

# **NOTICE**

**Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.**

**This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.**

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

Digital Object Identifier: S59-00003  
Interviewee: Joanne Wilson (JW) and Trudy Strong (TS)  
Interview by: Andrew Huse (AH)  
Interview date: October 30, 2008 and November 7, 2008  
Interview location: Joanne Wilson's home  
Transcribed by: Kimberly Nordon  
Transcription date: January 27, 2009 to February 2009  
Audit Edit by: Arlen Bensen  
Audit Edit date: April 9, 2009  
Final Edit by: Maria Kreiser  
Final Edit date: April 15, 2009

**Andrew Huse:** This is Andrew Huse, and on behalf of the Oral History Program at the University of South Florida Tampa Library I want to thank you for being here. Today I'm with Joanne Wilson, and Trudy's [Strong] here in the wings, who'll be joining us as well, and it's October 30th, 2008 and, well, thanks for showin' me around, first of all.

**Joanne Wilson:** Well, thanks for being a sucker and following me all around the property. (laughs)

AH: So, first of all, where and when were you born?

JW: I can tell you I was born in Oregon, but I certainly won't tell you when. (laughs)

AH: Okay.

JW: St. Helens, Oregon.

AH: Okay, and your parents were clowns, right?

JW: Yes, they were, and—

AH: Now Trudy, where were you born? Were you born in the same place?

**Trudy Strong:** I was born in Kansas City, Missouri.

AH: Okay, so were you both born on the road, essentially?

TS: Yup.

JW: Yes, and—

TS: I was born in Kansas City, that's where my mother's mother and father lived and she stopped there when she was going to have the baby. So—

JW: And my—I was born in St. Helens as the circus went through town. They—when my mother was ready to deliver me she went to the hospital in St. Helen's and the circus went on to the next town. But that—the night that she went into the hospital my dad was driving stakes—I guess it was in the daytime—he was driving stakes for the tent and he hit a yellow-jacket nest.

AH: Ouch.

JW: Which, they proceeded to sting him all over, so bad that he had to go to the hospital. When he got there they told him he had to wait because his wife was having a baby. So he had to sit there with his stings and wait until I was born. Then the circus went on and she caught up with the circus three days later.

AH: Okay.

JW: So that's how that works.

AH: So now, how did they—how did they get into clowning?

JW: Their parents were in the circus and they did everything, like aerial work, and—his dad was a clown too, played the drums in the band. He did—in those days you did a little bit of everything, and—

TS: —Monkeys.

JW: Monkeys, dogs, ponies, clowning and my dad grew up—they did a double aerial act and when he was a little boy, they put a clown suit on him and had him start clowning. But he—that wasn't all he did. He did other things too and then some how he just wound up doing that. He liked it, he's a—he was a natural comedian, funny all the time.

AH: Yeah.

JW: With six kids, and, so—whenever my mother joined him she was doing aerial work, and then she fell and broke her leg. And that's when she started clowning. So they made a team and clowned ever since.

AH: Now, your grandparents were in the circus, does is—is that as far back as it goes?

JW: That's as far back as we know.

AH: Okay.

JW: We can't seem to get much information before that. [Of] course, I'm sure we could really get into it and find out but we're really not that interested. It's fine with us. We loved our grandparents, the ones in the circus, they lived right here, we always came home and they were here. They were on the road, too, when we were kids. They would all come home about the same time.

AH: Now when's the first time you came to Gibsonton, then?

JW: Nineteen-fifty [1950].

AH: Okay.

JW: My dad bought this property, full of palmettos.

AH: So you were both alive by 1950, then?

TS: Yeah. (laughs)

JW: We were just tiny little things. (laughs)

AH: Okay. (laughs)

TS: There wasn't (inaudible) not one tree on this property, nothing.

JW: Barren, barren. He had a bulldozer come in and clear the property. Anybody who's been in Florida long enough, they know what it was like back then. There wasn't no houses around here anywhere. And he had a bulldozer come in and clear the palmettos and his kids got to pick them up and put them on the truck, haul them off. And then he built a little twenty by twenty house and a couple of years later they built a house for my grandpa. They had the Jim Walters Company come out and build it.

AH: Yeah, how much did you say that cost?

JW: Fifteen hundred dollars for a twenty by twenty, in 1956. I wanted to add a room to it in 1998 and I went to Jim Walters and asked him how much it would cost to add a twenty by twenty, and they, "Eight thousand dollars." Now, Jim Walters just does the exterior, they don't do anything inside, no electric, nothing.

AH: Of course, the shell home.

JW: Right. So eight thousand dollars, oh my goodness, I was thinking more like two thousand. I didn't do it.

AH: Okay. Interesting, well, that's—those are, kind of, the peak years for Jim Walter too; I mean, that post-war housing boom and everything.

JW: Yeah, and, you know, it's still here.

AH: Yeah.

JW: It's a good house. I did a little renovating, leveled it, put some new shiplap boards on the bottom sides, just—that's all. The rest of it was in good shape.

AH: Okay. So, when did you first start working professionally, then?

JW: When I was eight years old. I—that's when I remember, and my sister was already doing a contortion act, Trudy, but I was eight years old and there was a dog act—

AH: Now those are your folks there?

JW: Yeah.

AH: I'm looking at a picture of a couple clowns, Dime and Connie Wilson. Nice.

JW: He got that name, not to change the subject right quick, but he got that name because when he was a little boy if he got two nickels he would take it to the front circus office and ask them for a dime.

AH: Okay.

JW: If you got ten pennies he would take it up there and ask them for a dime. Any change he had he wanted it changed to dimes. And eventually they started saying, Whoop, here comes Dime. So then he just took the name. Everybody called him Dime until he went ahead and made it legal. And his son is named Dime, our brother. And our brother has five boys and they all have Dime in their name.

AH: In their name. (laughs) I'm looking at it right now [reading]. "The K-9 circus capers, The Wilsons Present." And this is G. E. and Lillian, the grandparents, "America's outstanding trained dog act, unbelievable stunts never before featured, how they trained dogs, lots of comedy, children love them. Truly the most marvelous feats ever accomplished in the history of trained dogs, you'll be delighted with their funny acts." (laughs) That's great.

JW: They were good; actually, we tried to copy some of the things that they did because that was so long ago and all the procedures have changed and the tricks have changed, but those old tricks were really nice and nobody's seen them, so when we do them they're, like, astonished. When they see a trick like that, and they're simple tricks, they're just different.

TS: That's my husband and me.

AH: Okay, wow.

TS: Years ago.

AH: So then with the—all right, so you got in at eight years old, and what were your—?

JW: At eight years old, the first thing I did was I rode a little pony in Spec [the circus street parade] and I carried an American flag, a little tiny American flag, and as soon as the pony was out the door—the back door of the tent, I had to jump off the pony give the flag to somebody, run back, in jump over the lion chute, and run to the end of the tent to perform with the dogs. At eight years old I just went in and posed. And we call it "styling the act," and so there was a girl in the act, a little girl.

AH: Sure.

JW: Then I had to go—

AH: Sort of like a Vanna White [Co-host of television program *Wheel of Fortune*] kind of thing? Gesturing and—

JW: Yes, just exactly like that. Yes.

AH: Yes.

JW: And I hated the—I had to point to the dog to go up the ladder, and then I'd point when he came back down as though the people couldn't tell they were going up, and then when I pointed down (laughs), and that part, I just hated that, I thought that was so dorky. At eight years old.

AH: Yeah, well, I'm curious; what were your first impressions, I mean, did you enjoy performing?

JW: Yes, oh, yeah.

AH: Overall?

JW: Oh, when you're a kid in the circus you want to get in there so bad, and the first time they give you a costume and put you in there—anything, for any—even to ride in the Spec on the pony, you have become the Queen of the Circus at eight years old. I thought I was it. I got to work in the trampoline act in the same show, and then I had to go in the clown act my dad had because there was no midgets on the show. So we would portray the midgets and I had to wear a little nightgown, climb up a ladder inside the—they called it the fire house—the little house got on fire and there was people inside of it and we would climb up a ladder onto a little plank on top and run back and forth on the plank and then jump into the net that the firemen, clown firemen, were holding, and that was my big clown number, which—I did not like that—I didn't like wearing the nightgown.

AH: Oh, you didn't like—okay.

JW: No, I didn't like that.

AH: 'Cause, yeah, so you are depicting a grown person, basically?

JW: Yeah, only a midget.

AH: Yes.

JW: And they were sleeping—supposedly asleep in bed and the house caught on fire and the clowns come in to save it and that's where the phrase, "Save the baby, save the baby!" That's where that comes from, because the baby would go flying out of the firehouse and someone would catch it outside. (laughs)

AH: Now you didn't—you didn't like the nightgown because, what, you didn't think it was glamorous enough?

JW: It wasn't glamorous at all, it was a nightgown! You're not supposed to be out in public in your nightgown. We learned manners when we were little. But then they shot

all to heck when they tell you to put a nightgown on and go out in front of—public. But it was just life, that’s what you did.

AH: So, Trudy, what was your first kind of gig?

TS: The contortion act.

AH: Okay.

TS: (inaudible) that was the first thing that I did in the circus, and I was nine years old.

AH: And what did this involve, like, putting your feet behind your head, or something?

