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Showmen's Oral History Project
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Andy Huse: Okay. Well, hello, my name is Andrew Huse, from the University of South Florida Library's Oral History Program, and today is March 7, 2008, right? Yes. Seventh, two thousand eight. And I am here in Gibsonton with Gloria Wilkinson, at her home, and she's agreed to talk to us today about her fascinating life. So thanks for being with us, first of all.

Gloria Wilkinson: My pleasure.

AH: Well, let's start from the beginning, where were you born and where'd you grow up? Tell us a little bit about that.

GW: Well, I was born in St. Louis, Missouri. I am the oldest of three children and I grew up there and I raised my family there.

AH: What did your parents do?

GW: My father was a dentist and my mother was a nurse.

AH: Okay.

GW: And when I was a kid growing up I was the animal nut and I always liked climbing trees. I was kind of the tomboy in the family.

AH: Okay.

GW: And I enjoyed all of that.

AH: Yes. How many siblings did you have?

GW: There were three of us. I had a younger brother and a younger sister.

AH: Okay. So growing up, just tell us a little bit about your education.

GW: Well, I went to high school and I was a big animal lover and at that time I wanted to be a veterinarian. And my mother took me to Columbia, Missouri to Missouri University in Columbia [the University of Missouri-Columbia] and to the veterinary department for me to talk to them. And this was in 1949. They said, “Well, quite truthfully, because you are a girl, we’ll do everything we can to keep you from going to school. The state does not want to spend money to—on a girl’s education because you are going to end up getting married and having children, and you won’t do the profession. So unless you are strong-minded enough to handle this, don’t even bother.”

And I didn’t want it badly enough, I guess, because they— I allowed them to discourage me.

AH: Okay.

GW: And—so that was a disappointment because I was quite an animal lover. But when I was about eight years old, I saw my first circus and, oh my goodness! I saw the— whatever—the Pinsky Bareback Riders. I saw the Great Unus [F.F. Unus] do his one-finger stand. I mean, it was just a magical time. And I saw the girls do a web number and I thought, I could do that, because I liked high places; all I did was climb up on a rope and swing around. It wasn’t a big deal. (laughs) So—and it was something I wanted to do.

But then I got married when I was twenty and started having children, and so all thoughts of the circus went away. And then when I was fifty and my family was raised and I went through a divorce, then I was kind of at a loss for what to do. I had been a dog groomer and—

AH: Before we go into the next part of your life, is there anything else we should know about the intervening years. Basically, you were a housewife? Did you work at all?

GW: Well, I worked as a dog groomer on and off.

AH: Okay.

GW: And I had other silly little jobs, but nothing of any importance.

AH: Okay. Nothing really to prepare you for the circus?

GW: No, no, nothing at all! Nothing at all. Except the desire to be there, but that kind of disappeared as I was raising my family. I mean, you know, I didn’t think about that.

AH: Of course.

GW: And then, I had an abusive marriage, and so when it ended I had basically no self-esteem. I had no—I didn't even exist because everything was in my husband's name so I didn't have any credit. When I left, I left with nothing and so it was a very difficult time for me. And I didn't want to groom dogs anymore; I was tired of that. I had done that, and it is very stressful sometimes so I didn't want to do that anymore. But I did go back to grooming dogs because I had to eat (laughs).

AH: Yes.

GW: And then one time I saw an ad in a local community paper in St. Louis at the community college. They were having a course in becoming a clown; it would be taught by a Shrine clown. And so I signed up for it. It was an evening course that ran for about six weeks. And through that I met a lady. She was there the first night and then realized that she was far above what they were teaching because she was trying to get her own business started. But she saw me, and she invited me to come to work for her after I finished the clown course.

AH: Okay. Now what were the other students in your class like? Did they tend to be younger? What was that like? Were you the oldest person in the class?

GW: No. I don't think so at the time, but I was the only one that wasn't fat! (laughs)

AH: Okay.

GW: Which is kind of strange because all of them were grossly overweight (laughs), and most of them were housewives and they just wanted to, you know, be clowns. And I didn't really have any—It was just something to do. And it was kind of an escape for me.

AH: Okay.

GW: And then I met Betty Rooney, and so she asked me, Would I like to work for her? And I said, "Well, sure." And my first job was ten dollars an hour, blowing up balloons with a pump for, I think, two or four hours at a grand opening of a hot dog restaurant or something. Some kind of a little fast-food joint.

AH: Now what do you think— What was her name, Betty—?

GW: Betty Rooney.

AH: — Rooney. What do you think Betty saw in you, as far as—there were other people in the class—? How was it that you guys—?

GW: I think she saw that I was very enthusiastic about it, and I just— She saw something. I'm not really sure what it was, but I guess she saw determination, or a real desire to do it.

AH: Well, and clowning can be fairly strenuous too, so—

GW: Right.

AH: You know, it doesn't really make sense for someone to be grossly overweight and wanting to be a clown, right?

GW: Well, I kind of think that was it too, because sometimes people that are overweight don't move as fast and they can't get around as well and so they just, I guess, didn't strike her as good candidates.

AH: Okay.

GW: But, when she asked me if I'd like to work for her because she wanted to develop this and then I would pay her, I think, 15 percent and I said, "I would love to." And I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll help you promote your business if you keep me working because I don't want to do the business part of it. I just want to do the clowning. But I do know a little bit about promotion." Because I had been involved with some kids that had a band and I was trying to help them promote their album. And so I learned a little bit about promotion.

AH: Was that before you got into clowning, the band?

GW: Yes. It was at a time when—because I had friends that had rock n' roll bands, and I kind of got involved with these kids in the bands because I thought was actually the next best thing to [the] circus. Because I wanted to be a tour manager for a rock n' roll band. I thought that would be a fun thing to do. I guess I was kind of going back trying to live my childhood over (laughs), I don't know.

AH: And what year would this have been, about, when you got into clowning?

GW: Well, I got into clowning in 1981.

AH: Okay, gotcha.

GW: Yep.

AH: Okay.

GW: And so I told Betty, I said, "I'll help you promote your business." And then, you know, sometimes you have the little lightning bolts that go through your mind and it's like "Boom!" I saw this article in the community paper and it said, "Operation Food

Search is looking for people to donate food for the needy people in their communities.” And I saw that and I thought, Man that’s what—This is what we’re going to do. I mean, it all just came to me.

I went to Betty and said, “This is what we are going to do: We’re going to put on school shows. The price to see our school shows will be a can of food for the needy. We’ll call Operation Food Search; they’ll come get the food. We’ll do a clown show and every child that leaves will have her little brochure that she sent out—because I had seen that. Everyone will get a picture of Mrs. Clown. It’s a picture [that] you color the clowns and then send it back to Mrs. Clown with your name, address, phone number, birth date, and that way she had [this information].”

And so within, I guess about two weeks, we put together [a show]. Betty wrote the show. I made these—I am pretty handy with making things and I had a saw and everything—I took these strips of wood and I built four—there were four of us ladies that did this all at our own expense—I built four jack-in-the-boxes. It was a four-sided box and but it all came apart and they were just like a canvas picture, but they were with canvas, and then I put Velcro on one side and one end, so they could be Velcroed together and there was a top. And then I painted the clown faces of each clown on the front of them. So that sat on the stage and kind of filled up the stage. And then I made—I measured the truck so that they would fit in the truck—Mrs. Clown had a truck—I made four screens that also would Velcro together to put in the middle of the stage and they had pictures on them and that was where we could put our props. And it helped fill up the stage, because just four ladies on the stage in a big school assembly isn’t much.

