

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Ronnie McFarland (RF)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Growing up in Gore, OK, and apprentice ironworking Part 1

Date of Interview: July 14, 2022

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Susan Seibel

Date of Transcription: November 5, 2022

Transcription Reviewers: Dick Phaneuf, Tom Martin

Keys: Oklahoma, Gore, Muskogee, Stilwell antique store, Tahlequah, Pryor, livestock auctions, stockyards, beef cattle, Fin and Feather Resort, Veterinarian Gloyd Miller, Bang's disease, David Bailey, pro rodeos, the Okie 100 Bull Ride, Slim Henderson, union ironworker, Tulsa Local 584, Kenneth Halpain, Oklahoma City Local 48, Hubert Hornbeck, tools, Show Low, Oklahoma, hanging iron, raising gang, bolt-up crew, connectors, Wayne Johnson, Kenny Lee Runyon, John F. Beasley, Virgil Craft, Rick Peters, Bob Peters, Bridge of the Americas, Ed Kent, Lamar Kent, Mountain Home, Arkansas, cowboy, calves, chores, churning butter

TM: Today is Thursday. It's July 14, 2022. This is a Grand Canyon oral history with Ronnie McFarland.

RM: But I have been called Ronnie Mac since the 1st grade, so pretty much everybody nationwide just knows me as Ronnie Mac.

TM: Ronnie Mac. Okay. Do you go by Mac or is it full together Ronnie Mac?

RM: Just Ronnie Mac.

TM: Okay. Well, that's what I'm going to call you from here on out then. My name is Tom Martin. Ronnie Mac, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

RM: Yes, sir. You may.

TM: Thank you. Ronnie Mac, what year were you born?

RM: I was born in 1959.

TM: And do you know how your mom met your dad?

RM: I have no idea.

TM: Okay. Alright. And where did you grow up?

RM: Well, I was born in Exeter, California, but my parents moved back to Oklahoma where my mom was raised up when I was just little, like, two or three or so. So, I've been raised in Gore, Oklahoma. It's a small town of about 325 people.

TM: Wow.

RM: Thirty-two miles kind of southeast of Muskogee.

TM: Okay. What were your folks doing in California at the time? Do you know that?

RM: Well, I think they had ventured out that way—or my mom's mom and dad had moved out there, I guess, for work in the '50s, I guess, or something. And my dad was in the military when he met my mom.

TM: Okay. And then they headed back to Oklahoma from California just to—

RM: My dad was raised up around Mountain Home, Arkansas.

TM: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

RM: I got three brothers.

TM: Older? Younger?

RM: One older, two younger.

TM: Okay. And did you go to school there in Gore?

RM: Yep. Yes, I did.

TM: Up through high school?

RM: Yes.

TM: What were your folks doing in Gore when you were growing up?

RM: Well, my mom was just a homemaker when we was going to school, and then my dad was a construction carpenter.

TM: Was he a journeyman? Was he traveling with that?

RM: He didn't do any traveling. He just worked around home there.

TM: Growing up, did you guys— I'm assuming you spend a lot of time outside, walking the fields or were you— Did you guys do a—

RM: You had to work. When I was, you know, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10-years old, we had chores to do. My parents had planted a big garden, but it was up to me and my older brother to weed and take care of it. And we had chickens and cows and pigs and stuff, and I had to feed them.

TM: Okay. Cows are a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour, 365-days-a-year operation right there. How many did you have?

RM: Oh, we never had too many when I was growing up. You know, maybe 15 or 20 until I got, you know, like, up in high school. Then I started buying some cows.

TM: Okay. That's 15 or 20. That—

RM: Let me take that back. I got, like, a dollar a week allowance, and I would save my allowance up. And in the summertime when I was out of school, I'd go buy bottle calves at the sale, usually two or three calves, and then a sack of milk replacer was, like, \$4. I'd have to save my money up to buy a sack of feed and then that would last three calves about a month. Then in the wintertime after I sold the calves, I'd usually buy some pigs or whatever and fatten them up, and then, you know, sell them to people for butcher's calves. Then I'd take that money the next spring and then I'd buy more calves.

TM: Nice. Were you thinking then in high school that you might want to run either dairy cattle or run some sort of a ranching/farming thing?

RM: Oh, yeah. Hell, all I ever wanted to be from the time I could remember was to be a cowboy.

TM: Okay. And how did that work out?

RM: Probably still about as much a cowboy as anybody. I mean, I started mowing lawns in the summertime when I was 10 or 11 for 75 cents an hour. And from where my mom and dad lived at, I had to push that mower up a pretty steep gravel road for about a quarter of a mile to get to the paved road, and then another three-quarters of a mile. But once you got it up to the paved road, there was a bunch of homes up there around Fin and Feather Resort that a lot of retired people live in. And I'd just go up there and I'd just go door to door, asking if they need any yard work done. Of course, some of them would say no, and some of them would say yes, but—

TM: Nice.

RM: That's kind of how the work ethic started.

TM: Well, yeah, and it sounds like your folks were a big part of that.

RM: It was more motive to start working and making money, get paid something versus having to work all day in the garden for free.

