

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: David Meche (DM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Monday, August 15, 2022. This is Part 2 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with David Meche. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Dave. How are you today?

DM: Good. And yourself?

TM: Very good, thank you. David, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

DM: Yes.

TM: Thank you. You know, last time you had talked about coming out to work on the Navajo Bridge. This is in the spring of 1994, and you were working for the superintendent of the job, a man named Ed Kent. And I just, I kind of wonder— Oh yeah, you'd also mentioned that they were still blasting the footings and foundation cut on the Marble Canyon side when you showed up. What do you recall about, like, the first bit of steel down in the skewback down there? How did that all work out?

DM: It went together good. We had quite a little bit of falsework in there to hold up that first piece until we had to— I did that work. Kind of like a temporary column underneath that first piece that made into the wall, you know, into the skewback.

TM: So that skewback was bolted on a foundation with threaded bolts coming out of it. Is that how that worked?

DM: Yeah, it had a— It hung on anchor bolts. It was like a big base plate. We put that on. And that first chord coming out, we had a temporary ledge sitting underneath it. So it sat on that where they blasted out that notch. It sat, you know, that post held it up till we had the tieback up from above into it.

TM: So from the skewback anchor plate, there would be vertical posts going up, and then they were hooked together with some sort of a top beam?

DM: Well, under that first piece, there was a—I don't know if it was a work hole or whatever, but that column, the post there, bolted underneath, and then when we had the first piece into that— I called it a knuckle down there where the anchor bolts are. You know, it just stood up underneath it like a post. And then I'm pretty sure we had to shim it to elevation.

TM: Okay. So with the first posts up, then the next piece is out, were those the bottom diagonals coming up?

DM: It was the first chord coming out of the knuckle.

TM: Okay. And did those need to be held up? Is that where you had the— In the cut there, were they held up with some sort of support?

DM: The temporary posts held it up till we had, you know, came from the top with the temporary, with the falsework.

TM: Okay. So that first chord was held up from below. Then the next— I'm not sure what the term is, whether it's a panel. It would be more uprights then. The next set of uprights. And then you would connect the first upright to the second upright. Is that kind of how that would work?

DM: Well, I think we put the bottom together, like, the two chords, one on each side. Then we framed that in. Braced, got it squared up. Then we started with—came from right there at the base of that first chord, started standing posts up and went up the wall to the top.

TM: Okay.

DM: Then we put the— The stair tower went up first, so we had access then. That was the very first thing.

TM: And at that point, the bridge is— It's— I'm not explaining this well, but from the bottom of the steel up to the road deck, is pretty far. There's a lot of steel in that.

DM: Yeah.

TM: And was it halfway up there's another horizontal run?

DM: Yeah, I'm pretty sure. It had a bunch of bracing on it, on that back wall, you know, from post to post.

TM: Okay. And then when would you kind of run the net out?

DM: That was on the bottom, off the bottom chords.

TM: Okay.

DM: They attached to the struts, matter of fact. That's off some beams that had like a flange clamp, and we bolted them to the bottom. I don't know if we had holes cut, already punched in there for that when we bolted them, you know, from the shop.

TM: Yep.

DM: We bolted them, and they cantilevered out. We hung the net off of that.

TM: Okay. So it seems like there's a sort of a spicy time in there when you're ready to move the net further along.

DM: Oh, the net stayed. The net stayed.

TM: Right. The next section of net.

DM: Yeah, we just kept adding to it. The next strut came up with the net on it. We pulled the— We let the net hang down and had ropes tied to it. When we made the strut, we'd cut the lines loose and just pulled the net to the next net beam and strut.

TM: That's cool.

DM: And hooked it off.

TM: So it was on there already when you dropped that down there.

DM: Right.

TM: Okay. And the bolt up guys, were they using pneumatic ratchets to—

DM: Impacts.

TM: Impact ratchets. Okay. And so did the first couple chords, did they go pretty easy? Was there any— You know, it seems like to start the whole thing off, how did that work out?

DM: Yeah, it went good. Vincennes was the fabricator, and they always seem to have a little roll in their iron for some reason, but it set up real good, I thought.

TM: Okay. And then once the posts were up, how much of that early work did you do with a crane based on the land?