AH: Yes.

GW: And so within a two month period we did, gosh, I don’t know how many school shows. We collected over twenty-four thousand cans of food for the needy. All these kids went home with the “Color Me.” And [in] each community I went to, I would call the local newspaper, community paper. And they came out and were happy to do a thing [an article] because it was kids, clowns, [and] food for the needy. I mean it was a win, win, win (laughs).

AH: Yes.

GW: And at the end of the two months we ended up with a full-page color ad on the “Everyday Magazine” section of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. And the business just took off.

AH: Okay.

GW: And so that’s what I did. I made my living. I still groomed dogs a couple of days a week but that was basically how I made my living for two weeks until the circus came to town.

AH: Okay now, for two months you mean or two weeks?

GW: I'm sorry. Two years I made my living [clowning], for two *years*.

AH: Okay. Okay.

GW: I'm sorry.

AH: No, it's okay. So the other women you were working with, were they of similar age or were y'all different? What was that like?

GW: Well, we were all—yeah, um—Betty and I were pretty much the same age and J.J. was in our age group. I think two others were just a little bit younger. But these were all housewives. These weren't kids. We were all housewives. Some of them's children were grown and others were [not]. But there was nobody under [the age of] thirty. Yeah. There were four of us.

AH: And if you could kind of summarize to us what was the act like? What were the acts like over those years? Were there certain kinds of props and gags that you used?

GW: Well, Betty got me into magic because we did mostly children's birthday parties. And so she had been doing clowning for about two years on her own. And she had developed kind of a formula for the show about the type of magic, so it was easy for her to get me into that because she taught me all the magic.

And then I would house sit for a man named Steve Bender. He had a company called—still has it—called Ickle Pickle. And so sometimes when he would go on conventions I would house sit for him. Sometimes the kids would be there, sometimes they wouldn't. I would always take care of their animals if they were left there. And so I would do that in return for magic. So I got a lot of nice magic. And then, I make a lot of magic too because, you know, I belong to three magic clubs (laughs).

AH: Okay.

GW: And so I still do the magic.

AH: Yeah. Tell us just a little bit before we continue a little bit about—well I guess—How is it different to have a clown show than to be part of a circus and to be a clown? It's kind of two different roles, right?

GW: Well, circus clowning and what I did is totally different clowning, because I would go in and do a show for a room full of people. Sometimes it would be a school show or something, and I could do that up on a stage; that wasn't a problem. But when you get in a big arena with—well, what I did mainly was, you know, magic and silly stuff with kids, story-telling magic mostly. And I made a lot of balloon animals and that sort of thing.

Whereas circus clowns, their clowning is done a little larger scale. Especially the Ringling [Ringling Bros. Circus], when you get into the Ringling circus and the big circuses like that. So you're going to play for twenty thousand people. And also, it's a lot more slapstick and falls. Those clowns, they also learn stilt-walking. And they do a lot of physical stuff that, as a birthday party clown, I didn't do.

AH: Well and then with like a Ringling clown, for example, would there be less speaking and more—

GW: Yeah. They don't speak one-on-one. Whereas the kind—

AH: It's more like—not mime, but it's no talking.

GW: Right. Right. And even when you see them a lot of them will whistle, and they'll gesture, but they don't really talk.

AH: Yes.

GW: So that's the big difference. I never really thought about it like that before, but that is a big difference.

AH: Well, I just wanted to give listeners who aren't initiated into this an idea that it's definitely different worlds there.

GW: Exactly, exactly.

AH: Okay. So at this point, then, you're making a better living with the clowning and still doing a little bit of the grooming and everything, and that went on for two years, and then what changed?

GW: Well, the circus came to town. And one of my sons has been—was on the road for years with rock n' roll bands, and so I know that these kids [that are] on the road always like something homemade. So I made a huge batch of cookies and took them down from the clowns in Clown Alley [to the clowns]. And so they allowed me to come in—not into the alley—but they talked me and all came out and talked to me. And I said, "Well, I have the next three days free," and—because these kids lived on the train and I knew that they didn't have cars or ways to get around—I said, "If you need to go shopping, or if you need to go sightseeing," I said, "I have the next three days free, and I'd be happy to take you around."

So they said—some of them said they'd love to go. So, the next day I made arrangements to pick them up at the train and, I don't know, we did some sightseeing. One of the guys was looking for a trunk, so we went to a bunch of Goodwill stores and thrift stores looking for a big old trunk for him. And they were just such nice kids. And they were all, for the most part, in their twenties. And [they were] just really nice kids. And on the third day I said, "How do I get a job here?"

And, of course, I knew I couldn't be circus clown because at that time to be a Ringling clown you had to go to the clown college.

AH: Yes.

GW: And they don't do that anymore, but at that time it was, it was necessary. And of course with my age, you know, I was fifty-three, so that kind of eliminated [my chances].

AH: Some of that physical comedy would have been tough to pull off, you think?

GW: Right, right. And because it's basically for younger people. So they told me to see Mike Falls in Sixteen Wagon, which is just a wagon sitting on the lot and it had a door going up to it. There was no windows in it or anything. So I went and knocked on it, and he opened the door and here is this office inside this wagon, this windowless wagon. And I said, "I'm Gloria Wilkinson," and you know I said, "I'm a local clown but I have always wanted to work for the circus and I'd like to put in an application." I said, "I know how to do some sewing, and I would like to work in your wardrobe department. "

And he said, "We never hire outsiders in wardrobe because we always have, like, the mothers or the aunts of a lot of these performers, people who used to be performers, but they are too old, but they still travel as families. But we still have to give them jobs."

And I said, "But I really want to do this." So to shut me up, he gave me this card and said, "Well, send me your resume." I spent a whole day on a resume and a cover letter, and I mailed it off, and by golly they called me! (laughs)

AH: Oh really?

GW: Yeah it was about a month and a half later that I got a call. I got the call the day before Thanksgiving. Well, I had to wait to the following Monday so I could return the call to him, because he left the message at my home.

AH: Okay. So were you surprised to hear from him?

GW: Yeah (laughs). Surprised and thrilled.

AH: Well, that must have seemed like a very long Thanksgiving weekend, too, right?

GW: Oh my goodness, it was forever. And so Monday I called and—because in the cover letter I had given him every reason to hire me, because, you know, I said, "I have seen the train and living in small quarters is not a problem" and all of that. So he said that if I could be in Florida, and he gave me the date—I think it was December the thirteenth. I think that it was either the twelfth, or thirteenth, or fourteenth was the day that I arrived in Florida and started working for Ringling. And so I only had a couple of weeks to get rid of everything and, you know, close my apartment.

AH: Yes. And actually before we continue, I just want to get an idea of, all right, after the divorce—

GW: Uh-huh.

AH: Were you living on your own? Were you able to support yourself living in an apartment, or did that take a while? Were you staying with friends and family?