TM: Got it. So, you were raising dairy cows and pigs. Were you raising chickens, as well?

RM: Oh, yeah. We had chickens.

TM: How many?

RM: Oh, I don't know. Probably 30.

TM: Okay. So, you had eggs to sell. You had chickens to sell.

RM: We never really sold any chickens. I mean, we'd sell eggs. People were stopped by and buying milk. People would stop by and buy butter. We would churn the butter.

TM: Alright. I was going to say, you're talking to a desert boy that knows zero about dairy cattle. But when you say butter, I think churning.

RM: Yes, and I'll backup and explain how that works.

TM: Thank you.

RM: All cattle will have a certain amount of butterfat in their milk. Beef cattle, not near as much as dairy cattle. And different dairy breeds have different levels of butterfat. So, a Jersey or a Guernsey have a lot more butterfat than what a Holstein or a Brown Swiss or some of them like that will. So, like, all the bigger dairies, commercial-type dairies, nowadays they like the Holstein cows because they produce the most milk. But anyway, we had one Guernsey cow and one Jersey cow. This is what we milked. So, I'd go out every morning when my daddy would get up to get ready to go to work and I'd go out and I'd let— Each one of them cows had a calf that we kept in a pen separate from them, and I'd let the calf nurse on one side, and I'd milk the other side.

TM: All right.

RM: So, out of the two cows, I'd still end up with a gallon of milk on a milk at night. Then you bring that milk in, and we'd strain it through a cloth to get any dust or hay particles or whatever because the cow's going to be switching their tails whenever you did all that. We just put it in the refrigerator and let it sit. In about a day's time all that butter fat will rise to the top. Well, you just reach down in there with a ladle, and you pull that butter fat off. We put it in another gallon jar. When you got, oh, half or three-quarters of a jar of that butter fat, well, then we would churn it. And my parents were real poor. The way we would churn it, you know, you just sent it out and let it get to room temperature. You just have to shake it in that gallon jug, and then every couple of minutes you'd have to crack the lid to let the air bleed off of the churning process. It would produce air. I guess it would be trapped inside the butter fat. Sometimes it would churn, you know, in 15 or 20 minutes. And other times you might have to shake that thing for an hour to get it to churn.

TM: Wow.

RM: Then as it churns, I mean, the butter has the color of butter, but it would just be kinda clumped and grouped up together in wads, you know, maybe the size of a tennis ball. Well, you'd dip them out and put it in a colander or strainer. You just take a spoon and just squeeze the milk and the byproduct waste out of it. Then if you had a butter mold, you'd put it in a mold or however you want to do it, and just let it chill in the fridge. Well, you'd add some salt to it and then, voilà, you have butter.

TM: Nice.

RM: I'll tell you another story on that.

TM: Yeah, please.

RM: I was probably eight or nine, and we had drove over to Mountain Home one weekend to visit my dad's family: his mom and uncles and, you know, brothers and sisters and stuff like that. On the way back, the way we would go, we'd go up to Stilwell, Oklahoma, then cut the back roads over toward Prairie Grove, into Fayetteville, and then a series of other little towns to get up to Mountain Home. But always on the way back home on Sunday there was an antique store at Stilwell, and we'd always stop and go in there and look around. And sometimes my parents would buy something, but most times we'd just look. But we was in there one day, and I seen this gallon jug high up on the shelf. And it had a wooden paddle in it and a hand crank. And I asked the guy in front of the store, "What is that?" He goes, "Well, that's a butter churn." I'm just like, "Okay, how much you want for it." He goes, "\$4." Well, I reached in my pocket, and I had \$4. I said I'm just going to buy that. And all the way home, all I heard out of my parents was "I can't believe you wasted \$4 on that butter churn. We'd been churning butter for years just fine the way we are." I'm like, "Yeah, we?"

So, anyway, I bought it and I put up with the ridicule out of them. But anyway, the next time it was time to churn, I put it in that churn I bought, and within 10 minutes we've got butter. I'm done. And I was like, "That was money well spent." So, then a few months later we'd make another one of those trips. We usually go about twice a year. We stopped in that same store again, and the guy had a butter mold. There ain't no telling how old this butter mold was, but I mean it had the little dovetail notch corners. I mean, it was handcrafted and—

TM: So, this was a wooden mold.

RM: Yeah. And I bought it for a dollar. It was a one-pound mold.

TM: So, about the size of two fists?

RM: Yeah, it was probably 2, maybe 2 1/2 inches wide, probably 2 1/2 inches tall, and about 4 inches long.

TM: Okay. What had you been using?

RM: Oh, they would just, like, put it in a small bowl. Once it got hard, you could just turn the bowl upside down and, you know, the butter was rigid enough that, you know, then they'd just wrapped it up in the bowl and leave it in the refrigerator.

TM: Right. Okay. So now you had a mold.

RM: And of course, I never got none of the milk or egg or butter money, but once people started buying it out of that one-pound mold, then everybody wanted butter. And everybody would compliment about, you know, that is so neat, you know. I guess none of them had been around or had access to a butter mold.