TS: Close, bending backwards, handstands with your feet to your head, bending, splits, and anything that pertained to that.

AH: So how did you learn to do it, or was it kind of—?

TS: There was another lady on the show that—I guess my mother or whatever—I don’t know, I made friends with her. She did contortion act and she did bareback riding and she taught me (inaudible).

AH: Now does that take kind of a natural gift, or—?

TS: Yes.

AH: —is it just learning the flexibility at a young age, or what?

TS: I guess. I don’t know. (Laughs)

AH: Okay.

TS: I know by the age fourteen my back wasn’t bending so easily, so I said—unless you practice all the time, you can’t do contortion; you got to keep it limber all the time, and of course I guess I didn’t really want to do it that bad. It hurt and I said, “I don’t want to it anymore.” So I went on to other things. I learned aerial work and—

AH: So is this mainly trapeze, then? When you talk about aerial work.

TS: Flying trapeze—I did the flying trapeze and the catcher and she did it too. We both did it.

AH: Yeah, so, Joanne, you got into the aerial work too?

JW: I did—

AH: Was this around the same age in your teens?

JW: Well, when we were younger we all had to do what is called a Spanish Web, that’s a production number where every girl on the show learns it and everyone—all the girls are dressed the same—

TS: It's a rope.

JW: It's a rope, you climb the rope, you all do the tricks in unison and then there are some other production number aerial acts that you—it's a must-learn thing when you're a young person on a circus. So everywhere you go, then, you can adapt to that show. And my real—the first real aerial was, she fell from her trapeze, and she had been working in the flying act on that show with—

TS: At the same time.

JW: With my now-husband and some other fellows, and she fell and she couldn't work—

TS: For a week.

JW: For awhile, and they said, "Joanne, you go up." And that was my first real, real serious aerial work. Scared me to death, but I did it.

AH: That's what I was wondering—it was scary?

JW: Yeah, and then I married my husband, who did—who was in that act, and did that. So I had to learn it, to be in the act.

AH: Sure.

JW: And it took me a little while, but I learned it, and after that everything was fine and I got over—

AH: So you guys were working together before you married—

JW: Yup.

AH: How long did you know each other before you started, kind of, dating?

JW: Oh, long time.

AH: Yeah?

JW: Yeah, he said I was a little girl on the Pollack Brothers Circus when he was over there—he was working on concession, I guess, and he said, "I remember you when you were twelve years old—" No, I was younger than that—

TS: I was going to say (inaudible).

JW: Six years old or something—But he was—he's, like, ten years older than me, so he wasn't very old.

AH: Yeah.

JW: So—then we—we did the flying trapeze for a long time, we helped—you have to a partner with the flying trapeze, so that would be another man and his wife, and my husband, myself, and you know—you go along and try to get along and—its not that bad,

but there's times when you wish you were on your own. And we eventually did that. We learned a—a double act by ourself.

AH: Now, and that's—

TS: Like—

AH: I saw a picture of that where you guys were hanging from like a jet, it looks like.

JW: That was Trudy, that's a different—kind of act.

TS: That was me. This is what we ran at—all of us, all of—

JW: This is called the double cradle.

TS: All the Wilson girls learned that with our husbands.

AH: Okay.

JW: And this is my sister Donna.

TS: Another sister.

JW: So, and my daughter does this now.

AH: How many other siblings did you have, then? It was you two and Donna—

JW: Three more and a brother.

TS: One lives in Sarasota, one Bradenton.

AH: And a brother—Now before I want to get to—you know, Trudy and her husband as well, but—just growing up being a kid in the circus, obviously there were other kids there, you just talked about the Spanish web—in—what was it like, for example, kind of, what were some of the things, I think, normal kids, kind of, take for granted that were maybe completely different for you. Like, what was schooling like—you know, being on the road, how did that kind of change, you know, growing up for you?

JW: Well, all right, for us, we had to go to school in the public schools. My mother's parents lived in Kansas City, Missouri. So we were shipped to them during the school months, and, at the end of that school season, we were ready to go back the circus.

AH: I bet.

JW: And we had two sets of friends, all the time. We had our school friends and then we had our circus fiends. And when we got back to the circus we were just like anybody else. In school, you have your little cliques and your little “Chit-chit-chit,” everything that's just like it is there, and, so, really it isn't any different. It's just that you're in a different place.

AH: Now, making that transition, then, from being on the road, did you look forward to going back to school?

JW: Heck no! No way!

AH: That's what I was wondering. So—

JW: No, we knew we had to. So we didn't make that big of a fuss, but we did not look forward, nobody does. Go to school, are you kidding? Well, we did it and we got our education and—not—we did not finish school.

AH: Okay.

JW: Very few did in those days. Now, the circus kids, they finish school; they have to. My daughter got into college, so—she didn't finish college but she did get into it. She had to go back to the circus to make a living.

AH: Yes, okay.

JW: She was—she started out okay in college, she had an apartment, she was making a living, she had a good job, and then, when the school was out for the summer, she came back to the circus to work with me, and when she went back, she had to get an apartment and another job, and it wasn't so easy that time. So she wound up coming back to the circus. However, she's so educated that she's a businesswoman and she is doing excellent.

AH: Great.

JW: And she's teaching her son—six years old, he's doing his schooling now and they're doing a correspondence. He went to pre-school in Sarasota to be—to get socialized, all—although there are children on the show—on the circuses that they're on, and he has his friends and then she does the correspondence, and they do it every single day. It's, uh, very clever—the way they do it now. They have a DVD [Digital Video Disc] and the teacher is in the room with them and he is—is just so—

AH: Okay, so that's you? [AH refers to photograph]

JW: Nope, that's Linda. That's the one with the horses.

TS: Liberty Horses.

AH: Oh, okay, this is the daughter.

JW: The tiger just is—no that's—that's our sister.

AH: Oh, okay, your sister.

JW: That's a long time ago.

AH: Okay.

JW: We all looked like that, then.

TS: Nineteen sixty-two. [1962]

AH: So wait, I thought the other sister was Donna.

JW: Donna is the one that had the chimpanzees.

AH: Okay.

JW: Linda had the Lipizzaners [a white breed of performance horse] Donna had the chimpanzees—

AH: Oh, I see.

JW: —Trudy had the tigers, and I had the elephant.

AH: And then—and then the brother.

JW: And then the brother.

AH: And, then, was he involved in the circus?

JW: He was for a long time—he clowned with my dad. But then he married a lady that liked living in West Virginia. So they—she was a circus lady, too.

AH: Okay, now, all right, so as a kid growing up in the circus, did you—did you have a lot of freedom? Or how does that work?

JW: No! It's just like—

AH: It's a pretty much closed—

JW: It's just like home. Our parents didn't let us do anything that anyone else's parents wouldn't—in fact, maybe a little stricter. Because we were in a different town every day, you know, we couldn't go off downtown to the bar. Holy mackerel! We went home and went to bed or we had our little barbecues by the trailer. We didn't—we didn't get in trouble, put it that way.

AH: Okay, well, now, talk for a minute about—all right, you were always involved in circuses and not carnivals, right? I know they're two different worlds.

JW: That's right.

AH: Okay, so tell me a little bit about the—the community of the circus? I mean, obviously it's a pretty closed system, its very tight-knit, right?

JW: It is.

AH: Yeah, I mean—how does it differ then, kind of, regular life? I mean, obviously there's camaraderie there, and such, but—

JW: Absolutely, it's such a tight-knit that—here's an example. A fellow died, my daughter knew it before his mother knew it, because he was in another town. And instant—it's like telegraph—instantly we know what's happening in the circus world before it even gets out. The fellow that—you remember the fellow that got killed in

Iowa, a circus worker [Marcucio Droguett], his wife [Debi Joy Droguett Olson] murdered him in the mall in Davenport, it's not too long ago. [This event happened on July 10, 2008 and they were members of the Carson & Barnes Family Circus]

AH: Okay.

JW: Several months ago.

AH: I must have missed that, yeah.

JW: We actually knew it before they got his mother.

AH: Okay.

JW: Before his mother did.

AH: So you guys aren't learning this by reading obituaries?

JW: No.

AH: Yes. (laughs)

JW: And then we have our own—my brother-in-law has a blog and he can get the word out to everybody instantly. He's very discreet about it, you know, he would never had put that on before the mother knew about that.

AH: Of course.

JW: And everybody's respectful of everybody, everybody helps everybody, looks out for everybody. If someone's in trouble everybody knows it and they do what they can to help.

AH: Now are you involved with the Showmen's Association?

JW: We're members.

AH: Okay.

JW: Yea, we're members but we really don't—

TS: Circus—

JW: We have a show folks club in Sarasota which is circus people. This is mostly carnival people, however, when it started, it was started by some circus folks, including my dad, he was a charter member. And you know, it became so big it's mostly carnival now—it's huge.

AH: Yeah.

JW: And they're all our friends. We're—we all get along. There used to be some sort of a rivalry between circus and carnival but I don't know nothing about that.

AH: Yeah, I'm kind of interested in that, though. So, for circus people, it's—there's a lot of skill involved and talent and this kind of thing, and with carnival, they could be selling food or manning a game station, so the—I guess the perception is there's a big difference, right? I mean, kind of explain it for us. I mean—

JW: Well, I'm—

AH: For people who don't understand.