GW: I had to move home to my mother. My mother had to cosign for me to buy a six hundred dollar car. And it was one of those deals. And I lived with Mom for about a year and a half.

AH: Okay.

GW: And then I finally got enough courage to get out on my own, and was making enough money, and found a cheap apartment that I could afford. I was in St. Charles. But I didn't get on my own until after I had become a clown.

AH: Yes. That allowed you to support yourself most comfortably.

GW: Right, right.

AH: And so then you lived alone after that point?

GW: Yeah. Then I just had a little, kind of a three-room apartment.

AH: Okay. I just want to save this file and then we'll start again.

pause in recording

AH: Yeah, just to be safe. Okay. So now you're closing— you're kind of tying up loose ends back at home before going down to Florida, right?

GW: Right.

AH: Okay.

GW: So I rented a storage space and put stuff in it, and got rid of a lot of stuff. I basically didn't have that much.

AH: Sure.

GW: —Except my magic and all of that stuff. Now I took some of that, ended up taking some of that with me, I think. But I sent two boxes ahead. One had a little VCR

[videocassette recorder] and a little black-and-white TV [television] set in it, and a few clothes, and basically that was it.

AH: Now for you—I want to get an idea of what this must have felt like for you, because nothing really in your life up until now prepared you for this. You had been doing some clowning and stuff, but you had never just—the divorce was one thing but that was—you were forced out by the circumstances and everything else. This was totally different. This was, you know, on your own initiative, going to a different part of the continent and starting over and living a completely different life. So, I mean, how did that feel for you?

GW: It was real scary. I got on the plane and my plane—the plane would arrive in Sarasota, Florida and I would be picked up there. So, I envisioned [that our] winter quarters would be probably like a big building with rooms—everybody had a room. You know it was winter quarters. I didn't know what it was.

So I get to Sarasota because at that time Ringling winter quarters were in Venice, Florida. So I get to Sarasota at about one o'clock in the morning, but the airport lights, for whatever reason, went out. So we had to circle for about forty-five minutes before we could land, until they could get the lights back on. And then the guy that was supposed to pick me up, he wasn't there. And my luggage was lost.

AH: Yes, familiar story.

GW: Welcome to the real world! So by the time a thing for my luggage which was—I had two bags, but it had to have been the one with all my makeup and everything, so that was very devastating (laughter). So finally these two guys came and picked me up, and they took me to the train. Well, I didn't know that everybody lived—Well, I knew that everybody lived on the train, but—(pauses) I didn't know what winter quarters was, but I had just envisioned it being something where you lived in a dorm-type situation.

So they put me on the train. Well I was—they said, "Here's your room." And it was a room on the oldest train car, which was probably built in around the 1920s or so. It was all metal, thin metal walls, and the door was a pocket-door that slid back and forth. And when you opened the door to my room it was, well, the area that my couch is in [now] is larger than that room was.

AH: Yes. Okay.

GW: And that was it. And the bed was like a Murphy bed, it went up and down. So I had this much room, I had about eight inches of room between the bed and the sliding door and I could stand in that, because fortunately I was pretty skinny then. And I could lift the bed up to get stuff from under it, because all my stuff was stored down below.

So anyways, I got there. It was probably close to two o'clock in the morning [when I arrived]. I didn't know it at the time, but it was mostly Polish working men that lived on that car. And it was a Saturday night, and they liked to drink and party. And they also like

it very, very cold. The vent was broken over my head; I was about to freeze. The air conditioning (laughs) was blasting me, and I hear this language I had never heard before, and all these men's voices. And I thought, Oh my goodness Gloria, what did you get yourself into? (laughs)

So the next morning, I couldn't find where to catch the bus. I said—the guys had told me, “There will be a bus that'll take you in the morning.” I never did see it, but I was able to walk over to where the actual winter quarters were and that was at a big building over in Venice, so it was over by the airport.

So I walked over there and they sent me to the office, and I let them know that I was there. And then as I was walking back over to the wardrobe department I saw Terry Devalde, one of the clowns that I had given a ride to. And he said, “Oh, my gosh, you're here!” And after I saw him it was like, I am okay now.

AH: Yes. I know somebody here.

GW: Right.

AH: Someone who doesn't speak Polish! (laughs)

GW: (laughs) Exactly! And it was after just a couple of days on the job, I was asked by Frosty Little, who was the master clown there, if I would like to be the stooge in the clown gag. And of course I said, “Yes.” I was the plant in the audience that would run out and—

Well, the gag was—they had two platforms. One would be with children from the audience. They'd have a dozen kids up there. And the other one would be a platform—clowns would come up on this platform as they were announced, and they were announced as like wrestlers. And they were going to have the kids and these wrestler clowns have a tug-of-war. And in the middle is this huge thing about—what it that—about five-foot [tall] filled with soapy goo. Soapy goo is actually—I forget if it is Palmolive—the shaving cream that comes on a bar, and they shave that and they put it in a bucket, and then they put these drill bits with an electric drill and they beat that, and that's what clowns use for their soap gags.

So my job was to run out of the audience because when they [would] start pulling it would look like this one [kid] was getting pulled in. And he was actually a forty-three year old Hungarian midget named Sean Murasky. Well, he would hang on the rope there. I would rush out of the audience. I would grab him and put him back up on the platform, and then I would take my purse and I would chase the clowns out and beat up the ringmaster and hit him on the back with my purse.

AH: Okay, because you were indignant that they had pulled the kid into the goo?

GW: Absolutely, they are not going to do that to that little boy!

AH: (laughs) Yes.

GW: And then I went up, climbed up the steps to the platform, and you have got all these clowns there holding on to this rope and I would hit them on the way [by] and the last one I would hit him in the soapy goo.

AH: Okay

GW: Tah-dah! (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

GW: And went down and everybody styled. And that was it. That was fun, I did that for two years.

AH: So at the end of the show you revealed that you were part of the show?

GW: No, no.

AH: Okay. That was never—

GW: The gag was over, and people never really knew yes or no.

AH: Yes, yes.

GW: You know, because then the light went out and it was on another act.

AH: Okay.

GW: So some people figured it out and some never did.

AH: Yes, okay.

GW: That was fun.

AH: Well and it's always the best surprise when something comes from without the show, you know, something that you don't think is part of it. Well that kept things interesting for you, then.

GW: It did.

AH: So then tell us little bit about working in the wardrobe department. What was that like?

GW: Well, it—I had never sewn a sequin in my life. And I really didn't know how. And I watched. I'm a quick learner and if I see something is done, I can look and tell how it's been done and I can recreate that. So they would tell me what to do and I would do it. And part of the job was, in each town, if there weren't enough dressing rooms—and generally there weren't enough because we required, oh, probably about twenty dressing rooms. Then the ladies in wardrobe put up the pipe and drape, and built dressing rooms. So that was part of the job. And I enjoyed that. It was physical work, and I enjoyed that.

And then—so we went up—when one of the performers would have a problem with a costume part, say a hook or a snap came loose. When they came off the floor, they'd say, "This snap needs to be fixed." And every girl had a number. And every costume part had a number. So we would put down, like, if it was Girl Number Six we would put down, "Girl Number Six—loose snap on whatever it was on."

