

Richard Elsenpeter

HIS LIFE: ACTING, FAMILY & FAITH

FRANKLIN DUNCAN
HOLLYWOOD, CALIF. 1937



Richard performing in a tent show

THE LIFE OF RICHARD ELSENPETER

This book was gifted to Richard, to memorialize his life, by his son, Richard (referred to in this book as "Rich," as his father called him). This story captures Richard's full life story from his childhood to his journey to Hollywood in various acting troops, his many years of travel in tent shows, his long-time vocation as a puppeteer, and his wildly successful creation and ten years run of *The Possum Holler Opry* live television show.

Through it all, Richard credits his acting career, and his family, to his strong faith and belief that love conquers all. This story is told in his words, with contributions from his son, Rich.

Beginnings

As told by Richard

My birthday is April 30, 1927. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My siblings are Jim, Joe, Tom, Paul, Mary, and Nina.

My mother, Verna, was an orphan in the Dakota territory. I don't know why she was an orphan. I really don't know. They didn't have orphanages in those times, you just went to live with someone. She went to live with family, but I never knew them. She is from a Swedish lineage. Her maiden name was McAllen, and her family was from McAllen, Texas. My dad, Andrew, was from Minnesota.

My dad was a railroader in the freight business. He never wanted any of us boys to go near the railroad yard because my mother told me later in life that Dad had a dream that one of his boys was killed on the railroad.

Dad was also Chief of Police. Later, my oldest brother became Chief of Police.

MEMORABLE STORY OF DAD

Dad chewed snuff and when my oldest brother was born, he went on the back porch and threw it into

the yard. Mom said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I can't kiss a baby with snuff in my mouth." It makes me choked up to tell that story.

PLAYING IN THE TRAINYARDS

No, we never got into trouble when we were kids. We were angels. Do you believe that?

We did play in the trainyards. I hopped a freight train once. All the boxcars had ladders on them. I jumped on this freight train, and they had a ladder going up the side of the car and then you could swing around to get between the cars. That's dangerous. But I did it, had an accident, and broke my arm.

My dad asked how I broke my arm, and I said I fell at the ballgame. Dad cut through the neighbor's yard going to work, and the neighbor told my dad that he saw me fall, but he didn't know that I broke my arm. Dad said, "You were at the ballgame?" And he said, "No, I was down at the railyards."

Dad asked me again how I broke my arm and where that happened, and I knew I was in trouble. He said,

“When that arm gets out of your cast you are going to get the damndest licking you have ever had.”

He did it. He was a man of his word. If he said something he meant it. That goes both ways - the good and the bad. Both of my parents were disciplinarians, but Dad was more severe.

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I NEVER EVER HEARD MY DAD OR MOTHER RAISE THEIR VOICES TO EACH OTHER.

Their relationship was wonderful. I felt very blessed that way. My mother was an angel. I do know that she had a hard time raising the kids. She was a nurse, but she gave up everything to raise the children.

DANCING THROUGH CHILDHOOD

There are so many childhood memories...I had dance and voice lessons - all of those wonderful things that make you a better person. My mother encouraged me to do these lessons. I went into tap dancing. It was a big thing because of Fred Astaire.

Richard's son, Rich, added, “Father had a heart condition, and he was not expected to live into old age. His mother encouraged him to get into dance and singing to help build up his heart, stamina, and

energy. They knew dancing was good exercise. They thought that football, baseball, and other sports were too strenuous.”

SCHOOL YEARS

We lived on the edge of the city. They didn't have buses for school. We walked to our elementary school, Oakwood Elementary. It was just a couple of blocks away. Columbia Heights High School was a mile away. If you made it, you made it and if you didn't, you didn't. They didn't count you absent.

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NO! WE WERE ELSENPETERS.

- Richard's laughing response to the question of if his heart condition scared him as a kid.

I never played sports. It wasn't that I didn't want to, but I was just miserable doing it. I was just bad! Let's be honest, I was really bad at it.