JW: I'm not really sure about how it was in the olden days, but my sister and I, we know how hard the carnival people work, very hard—we actually do some concessions and we have worked on carnival selling. It's harder than anything we do.

AH: Yeah.

TS: Takes a lot of time, time-consuming, morning to night.

JW: They work so hard. We do, too, but ours is totally different. We may go out and practice for an hour every day, or two hours, but even when they come home, they're painting and fixing their unit. We are too, not in the degree that they do—but, and—my sister and I understand all that. Back in the olden days they might have had a different opinion, they don't want to know what's going on, you know, it's easier to close your eyes than to see the truth—

TS: I talked to a lady with the circus, we got to be friends, and she said, “We—”

JW: Carnival.

TS: Or carnival, and we used to think, No, don't call us carnival people, because we're circus people. And they used to say the same thing. Don't call us circus people; we're carnival people. So it was a thing of, neither one really knew why. They just thought that they didn't want to be called that. And now they've found out that—(laughs)

JW: But it's totally a different business. You know, it's like an ice cream stand and a hamburger stand. It's two different businesses. And it's all put in one category, normally, as a carnival. And that's fine, we don't care. But if someone's getting snotty about it, we'll—

TS: The only thing we don't like is when everybody says, “Let's not make a circus out of this.” Or the dog and pony show—They're making a dog and pony show out of this. That's what we don't like.

JW: But I—I don't mind it, 'cause I say, “As long as they're saying circus—”

TS: Yeah, that's true.

JW: They're remembering us.

AH: True.

TS: But if you look in the dictionary, it says “Circus: Chaos.” And, whatever, so that’s why, they say this. I’m sure that’s why.

AH: Yes. But of course, there’s—there’s nothing really chaotic about the circus, everything is organized—

TS: Yeah, we know what we’re doing.

AH: —And scripted, and—right?

JW: It is, yeah.

TS: The people that are watching—

AH: But the people who are watching the clown show, they see utter chaos, right?

TS: Yeah.

***Tape stops and restarts***

AH: All right, so, then, when we—when we left off, going back to you guys, you were doing aerial work and you had gotten into aerial work as well. So what came next for you guys? I mean, you got married. How old were you when you got married?

JW: Nineteen.

AH: Okay.

JW: And we did the flying trapeze for quite a few years, and then we added a double trapeze—double cradle, we call it, double aerial act, and then I decided—I loved animals since I was a little kid. I had a rabbit and my dad had some dogs, and we just loved animals.

TS: Guinea pigs.

JW: All of us had a guinea pig one time—Pyewockit. I’d built him a little apartment; Bill, I think built it, a little apartment built thing, and painted it all pretty, and the first opportunity I had to get a pony, I took it. I got the pony and I trained it to do every trick that a pony can do, and I thought, Wow, I can do this.

Well, unfortunately he broke his leg coming over the snowy hill one day and the vet—tried to give him tranquilizer to set the leg, missed, and got it in his neck, and anyway, he died. So then I was without a horse for a while, and then I had an opportunity—well, she had—Trudy had started in the Quarter Horse [breeding of the American Quarter Horse] business as a sideline. Boy, take two major businesses and one as a sideline.

AH: Okay, that’s pretty ambitious, huh?

JW: And the folks that’s she had purchased the farm from had Morgan horses and I love Morgan horses, so when I felt comfortable enough to buy one I asked them to show me the horses and I picked out a—the father and the mother, and as the mother has a colt,

which is a boy horse, I would buy it. And she did, and so I bought it. And that's what started me on the horses.

AH: Now when you said, when you felt comfortable enough, what do—what do you mean?

JW: Well, we were in a—we had a flying trapeze act. We had—our equipment was set up for riggings, not horses, and that meant more money, you have to redo everything to haul a horse down the road or change your equipment, and so, you have to get comfortable with changing things. It's, like, a major change.

AH: Yes.

JW: And I feel like had—I had counted one time I had changed my life thirteen times, and I quit counting because every year I seem to change it again. And just if I buy a new truck—like, this truck is two years old; the one I had before I had built everything in it, it was just like I wanted it, and then I realized that it wouldn't make it across country, it was okay for in-town. So I had to buy a brand new truck and rebuild everything. It's like starting all over again, like buying a new house.

AH: Now—now Trudy, you were interested in animals at a young age, too?

TS: Yes, but I was in the aerial acts—we did the aerial acts until we had a mishap where two eighty-foot poles that we held the airplane up—one of them came down. The stakes pulled out of the ground while we were on it. And we didn't get hurt—

AH: How did that work? Did the whole thing fall down?

TS: One pole—one pole stayed up and the this was attached to the other pole, well, when it fell down it just hung on the one pole, and we were not quite—we were climbing the ladders then so we weren't actually on it yet, we were probably halfway up, we just come to a nice little—right down to the ground, and—

AH: Now had you been on it—had you been on it—?

TS: It might have been different. Yeah, it would have been different. Could have been thrown off or whatever. The second time it happened was, like, eight months later or—

AH: What, the pole came down again?

TS: It did it again.

AH: Now, is this because the stake work wasn't done right, or what?

TS: No, the ground was different.

AH: Too soft, or—?

TS: Yeah, we even backed it up sometimes with tractors or whatever, will—we don't know what happened this time—is, I guess they had a lot of rain—

AH: So the second time was enough?

TS: Second time we said, Okay. That was it. After the first time, though, was when I started getting my dogs.

AH: Okay, so you were already planning on—

TS: Training dogs, yes.

AH: —A transition.

TS: Well, you do two acts in the circus.

AH: Yeah.

TS: When you stop doing one—which we did a double—the double trapeze, like Joanne and I—all of us did it with our husbands and I stopped doing it because I had a whiplash on my neck and that's one of the things was spinning by my neck and I couldn't do that anymore without being dizzy all the time, forever afterwards. So we decided to stop that one, well, you don't just not—you have to have more one act in the circus because everybody has it. It's just the way it is. And so I decided to get the dogs, start training then, when the second come down I had already purchased a pony to go in with the dogs I had Dalmatians, ten Dalmatians. And pretty well going along by then, and I carried them around with the rigging—with the rigging truck and everything it was really quite a lot.

JW: Training on the road.

TS: Trying to, yeah.

AH: Yes.

TS: Had to get a trailer to pull for the dogs, finally, and when I got ten dogs and the pony had to go in there. Which grew up to be almost to be a horse. So, in the meantime we decided not to do the other aerial act, so then we had to think—said, Okay, now what are we going to do? I had this horse—this pony that grew into almost a horse, it was a POA, but a big one, Pony of the Americas, and so I thought if I get five more of those then I can train them to do the Liberty Act, which in the circus is horses working free, and, well, I did that, and then I put the one that was in the dog act, that was too big, (laughs) with those.

And so I had two acts then, and I—then I got another Appaloosa Pony and put it in the dog act so it all worked out and I did that for years and years, until my husband broke his leg—my husband was working the aerial acts, so when he had has his asthma, and it was getting hard for him. He was doing too much coughing while I was hanging from my toes hanging from him. And I said, “Hey, I can't stay on here with you coughing.” So anyway, we decided, or he broke his leg, it was too much for me to put all—we had portable stalls for the horses and I was putting them out. I had a—my son was only about seven or eight years old, he helped me as much as he could, but—I have two sons and the other one wasn't with us anymore, he—we had—

JW: He had moved on to another job, he had another job.

TS: Yeah, he had another job.

AH: Okay.

TS: Yeah, that's what I meant to say.

AH: That's—that's good to know.

TS: He's—he's in a different and good occupation—he's in the movie—lighting—both of them are now. Anyway, he broke his leg, it was too hard for me. I said, "I can't do this anymore, I'm just going to have to stop with the horse and dog, it's too much." Too much, too much, I was tired all the time. With his broken leg, then I had to take care of him too, and get somebody to drive the truck because I had another car that I was driving at the time.

Anyway, this man Mr. Cuneo, from Chicago, had the tiger act and he came up to me and asked me about them, and I said, "Nope." Definitely not, no, no, no. Well, I thought about it for a few weeks and I thought, You know, maybe I can do that. I'd be working for him, it would be all his expense he'd pay me, and no expense whatsoever. His equipment his trucks, his trailers, his animals, he—had—

JW: Niles! [speaking to her dog]

TS: —Full expense of everything, and I thought that just might work out. So I called him and told him yes—oh, okay—we—things went well, and I sold my horses to Arabian Nights [a dinner show] and I gave the dogs away 'cause they were getting—ten years old, anyway, they needed to have homes, not working anymore.

AH: Yes.

TS: And that's how I ended up with the tigers, and that was a hard—hard thing to do, because I didn't know anything about tigers, I was afraid of getting hurt.

AH: So let's—let's back up for a second, I want to put a bookmark right there, because I want to come back to this point where you starting with tigers, but what I want to do is get both of your thoughts a little bit about—are a lot of people—love animals, just like a lot of people love food but they don't know how to cook, you know. So you're—you love animals, but then how do you get in to training? Did you rely on a lot of people in the circus to—for ideas? What was the hard part, I guess? What is the difficult about getting into training animals?

TS: Well, traveling (inaudible) is one thing.

JW: There really isn't anything difficult about it if you're raised in the circus.