And then they would put their costume away and then we would look and see what was on the list and we would go get that and repair that.

AH: Okay.

GW: So whatever was required was what I did.

AH: Now what kind of people were you working with in costumes? Were these some of the relatives of performers and such? And what was that like?

GW: Diane Ross was my boss, and she was married to one of the guys from the King Charles Troop. And that troop had been on the show for twenty years. And, in fact, the show that I worked on the first—my first show I worked on was the one hundred and sixteenth edition of Ringling, and that was the last edition that had the King Charles Troop. They didn't give them a contract after that. Because they change the shows periodically, and they'd been there twenty years, that troop had. So they didn't get a contract.

After two years, then they asked me to be head of wardrobe. But Diane Ross was there, Lucy Cebreira was one of the wardrobe ladies and her daughters were both married to two of the Boskaz brothers, the Flying Boskaz. One was the catcher and the other one was the first person in the history of circus to do the quadruple somersault on the flying trapeze. And so Lucy was the mother of the two ladies that were in the act. And she had been in circus all her life. So she was one of the ladies that worked there. Gosh, who was the other one that—was it just Lucy and I?

AH: So it was a few of you then. It was maybe five at any one time?

GW: No, I think in those days it was, like, four, and I'm trying to think who the other person was, I can't remember off hand.

AH: Okay, that's okay. All right, so you're mending costumes.

GW: Right.

AH: What are some of the other duties? You described the making up the dressing rooms and things like that—

GW: Well that was when we would load in—

AH: Get into a new town.

GW: Yeah. And so we just stayed busy. There [was] always something to be mended or something to be fixed. So it was just—there was always something to do.

AH: And did you create many costumes, or did people come with their act and their costumes already developed?

GW: Well, in the wardrobe department, our job was to maintain all of the production costumes that belonged to Ringling. Now when the acts did their—like the people on the flying trapeze did their own act—those were their own costumes and they were responsible for those.

AH: Okay.

GW: (clears throat) And we were responsible for only the show's costumes. But you had opening, and you had spec, and you had finale. And so you had usually three complete separate costumes for each girl. And so, in those days we had right about forty ladies—you know with the act ladies and the dancers—that we took care of costumes for. There were a lot of costumes. Now it's not like that. They maybe only have fifty performers on the show. At that time they were a hundred and forty performers on the show.

AH: Okay. Now—and I don't know if you ever gave thought to this, but I'm just curious [as] to what you are thinking about it—First of all, did your ex-husband know what you went on to do? And that if he didn't know what would he think if and when he found out?

GW: That's kind of interesting. Before I ran away with the circus I talked to the kids. And I said, "What do you think about [me] doing this?" All of my kids, without hesitation, said "Hey, Mom, go for it!" And then when I—

AH: Oh, you told your children?

GW: Yeah.

AH: Okay, at first I thought you meant the younger clowns.

GW: Oh no, no, no. My own children.

AH: I'm sorry. Yes, your own children.

GW: Yes because—

AH: How many children did you have again?

GW: I have five. And so I told the kids all that I was going to do this and they all said, "Hey, Mom, go for it!" I forgot where I was going here.

AH: Well, I was asking what your husband would have thought—

GW: Oh yes!

AH: —if he found out.

GW: Well ultimately, ultimately he found out, because I had no reason to have anything to do with him. Ultimately he found out. And then I guess it was the first year—I'm not sure if it was the first year or the third year—They asked me to do a publicity thing in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was for George Parsione. [He] was the local media person there at the local radio station, and he always had little bits. That was my first thing and when I did that it was like, Oh man, what great revenge this is, because he always said I couldn't make it without him, and look at me.

Except I didn't tell him. The kids had no idea how much publicity that I did. I did a lot of publicity.

AH: And when you—no, go ahead.

GW: It made me feel good. It was a revenge thing, although he never knew it. Until one year we went back to St. Louis and I [had] a whole page on the *Post-Dispatch*, a feature story on me and a little picture of me on the front page. [It was] in the corner saying, you know, "Circus comes to town see page whatever." Or "local woman" or whatever. I said, "Man, I got my picture on the front page of the newspaper and I didn't do anything bad." (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

GW: So that was fun.

AH: So you imagine that he probably saw that.

GW: Oh yeah. Absolutely. And then we made peace in later years and—because by then I had become a whole different person—

AH: Absolutely.

GW: —and I don't look back. Because the minute that you look back you're not looking forward to what's out there. And you just shut yourself off. And so, I don't look back. I can't change what's back there.

AH: And why revisit that anyway?

GW: Right.

AH: You've got such great things going on.

GW: Exactly, exactly. So I had a fabulous life and in fact the kids told me the [my ex-husband] was really proud of what I did. (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

GW: Go figure.

AH: If only he would have encouraged you and not have been, you know—

GW: Well he did—My husband did encourage me on a lot of things, he just didn't like me doing anything on my own. I mean if it was under his auspices it was good. You know, he was always getting me to invite a lot of people for big dinners and stuff, and everything. It wasn't my idea to have thirty people for dinner and then have to wait on them.

AH: Well, and becoming that different person, in some respects, he missed out.

GW: He did. Yeah.

AH: And going on you became a completely different person with a lot more vitality and self-esteem and self-reliance and everything else.

So now, all right, with the publicity thing—first of all, you mentioned you were on the radio show. So you went into the studio and you were interviewed or—

GW: No, that was a TV bit and they came to the building in Cincinnati and I set all of the hats—we would set them out on these head [things]—

AH: Uh-huh. Like mannequins.

GW: Yeah these mannequin heads so I would set up a display of stuff. I would open—all of our wardrobe was in boxes that were not quite as long as that couch and about that size. These wooden wardrobe boxes, they opened and there were all the costumes; everything was in order and the numbers and everything. And I would open everything up and have it all arranged, all the costumes real neatly arranged and then I would have certain ones hung out that were some of the bigger costumes. I would have something

that was visually pleasing to photograph for the piece, so when they came in there it was like, Wow! You would see all this neat stuff. So anyway that was what I did.

AH: Okay. And then, before we continue, I just want to clarify something I was just thinking about. We talked about you becoming the head of wardrobe, and that was because some of the relatives from that other troop left. And by then it was only year, but you had picked up enough knowledge—

GW: It was two years.

AH: Two years.

GW: Because every show goes for two years.

AH: Oh I see.

GW: And then they change to a totally new show with totally new people and every show, so—after two years, Diane left and my boss liked me. He was a Polish man. (inaudible). And he's just a great, great guy. And he wanted me [for the position]. And I said, "Lucy's been here longer." [He said] "I want you. I want you."

AH: So what do you suppose he liked about you so much?

GW: Well, for one thing, I guess because I did a little extra. If I'd see a clown walking and I'd see a tear in his costume—and I wasn't really supposed to do the clown's stuff. But the guy in clown wardrobe, sometimes he'd get busy and backed up. So I'd say, "Why don't you take that off and give it to me." And then pfoom! I'd fix it and give it back to him.

But I would do a lot of little extra things that others didn't do. They came in to do their job. But I was—I wanted to be there, and I wanted to be a part of everything. And I guess that's why he wanted me; because he saw that I would go the extra mile.