DM: We had a picker on the bank up top unload the trucks. And then after we got the top chords going and that and set down our track, we'd have the traveler out there and the dolly behind it. Then we took the picker and loaded the dolly up, ran the iron out to, you know, erect. I picked whatever I could from crane from the bank and set it.

TM: And at one point then, you needed to get a crane out on the bridge.

DM: Yes. That was our traveler.

TM: How did that all work?

DM: It went pretty good, I thought. It was a 50-ton American, and all it was was the house and the boom. And I don't know if they built the turntable or took an old turntable, and they welded the frame to it, which was the traveler.

TM: Okay.

DM: So there's a bunch of little trusses and that, went from chord to chord.

TM: Did you guys build that on site there?

DM: We put it together on site, but I don't know if Vincennes built it for us or Traylor Brothers shop built it. I'm not quite sure.

TM: Alright. So you guys just put it together.

DM: Right.

TM: Then with the crane on the bridge, were you still using the traveler, or was the crane able to turn around and pick stuff up and turn around and bring it out one at a time, or did you right away start using the traveler and load the traveler up and then send it right to the crane and pick from there?

DM: Well, I erected what I could while we're close to the, I call it the embankment to the approach part. And whatever we could pick right there. And eventually we had to use a 30-ton Grove hydraulic crane. I think we loaded the dolly up and brought it to the traveler.

TM: Okay, so a 30-ton hydraulic crane on the— I wanna say on the shore, but it isn't on the shore. It's kind of on the top of the cliff there to load—

DM: I think it was 30-ton. It might have been bigger, I guess.

TM: And that loaded up the dolly, and then you'd pull the dolly out.

DM: We had two air tuggers on the dolly.

TM: Okay.

DM: Ran the lines out, you know, passed the traveler. We'd pull the iron right up as close as we could to the traveler where we could access the traveler from the dolly.

TM: Nice. And then at one point Ronnie Mac—that's Ronnie McFarland—came out onto the job. Do you remember— Had you worked with Ronnie before?

DM: No.

TM: Okay. And how was it that he got called out on the job?

DM: Not quite sure. He knew Ed Kent's nephew

TM: Jerry?

DM: I guess he worked with him. Yeah, Jerry. I think Jerry worked with him up in Cincinnati or somewhere up there.

TM: Okay. So now you got Ronnie out there and Ed. And there's some Navajo guys. There's Mike Charley and Louie Begay.

DM: Yep.

TM: And then there's Larry. Scary Larry.

DM: Scary Larry?

TM: I think he was on bolt-up crew. I'm not sure. That name rings a bell. Who else do you remember out there on the crew?

DM: It's been quite a while ago.

TM: Yeah. Many bridges ago.

DM: Yes. One of the boys from Denham Springs, Louisiana, I worked with him in Tennessee, and he came out there. His name was Danny. I forget his last name.

TM: Okay. What was his job?

DM: He was in the raising gang, connecting.

TM: And you were the raising gang foreman. Is that right?

DM: Yes.

TM: Okay. Alright. What else do you remember about putting that bridge together on that Flagstaff side?

DM: I know it was hot and dry. [Laughs]

TM: How hot did that steel get?

DM: You could lay on it, and it would dry your shirt off, I know that.

TM: I'm sorry. Say that again.

DM: You'd lay on it, you know, if you're trying to make a piece, be all sweaty. That'd dry your shirt off.

TM: And you guys were tied in with a— You had a safety harness with a rope that you'd hook on to something. Is that how that worked?

DM: Yeah, we had on the edge of the chords we had those handler posts with towers we were clipped into. And then on the traveler we had some beams sticking out of the front. We had retractables on those for the connectors, you know, working in front of the crane.

TM: Was it ever windy out there?

DM: I don't really recall. But if it was, I probably sure did appreciate it. It's been a couple years ago.

TM: I bet. It was hot out there. And do you remember every now and then the boats would go by down below?

DM: Yeah, we'd have to stop doing every time because of some kind of agreement they made, you know. And of course, if we dropped something, we'd be liable, too, and all that. They'd go by and wave and all that stuff.

TM: Would you guys just stay where you were and sit down, or would you walk back, work your way back to the bank and—

DM: It depended what time it was and if it was close to lunch whether we'd walk back. Most of the time we just stay where we were.

TM: Okay, so it depended.