TM: Okay. So, at this point now, are you looking to bring in more cows? If you've got more people asking for more butter and more milk—

RM: No. No, I didn't want to get into any more cows, not milking cows. I wanted to buy beef cattle.

TM: Was the money to be made in beef cattle or was it to be made in dairy?

RM: No, it was— To me, it was more about the beef cattle. I didn't have to milk them. And they would raise the calf, and then I could sell the calf.

TM: Okay.

RM: So, then by the time I was about 11 or 12, I started working at a— There was a resort, Fin and Feather Resort, and they had, you know, cabins people would rent. And they raised all their own beef. But anyway, I would work, you know, mowing around the cabins for them, helping pick up the trash, and make the garbage run. And when they baled hay, I would haul hay for them. I did that up until I was about, I don't know, 15 1/2 or so. And then I started working at the livestock auctions. There was one Tahlequah on Saturdays that I'd work at. And in the summertime, I would work at Muskogee stockyards, and the same people owned Pryor. So, I'd work Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday at Muskogee and Pryor. And then sometimes I'd work Thursday and Friday back at Muskogee, cleaning up and getting ready for the next sale. And then Saturday I'd work at Tahlequah sale barn. And the minimum wage back then was, like, \$1.60 an hour.

TM: Hey, Ronnie Mac, at the Many Feather Resort—

RM: No. It's Fin and Feather. The Fin and Feather Resort.

TM: Sorry. Fin and Feather.

RM: Yep.

TM: Got it. Were you working there just the summers? Or were you trying to work there weekends during school? How was that all working out?

RM: I usually worked a couple hours after school and then on Saturdays.

TM: Okay. And what were they paying you?

RM: \$2 an hour.

TM: Whoa! That was better than the livestock auction work.

RM: Yeah, but the livestock auction was a whole lot more fun.

TM: Was it? Why?

RM: Well, I just liked being around cattle and the sale. I just liked it better.

TM: Okay. Alright. Well, I'd imagine there would be a lot more people there and maybe a lot more action than the resort. So, you were 13, 14. Did you actually do any auction work? Did you work as an auctioneer?

RM: No sir. I've worked at about every position in a livestock auction except being the auctioneer. I've worked in the sale ring. I've run the scales, weighing cattle after they were sold. I've worked on both sides, running them into the ringside and then working in the penning alley on the penning side after they sold. Checking them in when the farmers and ranchers would bring them into sell and load them out on the semis when the sale was over. I mean, I've done everything there is to do at one except auction.

TM: And how much would the auction company take? What kind of percentage for, you know, a rancher would come in with cattle or a farmer come in with dairy cows?

RM: Most of that hasn't change a whole lot through the years. It was like 3% then, and most of them are maybe 3.75% now. So even though the cattle today are bringing more money than they did in the early '70s, but the percentage hadn't really changed.

TM: Right. Right. Costs have all gone up for everybody everywhere, so—

RM: Yeah, but the percentage is still going to be the same. I mean, if you got by on 3% of an animal that brought \$150 in 1974, well, then you can get by on 3% of an animal that brings \$800 in 2022. And there's been a few auction barns that try to—got greedy, raised their commission rates up to where people quit using them.

TM: Yeah, I'll bet.

RM: And then they wondered why—what happened to their business. I said, "Well, you just got greedy."

TM: That's right. That's right. So, did you graduate from high school there in Gore?

RM: Yes, I did.

TM: What year was that?

RM: 1977.

TM: Okay. So, you were 18 years old?

RM: Yep.

TM: So, some kids, when they grow up, their parents are, like, "When you go to college—" And other kids, when they grow up, college is never talked about.

RM: Well, my parents couldn't afford college.

TM: But sometimes, you know, you can do a scholarship for football or athletic kind of stuff, or were you not even thinking about it?

RM: I wasn't even thinking about it. Gloyd Miller was the vet that worked the Muskogee stockyards, and he tried and begged me to go to college. And he was going to sponsor me to be an animal vet.

TM: Wow.

RM: I'm just, like, Gloyd, I don't like school that well and I sure don't wanna spend 12 years to become a vet when, like, right now I could be riding bulls, chasing girls, having fun. And now that I'm older, I might wished I had the reconsidered that offer, but that's still an awful lot of school to be willing to go through to become a veterinarian.

TM: But he must have seen something in you to offer to put you through school.

RM: Of course, I mean, I would help him test all the cows at Muskogee sale. And what you have to do is you'd have to run them through the head gate, see how old they are, draw a vial of blood out of them so we could test to make sure they didn't have what's called Bang's disease. And it was a big thing back in the '60s, early '70s. Then they come up with a calfhood vaccination that they started using in the late '70s, early '80s, and now it's pretty much a thing of the past. It's got a long doctor-type name. The common people just shortened up to Bangs. I'd have to go back and do some research to find out just exactly what the medical— But anyway, what the disease does, it makes a cow not carry a calve to full term. She will abort it when she's about three or four months along.

TM: Oh, wow. Okay.