AH: Well, maybe other folks had been doing it for a long time and it was just kind of, not going through the motions, but doing as much as you needed to do.

GW: Basically he just liked me.

(telephone rings)

AH: I'll pause it.

pause in recording

AH: Okay. Now, you were just talking about your boss. So obviously, eventually, you got on and got along with all these Polish men who had at first kind of intimidated you.

GW: Well, it was simply because I didn't know what I was getting into. I had never heard that language spoken before. And it was—I was in a totally strange environment. I was cold, I was tired, and I didn't have my makeup.

AH: Or luggage.

GW: Or luggage (laughs). So—but the Polish guys who were on the show at that time had been there for, oh, gosh, twelve or fifteen years. They had been brought over as part of an agreement to bring these people to work on the circus. And they were hard working, and just great guys. They were wonderful. Yeah.

AH: Was there ever a time where you joined their parties in the train?

GW: Oh yeah. There was—we had lots of parties and what they—you spoke to me about how you had interest in food.

AH: Uh-huh.

GW: When you go on the train runs, for example, and you walk through the train cars, because there were about twenty-eight coaches where the people lived. But like the Bulgarians were in troops, they would have a train car. So, you know, because those were big troops. It depended on, anyway, you would go from, like, walking country to country. If you closed your eyes you could tell by how the food smelled when you went through there what country you were going through.

AH: Okay.

GW: That was pretty neat. And that always amazed me too, because we all went shopping, usually Saturday night after three shows, there would be a market bus so that people could get supplies. Because Sunday was load out and Monday was a train run. So they would have food because they cooked on the train. And so we'd all go to the same grocery store. We'd all buy, you know, buy food. But when they cooked it, and when I cooked it, it was totally different.

AH: Yes.

GW: Because they cooked it the way they cooked in their country (laughs). And I always found that kind of interesting.

AH: Well, it must have been fascinating because here you are, a Midwestern woman who—

GW: Exactly.

AH: — You know didn't get to see a lot of that.

GW: No!

AH: So when you're on this train, this microcosm, and—

GW: It was amazing. It was amazing.

AH: So obviously your food palette expanded a bit, right?

GW: Exactly, exactly. There were some great meals and then there were some things that you ate and you thought—oh, and the Mongolians were there! Oh, some the stuff [they ate]. Because they made—it was stuff made out of sheep's milk and (inaudible) and it was just not good.

AH: Now this was a beverage?

GW: Well, they'd have this candy stuff that they liked, and I don't know what was in it, but I'd eat a piece and it would just keep growing in your mouth and it would never go away. But, you know, they grew up with it and they just did things different.

AH: Okay, but a whole another side of life for you then.

GW: Oh yeah, yeah.

AH: Okay. So when you became a head of wardrobe did you get a bigger train roomette?

GW: Oh yes, oh yes. I got moved to a different train car. Because after I was there, I got moved to one that was a little bit bigger. Because it's all a seniority thing. And of course real estate on the train is in inches, not in feet (laughs). So I got a larger room and I guess I was there almost twelve years. I probably had about five or six different train rooms and they kept getting larger.

AH: Yes. Now, so, obviously you had a much-expanded social life as well and you met a lot of people and everything. So what were some of the other things that you might do when you were on the road? Was there certain kinds of things that you did during winter? What were certain kinds of rituals and, I guess, the culture behind the scenes? I mean, did people play a lot of cards during the winter? Did you take little trips, or were there things that people did together?

GW: Well, when I first went on the train—of course I rode the train on the train runs—

AH: Now when you say “train runs,” is this transport between different cities and locations?

GW: Right. You live on that train. Wherever that train goes, that's where you live. But a lot of people would drive overland. And occasionally I would take overland trips with

someone. And then later on, I was a driver for the ringmaster, for Jim Ragona, in his private automobile. Because it wouldn't go on the train, but he wanted to have a car so he drove it.

So my first two years that I was there, I rode the train. And then, I drove for Ragona for I guess a couple of years. And then—I am trying to think when I bought my motorcycle, because I had a motorcycle for four years; two while I was there.

AH: Now you never had a motorcycle before?

GW: Oh yeah, I'd had them when I was—but I hadn't been on a motorcycle in, oh for at least twenty years when I bought mine. And that was interesting. I had traveled overland with Bill McKell, one of the clowns, on his motorcycle. We went from Lake Charles, Louisiana to Austin [Texas], and then the show moved down to San Antonio and then after—well, I was with my family then, because my son lives in New Braunfels, just north of San Antonio.

And then when we left San Antonio I was going to ride the motorcycle with Bill over to Houston. But he wanted to go skydiving. And one of the guys, Tim, who was one of the musicians, wanted to go skydiving too. He also had a motorcycle. And my son lived there in New Braunfels. He set it up so that we could go to this place in San Marcos and go skydiving because he guys wanted to go. And when I listened to all of the stuff they [said] and they showed a little video [about] what can happen and everything, because it was a tandem jump they were doing. I said, "Well, gee can I go too?" And they said, "Sure." So I went skydiving, and that was a blast. I was like fifty-eight at the time, or fifty-six (laughs).

AH: Okay.

GW: That was fun. And then Bill said, "When we get back to Florida you need to get yourself a motorcycle, Gloria." I said, "Okay." And some of the dancers had these tiny little scooter things. And everybody thought that was what I'd get. And I said, "There's no way! Those are so dangerous. How are you going to get out of anybody's way?"

AH: Uh-huh.

GW: I bought—Mr. Bill found it in the local Venice paper when we got back to winter quarters—and I bought a four hundred [cubic centimeter] Honda. I had that for a couple of years and I liked it, but then I saw another one that was a bit of a nicer bike that was also four hundred Honda. I got rid of that one and bought another one. But I have ridden it across New York City, through the Catskill Mountains, over the George Washington Bridge. All of those neat places.

AH: Yes.

GW: It was so neat.

AH: And were you able to take the motorcycle on the road with you or not?

GW: Yeah, but most of the time it was trailered between— from town to town. I paid somebody— because there were guys on the show that would haul motorcycles. It was twenty bucks a haul.

AH: Well, then it's nice because you have your own transport too.

GW: Exactly. And that's before I could afford to buy a car.

AH: Okay, yes. This is a part that I don't know if you want to discuss or not, but were you keeping your romantic options open at this point, or were you kind of finished with all that? Or how was that for you?

GW: Basically, I was in a young person's world. And so there weren't many people— you know, just [not] a whole lot of opportunities for dating. Although I did go, for a time, with one of the guys in the band and we dated for about six months. And in fact he was quite serious and he proposed to me and I said, (laughs) “No.” I said no, and I tried to break it off, but he really cared for me. And I said, “No, it wouldn't work.” But he said, “But I want you—” Because he was a musician, that was his whole life—and I have a tin ear. And our age difference. It just wasn't for me. And I said, “One of these days when you go down the road—” because at that time they carried, I don't know, about five or eight musicians on the train and then they would hire the rest locally in each town—I said, “You're going to run into somebody, and when you do, I want you to date her.” And ultimately he did marry one of the musicians that came out of Louisiana, I think.

