

**Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society**

**Interviewee:** Ronnie "Mac" McFarland (RM)

**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)

**Subject:** Ronnie Mac reviews his various ironworking jobs.

Part 2

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**Keys:** John F. Beasley Construction Co., Rick Peters, Kenny Joe Runyon, Dallas, Placid Oil Tower, Thanksgiving Tower, Ed Kent, Lamar Kent, Jerry Kent, Kenny Upton, Ed Cross, Mountain Home, Arkansas, Norfolk Lake, AEP Building, ARCO Tower, running the phones, guy derrick, booming up, stiff-leg derrick, barge, spuds, tower cranes, InterFirst Plaza, topping out, upside down job, Bill Landfair, Ronnie Mac dollars, lums, Frank Williams, Traylor Brothers, J. Rollins, being ornery

TM: Today is Thursday, July 21, 2022. This is Part 2 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Ronnie McFarland, and Ronnie goes by Ronnie Mac. Good evening, Ronnie Mac. How are you today?

RM: I'm good. How about yourself?

TM: I'm good. Thank you for asking. Ronnie Mac, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

RM: Yes.

TM: Thank you. Last time we left off in 1979, I think, with your first job working for the John F. Beasley Construction Company with a man named Rick Peters on the seed house in Oklahoma City. Can you pick that story up?

RM: Yes. We were wrapping that project up. And Virgil Rap [phonetic] was the superintendent running the job, and he asked me if I wanted to go to work out of state for Beasley. I said, "Well, what have you got? He said, well, they had 29-story high rise going in Cincinnati.

TM: Wow.

RM: I asked what it paid, and he got all the particulars. At the time, there in Oklahoma City, I was making, like, I think it was, like, \$9.35 an hour. And the scale in Cincinnati was higher so that was \$15 something, so that was a pretty good bump. And it was gonna pay \$125 a week subsistence. So I was like, "Sure, I'll go." So I went to Cincinnati. A guy by the name of Kenny Joe Runyon was running that job. And I spent probably the next 10, 11, 12 years mainly working for him. Whenever it would get slow, they would send me to, like, Dallas on a Beasley job, or I'd go to a bridge job somewhere. They'd send me somewhere to keep me busy, but I worked a lot up in Ohio throughout the '80s up until about '91 or so.

TM: Can you talk me through a couple of the more interesting jobs you did in that 10-year time period?

RM: Oh, God. That list is pretty long. Well, let's see. I did that 29-story in Cincinnati, right downtown. And when we finished it, there was going to be, like, a two-month lull before Kenny's next job, and it was up in Toledo. Then we had a 50-story going in Dallas called Placid Oil at the time. It's called Thanksgiving Tower now. And they needed help down there, so I ended up going to Dallas and working on that.

TM: What were you— What was your job there with them? What were you doing?

RM: In Dallas?

TM: Yeah.

RM: I did everything. Whatever crew was shorthanded, that's what I did. One day I'd lay deck, and the next day I'd bolt up. The next day I hooked on. The next day I'd connect. It's just like, you know, if somebody was missing, I'd just fill in the void. It didn't matter.

TM: Okay. Nice.

RM: We finished that, we topped that building out, oh, in May of '81. And then they had two bridge jobs going. Both of them was up in Illinois. One was in Peoria, and the other one was in Moline. Ed Kent was on one of them. Lamar, Ed's brother, was on the other.

TM: Okay.

RM: And I was going to go up there to Ed, but they had river flooding or something and they was kind of shut down. And then they had a 31-story office building in Columbus that I was supposed to go to, but they couldn't get the foundations in in time so there was a lull in there. And the business agent out of Oklahoma City, he knew I was home, and he called and told me about a bridge job over in Mountain Home, Arkansas. I called that superintendent, who's Kenny Upton, and he was having a hard time getting help because he was out of the Little Rock Local, and Mountain Home's a pretty good drive from Little Rock. And it was a big girder bridge, bigger than the one I just got here. It had big girders on it. It went across the Norfolk Lake, so the bridge is over a mile long.

TM: Wow.

RM: And I ended up going up there and working on that bridge from right before probably about the 1st of June until the middle of October. And then they were ready at Columbus. Then I went up there and connected on that AEP Building.

TM: So, this was in October 1981.

RM: Yeah.

TM: Okay.