DM: Right.

TM: And then you would have gotten further and further and further out there. What was it like putting that last chord in halfway out across the canyon on a big, big diving board?

DM: It'd bounce around a little bit. I'd have to tell that operator to take it easy on the swing a lot of times because it would just make it sway out there.

TM: Oh! So when the crane would pick up some steel and turn around, that would get things to swaying a little bit?

DM: Yep.

TM: Okay. That must have been a little exciting.

DM: At least we knew it moved.

TM: Yeah, there was a little give in it.

DM: Yeah.

TM: So once the Flagstaff side was all built out, what did you do then?

DM: We took everything back to the approach part of the bank, tore it down and put it on the truck, and went to the other side.

TM: So the 50-ton American, just the house and the boom, and the turntable. Were you able to break that apart enough in little pieces to get it across the old bridge, or did it have to go all the way around the long way?

DM: No, we went across the old bridge.

TM: Okay. So then when the steel started coming for the lodge side of the bridge, did that steel come across the old bridge as well?

DM: I'm pretty sure.

TM: Alright, because I know the old bridge could only handle so much weight.

DM: Yeah. I'm pretty sure they got ones fabricated on most of that stuff.

TM: Okay.

DM: Make sure they broke those chords into manageable pieces for trucking in, you know, so we can handle them too.

TM: And you guys were working four 10-hour days?

DM: I think so. Four 10's.

TM: Yeah, I think that's what Ronnie was saying.

DM: Pretty sure.

TM: So four days on and three days off.

DM: Saturdays I'd gather my clothes up, go put them in the washer and all that, get the paper, go eat breakfast while that was going on, and then had the whole weekend to go do whatever you wanted to do.

TM: What would you do on your weekends?

DM: I'd ride around and look at the countryside, go fishing at Lake Powell.

TM: Yep.

DM: Go fishing right down there below the bridge.

TM: Oh, okay. Did you walk that trail down there?

DM: Yeah, that sheep, sheep something.

TM: Yep, the Sheep Trail.

DM: Yeah. Hike all the way down there and bring a bottle of water. Hike all the way down there, catch some trout, hike all the way back up. Fish would be dried out by the time I got back up.

TM: You need to try to hurry to get them home to cook them.

DM: Yeah. Yeah.

TM: Did your wife and kids go down that trail?

DM: Oh, no. We did the raft ride, not going down the canyon, but up there out of Page, you know, right by the dam. That raft ride up that way.

TM: That smooth water rafting from from the dam down to Lees Ferry.

DM: Right. We did all that.

TM: Nice. That's fun. Okay, so did the second half, the lodge side, did that go any easier or harder or any different from the Flagstaff side?

DM: It all went about the same from what I remember.

TM: Was there anything that surprised you or anything you remember on the first or the second half that was an interesting story?

DM: I know you can see the rain and lightning coming from a long ways off.

TM: What would you do when you saw it?

DM: Oh, we'd head back to the bank there and hunker down. And if it was raining— One thing that stuck in my mind was, like, when we'd leave the job, it would be raining like hell. And I'd come over the old bridge, and you'd see that water shooting in the canyon, you know, from running off. And it would shoot up there, you know, 40, 50 foot, that ol' red-looking water

TM: Wow.

DM: I still had some of that red stuff under the hood of my truck for a long time when I got home.

TM: Yeah, it's pretty tenacious mud.

DM: Yeah, it sure is.

TM: Colors your clothes and doesn't come out.

DM: Uh-huh.

TM: Did the bridge ever get hit by lightning when you guys were waiting for the rain to go by?

DM: Not that I can remember. I mean, you could see it coming from a long ways off, and so— I mean, it was like it was right there, especially when you got up there on that pass coming from Flagstaff. Not Flagstaff. Coming from Page right there in that cut.

TM: Yeah. To the cut there, uh-huh.

DM: Yeah. You could see it coming from a long ways off.

TM: Yeah. And you were driving every day from Page.

DM: Yep. I mean, I stayed at the lodge there for a little bit, then the lady who run the lodge, she was getting a little outrageous with her rent and all that, so quite a few of us went to town and found our own places.

TM: Alright. And what do you remember about putting up the last chord, the last, the top chord?