RM: But anyway, I helped Gloyd do all that stuff, and I guess he liked my work ethic. I wasn't scared to get shit throwed all over me or, you know, get in the pen with the bunch of mean, wild cattle and take care of them.

TM: Nice. And when did you get into bull riding?

RM: I started bull riding about 1976.

TM: There in Gore or in Muskogee?

RM: In Tahlequah. It was a nearby town. David Bailey and his mom were co-owners in the Muskogee stockyards and the Pryor livestock auction. But David was also a big-time rodeo stock contractor, so I knew him from working around the barns there. Back then, you know, he'd buy any bull that he thought looked like it might buck. He'd gather them bulls up, and on Sunday we'd go to the ring there in Tahlequah, and he'd say, "Buck them." And that's how I got started riding. I'd get on the green bulls and see what they'd do.

TM: What was the pay for that?

RM: Oh, you did it for free.

TM: Okay. It sounds like a good way to make a fast trip to the ground.

RM: No, when I first started rodeoing, I mean, going to the pro rodeos to compete with the big guys, I did real good my first two years. Never got hurt or nothing. And then in October of '78, I was ironworking, but I still rodeoed on the weekends. And I'd entered a rodeo there in Muskogee they used to have every end of October, 1st of November, called the Okie 100 Bull Ride. That was the early stage set of what's, like, the PBR nowadays. But that was like the biggest bull ride that they've ever put on at the time. Anyway, I had entered that, and I drew a bull that I'd had before, and I knew I could win on him. Well, I nodded my head, and the bull comes out there about two or three real high jumps, kind of like a bucket horse should do. And then he just turned back to the left and went to spinning. And I made a qualified ride. And I was a little cocky, a little big for my britches. And I had this habit of when the buzzer would ring, I would stay on the bull for an extra second or so, and I'd kinda get in time with him, and I would slide back on his hind quarters, and as he bucked up, it would, like, throw me out there and make like a flying dismount.

TM: So, you could do a like a somersault and land on your feet.

RM: Well, I wouldn't do a somersault, but I'd just stay vertical and land on my feet most of the time. This particular night I miscalculated slightly. Instead of landing on my feet, I landed on my side. Well, I go to rollover to get up, and the bull is—his head is right against my head. He just shoves me down. Well, his whole body is still up in the air, and when his front foot comes down, it lands on my left knee.

TM: Oops.

RM: And he hit and turns. Well, it goes on, and I mean, it broke the bone above and below the knee right there in the knee joint.

TM: Wow. So, that's your femur and your tibia. The big bone above and the big bone below.

RM: See, well, I ended up having to have it operated on, and that had me sidelined for a couple of months.

TM: Let's back up a minute because you mentioned that by this time—and this is in 1978—so you're 28 now, 29.

RM: No, I'm not—

TM: I'm sorry.

RM: I'm, like, 19.

TM: I'm messing up here. You were born in '59. Okay, that's right. I'm goofing up here badly. Okay, 19. But you already mentioned you'd done a little bit of ironworking.

RM: I started ironworking June 6, 1977.

TM: How did you start that job? How did that come about?

RM: Well, there was a guy that lived there in Gore—Slim Henderson—and I went to school with his daughters. He had one daughter that was a grade ahead of me, Terry—she's actually my banker to this day—and a daughter a grade below me, Kristi. Well, I mean, I knew him my whole life. And I'd hauled some hay for him, and he asked me what I was going to do after I got out of high school. I said, "Well, I don't know. I'd kind of like, you know, maybe get into construction or something. But I don't want to be a carpenter or a cement finisher. I'd rather do something different." He got to showing me some pictures because he's a union ironworker. So, he had me go up to the union hall in Tulsa, Local 584, and I tried to get in the apprenticeship program up there.

At that particular time the business agent was Kenneth Halpain. Well, Kenneth Halpain lived in Hulbert, Oklahoma, which is a little, old, small town west of Tahlequah. And about everybody that lives in Hulbert is a union ironworker and most of them are tower hands and work on communication towers and stuff like that. Well, if you wasn't kin to Halpain or live in Hulbert, he wasn't going to let you in Local 584. And I tried three or four weeks. You know, I'd drive up there and try to get in, and he wouldn't even talk to me. I stop by Slim's house there one weekend, and he asked me how it was going. I said, "Well I've been up there. I'm trying to get into the apprenticeship program, but he won't even talk to me." And Slim was out of Local 48 there in Oklahoma City. He's like, "Come up to the city Monday." Hubert Hornbeck was the business agent at the time. He goes, "I'll bet you we can get you in up there." So, I drive up there Monday morning, you know, green high-school kid. Don't know woke from siccum. I walk in there and introduce myself to him. He's like, "Slim says you want to be an ironworker." I said, "Well, I'd like to try. I don't know whether I'd be any good at it, but I'd like to give it a try." He said, "Well, let me think about it. I'll be in touch." I said, "Okay."