RM: And we topped that building out in April of '82. And then I had to have my knee operated on because of a bull ride wreck, so I went home and had my knee operated on. And I was home, I guess, about two weeks, and W.D. Whitaker, who was the superintendent for Beasley in Dallas. He had a lot of work going on, and he called me to come down there on one of their projects. So, I went to Dallas and was working on the ARCO Tower for Atlantic Richfield Oil Company. And they was up about 25 floors when I got there. So I topped that building out. I was running the phones for one of the derricks.

TM: So, hang on a second. Now I've got a bunch of questions. Let's go back a second. You had already had knee surgery from the time when that bull stepped on your knee.

RM: Yeah, but that was number two.

TM: Okay. And then I want to go back a little. You mentioned Ed Kent and his brother, Lamar, were working on two bridges in Illinois.

RM: Yeah.

TM: Had you worked for them?

RM: I hadn't work for either one of them. I had met Lamar. He come through Dallas one time. He come out by the job, and Whit brought him around, and I was introduced to him. Of course, my hands ain't real big, but Lamar has what I call grizzly bear hands, these big, old, monster big hands. You know, he shook my hand and wrapped all the way around my hand.

TM: Did Ed have the same hands?

RM: No. Ed's hands were kind of like mine, kind of normal. But Lamar had giant hands. Of course, Lamar was a big man.

TM: Was he? Okay. Now Ed was a tall guy.

RM: Oh, yeah. Ed was tall and skinny. Ed's the only guy I've ever seen in my life that could walk up to a pickup truck and just put one leg over in the back of it and stand there. The other leg's still on the ground, one leg up in the back of the pickup truck.

TM: Wow. Okay. And Lamar— Was Lamar as tall as Ed or a little shorter or just broader?

RM: No, Lamar was probably 6 inches or so shorter than Ed. But Lamar was real stocky built, where Ed was just tall and skinny.

TM: Alright. And then you've mentioned the connecting gang and hooking up and bolting up and putting down the decking. I think you'd mentioned that once before, but can you talk to me about the phones? When I think of a phone, well, I'm talking to you on a phone. Can you kind of explain to me what that's all about?

RM: Okay, well, on the high rise, you know, nowadays they don't use guy derricks hardly ever anymore.

TM: What's a guy derrick?

RM: Well, a guy derrick is something that has been around forever, ever since they started building skyscrapers. It had a steel-structured mast, and then they can vary in length, but on most high rises the mast will be 120-feet tall. And it sets on the floor of your building, on the last floor you built. It stands up above it, and it's got steel guy cables that come down and attached to the columns around the edge of the building. So you usually have anywhere from 6, 7, 8 guy lines on the derrick. And then it has a boom that pins to the base of it. Your hoist sets on the ground, and your cables are coming from the hoist over to the block and then come up through the building, and they go up through the base of the derrick. And you'll have three different drums on the hoist. The far-back drum is for your boom line. Your middle drum is for your main load, and then your front drum is for your whip line, which is it's just a single part line. So, you're going up the building. The operator is setting on the ground so he can't see nothing. So, the guy on the phones tells that operator what to do. And I'll go through a little scenario of what that sounds like.

TM: Please.

RM: Okay. We're up on the building, you know, working, and I'll pick the phone up and say, "Alright, we're gonna boom out here. We're gonna boom down about 25 or 30 feet, shake this bundle of deck out." He'll get out there close, you know. "Another five feet on your boom. And hold your boom. Coming down on your whip line. Coming down here 35-40 feet. Another 15, another 10, another 5, 3, 2, 1. Now hold that." Then we'd put the shake-out hooks on their side. "Shake-out hooks are on the hook. Work it up about 30 feet. Pick the excess cable up off the deck and hold that a minute." The guys'll hook one up, say, "Alright, work it up" to roll this beam up. And it's kind of like, "Okay, you're up. Alright, hold that. Coming down." And while you're right there by the bundle and it's just like, "Slack it loose. Work it back up. Slack it loose. Work it back up." He's just back and forth because he's just rolling— The operator knows he's just rolling them beams up, and it'll make a sound every time you set one down, "POW!" It'll make a pop noise where the beam hits on the 4 x's you'd have scattered across the deck just right above a beam, so you don't crush the deck. And it just makes a popping noise, but when you're around it, you can tell. You know, you could be 6, 8, 10 floors below them and you could tell by the sound. "Alright. They're shaking out. They're hanging iron." I mean, you could just tell by the sound because each one of them got a distinctive sound to it.

TM: But I imagine when the operator of the drums is 25 floors below you, he's not gonna— That sound of what's going on in your world, he's gonna be really relying on what you're saying on the phone.

RM: Well, he hears that through the phone. He's sitting down there with a headset on.