DM: The chord went good. I mean, we had to put the pin in, we had to do a little adjusting there, you know. I think we had to open it up some, then still have to drive the pin in.

TM: Oh, right. I forgot. I guess the pin would go in before the top chord.

DM: No, the top chord went in and then the pin was last.

TM: And what do you remember about putting that pin in there?

DM: That Ed Kent's lucky. It seems like he always lucks out on that. It was the coldest day we had in three months. I got the pin started and all I had to do is take the headache ball and beat it in a little bit.

TM: Wow.

DM: I mean, we adjusted the tiebacks a little bit. Anyways, it was a real cool morning, and it went in pretty good.

TM: Nice. How big was that pin? Do you remember?

DM: Four inches, maybe six inches at the most.

TM: And how long?

DM: Oh, 18, 24 inches.

TM: Okay. And there was one on each side of the bridge. Now I have to be careful how I say this. There was one on the upstream side and one on the downstream side where the two halves came together. Is that right?

DM: Correct.

TM: And that's the same way they did the other bridge was with these pins that were four to six inches in diameter, about two feet long. And there was one on the upstream side, and one on the downstream side. Did those go in together? You kind of got them in and they were both in place and then— Or did you put them in one at a time?

DM: One at a time.

TM: Once they were in place, how long did it take you to let go from the tie backs and weight it up?

DM: We had to do some adjusting on the skewbacks to get to that plate, to get all the bolt holes lined up, the plate bolted up, you know, to the chords. And then I know it was raining and it was pretty cool, so as soon as we got the pins in, we called it a day that day.

TM: Okay.

DM: The Indians got drunk.

TM: Well, it sounded like a good day for a celebration.

DM: Yep.

TM: So with the pin in place, then what happened after that?

DM: I'd say we had some, uh, those plates, we had to bolt those up. And I'm sure there was some bolting up left to do. And then start cleaning up and moving back to the approach.

TM: Okay. So the 50-ton American would be taken back to the lodge side and taken apart.

DM: Yeah, we started taking the net beams off as we went back. And pulling up our temporary track.

TM: Then did you stay on to help with the deck work?

DM: No, that was Kraemer's job.

TM: Okay.

DM: I wouldn't have stayed there. I was the last one there for Traylor. I loaded up the containers and all that stuff.

TM: The containers that were used for tool storage and that kind of thing?

DM: Right.

TM: Okay. And then did you get to work on the railing at all?

DM: Oh, yeah.

TM: When did you come out and do that?

DM: Well, they had to pour the concrete and all that. I don't know how long after that. Couple months, anyway, we came back and put the handrails up.

TM: How did you do that?

DM: We used that cherry picker; we used it to set the handrail. And it all had to be adjusted. You know, it was— It didn't line up.

TM: Did that go in in like 20-foot sections or something?

DM: It was something like that. I don't know if it was quite that long. It's like, you know, it came in panels.

TM: Okay, and then it would just bolt into the decking below?

DM: I want to say— I don't know if it was— I forget if it was something on the—from up top if they had some struts to bolt it to or cement beds. I can't really recall.

TM: Okay.

DM: I know it took a lot of tweaking to get them, you know, to make them look good, you know, where they matched up because if the form was crooked, you had to kind of feather it out to make it look right, you know, so the next one would line up.

TM: Alright. So if they had any sort of twist in them—

DM: Yeah, it could come from the deck, you know, from the concrete.

TM: So once they were on, I would imagine somebody might have been tempted to drive across that bridge just to check it out.

DM: Well, Kraemer had the ends blocked off. I mean, we could drive on there but, um, I went out there with a work truck.

TM: So were you the first one to drive a work truck out there?

DM: I don't remember.

TM: You would have been one of the first ones. I imagine—

DM: I might have been.

TM: The concrete guys would have probably driven across it just to say they got first drive.

DM: Yeah.

TM: So when you were done with the railing, was the road still closed? Was the bridge, the new bridge still closed?

DM: I think so because I don't think it was painted yet.

TM: Alright. So in building this bridge, was it just another bridge for you, or did it strike you as being different?

DM: Well, the difference was the location, for sure. You know, how often do you get to put a bridge over Grand Canyon, you know, going to the Grand Canyon and that.

TM: Yeah. Did Ed Kent talk about it with you, about what it was like?