Richard with his siblings

A LOVE FOR PUPPETRY

Puppetry was a hobby that turned into a vocation. When I was in third or fourth grade, they had a puppet class at school. I joined that class and became a puppeteer. I was a puppeteer throughout my life. I made a living at it. Then my son, Rich, came along and took it away from me! Ha. No, he also became a puppeteer.

I built the puppets. All of the puppets were handmade. It was really nice that it was my handiwork. I had Pinocchio, and other characters.

I don't remember the first play I did, but it was goood!



Richard's marionette show, later in his life

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I LIKED EVERYTHING ABOUT PUPPETRY. TO BUILD THE PUPPET WAS REALLY AN ACCOMPLISHMENT. IT WAS A WONDERFUL THING. IT WAS A JOY.

ON THE ROAD TO HOLLYWOOD

I wanted to be an actor. I didn't graduate from high school. I quit school. They had a big conference with the homeroom teacher and principal. They were all against me quitting school. But I was determined. I was on my way.

I remember the homeroom teacher said, “Richard, these are the happiest days of your life.”

I know that I thought, “What have I got to look forward to? THESE are the happiest days??” That really struck me. I wasn't that happy.

I went on the road instead of staying in school. My folks never put the brakes on. They said if I wanted to do it and I thought I could better my life - to do it.

My mother went to the door for my farewell and said, “I want you to know that Dad and I don't want you to go, but if you think you can better yourself - go. No matter what your mother and father want - you go.” I was very grateful they felt that way.



Richard's parents, Andrew and Verna

Tent Shows

As told by Richard

TOBY & SUZIE TENT SHOWS

I joined a tent show, the “Harry Brown Show” out of Amery, Wisconsin when I left high school. It was a really tough go for me because up until that point they only hired experienced people. This was during World War II though; I was at the bottom of the barrel. All the quality actors were gone.

Toby & Suzie Shows (tent shows) tended to be inside a tent in the summers. We never stayed anywhere long enough to stay in a room; we had a trailer we traveled and stayed in and used it as a dressing room.

In the old days, every town had an opera house or performing arts center. In the summertime, there was no air conditioning, that wasn't even on the drawing board. All of the opera houses were practically closed in the summer because it would be too stifling. So, the shows would be under canvas, outdoors in tents. That was great.



Richard's early years as an actor



One of Richard's headshots from his time in Hollywood

LOTS OF TALENT & A LITTLE BIT OF LUCK

I just figured out where to stay when I got to Hollywood. I was very very lucky. I made myself known to some people that ran a boarding house for actors. That takes me back...I met all kinds of actors. I had a very fortunate thing - I stayed with some people that were big in showbusiness. I stayed, as a guest, with Evangeline Russel, a silent movie star. That was really neat.

I was at a gathering with a bunch of people in the business. I wound up with that group and it was really crazy. I remember I woke up under a grand piano. I just fell asleep. That is what you would do. You would go here and there and spend time with people. Sometimes people would read Shakespear, or rehash plays.

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A HOLLYWOOD AGENT GAVE ME THE NAME DICK ELLIS.

He said, “Richard Elsenpeter - that will not fit on a marquee. So, let’s shorten it down.”

My first job was at The Comedy Francaise. It was a French comedy venue. I did a lot of acting with that group. I fell right into it. That was fun. I was there for quite a while.



Evangeline Russell, as pictured on Wikipedia

RUNNING INTO CARY GRANT

I was in the movie *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* as an extra for the crowd. It was with Cary Grant and Shirley Temple. Shirley Temple was the sweetest person in the business.

One day, on the set in the cafeteria, I had a tray full of food and I was walking behind Cary Grant.

Someone called my name, and I swirled that way and hit Cary Grant in the chest and all the food went all over him!

I said, "Oh, Mr. Grant, I am so sorry." I went overboard, I know I did.

He said, "That's okay. Just leave me alone."

HOLLYWOOD GOAL

My goal in Hollywood was to be an actor, and I certainly did that. You can't believe the people I met and chummed with. I went to Hollywood at 17 and left at 18 or 19 years old. I left because I couldn't do everything I wanted to do in acting. I wanted to do other things.