TM: Okay. Got it. Alright. Thank you.

RM: To me, a good phone man paints a good enough picture where he's got it in his mind, he knows what's going on up there.

TM: Okay. Great.

RM: And I always gave them operators, you know, like an 11" x 17" or 8 1/2" x 11" or whatever sheet, and it would show the outline of the building. And each bay has a different number for shipping purposes. And they'd be, like, labeled A, B, C, D, E. You know, each bay would have an alphabetical letter attached to it. And, like, say, we was taking the iron from the street, the guys on the street would rig one up and they'd start sending it to me. Well, when you're standing up there on the edge of the building looking down at it, you know, "Looking good. Keep it coming." And then when it got up close to the top, I'd always be like, "Ed booming up." Well, he'd reached over and start booming up too, and he's still getting up, and then once he was high enough to clear the building, you'd be like, "Now, hold your load. Booming keep booming up. Going all the way to the mast." That let him know he was booming all the way up tight, and he'd have a paint mark on his drum down there that let him know whenever he was high boomed.

TM: Okay.

RM: And he'd have a paint mark to let him know when—on all of his drums when he was as high as he could go. And every time you'd jump, you know, we'd jump every week. You'd jump two floors, you know, take the iron and shake it out and set it. Jump the derrick. I mean, it's just the same process over and over and over.

TM: Okay. Just moving the derrick up as your floors were completed.

RM: Yeah, and it jumps itself because you kicked the boom out from away from the mast and the base the boom sets on what's called the jump block. And then you have cables that run that attached to the, like, 30 feet up the mast from the base. And they run up through a block at the top of the boom, right down to the base of the boom, through the another shed. And you just drop your big-load line down and catches it. Then as you start coming up on that big load, and he plays off on his boom cable, it just picks the mast straight up, gets the mast up there as high as you need to go.

TM: Okay.

RM: Slide the jump block back underneath it what holds the derrick up. Set and touch it down. Make sure all your guy lines are right. Once you get into the typical floors you don't have to rework guy lines. But down there when you first start out on the high rise, a lot of times you'll have to rework guy lines every time you jump for the first six or eight times because the building changes. So the length you had at one floor might not work on the next floor. So you'll get jumped up there and just touch the mast down. Then you gotta, you know, pull you out four guys that will hold you up there. Then pull your boom up and then go around to each one, reworking them before you can start taking iron.

TM: Okay, and it's the drums on the ground that are actually lifting the derrick up to its next area.

RM: Yes.

TM: That's pretty clever. Okay, so that's a guy derrick.

RM: And then on the bridge projects, Beasley had a couple of big stiff-leg derricks that old man John F. designed himself, 200-ton and 150-ton. Well, the stiff-leg derrick, it's got two legs to hold it up. So if you just figure a center mass that comes from the base up, say, 150 feet. And then at 90-degree angles off of that, you've got a leg that's coming down in, like, a 45 that attaches to seal work. That's what holds the mast up. And then your boom is outboard of it. And that 200-ton derrick had 300 feet of main boom and 75 foot of jib, which is a smaller boom section that comes off the very tip, and you usually just have, like, a single part line off of it. But on that 200-ton that old man John designed, halfway up the jib, it had a five-part belly line we called them. So, the hoist for that derrick had four drums.

TM: Huh. Okay.

RM: And you had the boom, the main load, the belly line, and the whip. And that hoist would be down on the barge with the derrick, but you still had phones on him because he's watching the drums and he, you know, whenever he could see you or whatever, he would. But most of the time you'd have to tell him what to do.

TM: Okay. And my head's spinning because I'm thinking this whole thing is sitting on a barge. I mean, that barge has to be anchored in pretty well. It can't be, you know, going here and there.

RM: Well, I mean, when you're in shallow enough water, we've got what's called spuds, which are just big pieces of pipe that you'll drop down through a guide and sink in the mud to hold the barge in place.

TM: Okay. Alright that makes sense. You were talking about holding the derrick in place by putting pipes down in the mud through these guides.

RM: It's called spuds. And then they'll bury— Most of the time, they would probably be about a 24-inch diameter heavy-wall pipe. They would be usually about, you know, 60-foot long.

TM: Okay.