TS: It's repetitious.

AH: Okay.

JW: Because you've seen all the trainers—you watched them practice. Even if you didn't sit down and watch them you saw it. And so you—we all knew basically what to do, and we're pretty smart.

TS: Some people aren't animal people, some people are.

JW: We took the things that we thought were good and applied them to what we were doing, and the things we didn't like, we just didn't do that. You know, if a trainer didn't do it the way we thought it should be, like, maybe a little rough, we didn't do that. So, and you know, it's just like in every business; there's good and bad. So, we wanted to be the good guys. And we trained all our animals either with repetition, or treats, or (inaudible)—

AH: Well, tell me—tell me a little bit about this. At—was this at a young age that you realized that there was good guys and bad guys, I mean—?

JW: Oh, yeah.

AH: Yeah, you probably saw this stuff happening and—so what's—?

JW: It's not that much, but once in a while.

AH: Yeah, I know that the circus gets a undue—gets more of a bad reputation than it really deserves.

JW: Absolutely!

AH: Especially today.

JW: Absolutely!

TS: Absolutely right! Just from one person.

AH: Yeah. Things may have been different, you know, way back when or whatever, and certainly there's unscrupulous people in any business.

TS: Right.

JW: That's right. And a—

AH: Now tell us—a little bit about some of the bad things that you wanted to avoid, and why. I mean, is it simply a humane issue, or do animals perform better in the long run if you train them in a positive manner? Tell us a little bit about that.

TS: We feel better about it. Maybe the animal doesn't even care if they're in a smaller area, but we like to see them look comfortable and that was the thing—this—making them have bigger quarters, and we did that, I mean, we didn't have the smaller ones, 'cause we saw—Okay, that didn't look big enough to us, we'll make them bigger. And then of course the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] is there—with the dogs you have to have a USDA license and they come out and inspect you all the time and so there is, a, what do you call it, a— somebody watching over you all the time.

AH: Yeah.

TS: So you want to make sure, that, yeah.

JW: Big brother is watching you.

TS: That's it. And so is and if you can—you can't get away with anything if you wanted to. I don't know anybody gets—they don't anymore, they just lose their license and then without the license they can't train.

AH: But they can still train using negative feedback, no?

TS: No.

JW: Well, if they—

TS: Not so much anymore.

JW: They can't do it out in the open, anyway. And we—I can train an animal in front of an audience.

TS: Yeah, me too. In fact, I always train as if there's an audience there.

AH: And you just did. Yeah, 'cause I was right here.

TS: You never know if somebody's over there watching behind the bushes, and a lot of trainers do—you just got to train that way. You have to train, like, as if somebody's standing there watching your every move.

AH: Yeah.

TS: And, this very few times—I mean, I can scold them and you know that's a lot for them.

JW: That's enough. Yeah.

AH: Well, some—

TS: Like, "Oh, my God!"

AH: Yeah, so much of it is the tone of voice, right?

TS: Yup.

AH: Body language, and you know, sometimes I saw a pointing—

TS: I did it with the tigers.

AH: —Very close, you know, and things like that.

TS: Well, I can prove it by—'cause I did it with the tigers.

AH: Okay.

TS: I had two tigers get in the fight, and I just (inaudible) almost jumped right in between them, hollering out their names and everything and they just separated and went away from each other. And it was just because I had developed the respect from them that I was the leader, and they knew it. And it was a good feeling.

JW: I trained six little elephants, I trained two from totally wild—out of the jungle, and the other ones had been tamed to where you could handle them, but not trained to do tricks. And I trained six different little elephants and I could take them out on the Interstate I-75 in the middle, and lay them down and have them sit up with the traffic going both ways. I don't do that, I would never do that but they trusted me so much that they would do that.

AH: Well, the elephants might be safe, but the people driving wouldn't be. (laughs)

JW: But she—they wouldn't—they don't spook, they were, like, on me, because I gave them so much security when they were little. When I—I got the little elephants, I lived with them twenty-four seven. I stayed in the barn with them all the time. I was handling them all the time. I train them with positive and—so then, no matter what happened, a bomb could go off, they wouldn't run, they wouldn't run away from it. They would go to me because I'm the protector. I'm the one who takes care of them, and if you train with brutality they would not come to me, they would run the other way. "Help me! Help me!" But my elephants—in fact all, most of the elephants these days, people are doing that, the old, old trainers didn't know any better, they just thought they had to be a—mightier than the animal, and you know it—people have to learn, you know, and they are learning.

TS: 'Cause most—like with the tigers, too, most tigers are raised in captivity now—I mean, they are, you can't—and the elephants too, you can't bring them over anymore and so they're just raised like dogs and cats. I mean, they still tigers and they still will eat you, but you got to know what your boundaries are.

JW: You know their body language; you know what they're going to do before they're—if you live with them like we do—

AH: Yeah.

JW: We're around them twenty-four seven, and apparently—a lot of people don't realize that, they might think we put them in a barn and come back and at 5:30 [p.m.] we're done, and we come back the next morning—not so.

TS: Ten o'clock at night.

JW: We're here—we're still here with the dogs at ten [p.m.]; that's when we put them to bed. But they're never alone because I can hear them from my house—

TS: Niles! [speaking to the dog]

JW: If I hear ruckus, I could be out here in seconds.

TS: I was out here last night after you went in. (laughs)

AH: Okay.

JW: You hear something and, you know, because we are around them so much you get a feeling—

TS: You know something's wrong if you hear something and you think, Oh, something's wrong.

JW: You can tell by what they're barking or doing if it's okay or if it's not. And I've come out a couple of times—here's an example in Utica, New York, one year we had—I had my horses, and there was another lady that had some little mules and the circus had rented a tent from the town and they—people come out and put it up. Well, I knew the tent was put up wrong, I could see that, but everybody he-hawed me like, You don't know nothing. So we put our animals in the tent and my trailer was right beside the tent, we went to bed that night. All of a sudden, at three o'clock in the morning my eyes opened up and I laid on the bed going, What the heck is this; why am I looking at the ceiling?

And then I got up and I went to the kitchen and I'm just standing there wondering why I'm awake, looking out the window. And I realized that I could see the other side of the parking lot. Oh! There's supposed to be a tent there. Run outside, the tent had fallen, straight down, because they didn't put it up right. It's on top of all these horses. Luckily the lady with the mules had little stalls for the mules, so the tent kind of laid on the stalls. My horse was standing by the pole, so he was okay. You could see the tent laying over his butt from the outside. So I had to around to the trailers and wake up everybody, "Come on, we got to get the horses out of tent, it's laying on the ground." But the instinct to wake up and knew something was wrong, but didn't know what it was, just had to get up and—

AH: And there was no sound?

JW: Nothing.

AH: Yeah.

JW: Nothing, nothing, nothing.

AH: Yeah

JW: It just collapsed.

AH: Okay.

JW: They had put their stakes too close to the tent, so the ropes were almost straight up and down. Just won't hold anything. And we took them out and took them in the building. We tied them all up in the building. (laughs) Which we weren't supposed to do but we did it. It's cold outside. So, I mean, that's happened to me several times. Just from premonition, or what—what is wrong, and then they have to go looking for what is wrong. And you find it. But that's because you know your animals so well. And—

AH: What about you, Trudy, have you had similar experiences?

TS: Oh, yeah. Something's I can't think of in particular right now—

AH: Oh, that's fine.

TS: It seems like everything is—you just—it's because most of the things is 'cause you are checking all the time. Anything you see you check, check, check, check this. Or something, but you just hear the dogs, one will be just whining or crying and they're always quite after we got to bed or after we leave them at night then. Because they've had their dinner; they're asleep, they're done, they know it's over with, and they don't say anything else again. But last night I was out putting some laundry in my washing machine, I kept hearing one of them barking, barking, barking, and so I go—

JW: You left the door open.

TS: Yeah, one of the doors was open, and the other one was telling—

JW: Telling on him.

TS: Telling us.

AH: Yes.

JW: “That one's going to get to go out—“

TS: That they left the door—yes.

JW: “And we're not, so we're going to tell on him. So get in here and close the door.”

AH: So they kind of help—they kind of help you out a little bit that way.

TS: We always know, because we'll be out here and you hear it and going there's a door open, and the other ones just doesn't like it 'cause they just—don't always telling on him.

AH: Yes.

JW: Now the little midget—

TS: That's good. Because they can get—you know—they get in trouble, too.

JW: Get in trouble outside. Well, the little midget pony over there—

TS: Oh, yeah, even that one.

JW: —Sometimes at nighttime, when we got to feed—put the last feed in the pen, we don't see him.

TS: We always call him. Call him, call him, “Huey.”

JW: We want him to come over to this corner to the fence. The pen is pretty clear but there's sometimes a branches dropped to the ground. Well, then we go looking for him and his little tail is caught in a branch. And he cannot—

TS: He's so little that he can't move. (laughs)

JW: He's so little he can't pull himself loose from the branch to get over there. So he would have had to spend the night over there and that's the sort that you just—you go over there and you go, "Okay, he's not over here." Normally you would just say, "It's a pen, it's a fence, he's fine."

AH: Yeah.

JW: But he wasn't fine, he's over, they're caught—his little tail (laughs) was caught.

