's unfortunate but these band-aid and the feel-good legislation, which just seems to be more and more of the laws being passed anymore—

LS: It's ridiculous.

AH: —is messing with the business itself.

LS: It's destroying it. It's destroying it and it is putting a lot— thousands of people potentially— unlike a factory—the same as a factory not unlike— like a factory—out of work! If you take Hillsborough County—I was on these committees here in town [judging] what the value of Gibsonton [a Florida town where many carnival/sideshow people winter] was to the community. Well, they did the study, not me, and they determined with our trade show brings eleven millions dollars into Tampa Bay. That's only for six days. That's a lot of scratch. And we're the dirty carnival people.

AH: (laughs)

LS: You know what I'm saying? It's not our money. It's going to the hotels, to the restaurants, to the rent-a-cars, all the support. The prostitutes or whatever else is here. The money is being spent here. And then they realized how much money we carnival and circus people, when we come back home, we always spend our money in Gibsonton.

AH: Absolutely yeah.

LS: We weren't taking money out of the community. We were the only income, viable income, traceable income source!

AH: From completely outside the community too.

LS: Exactly.

AH: You come in from outside—

LS: From out of state and bringing our money home and spend it here. We bought our trucks here; we bought our paint, our lumber, our steel; and our animals [were] imported here; bought all our animal food here; every bit of it: our tires. I mean whatever. All of it.

AH: But you spend money at chain restaurants or hotels and that money is shipped out to their corporate headquarters.

LS: Exactly. Unh-uh. And it's still that way. There's a few local businesses here, everything has been crowded out by big bucks but still. You know, before there was a Lowe's and a Home Depot we had Isabel's. And we always paid four or five dollars more for something because we knew it was going to cost her more. She wasn't big box. But

that was okay. That was okay. And she held notes for people who didn't have it or were in trouble and never asked for it. Because she got it through the grapevine if you had a few bucks and the next thing you come in [she would say] "I just want remind you, I am not asking you." And she never did ask anybody. I know she didn't. And as people died they might have left her with a lot of debt but that's how she was.

And all the businesses here are that way. The restaurant where if you were hungry you ate. Nobody went hungry here. It just wasn't that way. That's why I lived here. That's what was nice about it.

AH: Yeah. A real sense of community.

LS: That's what I loved about it. And it was the show people blended with the town people.

AH: Yeah, that's one thing I wanted to get into too is this kind of, it's a bit of both. I mean, there's people here that are here year-round. And there's the show folks who come back and there's, well, kind of a symbiotic relationship there right?

LS: Really. And it's a great relationship. At the time most of—I never— You know I lived at one location here for seventeen years. The house is gone now; it was mobile home. It never had a lock on the door, on any door. I was just lazy about my locks. I just never bought locks. But I never felt threatened. It was that kind of community. Not anymore because of the development and stuff around us and then comes more and more influx of stuff, but it was that way.

And when we would go on the road, the neighbors watched it. They knew nobody belonged there. That's me and Judy's place but they're on the road. They're not coming back. Well, "Oh, I hear something over there, go check." And everybody did that for you. It was wonderful. It really was wonderful. We were very close that way. And that's sad that that's gone.

AH: Definitely a unique history.

LS: To tie the club in, the club is the focal point. And to us—I have to stay up out of the box a little bit because I do a little more in the community other than the club, which is getting old, but in any case. This is everything. When you say Gibsonton this is what you think of. Not someone's house, not the street, you think of this place.

AH: And most people don't even know it exists! And they certainly don't know that it's a massive complex and people have no idea. They think carnies [and] they think people are rubbing a couple of pennies together to buy beer that night or something.

LS: Or living under a trailer or something. Yeah, I know it. And you can't change that.

AH: I mean just one stroll through this complex I think would change a lot of people's minds.

LS: And it has. When I was president I brought four, I had four of the commissioners and the other three had their representatives here. I gave them a whole tour of the trade show. I gave them a tour through all the buildings. I explained what we were doing with the museum. I mean, I really tried to push the whole, "We're here and we can't be quiet anymore." There's too much going around us. So my thing was let everybody know who we are, take the mystery away and let them know it's a fun place, i.e. now we have a bike night on Wednesday. We went from the bike fest and now we are going to open it to the public, at least the parking lot, and let people onto the property. Take that stigma away. It's worked out. It's big; it's great.

