



Photo by Susan Hopkins

Dale Longmire, "boss clown" of the Circus Vargas clowns, demonstrates one of the facial exercises he does to prevent premature wrinkles caused by exaggerated smiling and constant laughing. Longmire has been a clown by profession for 7 years.

By SUSAN HOPKINS

Battalion Reporter

Dale Longmire is paid to be happy. And, more importantly, his job is to make other people happy — no matter what. He is not just an entertainer, a comedian or a stunt man. Longmire combines all of these talents, seven days a week, 11 months of the year, as Circus Vargas' "boss clown".

Stopping in Bryan for a two-day circus performance with "America's Big Top Giant", Longmire discussed his life as a clown. "The circus business is constant," he said. "It's a life to me, and I love it. Anyone in the circus has to love it."

With a red painted smile, white face, sequined nose and eye lids, and flashy red suit with a huge bow tied around his neck, the tall, slim 30-year-old professional said the hardest part of being a clown is the constant need to appear happy — even when he's sad or feeling poorly. However, Longmire said, that single disadvantage is far outweighed by the benefits of a clown's life. He said that being instantly loved by children makes his job both fun and easy. All the kids want to talk to him and touch him, Longmire said, every time he puts on his white face, sequined hat and orange hair. He said that all clowns should love children, since pleasing them is such a vital part of their job.

Longmire said he loved clowns as a child. "I had a hidden desire to be a clown when I was young," he said. "My father took me to the circus as a kid, like most fathers take their sons to baseball games."

"I was always the class clown in school, and I got in trouble a lot. But what really interested me in the circus was that I wanted to travel." In seven years as a clown, he said, he has traveled to every major city in the United States four times.

Longmire said he did not act on his desire to join the circus until he was 23 years old. By then, he had been graduated from West Virginia University with a bachelor's degree in art, and had been employed as an advertising artist with Hallmark Cards, Inc. He said he left his job in Kansas City, Kan. and went to a clown college in Florida, where he learned everything from juggling and elephant riding to sewing, costume design and the history of circuses.

Upon graduation from clown college, Longmire auditioned and took a job as a dancing clown for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He said that after five years with Ringling Bros., he decided to sign a two-year contract with Circus Vargas, because wanted to help keep the "tent tradition" alive. He said the circus began with performers working under huge tents. "Working under the 'Big Top' can't be compared to anything," Longmire said. "There's an atmosphere, a feeling and even a smell that is lost when circuses are performed in buildings."

During Longmire's career as a clown, he said, he has had a few mishaps that were probably never recognized by most people in the audience. He was thrown off an elephant in one parade, and fell off a huge ball another time. He said the audience got a kick out of the fact that a clown had fallen.

He said that a clown "gag", or act, done with the Ringling Bros., called for a bunch of balloons that were never brought out. So, he said, one of the clowns improvised by grabbing a nearby vending machine to make the gag work. No

one ever noticed the extreme ad libbing, he said.

Although two nights are never quite the same for any of the five clowns in Circus Vargas, one thing never changes, Longmire said. Each clown has his own makeup design that remains the same show after show. "It's a gentleman's respect not to copy the makeup of another clown," Longmire said. He applies all of his own facial makeup, which consists of zinc oxide and olive oil.

He said putting on the makeup is like having a facial once a day. However, he said, clowning through the years has shown up on his face. Laugh lines around his mouth, and creases on his forehead from years of exaggerated smiling may seem a sign of premature aging to some, but, in reality, he said, are only reflections of his performing expressions. In an effort to minimize the wrinkles, he said, he does a routine of facial exercises each night after performances. He demonstrated one exercise where he fills his cheeks with air like a balloon, and holds the position for several seconds.

Longmire is unmarried, and lives

in a trailer with an elephant trainer. He said his parents visit him frequently while on the job, and are "amazed" with his job.

Small-city folk, Longmire has learned, are much more appreciative of the circus. He said that for some of the children in rural areas, Circus Vargas may be their first exposure to dazzling lights and fancy stunts, whereas children from larger cities may have been exposed to such entertainment all their lives.

Besides the idea that circus performers are dirty, lonely people, Longmire said, probably the most common and worst stereotype put on clowns is that they are "crying on the inside, and laughing on the outside." He said there is nothing he would rather do than be a clown. Out of costume, Longmire said, he is just another face in the crowd. No one gathers around him; no one reaches to touch him; and strangers don't want to have their pictures taken with him. But that, he said, is why being a clown is so important to him. His costume adds the color and spice that every human needs in one form or another.