RM: But you was hooked onto him with the derrick and he'd, like, lift it up. And they'd have holes every so often, and you could put a pin in there. You know, an inch-and-a-half round solid bar would go through there. You could come down and that would hold the spud up where the tug to move the barge around. And when you got where you wanted to go, the tug would hold you in place. You'd hooked back onto that spud and pull it up, pull the pin out of it, and drop it down till it sunk in the mud to hold you there. Then if you got out into deeper water, too deep for your spuds, there was another hoist on the barge there that would have, usually have a pair of them. They'd have a two two-drum hoist. One side would work anchors on one side of the barge. The other side would work anchors on the other side.

TM: Okay.

RM: And those cables will come off and go through some fleet sheaves above the deck of the barge to the corners. And you'd go to pull your anchors out, you'd come off, say, the right-side corner. Well, you'd pull that anchor off out towards the left side, like, going in a 45 where your cables were X when you pulled your anchor lines out front and back. The reason for that was

you'd get up on the right side two cables and run off on the left side two cables and just move your barge over, you know, several feet—sometimes even a couple of hundred feet—to where you need to work at just by getting up and down on those anchor lines.

TM: Right. Just relying on your anchors but moving the barge by pulling on the cables. Okay.

RM: And then depending on how swift the water you was in, a lot of times they would always keep a tug up close to the barge in case we lost an anchor, like, when we were setting. When we were erecting iron, we would always have the tug close to the barge on the downstream side so in case we lost an anchor, we wouldn't just be at the mercy of the current taking us down the river.

TM: Right. That makes sense.

RM: The tug would hold us in place, and we'd bring another smaller tug around or whatever to catch the anchor line if we had to pull an anchor line up and get it repositioned or whatever.

TM: Then what replaced the guy derrick?

RM: Tower cranes. They were a lot of work, and a lot of people were scared of them and didn't want to work that hard. And this society has evolved with all these smartphones that make people dumber.

TM: Hmm, yeah.

RM: More and more contractors just, you know— They still use them every now and again in New York City and Chicago but Beasley was probably the last big steel erector that had a large fleet of guy derricks and used them on high rises all the time. But when the high-rise market kind of petered out there in the early '90s, well, then that was kind of the end of the era for the guy derricks. Everybody from then on just kind of went with the—started using tower cranes all the time.

TM: And when I think of a tower crane, you know, we live in a town where our tallest building is, I think, five stories high, so a tower crane kind of makes sense in this tiny, little town. But when you've got to go 50 stories or 25 or 30, the tower crane has to be on the building, doesn't it?

RM: No, usually they run up the side of the building.

TM: Okay. Alright.

RM: And then, like, every five or six floors, you'll have a tie-in collar that ties it back to the building. Then as you keep adding sections, you know, going vertical, keep building up, you just keep adding tie-ins, you know, where the engineer says you need them at.

TM: That makes sense.

RM: Usually when we had to jump a tower crane, most of the time we'd jump four, five sections at night. Most of the time we jump them at night when there's less people on the project

working. And it usually takes you six to eight hours to jump a tower crane five sections, which should be 100 feet. And each of those sections are 20-foot. Well, 19' 11" or whatever. I just call them 20-footers.

TM: Right. Right. And would the tower crane need somebody on the phone as well?

RM: Oh, yeah. You always had somebody flagging it.

TM: Okay, because I'm thinking the tower crane, that guy can see what's going on. I would like to think he could—

RM: He could see, but you still always have somebody flagging him because he's on one side of the building. You need to do something on the other side. It's just easier to have a phone system or a two-way radio or whatever. Most of the time nowadays it's hardwired, runs up the tower to talk to him with. Back in the old guy derrick days we just used old military-style handsets from, like, World War II. They had the crystals in them.

TM: Uh-huh. Yep.

RM: They worked good. And what I liked about them you could tell by the sound if you had connection because it would have a little echo kind of sound to it.

TM: Okay, so on that ARCO Tower, you started into that 25 floors up, and that was in '81, '80. No, that's in '82.

RM: '82. And then we topped that building out, oh, it was in the fall, like, maybe October, November. And that building had three derricks on it when we were setting it.

TM: Wow.

RM: When we got it set out, I took two of them down, but we left one on one corner that we had rented out to the general contractor to hoist duct work, drywall, all that stuff that has to go up into the building. So I ended up running phones during the day on that. Then I would go a block and a half over to the InterFirst Plaza, which was a 64-story high rise, and I'd run the phones at night over there, setting precast.

TM: Wow.

RM: They would hang iron during the day, and we'd set precast at night, and they couldn't get a phone man, so I'd do double duty. But when Friday come around, payday, well, I had a check from two jobs, so I was doing pretty good.

TM: I'll bet you were! But you were probably working, what, 20-hour days. I don't know, 18-hour days?