But other than that, I basically didn't have any interest. I was having too good of a time. I was having too much fun.

AH: Of course. Okay.

GW: And being single too, the clowns— because for four years I was in clown gags. So if the clowns were going to go somewhere like to Disneyland or go someplace, they would invite me along. So I had a lot fun going with them, because we had a common thing because I was a clown before I went to the circus. So we had that in common, plus I was part of their group. I was their stooge. So I got to do a lot of things with the clowns.

AH: And you had so much companionship anyway—

GW: Exactly.

AH: With this huge circle of friends. You probably didn't feel as much of a need to for that anyways.

GW: No, and I was just too busy having a good time. I didn't want to be tied down.

AH: Okay. Well, let me see. What are some of the other aspects that we haven't explored yet? So, okay, you get to head of wardrobe for Ringling—how long did this last? And I guess, before we go there, before we tie that part of your life up, maybe give us an idea of what the workflow was like. Because you were fixing things and things like that from time to time. Were there certain times that you would be really busy for a certain reason? Were there other times when you wouldn't have much to do? I mean were there, what was the—

GW: We um—every show ran for two years. The clowns and the dancers—there were sixteen clowns and sixteen dancers on the show. And they had one year's contracts. All the performers were set for two years. Now occasionally, if one would get injured or, for whatever reason, have to leave the show and they'd bring in somebody else. Then I would have to—I was responsible for making that production costume fit the next performer that came on the show.

And, for example, one year they had a dwarf clown—a girl dwarf clown—she was from Colorado. After the one year she then left the show. Now this is a girl dwarf clown that was kind of chunky and stood about, oh, maybe four foot tall.

She was replaced by—you know Olive Oyl from Popeye?

AH: Uh-huh.

GW: A very tall, skinny [woman]. Well [the dwarf girl] was replaced by this very tall girl—her name was Peggy—and she was very slender and very tall. Just the neatest gal! And I had to take this clown costume from this little dwarf and make it fit this other one.

And I always kept—when the show would leave winter quarters I would always get a supply of leftover fabrics that the costumes were made from, from the costume companies. And so I'd always have little bits and pieces of things. And with the clowns too, you had a little more wiggle room to make things because they weren't as exacting as far as matching, in some cases. So I was able to take my scraps and bits and pieces and I was able to make her a costume.

And another time, a kid named Digger the Clown—I can't remember his real name—he came on the show. He didn't, for whatever reason, he didn't have a costume. I don't know if they hired an extra clown. I don't know why, but there wasn't a production costume for him. So he couldn't be in any of the production numbers because there wasn't a costume for him. And I scrounged up bits and pieces and I made him a production costume, so he could be in the show. So those were things that I did. (chuckles)

AH: Okay.

GW: I think that's why they liked having me there, because I would make sure that everybody got in the show. Do whatever it took.

AH: Uh-huh. Okay. And then so how long did that position last and then what happens next?

GW: I stayed the wardrobe mistress for the whole time that I was at Ringling.

AH: And how many years was that?

GW: Well, you could retire after ten years. However, the first year that you were there didn't count, and then time off, vacations, or any time the show was in winter quarters or something, that didn't count. So I was there almost twelve years.

And by that time the whole thing had started to change. It wasn't the management change. They had people running the shows that were from—we called them the suits. They didn't come up as performers or some up on the circus. They didn't understand the needs of the people. And they would make it difficult sometimes to do your job. Because they wanted it done this way, not realizing that the way you did it was done that way for a reason: because of our lifestyle, because of the way we travel. And they just—I don't know—it was that the whole kind of atmosphere changed.

And I guess I was kind of looking for a change too. Because I wanted to work on a tent circus and then I went to work for Big Apple Circus for a year. And that was great.

AH: And you were working wardrobe—

GW: I was the wardrobe mistress for that show.

AH: Okay. And so how was that? How did that differ?

GW: That was a tent circus. So it was a totally different experience. The wardrobe department was a semi-trailer. And the front end of it was the washers and dryers and all the—they had two huge wardrobe cases for all of the wardrobe. I mean it was just crammed in there. It was a nightmare to move, because everything had to be jammed in tight because it was such a small area.

And so the ladies had the back half and the men dressed in the other end of it. So—I'm not quite sure how many performers there were. I don't remember how many performers were on that show. But it was just a different atmosphere, but it was interesting.

AH: And obviously [there was] different people. You were leaving behind a lot people at Ringling, which you might have known. And so then after the year Big Apple—

GW: Uh-huh.

AH: —what next?

GW: Well, when I went—I retired then because I was sixty-six at that time. And I heard from two different people. Somebody from Las Vegas, and somebody from New York. Both, I heard from them that “Lee Stevens¹ expects you to come down and live on his property.” It’s like, Where else would you go?

AH: Yes. Now let’s back up just a minute, because he is kind of an important part of this story. He is the one, after all, who got us together. When did you meet Lee? And tell me about your impressions because we know Lee already from a previous interview.

GW: (laughs)

AH: So tell us a little bit about that.

GW: Well, I met Lee and Judy when they had their baboons on the show and about—

AH: This in Ringling, right?

GW: On Ringling.

AH: Yes.

GW: Yeah. See, Lee was on all three of the Ringling shows. He was on the—I was on the Blue Unit. There’s two complete Ringling Circuses out, I don’t know if you realize that or not.

AH: I think that Lee mentioned it.

GW: And I was on the Blue Unit. Lee had come from Japan and then they went on the Blue Unit. He was on the Blue Unit for two years, and then he ended up being on the Red Unit after that. I only knew him the two years that he was on the Blue Unit. But, I don’t know, you meet certain people and you just click as friends. And we just developed a nice friendship. And I just think the world of Lee and Judy, and it just clicked.

AH: Okay, so it’s someone that you kind of, stayed with you, even after you moved?

GW: Yeah, yeah.

AH: So—and tell us about the [International Independent] Showmen’s Association. Now at what point did you become involved there? I mean, were you automatically a member, or how did that work?

¹ See Andrew Huse’s interview with Lee Stevens (December 19, 2007).

GW: Well, when I moved down here then—when I moved down here, I moved down in, like, February of ninety-eight [1998], I believe it was.

AH: Okay.

GW: And so Lee, of course, got the application for me to join it, because he was a member and it just, you know, I'm here, I have got to be a part of this community, so that's when I joined. So that was basically it (laughs).

AH: And Lee hadn't been president yet, that was still years later.

GW: Oh no, oh no.

AH: Okay. So tell us some of your—well first, let's go back; you were telling the story of friends [that] said "You know you're expected to come live with Lee." So tell us about that. What was that like?

GW: Well, you know, I don't know how we got [in touch]. We didn't have cell phones in those days, so it was landlines, and we got in touch with each other, and anyway they said, "Oh yeah, come on down." So [I bought] a trailer and put it on their place. See, they wanted someone to live on their property, because when they're gone, if you don't have someone on your property and you have anything there in your house, it probably won't be there when you get home, because people know that the show people are gone for months at a time.

AH: Yes.

GW: So he wanted someone to kind of go and live with him on the property. And so it worked out really well. At the time I came down and moved in with him, they lived over on Cliff Avenue and we were only there until June, when we moved over here.