I always kept in touch with people in the business in the Midwest. There were stock companies in the Midwest. When times got tough, I could just write them and say, "Do you have room for me?" They always did. I joined them and their fellow mates after leaving Hollywood.

This has brought back so many memories. My mind is going!



The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer, 1947



Richard's wife, Delores

Marrying the Ingenue

As told by Richard

I was with a show in Illinois and putting up posters for the acting company I worked for in Quincy. I was paid five dollars to put up the posters. This girl came out of a store and said she wanted to be a singer and asked if I heard of an opening to let her know as she wanted to break into the business.

During the run of the play, the ingenue (leading lady), left to go back to Chicago. The manager asked if we knew of anyone that could be a replacement. I told him I knew of two replacements. One was the girl from Quincy, her name was Delores.

The manager said that we should go with Delores as if she didn't work out, she didn't have far to go home. I would imagine she was 17 or 18 as she had just gotten out of high school. She got the part. She wasn't a great singer, but she was a good singer.

My guess was they hired her for her looks as she was really cute, and she could sing. We started dating right away then got married soon after.



Richard and Delores' Wedding Day

CIRCLE STOCK

We were on circle stock. The show stayed in one town, and we worked around seven towns. Every day we would play a different town in the surrounding area. We started that circle in Fall and ran that circle until Christmas. Then in the new year you would start a new circle.

Every week while we were doing one show we were practicing for the next week's show. Delores and I did this for five or six years. We didn't play in big towns. We never played in the town we stayed in, only the towns around it.

When we got to town we would walk around the town and there would usually be signs up in the windows of the houses saying, "Rooms for rent." Once people knew the show was coming to town, they would rent a room to make money, five dollars a week.

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**I HAVE DONE HUNDREDS OF PLAYS
THROUGHOUT MY LIFE BECAUSE WE
LEARNED A NEW SHOW EVERY WEEK.
WE PERFORMED EVERY DAY, SEVEN
DAYS A WEEK.**

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

My children, Anna, Dulce, Lisa, and Rich were all born on the road. When Rich was born, we were traveling through the mountains. It was a mountain range we had to go over. I told my wife, "Why don't I take you over to Cortez and put you in the hospital and I will go back for the last show and then I will come back over." I didn't want her to go into labor while we were going over the mountains.

I dropped her off at the hospital and went back after the show to pick her up at the hospital. She didn't take a break. She went right back to work. We were troopers! Some people thought we were crazy to do that, but it was a way of life. I think we were privileged to travel and entertain people. We did what we loved to do.



Taken by Shirley in our trailer
Richard & Delores' tent show trailer (their home on the road)

There were rules. You never used a cuss word in those days. Once I had a “damn” in my monologue and the director told me to cut that. I said, “But I am supposed to be mad, and how can I convey being mad saying ‘golly darn.’” He said, “Dick, a hell or a damn has never brought people to the theatre, but it has kept some away. And we can’t afford that.”

Rich added, “My birth on the road really fell into the show must go on mentality. You had to act, set up the tent, put out the chairs, set up the stage, get the dressing room set up, and put out the flyers. Nobody ever got rich in this job. It was the adventure of traveling, getting out and seeing the

country, and the thrill of being on stage. It was the lifestyle they chose, doing something they loved.”

“Father was in circle stock and Toby & Suzy shows for about twenty-five years total. People travel for about five or six years. They realize it is a hard life and not as glamorous as they thought it would be. I was about two years old when they stopped.”

“Mother decided she couldn’t take the road anymore. She moved back to Illinois. Father followed her back to the Barry/Quincy area. He started doing puppetry and *The Possum Holler Opry* show at that time.”



Richard in the tent show men's dressing room



The Bisbee Tent Show

Elsenspeter Marionettes

As told by Richard

When I was a kid, I made puppets, marionettes. It was a government program for children in the summertime. I loved it. I made my own marionettes.

When I stopped traveling with the tent shows and was back in Quincy, they had a summer program for the schools and B.J. Adams, a very well-known woman in Quincy, with the Women's Club at the Country Club, asked me to do marionette shows for the children in the summer.