RM: Usually about 18.

TM: Okay. Alright. And then where'd you go?

RM: Let's see. That would have got us up to the end of '83. And I left Dallas in, like, May of '83 and went to Cincinnati to do a 35-story Linclay office tower. Sixth and Vine Street, right in downtown Cincinnati. And it was a, oh, it wasn't real enormously heavy job, but it was a tough job. We had two derricks on it. Turner was the general contractor, and they had us working six days a week. We worked 10 hours a day hanging iron, and then anywhere from two to four to six hours more hoisting shit for everybody else. I'd had to hoist wire mesh and rebar for the rockbusters. And we'd have to hoist— We'd have to make trash runs, you know, clean the excess decking and stuff off the building. Hoist the ductwork and shit for other trades.

TM: Those are long days, six days a week. I mean, the overtime's gotta be really good, but—

RM: We finished that right before Thanksgiving. And they had a little, oh, like, a nine- or ten-story building up north of town. And they sent me up there and just— They had hired a new guy to run it, and they kind of set me up there just to kind of babysit him, so to speak, but I was only up there a couple of weeks, and then I went back to Dallas on another high rise.

TM: Okay. That's another question I wanted to ask you. Every now and then I'll see these photos of ironworkers putting in the last piece of steel or a pin in a bridge or some sort of the final steel. And typically, there's—

RM: Usually we refer to that as the topping-out beam.

TM: Okay. Would that be true for a bridge as well?

RM: Yeah, but the difference between the bridge job and a high rise, on the high rise, they'll paint usually the last beam white. Everybody—you know, all the big shots—everybody wants to sign their name on it. They'll have a big ceremony. You know, we'll have the customary Christmas tree on it and the American flag and usually whatever state we're in. And then the local union that that particular jobs out of, they'll have their logo on it. But on a bridge, you know, most of the time we'll just hang a, you know, put the customary tree on it and hanging a flag or whatever, have a little ceremony just setting the last piece.

TM: Yeah. It's kind of neat. I mean, it's an internal kind of ceremony. It's not like an opening dedication. It's not like a big, you know, the mayor's going to give a speech. It seems like it's more it's the team, it's the ironworkers realizing, alright, we've got this one done. Is that right? Is my perception of that correct?

RM: Yes, sir. That is correct.

TM: Okay. That's pretty cool. Alright, so we are kind of 1984-ish, going back to Dallas. Man, they were they were building a lot of stuff there, huh?

RM: Yeah, and I went from— In that time frame, Beasley had work going all over. And Beasley owned, I think, 27 guy derricks, but we had 34 working. We were so busy, we had to rent them from F&M Mafco. And I went about a year or so in there from, like, end of '84 and about all of '85, about all I did was either put derricks up or take them down or go somewhere and jump them. If they had a hard jump, they'd send me in there, you know, get it jumped and get it back

working. And then I'll jump on the plane, and I'd go to Reno. Then I'll jump on the plane, and I'd go to Cleveland, or I'd jump on a plane, and I'd go to Dallas, or I'd go to Houston or—

TM: Wow. At least you could sleep on the plane.

RM: Even to this day, I'm usually asleep before we ever take off.

TM: Hmm, I bet. Okay, so lots of derricks.

RM: In that same time frame, the latter part of '84, about all of '85, first half of '86, you know, I was just bouncing all over the place. I might go to a bridge job for three months to help them get done just as a filler, you know, until they needed me somewhere else. And then I'd go finish a high rise and take the derricks down. Then I'd go to a different bridge. I mean, I just kind of bounced all over the place.

TM: Did you like that? Or did you wish you were on one job from start to finish?

RM: To me, it didn't matter. It was just work. Really, the only drawback to it was when you had to go in and take over one that was what we refer to as upside down and wasn't going like it should go. You know, them kind of suck because you'd always— You know, the workers were pissed off. The general contractor was pissed off. My bosses were pissed off because it wasn't going the way they had bid it and planned it. When you go in to do them, it's kind of a no-win situation, so you just have to go in there with kind of a Marine Corps drill sergeant mentality. This is the way it's going to be. You either fall in here and help us get done, or you could stand across the street and watch this get done. It makes no difference to me.

TM: How often would that happen? Because I can think of a company like Beasley, if you missed your bid, you know, if you underbid a job, that could be financially very detrimental, no matter how hard the workers would work—

RM: You'd be surprised how often it happens even today. That's like this bridge I'm doing now. The estimate department missed so much. So, this job was going to be a loser before I ever started. The only way I could, from the field-erection standpoint, show it as a good project is to do it with less man hours than what was in the bid.