I leave the union hall, and that was on a Monday, so I drive over by Oklahoma National Stockyards, which is the biggest livestock auction in the world now, just to watch the cattle sale for, you know, a couple hours or so. Then I'd drive back to Gore. Back then, the speed limit was 55 because of the Jimmy Carter years, so it would take me four hours to make that 200-mile trip. Anyway, I get back home, and by the time I got back to mom and dad's house, Hubert had called, told me to come on up. So, I drove back up there the next morning, and he gets me all signed up in the union. And I had to pay, I forget, \$175 or something to get started in the program. He gave me a list of tools that I'd need to go get, so I went to a little contractor supply about quarter of a mile from the union hall. I got me everything that was on that list, and I come back to the hall. He looked my belt over. He's like, "Well, you know you're gonna stand out like a sore thumb with all the new tools." I said, "Well, I'm going to stand out anyway because I gotta start somewhere." So anyway, he sends me out to a job.

TM: Hey, Ronnie Mac. Hang on a second here. I'm curious to know, what do you remember was on that list of things to get?

RM: Well, a 25-foot tape measure, a 12-inch crescent wrench, a 7/8 spud wrench, and a 3/4 spud wrench. That was for the size of bolts. They were for the jaw. It's 1 7/16-inch for a 7/8, and 1 3/4-inch for a 3/4 bolt.

TM: A spud wrench. Does that have a wrench on one end and goes down to a tapered point on the other? What is a spud wrench?

RM: Yeah, that is it. Two bull pins, two bolt bags, a tool belt, and a 6-pound beater, sledgehammer. We call them beaters in the ironworking business.

TM: All right. And a belt to hook all that stuff on.

RM: Yep.

TM: Hard hat? Was that part of the deal or was that—

RM: Yeah, I had to get a hard hat too. But that was it. I mean, there was no safety harnesses back then, no safety glass issues. I mean, they'd give you goggles or a faceshield if you was gonna be grinding or chipping, but for just normal work—

TM: Did they sell you a pair of gloves?

RM: Negative. The only time I wear gloves even to this day is in the wintertime when it gets so cold I have to. And a lot of companies are trying to make it mandatory where you have to have gloves to cut down on hand injuries. But me being in supervision, I don't wear them unless I need them.

TM: Right. Okay. Alright, so you got all this stuff, and it's all shiny new. I'm thinking that outlay right there might have been close to \$100. What do you get for that? More, maybe.

RM: I think it was, like, \$87 for everything back then. If you had to do it now, you'd probably spent \$300 or \$400.

TM: Well, you've got about \$250 in the game now. This is getting expensive.

RM: Well, I was a first-period apprentice, so the pay for a first-period apprentice in 1977 was \$4.05 an hour. And I thought, damn, I'll never see another poor day. Anyway, so he sends me out to this job, and they're doing precast. It's a tilt-up job. They're using precast panels but they're making a VoTech school with it. Of course, I mean, I don't know nothing, and the guy there is sending me back and forth, here and there, anyway. I worked there for probably, I guess, two months. And we were about finished, and the guy running the job, he's like, "Would you be interested in going—?" The company had, you know, several jobs around the city. He said, "Would you be interested in going over towards Yukon?" They'd had a little addition on the power plant. I said, "No, I don't care. I'll go over there." So, I went to that other job there on that power plant, and really the first structural steel I'd been around. And I'm watching the guys, and they can climb the columns and walk the beams, and I'm like, that's pretty cool. But they had me on the ground. I'd go get bolts for guys and tie them to a rope, and they'd pull them up. You know, I'd stack up 4x's after the raising gang to set beams. For about two weeks I just did grunt work. And then they needed some help bolting up, so then I went up on the iron and started bolting up. I did that for, oh, probably six months or so and then finished that job.

TM: Okay, hang on a second. My questions are building up here, so—

RM: I'm giving you more history about me. We should be talking about the bridge.

TM: We're getting there. We're getting there. The Navajo Bridge is coming, but how you got to get there is important. What's a first-period apprentice?

RM: Well, you know, back then they had four levels of apprenticeship. So, like, the first six months you're the first-period apprentice, which is what I've kind of referred to as, you know, just a green or a virgin apprentice. You don't know nothing. You're there to learn. And then you go to second-period apprentice and then third and fourth. And nowadays they've got it where there's eight periods to it. And I argued all the time. I said, "Well, we had better hands when the apprenticeship program was only four periods, and you could get through it in two years. Nowadays you drag it out over four years, and the guys that wanna learn are gonna learn everything they need to know to be a journeyman in two. And the ones that take four years, they're just as dumb after four years as they were the day they started."

TM: Fair enough. Okay, so that kind of makes sense then in that time frame you mentioned, going up on the iron to bolt up. You got up there pretty fast. You were still in your first six months. Can you then describe for me bolting up? How does that— What does that entail?

RM: Well, what bolting up entails is when the raising gang, which that's the crew that hangs the iron. And what they'll do is they'll put it in place. They'll put two to four to six bolts, depending on how heavy the pieces is. Let's just say they put two bolts in each end, and they cut loose and just keep hanging. Well, the bolt-up crew comes behind them and puts all the bolts in.

TM: Which might be how many per joint? I'm thinking—

RM: Well, I mean, it can be anywhere from four bolts to 50 bolts, depending on the iron and how big it was.