I remember putting Rich and his sister in the front row and I could look down and see them. They sat through the same show over and over and over.

Rich said, "The Elsenpeter marionettes comprises four generations. It started with my great grandfather in Elsen, Germany, about 154 years ago. Since my father has retired, I have taken that over. We do the old storybook style. We hide ourselves from the audience, we have a curtain we work behind, and it takes about an hour to set everything up. The show itself lasts about thirty minutes. Father's show lasted about 45 minutes and was a two- or three-person show. We now have it down to a one-person show."



One of Richard's marionette shows, The Wizard of Oz



The Elsenpeter children

Rich continued, "Father traveled nationally. He was involved in school assembly programs and worked extensively with the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. He would do anywhere from 350 to 400 shows per year. He would travel from the East Coast to the West Coast, from Canada to Mexico. It was full-time during the school year.

From September to December, he would be in and out, but after Christmas he would be so far away, we wouldn't see him for two or three months.

"Mother continued to act but historically her day job was working at Kemner's furniture store in downtown Quincy. Then she worked at Dohrn Transfer."



Exclusive Management
Elsenpeter Productions
Liberty, Illinois

"Toby" DICK ELLIS
Star of

"POSSUM"
Recording
Artist

THE  POSSUM HOLLER Opry

WGEM - TV, Quincy, Ill.

Possum Holler Opry

As told by Richard



Richard's Possum Holler Opry character

Sometimes I would be hundreds of miles away from the TV station and I would have to drive to Quincy to do Possum Holler and then drive all the way back again to where I was doing the marionette show. Joe Bonansinga, General Manager of WGEM-TV at that time, said, "You have to be careful driving so much, you could get hurt."

Rich said, "Possum Holler started Mother's Day of 1960 and went through Mother's Day of 1970. When they approached him about doing a live country western show, Joe Bonansinga didn't have a lot of faith, but he gave him the chance. They didn't really think it would last more than two or three weeks, but it ran ten years straight without any Sundays off.

"With *Possum Holler Opry*, people would go to church, come home, turn on the TV, let the kids watch cartoons until noon, and then *Possum Holler Opry* came on. If they played opposite of the World Series or the Superbowl, people would watch *Possum Holler Opry* first and then switch it over."

Richard commented, "Isn't that a wonderful thing?"

I was in Indiana, and someone asked what I did, and I told them about *Possum Holler Opry* and he said, "Oh my God, you beat the NFL game of the year rating." I said, "We did?" He said, "They didn't tell you that?" They didn't tell me anything, they probably thought I would ask for a raise or something!

Rich added, "I remember that Mountain Dew, Kool-Aid, and Prairie Farms milk were the sponsors. It was all live. If anything went wrong, they just rolled with it. It went from a half hour show to an hour show. People called it the 'Baked Potato Hour.'"

"People would say, 'We came home from church, we put on cartoons for the kids, I started baking

potatoes, frying the chicken, and Linda Cassidy came on and I started listening to her and my potatoes started burning.'

"What was great about the show, very much like a modern variety show, they had sketches, musical performers that were local and national, they had square dancers, and comedy. It went from one act to another, to another.

"They were seasoned professionals. If somebody made a mistake, if someone forgot a line, somebody else would pick that up and they would just roll with it, and it would look so seamless. Everyone else behind the curtain knew it was a mistake, but no one watching it did."



Richard and Al Harvey receiving an award for Possum Holler Opry

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I DON'T KNOW HOW WE DID IT. I REALLY DON'T. WE JUST DID IT. I DON'T EVER REALLY REMEMBER IT BEING A HARDSHIP, IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY.



Delores on the Possum Holler Opry Set

LEAN TIMES

When we had what we call “lean times” when you weren’t up to capacity working, you knew it was cyclical. It would come back.

Rich said, “Father would be very restless during those lean times. He always wanted to be back on the road. He always felt he had to be traveling and being behind the wheel. That was his life in the tent shows. In the circle stock he was always driving from one place to another. The same with the marionette shows.