He went on the road and then in June they were—it was when we moved over. They came back for a couple of weeks, packed all of the stuff they had there and came over here.

AH: Okay.

GW: And then I stayed here on this property. We've never had anybody take anything. I mean, it has been secure, and whatever they needed. You know, they built some other shows and so I would make all of the costumes for the other shows. You know, just whatever they needed. Whatever they need. (laughs) That's all.

AH: Yes, okay. So he kind of got you acclimated to the beginning of your retirement. You have a place to stay, you still have some things to do. Besides looking after the place, you can help him out with costumes and things like that so.

GW: Right, right. I did that and then I got involved with the—Oh! One of the fun things I did—I am trying to think of his name—the guy that was Eddie Munster.

AH: Okay.

GW: Butch [Patrick] something-or-other. Anyway, he had some kind of an acting seminar at the mall up there. I don't know, I saw it in the newspaper, I guess, or heard about it on TV or something. Anyway, it was like a hundred and twenty-five bucks. It was an all day seminar, because I thought that I wanted to get in to doing extra's work on movies. I thought that would kind of be a neat thing to do.

And so I went to that, and well it wasn't that big of a deal. They were going to give you a—you were going to do this commercial and then you were going to have this video of this for whatever. Well, it wasn't too good. But there was this kid there. I say kid, he was thirty years old, but at my age they're all kids (chuckles).

AH: Uh-huh.

GW: This young black man, and I could see that he had this eagerness about him. And, I mean, he just wanted to be in show business. So after it was over I went over and talked to him and introduced myself. And I said—because he had said that he might like to do some stunt work. I said, “Well, some of the clowns have gone on to do stunt work like, you know, over in Orlando and stuff. I don't know if I could hook you up or not, but if you want to do that maybe I can help you.” He said, “Oh that would be good.”

And he was a very nice looking young man and I said, “Do you have any interest in—?” And he said, “I just want to be in show business. I don't know what I could do.” I said, “Well, do you have an interest in magic?” He said, “Well I don't know anything about?” I said, “That's not what I asked you. Do you have an interest in it?” He said, “Well, I guess.”

I said, “Because there's not many black magicians.” And he has this stage presence, you know. He just has it. And I said, “You know, if you think you would like to learn magic, I would be your mentor. I will teach you magic.” He said, “Yeah, I would like that.”

I gave him my number, and a couple of weeks later he called me. So I invited him to come out. So I got him into magic and started teaching him magic. And he picked up on it real fast and was doing really well. And then I would take him to magic club meetings and things like this. And we went to a magic convention down in Miami Beach. And we just did a lot of really nice things together. And then he kind of adopted me. I was—he calls me “Mama G.”

And then so one day he said, “Mama G., I saw this guy one time out in Venice, California. He was out on the beach and he was doing this fire [thing].” He said, “I have always wanted to learn how to be a fire eater.” I said, “Oh, well no problem. I'll introduce you to Melvin Burkhart.”

He was in the magic club. Melvin Burkhart was in the sideshow all his life. He was in his nineties then. He has since passed away. And so I told Melvin, “This is Lamont and he wants to learn how to be a fire eater.” He said, “Oh, yeah. This is what you do.” And he was explaining to Lamont, you know, what to do, how to make a torch, what to do. And he said, “Just go home and practice. Just be real careful, take it easy.”

So Lamont went home and started practicing, and I introduced him to others that I knew that were fire eaters: Johnny Box, and a kid that came up at Ringling, he was working over in Winter Haven. Just different ones that I knew that ate fire. And they would give him little pointers on, like, where to buy wicks, and one showed him to make a fire circle. Just spread the fuel and then you’re standing in this ring of fire. You know, and how to blow volcanoes and all of that stuff.

So he got really good at that and it’s been—well, that’s how he makes his living now. He is the Human Volcano. And I’ve—I’ll show you some pictures of some of the things that I have down and some of the costumes I have made.

AH: Great.

GW: So it’s neat to be a mentor, and in fact, when Lee had his installation, Lamont was part of his show that he put on. He came out in this Zulu [outfit]. I made this Zulu looking stuff for him. And he put white paint on his face, and he came out and I mean he was really good. He was part of Lee’s installation when he became the president of the club. And he also performs at the circus when they have the circus over at the club. He has been there a couple of times as a performer.

AH: Okay. So although you’re career in the circus wasn’t as long as some other people’s you still had that full circle experience of being able to give back and—

GW: Oh absolutely! Absolutely. That’s what it is all about!

AH: Yeah.

GW: That’s what it is all about. And it was interesting because Lamont, then, he got an invitation—because in his search to get into the movies or find his niche, he had met up with some people out in Clearwater that had Wildheart Studios. And he got this invitation to go to their premier of this movie they had made. It was an independent movie and it was [being shown] at the Vinoy Hotel. And it was—gosh, I think it was fifty dollars to go. Maybe it was more than that. I don’t remember.

Anyway, it was [required] that you make reservations and pay to go see the movie. But it was a black-tie affair. So, boy, I got all dressed up. My friend did my hair, and Lamont rented a tux and we went over there and saw that, and, you know, shook hands with all the people and everything. And then they had little comment cards to fill out for how we like the movie, and would we be interested in any future, helping with any future things.

I said that I would be interested in helping with wardrobe. If they were going to do another movie, maybe I could help with wardrobe. And about a year later I got a call, and they asked me to come out. And so when I went out there, of course they had no idea what I did, except that I had said that I would like to help with wardrobe. When I went out there I took some of my stuff from Ringling and showed them what I did. And they were pretty blown away by that. And anyway, I was wardrobe designer on two movies. And that was fun.

AH: Okay—

GW: They never went anywhere, you know? But it was a neat experience.

AH: Yes.

GW: And those people are as equally hard working as circus people are, but they're, you know, they have a little bit different language that they speak. But it was great. I had a great time doing that. And there again it's created—

AH: And when was that?

GW: That was in about 2000. I did that. And I made some—I made a lot of neat costumes for the movie.

AH: Yeah.

GW: And that was fun.

AH: Let me see—

pause in recording

AH: Okay. So you do a few movies, and now we're into the twenty-first century. And what else between then and now?

GW: Well, I am working on an invention. I am about through the first phase of getting it patented. And it requires a large manufacturer, and if I don't find somebody that can manufacture the product, I just don't have another four or five thousand dollars to put into it to get a patent if I am not sure that I can market it. So that's where I stand on that. And I like to invent things. I like to create and invent things.

AH: Do you want to tell us what the invention is, or should we not because you're waiting for a patent?

GW: Well, no. No, I won't talk about that one. The one I will talk about, though—when Lee and Judy bought the dog-grooming shop after they retired—I am kind of skipping

around here. But when they bought the dog-grooming shop, I told them, I said, “I can’t groom dogs anymore. I don’t have the patience for it.” And so—but I felt so guilty! I felt so guilty because—but it was their decision, they bought it. But I had been a dog groomer and I didn’t want to do that. But I had this guilt.

So one day Lee and I were over at the shop. It was on a Monday on the day off.

(telephone rings) Oh, I am so sorry!

AH: Oh it’s okay. I’ll just—

pause in recording

AH: Okay.