TM: Right. And these are gonna be half-inch diameter bolts, roughly.

RM: Most of the time, they were, like— They're either going to be $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch diameter, $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch diameter, or 1-inch diameter.

TM: Okay. And in theory, you'd have to be careful not to drop those things 'cause somebody down on the ground wouldn't have a good day if that happened.

RM: Well, obviously, you didn't want to drop anything because then you'd have to go back down and get it. You sure didn't wanna drop any of your tools.

TM: Right. And so, one of the things that would have been going on up there was, I'm assuming, there wasn't a lot of safety— But again, that's an assumption on my part, which may be very wrong, as far as safety belts are concerned, that kind of stuff.

RM: Oh, no. This is all back before all this safety come to be. There was no safety. Your safety was common sense and knowing that if you messed up, you was going to fall and die. That was your safety.

TM: All right. And I'm putting this back to your knee. How did that knee heal up for you?

RM: It's healed up okay. Of course, it was pretty tender for the first six months, but it healed up alright.

TM: Okay, because I'm thinking you need your balance and agility. Now, you've got that. I mean, you're riding bulls, and you've worked out a fun dismount, so you've got, you know, you're pretty agile. I think that would come in handy.

RM: Yeah, when I first broke it, and they operated on it, the doctor said, "Well, you're probably gonna have a limp for the rest of your life," and I think a lot of that was a mental deal. But I refused to limp. I mean, I didn't have a choice, you know, when they first took the cast off. But I would force myself to walk where I wouldn't limp just to prove them wrong.

TM: Yeah. Good. And this was— When you got to your first bolt-up job, that's in Utah?

RM: No, I was still in Oklahoma City.

TM: Oh, I thought that was on the power plant. I got confused.

RM: No. It was, but it was there west of Oklahoma City.

TM: Oh, okay. I don't know how I got Utah wrapped up in this.

RM: We'll get to Utah later on. It ain't time for Utah yet.

TM: Okay. Alright. So, how high did you go on that first bolt-up job?

RM: Uh, 250 feet. That was as tall as the boiler was.

TM: That's a world away. That's a long ways up there.

RM: And they was up probably 50 feet when I started. The first three or four days up on the iron, you could tell I was green, but it didn't take me long to adjust to it.

TM: Okay. So, I'm thinking the bolt-up crew is going to put in, as you say, four to six bolts. Would everything line up easily, or would you have to really work at it to get your bolts—?

RM: You'd have to work at it. That's what you needed the two bull pins for. And a bull pin is just like the end of a spud. It starts out about, you know, 7/8-inch diameter at the big end and down to nothing. And it'll be 8-inches long. Well, you'd stick it down in there and get it started in the hole and drive in there with your beater, line the holes up to where you could get the bolts in.

TM: And then you'd have to knock that out, and you'd have one hole left, and you'd bolt it up, and you're moving on.

RM: Yep.

TM: Did you have air hammers for this? Or were you doing this all manual?

RM: Well, when we just bolted up, we'd just do it manually. Just snug them up, then we would come back once we had everything plumbed up and then tighten the bolts with an air impact.

TM: And then plumbing up, that must have been— I mean, 25-foot tape, I'm thinking that might have been a bit short for something like that, but it might have worked. I don't know.

RM: The tape measure would just be, like, if you had to measure a piece of decking to cut it to fit around the column or find centers of beams, you know, to mark centers to rig them up where they come up level. Tape is just for that. Measuring bolts, make sure you got the right size bolts.

TM: Okay, and then how would you— You've got this structure 200-feet high, 250-feet high in air. How would you plumb that up as you went?

RM: Well, when we'd plumb it up, it's in tiers. So, say your columns are 50-feet long. Well, you'd hang that first 50 feet, and then you'd put steel cables from column to column, making an X. Then you'd have a turnbuckle on each end of it down at the bottom where you could get up on one or whatever to pull it to where it was plumb. Then you'd set up a transit to look in through there to make sure the building was plumbed. And then once you got it plumb, then you'd go up there and tighten the bolts and then grout the bottom of the base plates. And then you'd hang the next tier, do the same thing. Of course, it was tied in. You'd hang your plumb cables, get it plumbed up and tighten all the bolts and just keep jumping up as you went up.

TM: Okay. So, you mentioned grouting. I'm assuming once you plumb things up, there might be a gap somewhere.

RM: Well, you set all those columns on shim packs. So, say they poured the footer, and they got anchor bolts cast in the concrete.

TM: This is at the ground.

RM: Yes. And every structural engineer of record, he'll have his own preference. And back then, most of the time, they wanted at least an inch of grout. Nowadays, most of them want three to four inches of grout for whatever reason. I don't know. But it's their stamp and their seal on it, so you gotta give them what they ask for. So, you'd put shim packs down there at the top of the concrete for your column to set on. The shim packs would hold the column to the right elevation, and then they would grout just so when the building was loaded, you had equal pressure pushing down on the footer.

TM: Makes sense. Okay.

RM: Or otherwise, you could just have the shim pack, you'd be point loading the footer. Under extreme conditions, it could bust the footer out.