TS: Went to make sure he was there, 'cause—

JW: Now the other problem is, we never have any problems with them. They don't seem to get in trouble.

AH: Okay. So now, Trudy, we left off with you getting to the tigers, and how is that different? I mean, obviously, you said it's—

TS: Yeah.

AH: —Potentially dangerous.

TS: The difference is that they can eat you.

AH: Yeah.

TS: And you have to know when you can push them to do something and make them do it, or when you just need to back off a little bit. And it took me a while to learn what their reaction was and their ears and their eyes and their tail, mainly. It's just like a house cat, the tail will flick that—the cat will flick that tail when they really want to get at a mouse or rat or you, and that's all the things I had to learn really to be able to work with them. And I did.

AH: Did you have any close calls?

TS: A few, yes. I—one of my—actually, the—we call him contact cats, is one where you can sit on them or be with them or anything, well, I was just patting him on the nose, because I didn't get really into it, just a little on the nose, but I stayed there just a little too long. And he just reached out with his claw and snipped—he just (inaudible) all right, got me just a little bit, like, "Don't mess around now."

AH: Okay.

TS: "Don't be messing around." And the other time I was walking beside the same tiger and I was going to jump on his back, but I still hadn't got to that point yet to do that. I wanted to be sure (laughs) that, you know, he was going to let me, because I'm new.

And I just walked beside him and he just reached with his paw around my leg and put his face right on my knee—his mouth on my knee, and he didn't do anything. But yeah, that's about all. That was just teaching things to me. Teaching me, look what I'm doing.

JW: Niles! Niles! [to the dog]

AH: So you're kind of training each other, in a sense.

TS: Yeah, right.

AH: Yeah.

TS: But we had—we had some—it was pretty good, though. And I had some good teachers too, so, you know, they would tell me a load of things, or wouldn't, just so I could learn. You know, by the hard way, as long as I wasn't in trouble. They were watching, watching for me, but it—I learned a lot, and I learned, actually—I was training, presenting tigers—I was working with tigers that were already trained, but then I had to train some to go in with the other tigers, and that is—you got to teach them to get along. Sit them beside each other, you've got to—ah, that was probably the hardest thing to do is bring new tigers in with the old tigers, because they don't want to in there. There's a—and that—I learned to do that. And I did it.

And that's when I considered myself a tiger trainer, because I trained tigers to do different tricks, all right, they learned to sit up and that, well, then you had to do train them to go in a different position like on a pyramid, had to teach them to go up here, rather than there, and you had to move them around. And I had to train a few to do, like, the waltzing trick that we did. I had to actually train that trick and I did, and I had my son and I actually did it together. He'd—

JW: The hardest thing about learning to train a different animal is knowing who to listen to. Because everyone suddenly becomes an expert—

AH: Yes.

TS: And they know you don't know what you're doing

JW: When they think you don't know what you are talk—you're doing. So everybody's going to give you advice, now, you have to decide whether it's good or bad. Because the man who does the flying trapeze is telling you how to train a tiger, you go, Hm, has he done this before? Oh, he might have, in the old days, but you didn't know that, so there's a lot of thought [that] goes into everything—

TS: (inaudible)

JW: If you keep your mind open, I learned so much stuff just by listening to people talk, they'll say things that they probably wouldn't have said if I asked them.

AH: Yes.

JW: And then you got to document that, you got to get it in your brain and keep it. And they don't even know they told you. (laughs)

TS: And another thing is, you have to know your animals too, because, like, I had that—the Dalmatian dogs and I had one dog that was very timid and you could not scold him, even. You couldn't even say his name harsh because he would just cower, and I was teaching him jump over hurdles on his hind legs and you had (inaudible) and yet there would be another one that if you didn't holler at him sometimes they, Oh, I don't have to do this. You know? And they'd just like rats—

JW: They're all different.

TS: They're all different, so you got to learn what that animal does and it's—they're all different.

AH: Now, are any un-trainable?

JW: No.

AH: They're all trainable?

JW: To do something.

AH: Okay.

TS: Now, maybe not the hard—hardest things, but something.

JW: But that's what I was telling out there—our dogs all learn the basic tricks, jumping, hurdles jumping, jumping hoops, running, the hurdles, and then after a while we see what each dog is capable of and then we'll teach them a specialty trick that they can do, but maybe another one can't do it. So, then you get three or four specialty tricks and then you can incorporate that into the act.

TS: I have a specialty trick in here, I want to show him.

JW: But all the dogs can do that, most of the dogs can do that.

TS: That, that's sorta—that's sorta special.

JW: This is a spec—(inaudible) double act.

TS: I'm trying to find—well, I don't know—

JW: Double ladder is a specialty trick. And I have two that do that.

TS: But this one here. This is a specialty trick.

JW: Oh, yeah, Daisy May—got to look—he's on the—

TS: Doing a nose stand.

AH: Oh, yes, a nose stand, yeah.

JW: I had one that can do that.

AH: Okay.

JW: And my grandmother's the only person who ever did it. She invented it.

AH: Okay.

JW: And then—where's the double ladder?

TS: This is—I don't have it here.

AH: So who is this in the picture? Is that your grandmother?

JW: That's Grandma, yeah.

AH: Okay.

JW: And that's not a specialty trick, but it is, sorta, because—

AH: Yes, well, you got—

JW: Probably—

AH: —Three dogs doing three different things.

JW: Yes.

TS: That's me.

JW: Oh, yeah, I remember that. Oh, who's (inaudible). Okay, there's Trudy right there.

TS: That little girl.

AH: Okay. (laughs)

JW: And this ladder—see the ladder there?

AH: Yup.

JW: Well, it's not on the stage but, when it's up—boy, that's a big ladder; she must have had the big dog do that, wide. They walk up it, their back feet on this one and front feet on this one, and they would—

AH: Oh, wow! Okay.

JW: And I have two that do that here.

AH: Yeah, there are two parallel vertical—

JW: Actually, Rex does it too.

AH: —ladders, yeah.

TS: That (inaudible) so big that I can't lift him off, so we don't do it with him.

JW: Well, I told you, got to teach him to come down—

TS: Yeah, I know.

JW: 'Cause the one I pointed up and down, that was that trick.

AH: Now—

TS: This is what we were doing out there.

AH: Okay, yes.

TS: With the Labradoodles one at a time, but the one going through, one on top and one pushing. That's when it gets finished at all.

JW: Now see, she—carried a stick.

AH: Yes.

JW: Because, like I was showing you—

AH: Your grandmother.

JW: We—you start with your hands and your all bent over, and of course you can't be there when the show is on—you can't be there in front of these dogs, so then you back up with a stick and you touch where you were touching before with your hands or lifting their feet, or whatever you were doing. And then—now, she didn't need the stick. She just had it. She just had it so long, she just didn't know she didn't need it. She just carried it. She just—it was part of her costume.

TS: Yeah, we don't have them—

JW: And I did—I did for my first dog act, I carried one, too. I never touched a dog with it, they did the tricks. Why did I have it, I don't know, because it was just part of the costume.

AH: So you don't use it anymore? You don't use sticks anymore?

JW: Oh, no.

AH: Yeah.

TS: What you see, us there, that's just to tap on their feet up.

AH: Yes.

TS: Because you can't get under there with your hands.

JW: Well—just what I said to you just now, but the one I used—

AH: Well, you don't have to crouch over all the time either, that must get old, yeah.

TS: Right.

JW: Right. You can't. Well, you—it hurts too, but you got to—you got to get away from the dog, eventually so that it—he's doing the trick and that's how you do it, by extending your arm longer and longer and longer. Now when I want all six of them to sit up together, I'll start at one end and I'm going to have a longer stick and as I back across I'm going to ask each one and I'm going to say stay and if they come—start to come down. I can push that stick out to the last one and he'll see it and go back up, until they learn that they all stay up there until I say, "All right." And now when I run 'em all around in the ring I have the long whip—

TS: Push them out.

JW: And that's just to keep them out there until they learn that—go over all the hurdles every time—don't cut. Don't cut across the ring. And they'll learn it. This is very new to them and even if I have to use it for a while in the show I will, but you don't touch them. You just—it's a thing, like, "Stay out there, don't come in this way, stay out there by the ring."

AH: Well, you also mention that you don't do treats because with so many dog it was—

JW: On the big dogs.

AH: —essentially undermined discipline?

JW: It's on the big dogs that we're training right now because there's six of them and we don't normally train six at once. So you got six dogs wanting that treat that you have in your hand, and they all want to—

TS: They all forget what they're doing, they just—

JW: Just glom on to you. Normally, like, our little dogs—there'll be ten trained dogs, totally trained and one new one. So you have your treat 'cause those other ones know that their treat come when they do a trick, they don't come and get it. But the new ones, they think, Oh, we have to come and get it. And no, you don't, but there's too many dogs—

TS: I had that problem with the Dalmatians too.

JW: Too many dogs right now to—

TS: When I started tricks—treats, it didn't work. (laughs)

JW: There's too many dogs to deal with, if they all come out at you at one time. You can't teach each one, so we don't do the treats until later. Once they've learned and they got it down firm that, "Stay on those little pedestals, we'll bring them to you." And the repetition works good, it's good exercise for them. And you can teach them a little faster if you have treats. But we don't—we're fine with this, the little dogs all get them.