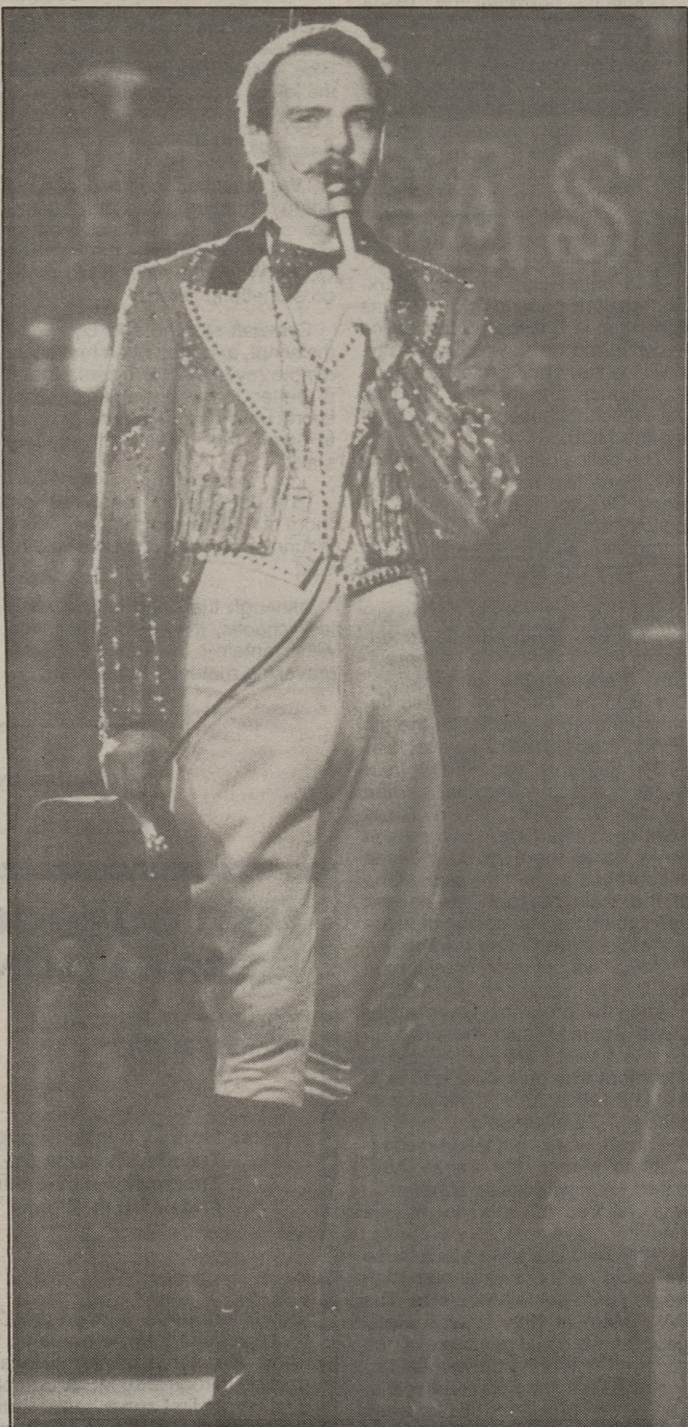
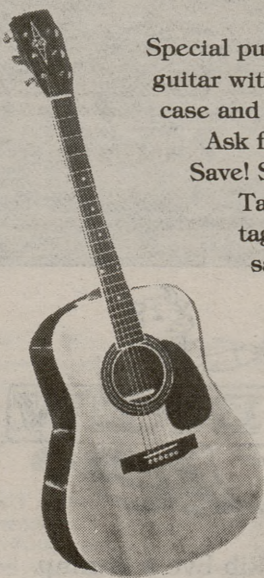


Photo by Pat O'Malley

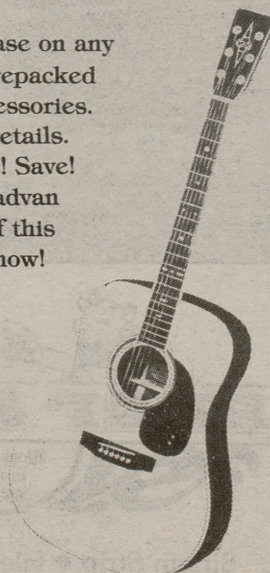
Former English teacher Joe Pon serves as the ringmaster, or master of ceremonies, for the 1980 circus.

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