TM: Right. So, if the steel was just sitting on the shim packs, it wouldn't be loading the footer completely. It would—

RM: Evenly.

TM: Right. It would be point loading it. Okay. And how long were you on that job?

RM: Oh, probably about 6 months.

TM: Okay, and that was in Oklahoma?

RM: Yes.

TM: Okay. Two-hundred and fifty feet. That's up there a ways.

RM: And then I left that power plant and went to work at a power plant at Show Low, Oklahoma, which was actually out of Local 584's jurisdiction. They were needing help, and they had called our hall there in Oklahoma City, asking if we had anybody available. And I don't know, there was probably 20 of us went over there and went to work on that. And I remember walking into that Tulsa hall to clear in, and there's that Kenneth Halpain. He says, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm here to take one of them calls for that powerhouse there at Show Low." He's like, "Didn't you try to get in the program?" I said, "I did, and you didn't give me the time of day, so I went to Oklahoma City and got in the program up there."

TM: Were you still in your apprenticeship at that time?

RM: Oh, yeah.

TM: Were you in Level 3 by then?

RM: Yes.

TM: Okay. And what did he say?

RM: He just handed me the referral, and I went out there and went to work.

TM: Nice. Nice. Very good.

RM: I was hooking on in the raising gang, and that's the guy that puts the chokers on the beams and hooks them to the crane for the crane to hoist them up there and put them into place.

TM: Okay. So, you're not bolting anymore. Now you're hooking on. So, the steel comes in, I'm assuming, on a semi.

RM: Yes.

TM: And then does it get, like, fork-lifted off the ground?

RM: Well, we do it nowadays, but back then we'd just unload it with the crane. We had to take bigger chokers, and we'd choke around a bundle of beams. There might be anywhere from

three to a dozen beams, depending on how heavy they were. We'd just put big chokers around it, pick them up, swing them off to the side, and land them on 4x's. Once we got the truck unloaded, we'd take our street hooks off that were used to unload it with, and we'd put what's called shake-out hooks on there. And they just got a hook on the end that comes to a point that you can stick in the bolt holes or catch the top flange of the beams to roll them all up workways.

TM: So, those are called shake-out hooks. Hang on a second. Let me make sure I figure this out because there's a— At the bottom of the first Navajo Bridge, on the slope on the Fredonia side, there's a chain. That chain has two of these hooks on the end of each end of that chain and ring in the middle. And so, is that the kind of thing you're talking about?

RM: It's similar. I'll have to round up a picture of a shake-out hook, or I'll take one tomorrow at work and then send it to you.

TM: Okay. Thank you. And so, you've got this hook that comes to a point, like you say. You can get it through a bolt hole. And then would it be on a steel cable that would go to a similar thing on the other end? Or would it go to a loop?

RM: It would be— The hook would be attached to a steel cable. Those hooks on the neck could be anywhere from, you know, 20- to 40-feet long, and they would hook up to the ball on the crane. And he would lift them up and get them turned up workways. And then we'd set them back down before we could come back when we're ready to hang it and put chokers around it in the center to hoist it up into place.

TM: Okay. So, would you have a low crane, like a yard crane? And then you'd have a—

RM: No, back then we just used the crane we was hanging iron with.

TM: Okay. And was that— Was hooking on, was that a step up from the bolting crew?

RM: Well, to me it was. A lot of guys, you know, kind of pride themselves in being in the raising gang because that's like the elite of the elite if you're in a raising gang. Bolt-up crew is, like, the next level down. So, if you put it in military terms, the raising gang would be like the Marine Corp, then the bolt-up crew would be like the Army, and then the decking and the detail crew would be kinda like the Air Force. I mean, just—

TM: Just working that analogy, yeah. So, hooking up. Were you still making \$4 an hour or had that price gone up a bit?

RM: At that time, I was up to, I wanna say, right around \$8.

TM: Whoa. Okay.

RM: The scale at that time was, like, \$9.75, so I was making about \$1.50, \$1.75 less than journeyman pay. And I had hooked on for probably a month on that job, and we come into work one Monday morning, and we had three connectors that would work up in the air hanging the iron. Well, all three of the connectors didn't show up.

TM: Okay. So now, here's a new term that I don't know what that means. What's a connector?

RM: A connector is the guy that climbs the column, grabs the beam with the crane hoisted up there, gets it into place, spuds a hole, gets the two bolts in it to where they can cut loose from the crane.

TM: Okay. Alright.

RM: The three connectors didn't show up, so Wayne Johnson was pushing the raising gang. He was the foreman and he asked me and another guy, Kenny Lee Runyon [phonetic spelling], who was an apprentice also, if we'd go up and connect.

TM: Okay. Had you guys done that before?

RM: No. Neither one of us had. We both said, "Well, we'll give it a try, but we've never connected before. We just wanted you to know that before you start yelling and raising hell with us 'cause—

TM: Fair enough.

RM: Ass chewings were free back then, and you got them often, but they make good ironworkers out of you.

TM: Yes, sir.

RM: So, anyway, me and Kenny, we go up there and we start hanging iron.