“It was very hard for him to sit at home and not have somewhere to go. There were many times

Father would come over for dinner and a half hour later he would say he had to go. He had to be in the car with somewhere to go.

“My mother liked the stability, having a nest and a home to go to. When you traveled you had a trailer that was constantly moving.”

ALWAYS AN ACTOR

As told by Rich

Father and his longtime business partner Al would just be in a car talking and then all of a sudden, I would realize they weren’t talking, they were acting.

Father would say, “That’s a nice bunch of cows out there.”

Al would say, “That’s not a bunch of cows, it’s a herd of cows.”

Father would say, “Heard of what?”

Al, “Herd of cows.”

Father, “Sure, I have heard of cows.”

Al, “You are right, that’s a nice bunch of cows.”

Big Picture

As told by Richard

MOST GRATEFUL FOR

My children are Anna, Dulce, Lisa, Richard, Robert, and Joni. Anna was in the military. Dulce and Lisa were nurses. Robert was in the insurance business. Joni works in HR at a hospital. She did like to write and sing. I think my kids all liked to dance and perform. Rich is the only one that did it professionally though, after his time in the military.

My kids always call me “Father.” Someone said, “I didn’t know you were a priest.” I told them, “Well, that is what I am, I am my kids’ father.”

Delores, their mother, once said, “I am proud of you guys. There is not a slacker among you guys. You are all successful. You all made your way.”

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I AM MOST GRATEFUL IN LIFE FOR MY CHILDREN, MY FAMILY. MY KIDS ARE MY LIFE.

LIVING A SUCCESSFUL LIFE

I think first, you have the love of acting. Love conquers all. That is true especially in show business.

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IF YOU LOVE WHAT YOU ARE DOING, YOU ARE GOING TO BE SUCCESSFUL. THERE IS NO WAY YOU CAN ESCAPE IT.

Rich contributed, “You can look at success as monetary success or personal success. Possum Holler has been off the air for 52 years and people will still ask me if I am related to Toby (Richard’s show name). It is a little show in the Midwest and yet there are national shows that had million-dollar budgets that went off last year that no one remembers. But this little show, in Quincy, Illinois, 52 years later, people are still talking about it, writing articles about it, and doing interviews with Toby. It had an impact on the community, that to me says, ‘How was it NOT successful.’”



The Elsenpeter Family, Dolores Lee, Richard, Lisa, Anna, Joni, Robert, Dulce

LIFE PURPOSE

From the higher power, my purpose in life was to enrich people's lives through acting.

In circle stock you play in the same town every week. You make friends that way. One time a man said, "My wife and I were not going to go to the show tonight but I am so glad that we did." When you are a performer you have to bear that in mind, the memories you leave behind.

Rich added, "Father had three pillars in his life: his acting, his family, and his faith."

FAITH

Faith IS my life. My faith means everything to me. I honestly don't think you can be successful in theatre or the performing arts without faith. To me it is impossible. You have to have faith that it is going to be okay.

I always get the picture of God patting my back and saying, "It will be okay."

You have faith daily. You will get through it. Just believe in God, Christ, and the blessed Mary. You

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I WAS BORN AN ACTOR. I DIDN'T WANT ANYTHING ELSE. IT'S BEEN A GOOD RIDE.

have to have faith or it is hollow. You don't have to declare anything. It's there.

Rich, "With Father it has always come through. When he was out on the road he always found a church. I don't remember him ever not having faith. It has always been there."

LIFE LESSONS

The only thing that I can share is: Believe. There is a God. You have to believe that you are under His care. If you believe, it will be. That's never left me.

BORN TO ACT

I remember in grade school I was acting in little skits the teachers would put on. The one I remember is "The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick Maker." I was the baker. I knew then that the audience was with me, and I knew that it was my future. I just knew it. That is what I wanted.

