



Frank Edward Clark

October 15, 1929 - January 6, 2026

From about age four or five onward, native Chicagoan Frank Edward Clark vividly remembered his parents taking him each summer to see Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus on the Chicago lakefront. Once he was old enough to continue those annual pilgrimages on his own, he did so by bicycle—rarely, if ever, missing a performance year after year. Those youthful encounters with show business would form the nucleus of Frank’s future ambitions.

Frank graduated from St. John’s Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin, and went on to attend the University of Illinois, where he studied technical engineering for approximately three semesters. “But it wasn’t what I wanted to do,” he later explained.

After serving as a Staff Sergeant during the Korean War for thirteen months in 1950–51, Clark returned stateside determined to pursue his true aspirations. “I always wanted to be a circus performer,” he would often admit.

Inspired by a hand-balancing duo he saw on The Ed Sullivan Show in the early to mid-1950s, Frank became obsessed with the idea of becoming a circus artist. He began practicing handstands, one-arm stands, and eventually head-balancing techniques, which would later become his specialty. At the same time, he was studying dance—tap, eccentric, adagio, and acrobatic—at

a studio on Chicago's South Side owned and operated by former vaudevillian Sylvester G. Smith. While training at the Smith school, Frank auditioned for a dance troupe that worked fair grandstands and showroom engagements for Chicago-based theatrical agent Ernie Young. Before long, he found himself surrounded by variety entertainers, vaudevillians, and fellow dancers, working summer dates throughout the Midwest.

In short order, Frank became a member of a parallel-bar acrobatic act known as The Noble Trio, working with them on circus, fair, and nightclub bookings for several consecutive years. On the sidelines, he continued refining his head-balancing skills, now balancing himself upside down on a swaying trapeze bar.

By the early 1960s, when his partners decided it was time to retire, "The Great Francarro" was ready to debut his solo trapeze routine high above the circus ring. He began playing scattered engagements here and there, including the Shrine Circus in Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago television's popular Bozo's Circus; and a variety of fair dates. It was on one of those fair bookings, somewhere in Illinois, that Frank met another acrobat working in her family's act—the attractive Ruthie Engford. Despite their hectic and far-flung performance schedules, the couple began dating and soon became engaged.

Around this time, Frank had sent out several 8mm films of his act to various agencies in search of work. To his surprise, he was contacted almost immediately by one of England's largest traveling tent shows, Billy Smart's Circus. Soon thereafter, he was off to Europe—leaving his new fiancée behind—to spend the 1964 and 1965 seasons with Smart. Ruthie remained stateside, continuing to perform with her family's troupe, the Engfords. Frank then moved on to France, appearing at Paris's famed Cirque Medrano and the iconic Cirque d'Hiver. He returned to America in February 1966, reunited with his fiancée, and began planning their future together.

The couple married in London, Ontario, in September of 1966—during a circus performance—hanging from an aerial rigging suspended beneath a helicopter, several hundred feet above the open-air fairgrounds.

Billed as “The Great Francarro,” alongside his lovely bride “Estreleta,” the couple upheld the highest standards as stellar aerialists for more than forty years, appearing on countless circuses around the world. When they retired from their lofty pursuits in the early 1990s, they remained active in show business. Frank introduced a top-notch foot-juggling act and an innovative comedy cannon routine, both performed with Ruthie’s assistance.

Eventually, the couple stepped away from the circus spotlight altogether, yet remained deeply involved in the performing arts. Frank became Property Master/Rigger for twelve years at the Sarasota Opera Company, while Ruthie took the helm as the opera’s Head of Wardrobe—a position which she held for thirty-plus years.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations be made to the Sarasota Opera, 61 N. Pineapple Ave, Sarasota, FL 34236.

Tribute Wall

PD

“ I worked with Frank and Ruthie on my first ever real Shrine Circus booking in Sioux City, Iowa for Hubert Castle Circus. I was just about to graduate from college and I recall chatting with them in the hallway of the arena as we waited our turns to perform. Later I was booked at a series of county fairs in Wisconsin for Ruthie's dad, Harry Engford. That was 1973, and we learned that my wife and I would be working with them for the entire 1974 season with Hubert Castle. Frank and I often shared dressing rooms on that long tour. Frank was a genius when it came to props and aerial rigging. Soon after that we both bought highway buses and converted them to motor homes. Frank's was a 1950's GM 4104, mine was a 1963 GM 4106. Frank did his conversion by himself (like I said he was a building genius), mine was converted by a family friend who did that work professionally. We always shared the comradery of bus trials and joys! As a cartoonist I did a drawing of Frank repairing his bus engine with the help of Frank's true-blue friend Kermit the Frog sitting in a barrel of motor oil! Frank and Ruth were good friends during good times and bad. I very much miss those days and working with Frank and Ruthie. G-D brought Frank Home gracefully, and no doubt has a beautiful place for him to rest in His care.

Pat Davison - February 11 at 03:36 PM



“ I remember Frank as a kind and gentle man. I first met him when I was child going to the trailer where he was with Ruthie. Later, I remembered how overwhelmed he was when my son Matt and I showed up with the DVD of "To Tell the Truth" of their TV appearance. It was such a blessing to see he and Ruthie talk about the backstory of that appearance.

Steve Booth (Ruthie's Cousin)

Steve Booth - January 17 at 04:21 PM

KS

“ I remember coming home for lunch from grade school and watching you on Bozo's Circus. I always thought I had the "coolest" uncle. He will be missed.

Kelly Sica - January 17 at 03:02 PM

MP

“ We worked side by side so many times. I will miss his gentle presence and humor

Marty Petlock - January 17 at 11:43 AM

PC

“ I've known Frank for 30 years, he always had a smile for you and hello I will miss him very much! God bless you Frank

Par Comer - January 17 at 07:53 AM

HK

“ May his memory be a blessing. Rest in Peace Frank.

Howard Kaplan - January 15 at 07:11 AM

AD

“ Annette Dean lit a candle in memory of Frank Edward Clark



Annette Dean - January 14 at 03:28 PM

EK

“ *Our friendship goes back to the early 70is when I worked with you and lovely wife Ruthie side by side at Circus Vargas. My memories will always be in my heart!*

*Elfie Klementi
South Lake Tahoe/NV*

Elfie Klementi - January 14 at 12:50 PM

JL

“ *You will be missed, but you will forever be in our hearts.*

We are so grateful for our recent visit in December.

*John & Mary, Indiana
-Former neighbor and friends*

John Lane - January 14 at 12:15 PM

IH

“ *you will be greatly missed by all who knew you especially me Ilona Fredonia*

Ilona Harnas - January 13 at 07:56 PM



“ *1 file added to the album Memories Album*



Toale Brothers Funeral Home & Crematory - January 13 at 09:12 AM

LB

What perfect condition your bodies and minds needed to be in for that kind of work. Absolutely amazing.

Lynnette. Booth - January 24 at 01:27 PM