TM: Had you worked with Kenny before?

RM: No, that was the first time me and Kenny work together. So, both of us had never connected before but we got through that day and our piece count was only about 10 off of what the other guys had done, and I thought that was pretty good for two green horns.

TM: Wow. And what did Wayne think?

RM: He thought we did alright. He wouldn't sugarcoat anything. He said, "Y'all still got a lot to learn but at least you tried. That's all I can ask for." So, we show up to next day, the raising gang ain't there again, so we go up and connect. Well, that particular day, our piece count was higher than the main raising gang.

TM: Oops.

RM: So, we show up the third day. Well, the raising gang shows up. I thought, well, here we go. We're going to be back in the bolt-up crew or back hooking on or whatever. Everybody's around the gang boss. And, of course, the guys who missed two days of work, they kind of got their head tucked between their legs, you know, knowing that they screwed up. Wayne comes over. He said, "Y'all can gather y'all's shit and hit the road." "Well, who's gonna hang your iron?" Wayne looks at me and Kenny and goes, "Them two boys right there been hanging the last two

days and their piece count's higher than y'all's. I'd rather have them. At least they show up every day and listen when I tell them something."

TM: Nice.

RM: So, those guys got mad, and they got all butt hurt. You know, some of them wanted to fight. But we went up there and went back to hanging iron. And when we got that building set out, I went back to Oklahoma City, and Beasley was doing what was called a seed house.

TM: Okay, hang on a second. So, tell me about Beasley. Who are they and what did they do? Because I think they're gonna play a big role in the future here of this history.

RM: Oh, yeah. That company was founded in, like, the early '40s. I wanna say, like, 1941 by John F. Beasley in Muskogee, Oklahoma. That's where they started. And how he got his start in the steel erection was he was just, like, a general contractor and he had built three cotton gins in Webbers Falls, which was right across the river from Gore where I was raised at. Well, they had a flood in '42, and it washed about half of the bridge out that carried Highway 64 from Gore over to wherever it went on to Warner and Checotah, Muskogee, and then points west. This is back before any interstates, you know.

TM: Right.

RM: But anyway, somewhere or another, John talked them into letting him build the bridge back. And that's how he got into the steel erection business.

TM: In bridges. Or was he doing structures and towers and the whole deal, or was he just bridges?

RM: He did everything. At one time, even up in to the mid '60s, he was the largest independently owned construction company in the United States.

TM: Wow. Wow. Did you get a chance to meet John?

RM: Yes, I did.

TM: What do you remember about him?

RM: He was a no-nonsense, direct, to the point— But if he liked you, he liked you. If he didn't like you, you knew it. The first time I met him, and this is going to go a little bit later on down the road here. But anyway, I went back to Oklahoma City and Beasley was doing this seed house, which is just a metal structure, super large barn that they store grain in. Well, and I had heard of Beasley, and they had kind of a bad rap. Everybody called them the Killer Bees.

TM: Oh, wow. That doesn't bode well.

RM: Well, most of the people that started those rumors had never worked for them because they wasn't worth a shit and they wouldn't last anyway.

TM: Okay. Fair enough.

RM: But anyway, I said, "I'll go out there and work for him. I ain't scared." So, I go out there, and Virgil Craft [phonetic] was the guy running the job. And I introduced myself to him, and he takes me over and introduces me to Rick Peters, which is Bob Peter's boy, and Bob worked on the bridge down in Panama.

TM: Okay. So, this is the Bridge of the Americas over the Panama Canal.

RM: Yes. So. Rick's dad, Bob, worked on that bridge, so that's how I met Rick.

TM: Okay, and that Bridge over the Americas is where Ed Kent and his brother Lamar worked.

RM: Yes, and Bob was down there with him.

TM: Okay. Alright. So, we're starting to lay out the connections here.

RM: Yep. Starting to build the road map.

TM: Very good. So, Ronnie Mac, we have been yik-yaking now quite happily for a little over an hour, and this might be—

RM: We ain't even scratched the surface yet. We didn't even get to the good stuff.

TM: I'm telling you I'm thrilled. I am thrilled. This sounds like your introduction to Beasley sounds like a good place to put a comma in this oral history series.

RM: Okay.

TM: Because I'm going to want to know all about that job there, putting up that super large barn for Beasley. And you mentioned Rick Peters, so this just sounds like a good place to, like I say, put a comma here. Thinking about what we just talked about already, is there anything else in that ground that we've covered that you want to add that I didn't ask, or you were thinking about that should go in there?

RM: I don't think so. I like to keep it simple, not getting bogged down in too many what I call really unnecessary details.

TM: Fair enough.

RM: Kind of like the *Reader's Digest* version.

TM: That's it. Sign me up. Good. But whenever we stopped like this, I always look back in the rearview mirror and make sure we didn't miss anything, certainly of importance, back there. Okay. Well, with that, tell you what, let's wrap up this Part 1 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Ronnie Mac. Today is Thursday, July 14, 2022. My name is Tom Martin. And Ronnie Mac, thank you so very, very much.

RM: Well, you're very welcome.