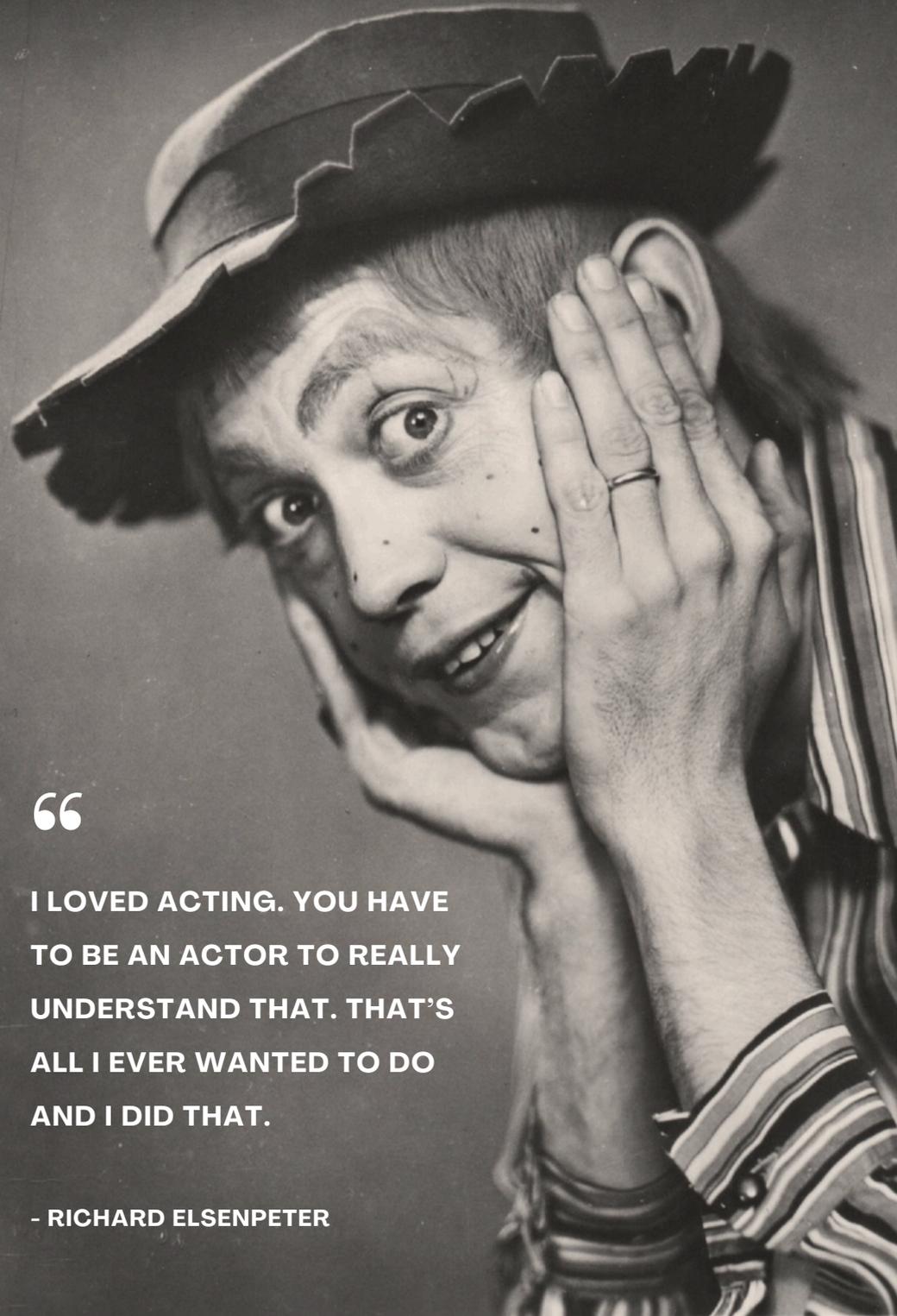
I liked all of it. I can't pinpoint one time in my life. Whenever the light goes on.

Rich added, "He loved performing. He loved making people laugh."



Memoirs
by
Maureen

Life Storyteller, Maureen Klues



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I LOVED ACTING. YOU HAVE
TO BE AN ACTOR TO REALLY
UNDERSTAND THAT. THAT'S
ALL I EVER WANTED TO DO
AND I DID THAT.

- RICHARD ELSENPETER