AH: Well, and then later on you're going to introduce the treats for the big dog.

JW: Yup, yup, absolutely.

AH: But that's—

JW: Once they've—

AH: Once they're disciplined enough.

JW: Yes, settled down to being a nice ladies and gentlemen.

AH: Yeah, okay. Well—

JW: Then it's like people. They got to have their manners too.

AH: Now, this may be a tough question, but do you guy have favorite acts that you've done?

JW: I do.

AH: Yeah?

TS: (makes noises) I can say I've almost liked everything I've done.

AH: Okay.

JW: I do.

AH: The Persian act, I don't know that I liked that so well, but it was started me out, so—

JW: I like everything I've done too, but I really like the flying act, I really liked Liberty horses.

TS: I did too.

JW: And I loved the elephant.

AH: Okay.

TS: I loved working with tigers, but I love working with horses, so it's—and I loved working the aerial work while I was doing it, until till I just fell, like, "Okay." And the older you get, you got to get on the ground. So—

AH: And then—well let's talk about Gibsonton for a minute. First of all—you said it's changed quite a bit, was there kind of like a golden age, I mean?

JW: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. When all the—

TS: This used to be show-town U.S.A.

JW: Mayor was a—the mayor was a midget and the fire chief was a—or the fire chief was a midget and the mayor was a giant. And we had such colorful people here and the lobster boy, and I mean, it was just incredible. We had—

TS: Just across the street we have—

JW: Yards full of miniature animals that the—two midgets, the two dwarfs owned the midget animals, how clever is that! (laughs) And you could drive by their house and see them. I mean, people still take tours of Gibsonton.

AH: Yeah?

JW: Hoping to see—

TS: Our street has four show people on it.

JW: Something, but—Yeah, we got the circus—which isn't existence anymore, but down the street the Stu Miller Circus, the trucks are still sitting there cross the street is Roy Houston, illusionist. Down here is Ward Hall with sideshow man, there's us, behind is the baboon man, he's not here now. Well, everybody out right now.

AH: Who's that, Lee [Stevens]?

JW: Well, Lee used to be over here.

TS: He's down the road now.

JW: He's moved. And he sold it too—

AH: Yeah, I—

JW: —Irving Hall, who has baboons also.

AH: Okay.

JW: And the bear man used to be down the street, and the chimp man used to be down the street, flying trapeze man used to down the street, and then there was one right behind us—on this lot that I have the ponies—was always a flying trapeze act set up there and we had it in our yard; all our aerial stuff was up here.

AH: Now is there any kind of precedent for a place like Gibsonton? I mean, obviously Sarasota is kind of a center of circus folks as well, but were there any other places before Gibsonton?

JW: No, no.

AH: Yeah.

TS: Well, ours is actually—

JW: We have—

TS: —Zoning for show people.

JW: Lil' show business.

AH: Okay.

TS: We can have anything on here—

JW: Anything that—

TS: —We can have an elephant, we can have a—

JW: —Pertains to our business can be on this property. And we're the only place in America that has a zoning like that. And it's because of the carnival folks. They stick together and when they—a few years back when they come in and started fussing about the carnival rides and—set up in their yards, they're painting and fixing and—they said, You going to have to take those down—well, where are we going to put them? This is where we live, this is how our winter quarters. Well, you're not zoned for that.

So you know what they did, they went down to the courthouse and got a—the commissioner got in the—they filled that room, they were down the steps out in the street and down the block. And they changed the zoning to rule show business.

AH: Okay, so that got pretty quick results, then, right?

JW: Yeah, and so you were grandfathered in at that time. Well, my dad, ha-ha-ha, bless his heart, didn't get in the line. Maybe he was on the road, who knows, but we didn't have it. Then we got a new commissioner about ten years ago—zoning man, and he decided—he come—he draw—he was going to clean up Gibsonton, he drove the streets, picked on anybody that was doing one little thing illegal. I had a house trailer, with a light cord hooked up to it. I'm in show business. I thought, that's my trailer that we use for the road, and he sent—they sent me a letter citation saying, "You cannot have living—in those trailers in the, on the property." And I'm like, "Well, I'm in show business, why not?" "You're not zoned." "Oh, I'm not?" See, I wouldn't know that.

AH: Okay.

JW: So I was—one guy was nice enough to say, "Go down there and change it." So I was going to change mine, on this side. And we went together, and her husband, and twelve hundred dollars to change my half. Three months—takes three months to go get letters from everybody around you, and I, was not that hard to do.

TS: If they didn't want it—if they were against it.

JW: But her husband said to the lady, "We want to change ours, too." She says, "Well, then do it all together," for twelve hundred dollars.

AH: Okay, great.

JW: So we did it. We rode everybody around—everybody—nobody complained, 'cause they're used to us. And we have it now. That property has it, that property has it that already had it. So didn't have to worry about that. So now, nobody's living in a trailer but it has a light cord hooked up to it because I go in there and clean up and move things

out and move things in. I would like to see what I'm doing, but nobody's living in it. However, we could, now.

And we're not being harassed and, you know, I went down and I said, "When you drive by my place in the front, you will see a normal home, like everybody else. Now you come in the backyard, you're going to see a few things that most people don't have in their backyard, but you're not going to see a cigarette butt in my ground, you're not going to see a paper on my ground, you're not going to see weeds, you're going to see a nice clean property," 'cause that's what I want. I really don't care what the rest of the world wants; I want my place to look nice and clean. And if you would look, you would see that. So why would you complain about anything about my property when I could go over two streets over there, and I could show you something really horrible?

AH: Yeah.

JW: And nobody's doing anything about that. And mine is beautiful in the front. It's not bad—it's, you know, we got our trees and things, we have our stuff, we work out here, we have our trailers; maybe nobody would like to see that, that's why I put it back here.

AH: Well, as many dogs as you have it's not—it's not dangerous to walk around (laughs) I noticed. How do you manage that?

JW: We're the boss.

TS: We're the cleanup crew.

JW: Oh, you mean the ground, oh, yeah.

TS: PeeWee PeeWee cleans—when we're here her husband goes out while we're running dogs in here, he's out doing the yard.

JW: It's a daily—a daily thing we do not—

TS: And it's, if we see one, we either holler at him or we get the shovel ourselves.

JW: And we maybe used to it, but can you smell?

TS: No.

JW: The dogs?

AH: Not especially, no.

TS: You might be a little different.

JW: So, you know, we're not having a problem with stinky dogs; we have a barking dog on occasion. But then again, so does our neighbor, and so does our neighbor.

TS: If they don't complain about us, and we don't complain about them. (laughs) So we don't—there's more over there, then—

AH: And then, remind me how many dogs do you currently own?

JW: We don't really know. (laughs) And we don't like to say. (laughs) A lot.

AH: Okay. But how many of those—I guess, all right, you don't want to say the number, what percentage of your dogs are currently working dogs?

TS: All of them.

JW: Well, all of them.

TS: Except (inaudible).

AH: Well, you got five—

JW: Well, my housedogs—

AH: —House dogs.

JW: Two of those would be in the show.

TS: He performs—he performs and—

AH: Okay.

JW: He has been in the show.

TS: This one and another—

JW: He's not—he's an old man now.

AH: Yes, he's—

JW: And we keep them until they die, we don't pawn them off.

AH: Yeah.

TS: We got two or three old dogs in there that just we feed them, take care of them, until they [are] ready to die.

JW: One is ready to—

TS: Then we'll—

JW: —Go see the vet, but we're just hesitating. You know, it's hard.

TS: Well, 'cause he's still hasn't told us—

AH: Yeah, of course.

TS: —Yet, that he's ready. He's just sorta, that we know. That it's not going to be too long. And—

JW: And you know, we live here, so—

TS: We have to carry everything out.

JW: —We want everything to be as if—what our neighbors would want—we don't want to hear barking dogs and we don't want to walk in poop, and we don't want a dirty place. We do it for ourself. And we work hard, from morning till night. We're going—

TS: This is rest time with you.

JW: —Her and I are going all day long every day.

TS: In fact, I got to go.

JW: We enjoy it. You're going to the doctor.

TS: Well, I got to get ready to.

AH: Yeah, this will be a good—this may be a good time to stop anyhow. I know you got some more visitors. Well, thanks for talking with me today.

JW: You're welcome, any time.

AH: I really appreciate it.

***pause in recording***

[Transcribers Note: There is a pause in the recording then audio begins again abruptly.]

AH: —This isn't as novel as it seems, but what's it like working with family? I mean, I—I guess, yeah, you've always had family in the circus or always worked together to some extent, so does it feel—kinda different, or—?

JW: It's, no—it's, no, like a sister. (laughs) Like having a sister here.

AH: Yes.

JW: No—we get along really good.

TS: We can rely on each other. I mean, if, like, now, she can take over the—takin' care of the animals while I go, or if she has to go somewhere—

AH: How long have you been working directly together on acts?

TS: Oh, well—

JW: Nine, years—nine years—

TS: —Throughout all our life, more or less, sometimes.

AH: Yeah, but nine years, you guys have been—

TS: At least yeah, just here—

AH: —working on the same act, yeah.

TS: —right here.

AH: Okay, great.

TS: It's a—we just get along.

AH: Yes.

TS: Because she has her house over here, and I have mine over there.