DM: Uh, I don't really remember.

TM: Okay. I'm just asking because his daughter Tammy had sent me a photo of Ed's headstone, and it shows that Navajo Bridge.

DM: Oh, really?

TM: Yeah. That's it. It just says Kent, and it's got the second bridge, it's got the crane out there on it. And there's a little gap between the two bridges, between the two halves.

DM: I wonder if that's what he wanted. He might have talked about it a lot, and that's what the kids did.

TM: It sounded like he really liked that job. And it sounds like y'all did.

DM: Yeah, it was unique.

TM: Very much so.

DM: The one in California I did, that was unique one, too.

TM: What was that one?

DM: Oakland Bay Bridge.

TM: When did you get on that job, Oakland Bay Bridge job?

DM: '09, I think.

TM: 2009?

DM: Yeah.

TM: That's an amazing bridge.

DM: Sure is. I was glad I went to do it.

TM: Absolutely amazing. So of all the bridges you built, what's the one that comes first to mind? Is it the Oakland Bay?

DM: It was probably the most challenging one. That's why I went out there, to tell you the truth.

TM: What was challenging about it?

DM: It ain't every day you lift 1,100-some tons, you know, in one piece.

TM: How many tons?

DM: Eleven hundred.

TM: Whoa! One piece?

DM: One piece. That was the first section of that tower coming out of the anchor bolts. Yeah, it was— It was like a challenge, so that's why I went, to tell you the truth.

TM: I don't doubt that one bit. Wow. Was that Traylor Brothers as well?

DM: No, that was American Bridge and Fluor. It was a joint venture, and I was working for American Bridge.

TM: Okay. How long were you on that job?

DM: Uh, when did I leave? I was there about three years.

TM: Wow. Was that first section of that tower, at 1,100 tons, was that the biggest and heaviest part of that bridge placement?

DM: Yeah, the first section of the towers, yeah. Four legs to that tower. First section, yeah, pretty damn heavy.

TM: Did any of the guys that were on the Navajo Bridge get in on that Oakland Bay Bridge except you?

DM: No.

TM: Okay. Three years out there.

DM: Yep. When I left, it was still going on, too.

TM: Oh, really?

DM: Yeah, I went back to Philadelphia and then up to New York.

TM: On different bridges?

DM: Yeah. I went back to California to get that Left Coast Lifter ready to come over to New York.

TM: I'm sorry. Run that past me again.

DM: We had that big water crane, the Left Coast Lifter. It was still in California and a job in New York bought it, so I went back to California to get it ready to come over to New York.

TM: How did you do that? Did you take it all apart or did you boat it around?

DM: They hauled it through the Panama Canal.

TM: Okay. Under the bridge that Ed and Lamar cut their teeth on. How cool is that? That was the Bridge of the Americas, huh?

DM: Uh-huh.

TM: That's pretty neat. How long did it take to get that lifter from California to New York?

DM: Shoot, I forget offhand.

TM: Some months, I suppose.

DM: I'll say it took about a month, you know, with all the stops and starts. I think it took them maybe a week to come through the canal. You know, you have to wait in line.

TM: Right. Did you get to go with the crane through the canal?

DM: Oh, no. I've been on them boat rides before. With Beasley, we'd load all the equipment up at Wickliffe and, you know, run everything to the job site. That's not a real fun ride.

TM: I suppose there's not much to do but sit there.

DM: Yeah, especially if you're using your own tugs, and you only make, like, six miles an hour, and you can see the same tree for, you know, two hours.

TM: Yeah. It's a long road around. David, is there anything else about that Navajo Bridge build that you remember that you wanna talk about?

DM: No. I mean, I enjoyed going out there to do it. Like I said, it's not every day you put a bridge over the Colorado River.

TM: That's right, and that is the start of the Grand Canyon.

DM: Yep, sure is.

TM: Nice. Well, with that, maybe this is a good place to wrap this interview up. What do you think?

DM: Alright. You got my number so you can call me back if you need to.

TM: I do, and I will. Hang on a second. I'm going to wrap this up, and then we'll chat for a little longer. So this will conclude Part 2 of our Grand Canyon oral history interview with David Meche. Today is Monday, August, 15, 2022. My name is Tom Martin. And David, thank you very much.

DM: You're welcome.