The circus lets all the people from Sun City, all the little old ladies that moved from Brooklyn and Chicago that think you can't live in Gibsonton; it's carnival land. I just did—I went to do a twenty-minute talk at the ladies' club of Apollo Beach, Ruskin. The South Shore Ladies Club at Summerfield Golf Course. It was very twah-twah, very nice. A hundred and twelve ladies were in the club. They're running out of room. It's great. And most of them—the reason why they asked me to come speak is a lady that—she was born and raised here so she knows—but she listens to people talk all the time, "Oh, my God, don't take [State Road] 41. Don't go home on 41!"

AH: Oh, my God!

LS: Yeah! Well they don't know! So this just gets festered and festered. There was a time when that was great because there was nobody here. It kept everybody away.

AH: Yeah. They leave you alone.

LS: Yeah, nobody cared. Now it's different because the way property taxes, all this stuff is all outrageous. I went to do this twenty-minute talk and I talked for about an hour and forty minutes. And every time I went to stop they wanted to hear more. It was mostly my opinions and just— But I kept saying, I probably said it seven or eight times— I said, "Just remember, don't walk through Gibsonton cause we slither out of the river and we'll grab you and take your purse and slither back into the river. You know. If you have children we'll slither out of the trees and grab you."

And after I did that they started (sighing)—they started doing that. They knew, through the sarcasm, whatever fears or whatever premonitions or prenotions— What's the word?—

AH: Yeah, yeah. Preconceived notions.

LS: —preconceived notions that they had were not really grounded in that.

AH: Yes, they were, yeah—

LS: And the fifty sideshow people or hundred sideshow people that might have lived here in the thirties and forties are long dead. Again, they had all the notoriety because of their deformity or oddity or whatever the hell—

AH: Sure, everyone knows the Giant [Al Tomaini]. And, of course, because he had a business too [the Giant's Camp, a restaurant] but—

LS: Yeah. And he had a very good business for a very long time until he died and then long after. So it's just another—I told them that we are just ordinary people with extraordinary jobs is what it comes down to.

And what was a wonderful lifestyle isn't so wonderful anymore. Times change, computers changed everything. Cell phones changed everything. So even us as a group, when the Ferris wheel lights go out that's usually the end of the night; close the show. And we'd all go to somebody's trailer. The awnings were out. We had candles and chairs and lights. And sit and have a couple of beers or a couple cups of coffee or whatever, who drank [or] who didn't. And [we would] just talk. Bullshit [about] how the day went, or [about how] my kids have got to go home to school next month, [or about how] I have to go set up— You know, just daily life. That doesn't even happen anymore. Because now we have satellite TVs in all the trailers we go, "I'm going to watch whatever."

AH: Or you go on your cell phone and call someone a thousand miles away.

LS: Yeah, or you're on the computer because of all the air cards. So, you know, half of us are playing poker or half of us are doing whatever, talking or e-mail. So even that has disintegrated.

AH: The culture, from the inside, is fallen apart.

LS: Yeah and it's funny because I just had a long discussion with a very prominent Gypsy family in town—very nice, wonderful people—and the one guy is about my age, he's probably in his fifties, and how sad it is that he knows the culture that he grew up with and it's not there because the kids aren't interested anymore. It's like Latinos, after several generations, no one is speaking Spanish in the house. Or no one is speaking Hebrew; no one is speaking Italian in their house because no one takes their grandparents in anymore. They put them in nursing homes.

AH: Absolutely.

LS: See? So whatever happens in society eventually happens to us. It's another metaphor.

AH: Yeah. Well I think that's a great way to wind down and, on behalf of the USF Libraries and the Oral History Program of the Florida Studies Center, I want to thank you for sitting down with us and sharing with us.

LS: I am honored that I was asked, first of all. I hope my story was interesting enough for anyone who is going to read or listen to it.

AH: Believe me, we have got a lot of people doing transcribing interviews on land use and citrus and things like this and mayoral administrations which is all relevant and interesting—

LS: Sure.

AH: —But I told them that there's some showmen material down the pipe and you can look forward to some of that.

LS: And if you listen to my sarcasm or whatever I hope they see that, you know, it's just—it was a nice life. It's a nice life. And if you know, take your time and come down and meet some of us, our doors are always open. Especially now with our collaboration going on and Chuck who is working with you now. I think it will be great for a lot of students and a lot of people and it just makes the world a better place.

AH: Absolutely. Thanks Lee.

LS: My pleasure.

End of third interview