GW: This lady walked in. The shop wasn’t open, but the door was unlocked. This lady walked in and she said, “I just want to know if you can trim my dog’s toenails. I have been taking it [to] the vet in Sarasota, but he told me that next time I bring it he will have to put it to sleep to trim its toenails. Can you do it?” And Lee said, “Sure, bring it in.” It was a pug and you know, they have got those pushed in little faces so you can’t really muzzle them.

So the next day—well that following evening I asked Judy if that lady had brought a pug in to get its nails trimmed. She said, “Yeah.”

I said, “Did you do them?” She said, “Oh, yeah.” I said, “How did you do it?” And she said, “Well, two of us got the big gloves on and held it and the third one clipped its nails. Yeah, we got it done.” And I thought, Well, there’s got to be an easier way than putting on the big gloves and holding the dog.

So I came up with an invention, and I’ll show one of my prototypes.

AH: Okay.

GW: And it’s a dog holder.

AH: Okay, a dog holder.

GW: (pauses) Now, this one doesn’t work because it is made from the wrong kind of fabric. It has to be made from a certain kind of fabric to work. But what you do, (demonstrating to Andy Huse) you put the dog in here. You put his front legs, his hind legs here. You put this like this, and then you turn it down. Now his face can’t go anywhere. But this has to be made out of a stretchy fabric [because] when it is a hard fabric they can get their leg up and get it out. But when it is stretchy, it molds to the body and they can’t get it out.

AH: Yes.

So it comes in two sizes. This is a prototype because Lisa [had thought] it would work in denim because my original idea was that it had to be a stretchy fabric that they couldn't climb out of. And this is something that is not really worth the money to put a patent on it, because it is kind of a specialty thing. And I should get on the ball and just make them and sell them.

AH: Yeah.

GW: But anyway, I see a need and I create things.

AH: Okay.

GW: In fact I'll show you one my little—I'll show you a donkey head that I made.

AH: (chuckling) Okay.

GW: Would you like to see that?

AH: Sure.

pause in recording

AH: Okay so now you're a tinkerer, kind of semi-retired—

GW: Right.

AH: —and [is there] anything else we need to know about in your settling down years, I guess?

GW: Well, no. I feel—I'm seventy-five. I feel like I am halfway through my second life and when I hit a hundred, my third life will start.

AH: Yes.

GW: And then I'll do good stuff (laughs).

AH: (laughs)

GW: Because life just gets better. And I was blessed with good health.

AH: Yes. You look great for your age.

GW: I was lucky in the gene pool.

AH: Yes, okay. And what about involvement in the club? You joined when you got down?

GW: The only committee I am on in the club is the cemetery committee. And so I help raise money for the cemetery. Because we keep flowers on the graves and occasionally some [person] needs a place to be buried and we take care of that. And so I am active there. And when there's a trade show or whenever we have fundraisers and I'm involved with that part of it. And if they need somebody to come over and help cook or whatever they need, you know, I am always happy to do that.

AH: Well, it seems like a really neat, active club, at least when everyone is here. There's always something going on and [it is] a nice home away from home for people, right?

GW: Oh, it's an amazing club.

AH: Yeah.

GW: The charity work they do is just amazing, and I don't think the people of the community have any idea—

AH: No.

GW: —how much charity work is done by the club. I mean that's what it's all about.

AH: Absolutely. Yeah.

GW: Well, yeah it's certainly—I've been surprised just in the last year of learning more, you know more about the club and everything and how amazing just, not only [that] you've got all the charity stuff but also this idea of community and hospitality for people who are on the road all year long, and then they have a place to come and recreate and relax and everything.

GW: Right, right, yeah.

AH: And then the trade show is a whole other animal all together. That's quite the spectacle.

GW: Exactly. So from November through March is our carnival circus family reunion time. And we all get together and it's great.

AH: Now are there many people from your days on the road that are living around here?

GW: Uh, there's a few but not a whole lot that I work with. There's some that live down in Sarasota. But, except for Lee and Judy, there's none in the immediate neighborhood here.

AH: Yes. Okay. Well, and you do just about live right across the river from the club just like you said.

GW: Right, right.

AH: I was like, wow, she wasn't joking. Well, do you have anything else to add? Is there anything else that we missed here or anything like that?

GW: Well—

AH: —obviously you could never cover or do justice to a whole life in [an interview].

GW: Well, I could ramble on for hours about things, but I think you probably have kind of a little map of my travels as I turn fifty and [have] my second life. So it's been great.

AH: Yes. Well, and if in between now and the next time I see you there's anything you want to add or anything, [it's] no problem.

GW: Okay. Sure.

AH: Absolutely. Um, and then the other thing that I usually ask—well I usually ask three different questions at the end. The first is like a two part question. [What was] the best time in your life, and the toughest time in your life? You can start with whichever one you want, and you don't have to be that specific if you don't want.

GW: Well, I guess the toughest time in my life was really struggling to raise five kids because we just never had enough money. And times were not real good. So just getting through life at that time, it was difficult. It had a lot of rewards and along the way it wasn't all bad but it was always a struggle because with five kids there was never enough money. So that was, I guess, a little bit difficult.

AH: And I didn't ask you before, but how much time passed between the time your youngest child was raised and out on their own, between that and your divorce?

GW: Well, my son had just graduated from high school when I got the divorce, my youngest son.

AH: Okay.

GW: And the others were all pretty much gone from home by then. So, yeah.

AH: Okay.

GW: I had to wait for my kids to grow up to join the circus.

AH: Yes, of course. And then, you know, [what were] the best times?

GW: Well, the best times would have to be the years I spent at the circus. It was just an absolute fabulous time in my life. I met so many neat people. In fact, I would like to go visit—I became Mama Cossack when the Cossacks came on the circus. And the leader now is in charge of the circus in Kazakhstan. And I would really like to go to Kazakhstan for a visit and see some old friends over there. But I enjoy traveling and visiting friends and it's all just great.

AH: Yeah, good for you. And the last question I usually end [with]—sometimes I do it as a matter of profession, and you can interpret it in multiple ways if you like. But [do you have] advice for people? And this could be advice to women, or advice to people working in the circus or whatever, or people that are interested in it. What advice would you give people?

GW: Well, I believe that you should follow your dream. Always follow your dream. You only have one life. Every day that you use up and don't do something fulfilling in your life is a day you've lost. And just make the most of every minute of your life. You only have one life and just follow your dreams and always look forward. You can't change the past. And also, if you put out something good, something good will come back to you.

AH: Great advice.

GW: Thank you.

AH: Well, thank you so much, Gloria, for—

GW: It's been my pleasure!

AH: —for sharing part of you afternoon with me today and sharing but in behalf of USF Libraries and the Oral History Program, I really thank you.

GW: Well, it's just been my pleasure. And if I can do anything, or you want any information or if when you're doing the archiving—now I am going to be leaving, my sister has to have a hip replacement. I'll be leaving at the end of this month for a couple of months. And then when I come back, though, I would enjoy volunteering over there and helping with the work of the museum because that would be neat.

AH: Okay. Well, I'll be doing the same thing.

GW: Good.

AH: Yes. All right, thanks again.

end of interview