JW: Yeah, we keep our separate lives—

AH: Oh, of course.

JW: —We don't—you know, I don't mess them and they don't mess with me. We have a fight, me and my husband, she just goes home. (laughs)

AH: Yes.

JW: If they have one, I just go home, it's, you know, that's—

TS: Time to go.

AH: Fair enough.

JW: That's just the way it is. And she can handle herself and I can handle myself.

AH: All right, thanks. All right, so—so I should read the whole thing here.

JW: Yeah.

AH: All right, this is a poem written by Joanne Wilson, and she can't read it without weeping, so I will—I will do the honors here. “Dedicated to my friends Lee, Dusty, Chris, Michelle, Phil, Bella, Annie, Hines, David and Patty.” And these were the poodles, correct?

JW: Standard poodles, yes.

AH: Okay. Says, “You don't wear your rhinestone collars any more, you can barely walk across the floor, you will not do another show, you'll stay right here until you have to go, its no small loss for me you know, you were my live ten years or so, you bought my home, and bought your own, now young dogs do the show, your hearts must break when you can't go, you worked your hearts out for twelve years and when you go I'll shed my tears.”

TS: And I'm crying and I'm not even—

AH: (laughs) Yeah, well, it is very touching. And—

JW: And they're all gone now.

AH: Okay.

JW: The last one died this year, so—

AH: Well it's—is just a great show of gratitude, I think.

JW: This was on the blog, so the world got to see it. I got a lot of comments on it, because normally, you know, no matter how much they love their animals they don't really do something like this, they don't think about them afterwards because they have to move on to new things. But these guys, it was—it was a trip I'd take again.

AH: Yeah, well, and everyone feels it, but don't express—

*end of interview, Part 1*

[Transcriber's Note: A follow up interview is conducted on November 7, 2008.]

**Andrew Huse:** All right, so it's November 7<sup>th</sup>, yes, 2008, and I'm back with the Wilson sisters and I just wanted to follow up with a couple questions and see if there's anything that you guys wanted to add. But I guess first of all, what—what's it like being women in the circus world?

**Joanne Wilson:** Oh, talk about women's lib [Women's Liberation Movement].

AH: Yes—

JW: We have been liberated since the day we were born in the circus. There is no such thing. We do anything the men do, it's just the same. We drive the trucks, we put up the riggings—

**Trudy Strong:** (inaudible) We carry the stuff.

AH: What's that, Trudy?

TS: Drive the stakes in, we driven the stakes in, we carry all the stuff—the heavy stuff that the local people wouldn't carry—"I can't carry that, that's too heavy." "Okay, let me show you." (makes noise) Pick it up—

JW: But we're right alongside the men, we're not doing it instead of the men, we're doing it with the men. In fact, I had done so much with one our riggings that my husband really didn't pay attention to the—the, well, the technique of putting it up, and one day it was our son's birthday and I had to walk to town, we were pretty close to town I had to walk to town and get him a birthday present—I mean, a birthday cake, and I said to him, "I have to go now, to get the cake. You go ahead and finish putting up the rigging." It was outdoor rigging, where it's, like, fifty foot high and has guidelines. And you have to pull it up in a certain way so you don't drop it before it gets all the way up.

And as I went out the front gate of the lot that the circus was on, and I walked down the fence line towards the town I looked—I heard a crash, and I turned and looked, it was our rigging—just one thing he didn't know. And I—didn't know that he didn't know, but it was one of my jobs, and down it came. And I—I thought, "Oh, I know how to make him

learn what that is, I'll just keep going to town." And I did. I kept walking on to town, when I got back that rigging was up. (laughs) And I was—I love doing things like that. Anyway, that's, yeah, women's lib. When we heard that, you know, when they first started talking about women's lib. We're looking at each other like "What? What are they talking about?"

TS: Said we don't want women's lib. (laughs)

JW: No, please open the door for me. We still demand that. That's—that is—we're women! You are suposta have the door open for you, and a little feminine courtesy. So we still—we demand it, we don't—well, I'll stand at the door and wait. And, you know, some men will walk through the door, as I'm approaching the door they'll just go on through it and leave me, smack it in my face. Not, not our friends, or not my husband, but regular people, and I'm like, "Did you not learn any manners at all?" But then half of them will open the door if they're—if they get there first and they see me coming, they'll actually wait and open the door. And we love it. We're women!

AH: Now, so did you guys know at an early age that—I don't know that this, this treatment of women and things like that, that you were kind of living a different life than a lot of women were at the same time?

JW: No.

AH: No?

JW: We just didn't think about other people. We just do our—we always let—lived our own lives, and which was pretty full. I mean, a circus lady, especially, she had all the daily chores of any other women, plus the putting up of the riggings and getting the animals cleaned up and ready and feeding them. So we have no time for thinking about things like what are the other women doing.

AH: Yeah, yeah, or women's liberation.

TS: Yeah, what she used to say, "God, give those people something to do, they got nothing to do but think of things to make trouble."

AH: Yes.

JW: The only thing that we ever actually thought about was if on T.V. or something we would hear where a man beat up his wife. Just try that with us. That's not going to go, and it wouldn't, you know. It's just sometimes you just have to be strong and then they don't even think about it, they wouldn't even think about it. And we always wonder how that can happen, but—

AH: Well, that leads to a good kind of segue then, and I wanted to ask about marriage and how, you know, your professions and kind of being pre-liberated women, you know—how does that change marriage? I mean—

TS: You work together all the time and that's just—

JW: Twenty-four seven.

TS: You just, you're just always together, just like with our children too. The children are always with you and you always know what they're doing and they always know what you're doing, and it's just a togetherness thing and it's not as if they need their own space and all that stuff. They just, it's a family, and everybody pitches in and helps each other and helps the other acts if something happens with one of them. I mean, we've even gone into other peoples act just to help them out because something maybe happen to them; they can't work or something, and it's not just for money, it's just—

JW: What's that got to with your husband?

TS: Well, it's—

JW: You got—

TS: Just saying, helping each other. But any, yeah, your husband—

JW: We have our—we have our days—

AH: Of course, everyone does.

JW: But like us, we could just go out to the animals and—

TS: Yeah, that's why we like the animals. (laughs)

JW: —Play with the animals, train them a little bit.

AH: So that gives you kind of some—a little time away, a little release away from the marriage?

JW: Yeah, and when were—

AH: —dealing with the animals?

JW: And when we're driving that's, that's kind of the test, because unless you can—well, no, that didn't work either, I tried driving one—I drove one, he drove one, and it, until they got CB's, [Citizen's Band Radio, invented in the 1960s and became popular in the 1970s] it was really bad. If you—if he gets away from you and you lose sight, if he didn't stop somewhere and wait for you, you had a good fight coming. But if he'd stop and wait, you got the CB's; it was good because you could talk to each other. When they got radio—telephone's now, we don't even use CB's any more.

TS: We always travel in different rigs because we have too much equipment. So the husband would drive one and the wife would drive the other, so that's what she's talking about.

JW: Now, we're back down to one rig and I'm the navigator. And if I say turn left and he better turn left, he gets to thinking he's knows where he's going and he doesn't turn left and he winds up, up a dead end street or something, that's when I do the same thing, I

just look out the window and I say, “All right, get yourself out of this.” “What, what you got to help me.” “Unh-uh, I didn’t help you get in it.”(laughs)

AH: But in the old days, driving in separate rigs, that did give you little time to yourself.

JW: Apart. Yeah, sure. To think about what you goin’ yell at him about next. (laughs)

TS: When you’re in the circus you have time, because your husband goes out and does some stuff while you’re inside your trailer at certain times—

JW: They’re doing the riggings.

TS: So there’s—you know, there’s—

AH: Now does it make it tough, let’s just—let’s say guys are having a rough patch and then you’re, of course, expected to work together all day long and you’re already resigned to it, right, but does that make it more difficult, or does—so how that work, working together kind of just bring you right back on track, or—?

JW: The working together, if you are having an argument for instance, the minute you walk through the curtain into the arena, everything is disappeared. You’re in another world, you’re doing a job and you do it together the right way. Nobody ever takes their grievances into the arena because you could get hurt. I mean, the one that’s mad could get hurt, and they know it. And they would never take it past the curtain. Once you’re in there, you love each other to death.

AH: All right. All right, so, let’s just back up for a second because we might have missed a little snippet of that, but you were talking about kind of the support system of the circus. Describe us for us again, just briefly, putting up the rigging and the children.

JW: Well, whenever we go to the circus to put our area riggings up or get out props in we take our kids with us. Well now, I have a grandson, and that same thing applies if I’m there, it’s a family of circus people, and even though mom is busy putting shackles on her rigging or grandma is busy putting dog props up, someone else in that arena is looking at your child. And if he wanders too far they’ll either call him back or they’ll call the mom or the grandma and ask if it’s okay for him to go out there and if it isn’t, then they get him right back. (laughs)

AH: A dog just fell—

JW: Stepped on his feet.

(all laugh)

AH: Just fell from Trudy’s lap. Never a dull moment.

JW: Anyway, it’s a family thing. That if someone else’s child is playing with our—my grandson, for instance, and they, the two of them decide to wander up the seats, I will call them both back and reprimand them, I’ve known—“You cannot do that, your mom said ‘no!’ And your mom said ‘no!’ So get down here and stay on the floor and don’t go under

the riggings.” But that’s pretty much it with the all the circus people, even the young people, they’re looking out for the—for everybody. If you come walking in the arena in a fog, somebody will say, “Hey, look up.” And you’re walking under somebody who’s putting a rigging up. You know, so everybody looks out for everybody.

AH: Okay, now the—one of the last areas I wanted to get into is—that we didn’t really touch into much before was your parents, your grandparents were both in the business. How much did you rely on them, I mean, for advice? Did they you find your own way, or did you go to them for support if you had questions about, you know, training or the business? How much did you rely on them?

TS: We had the support. We had the support all the time but they never pushed us in any direction; like, we had more or less figure out what we wanted to do, then they’d help up with as much as they could. And if they couldn’t help up they’d have somebody else help that knew what it was that we wanted to do. Because they were—they were performers, but maybe they didn’t know how to do this or that, you know, certain things. And there was—they were just they were great parents because they didn’t push you if you ask them something they tell you, but if you didn’t, they wouldn’t push into you, and we were young kids, of course, they took care of us like you would any young kids, but—

JW: But the most—

TS: —As you got older can’t do as much—

JW: This is that they taught us by example, and we had the greatest grandparents you could ever want; they were just sweet, sweet people and they were already old when we knew them, which is kind of sad because I wish they were here now. They had a wealth of knowledge that we can never get because they’re gone. But they were—they live in my little shop over here, that was their house. And they were always there if you wanted to go over and sit down and have a little soda with them. The door was open. They had their dogs here; and now, now that I’m an adult and I have my own dogs I can go back in my mind and think of things that do or said, or that their dogs did that helps me.

So it’s really by example that and they have taught us without even knowing, and learned without even knowing through them. My mom and dad too, just one sentence can change everything and we can go back and say, “Ah, I remember he said, blah, blah, blah.” And then, “That’s what it is.” So it’s just—

AH: Okay, and then how much is the business changed since you first got involved, and in what ways?

JW: Well, I don’t think it’s the actual shows or anything like that have changed, the business end of it probably has, because now when were kids you could pretty much come to a town with a circus and everybody came just because they saw the one poster or something. Now, it’s—it’s more advertising and there’s so much entertainment and with the cable television, oh my gosh, and all the specials on TV—

AH: Kids with video games, and—

JW: Yeah, we have to push to get people to know that we're here; plus, if you do it too soon they forget, if you do it late they planned already, so it's really touchy now. No longer can you just put the tent up and it's—expect someone to come. 'Cause they're watching TV. They didn't drive by the tent and see it.

AH: Okay, all right, and then usually when I conclude interviews I usually like to ask three little questions, all right, so—

JW: Don't ask how old am I. (laughs)

AH: Yes, no, not that. But first of all there's—the first two is, what was the best time in your life, and what was the toughest time in your life? And you both can answer separately, or not answer; however you see fit.

JW: Well, I'm going—I'm going to say when I was sixteen years old, I think, I—I remember that year as really great.

AH: How so, why is—?

JW: But there's been so many more that compare—that really can't say. Most of our life—most of my life has been great. There have been some scary moments, which would be the bad times, but you don't get scared when it's happening because you're trying to deal with it. You only then—course—my sister and I, we're like—we never take it to heart. After we have come through a life and death situation and lived through it! We laugh about it, we don't take it seriously, we, we don't even think, Oh, my God, I could have died. We don't think that way, we just tell the story, and it's funny. After, afterwards, so yeah, I think every year of my life has been—its been different, each one, it's like I changed things like fourteen times, changed—

TS: That's the same with (inaudible) it's just almost like you change your occupation, but it's only because you're changing different kinds of acts. And it's like going out of one, like, oh, let's say I started contortion and we did a juggling act that we went out of that one and into the other one, then I did the flying trapeze and then I went in to an aerial act with my husband, and then we got so we didn't feel safe on that anymore, then I went to animals, and you phase out one and go into the other. And then I faded into the tigers; that was a big difference.

AH: Yes.

TS: A different experience, you know.

JW: Each phase really is like changing your life, because you can't—everything that goes with the one phase won't go with the next one. You have to buy a new truck, a new trailer. You have buy new riggings, you have to buy animals, whatever it is; what you have doesn't work for the next thing.

TS: We've always seem to make it work thought. Everything we've tried has—has we've made it work. It's, and it's been successful, so I can—I feel like our life has been a success, and I didn't tell you that our—my last years in the—in show business before I

semi-retired, semi-retired, I'm always doing something, but was over in Germany, I was there for six years and that was a great, great circus town.

JW: With the biggest circus in Germany.

TS: In Germany. Circus-Krone, that was a great time.

AH: And how did that—does that differ much from an American circus?

TS: Yes.

AH: How so?

TS: I felt like a star over there. Because you were the—you were the star, and in fact, after I left Germany there was still pictures of me in McDonalds from my act. And they took pictures and sent them to me because I was the—they really liked me.

JW: Oh, you didn't tell me!

TS: I got pictures of—

JW: Oh, gosh!

TS: So, people at McDonalds, but anyway—

JW: Yeah, over here everybody works together, they're on the equal basis, but in Europe they do make stars out of certain people, who are star quality of course, but they—here they feel like you're going to make enemies if you—

TS: Yeah, they can't make anybody a star.

JW: Ringling Brothers does it. They're the only ones that do that, and the star on that show gets paid a star's salary, so, you know, and they do make an impression.

AH: Do you—

JW: The last one was Bello [Bello Nock, performed by Demetrius Alexandro Claudio Amadeus Bello Nock], and he's—he's been there for seven or eight years or more, maybe. God, I can't even—we knew him when he was a little baby. He was, practically when he was born, our kids and him played together.

AH: Do the audiences, are they much different than here in states?

JS: Yeah, there, they're appreciative, they're more appreciative. I don't know if they have as—they have a lot of things over there like we do, you know. As they told me over there, We don't live on the moon, we do have things. But they seem to really—when they come to the circus they come there in their elegant cloths and their—most of the people in and they sit with their little bottle—glass of wine, and watch the show, it's amazing.

AH: Okay.

JW: It's more like a theater.

AH: Yeah, yeah.

JW: And the people are made to feel like, like they're going to a theater.

AH: Yeah, a special event.

JW: That we are special, we are, in fact—There's a circus in New York and I work with them on occasion, my daughter's there now. Every time something would come up, like, do you think the school will let us do that, and he would say, "We are their guests, we are special, they love us to be here and we are treated like guests, we're treated special." Well, he made sure of that, and, you know, we're welcomed in every school in New York. We have stayed over two and three weeks at a school, commuting to other ones, and when you talk about all these things that happen at schools and they're putting lock on the doors and guards, they don't worry about us.

AH: Um, okay, and then the—usually the last question I ask is advice. What advice would you give somebody, say, that badly wanted to get into the circus?

JW: Oh, good! Do it, but be prepared to stay, because once you do it you don't want to go back to anything else, and if you do—

TS: If you really want to do it—

JW: —You have to make, make yourself so good at what you do that you will be able to work all the time.

TS: There's a lot of people that can't do it, though, because there is the bad times when you out in the ring putting up your rigging and all that.

JW: Well, that's, but—

TS: —In the snow doing stuff, and—

JW: A lot of folks, from town have come into the circus and they have gone through all that—

TS: And made it.

JW: And they know it's awful but the good parts overwhelm the awful parts and so they, they're like, "I can't go back to working a nine to five job after I've been in the circus."

AH: Well, and then it seems to some extent, it's just tough to retire, right?

JW: Yeah, well—

TS: Evidently.

JW: For me it is.

AH: Yes.

JW: Yeah, it's—I try to stay here for—I was here for a nine, well, actually I wasn't home the whole time; I worked every year but one or two dates a year. One or two spots a year, and then I got a job where I had to go out all year and that was that, and now I'm doing it all the time. Because I kinda forgot what it was like. Now I'm back doing it.

AH: And where can we see your act?

JW: Well, this year I'm going to be on—

AH: You're going to be far away, right?

JW: Stage show called *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and I won't be doing my act, my doggies will just be little actors in the show and we will be in Tampa, and December Ninth to the Fourteenth, but all you'll see is my little doggies. Miss Joanne is going to be behind the scenes telling the little doggies to go! And catching them on the other side.

AH: Okay, so they're kind of like extras?

JW: No, they are stars.

AH: Okay, they are performing.

JW: Yup, They'll be in there all the time.

AH: You're just not there with you're—

JW: I don't go in with them. They're going to be interacting with the actors on *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

AH: Okay, I see. All right, sounds like fun.

JW: I'm the one going to give the hot dogs when they come off.

AH: (laughs) Is that what they get as a treat?

JW: Yup.

AH: Okay.

JW: Little pieces of hot dog. All they'll do anything for that.

AH: Yes.

JW: I don't even have to ask them, they'll just do it.

AH: Well, once again I want to thank you. Thank you, both of you guys, for sitting down—

TS: You're welcome.

AH: Anything else to add, before I turn this off?

JW: It could take a little while. (laughs)

AH: Yes.

JW: It could go on forever.

AH: Of course.

JW: But that will have to be for another time, 'cause I have to get ready to go to Fort Myers.

AH: Okay, excellent.

*end of interview*