TM: Hmm. I mean, the only way you can do that is either you cut back hours or you try to just, you know, work double time.

RM: I got sent to Dallas one time. This would have been, let's see, it was '86, '87. I was up in Ohio. So, this would have been in '89. They had a 40-story building in Dallas. It was only up six floors, and they had already written the job off as a loss.

TM: Oh, no!

RM: And I was in Dallas for something, for a quarterly meeting of superintendents, and that job come up. I was like, "How can it be considered a loss if you're only on the sixth floor, and you got to 40?" I go, "That's still 6, 8 months-worth of work that you still have to do." Of course, I was young and cocky. I said, "I ain't seen the drawings. I hadn't even seen the job. And I like to

gamble, and I like to bet." And I said, "But I'll bet you \$5,000 cash that I could do that job and make money on it. Well, the area project manager that was over that, he was just like, "Well, I don't think you can, but I'll take your bet." I said, "Okay, but we're talking real money. When that job is done, if it makes \$1 profit, that's considered a win, and you'll owe me \$5,000. And if it loses a dollar, I'll owe you \$5,000." Then I reached down in my damn Wrangler pocket, and I pulled out a wad of money, and laid it on the table. I said, "There's my 5 grand right there." He's like, "Well, I don't have mine on me but I'm good for it." And I looked at Bill Landfair, who owned Beasley at the time, and Bill kinda nodded. He's like, "He'll make it right." I said, "Okay, I'll be back down here in a week." I had to go to Ohio and get all my stuff. Anyway, I come to Dallas and I said, "It ain't going to be pretty, but I'm going to take that job over. I got \$5,000 of Ronnie Mac dollars tied up in it. I'll make a difference."

So I showed up, just showed up on the job like I was just coming to help. I walked in the office, and I can't even remember the guy's name that was running it, but it was, like, his first superintendent job. And he had a bunch of his buddies. He was a local guy there in Dallas, you know, and they wasn't getting shit done. I made the tour. I went up the building, come back down the building, you know, spent a half a day just observing. After work I went down by Beasley's office, talked to Bill Landfair. I said, "Okay, here's what I'm going to do." And I told him who all I was firing, and Bill's like, "You ain't gonna make any friends." I said, "I didn't come here to make friends." So, I showed up the next morning and I was in the office when the timekeeper Shirley Curry showed up. She was like, "What are you doing here, Ronnie Mac?" I said, "Well, it's my job now, Shirley." She's like, "I figured that was coming whenever I seen you here yesterday, the look on your face."

When the superintendent and his foreman started showing up, it was like, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm taking over. Your services are no longer required." And I handed him his check. I handed him all his foremen that wasn't worth a shit, their checks. Of course, by that time word had already spread, so all the hands were lined up around the trailer. The foremen were all butt hurt, and they were just like, "God damn, they run us off." I just stepped out on the little porch of the office. I'm just like, "Let me have all of your attention for a minute. Here's where we're at on this job. The company has written it off as a loser because y'all's on the sixth floor, and you should be on the 30th floor by now." I go, "I'm taking over. I fired the foremen. You men working in the gangs, here's your choice: you either go to work and give me an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, or I'll fire every one of you and start all over."

Well, probably 90% of them walked off. I said, "Yeah, go!" Out of the 20 that stayed, I went through them and like, "What do you do? What do you do?" So, I come up with enough guys to have a raising gang hanging iron, and I had enough guys to bolt up, and I had enough guys to do deck. So then I just called the hall, the union hall, and I told him I need 15 guys. He's like, "You's gonna have a hard time getting anybody because you run off some good people." I said, "I run off bums. They were riding the gravy training with both feet dragging in the gravy. Them days are done. You could either send me 15 guys or I'm going to bring in 15 guys." He said, "Well, you'll just have to bring in people." I said, "That's fine." So, I just started calling around the country to guys I knew. And brought them in there. So, long story short, we went from a job that they had written off as a loser, and when it was all said and done at the end, it made 20 percent profit.

TM: Wow.

RM: And I stepped in that office when we went to do close out on it. We went down the list, and I looked over at Bill Landfair. I'm like, "What was the final tally?" Of course, they're over there on their calculators and shit, punching numbers and back and forth. He was like, "I just don't see how you done it, but it made 20 percent." And I looked at that little project manager. I'm like, "I believe you owe me \$5,000." He was like, "Well, I don't have \$5,000 on me." I said, "Well, you knew this day was coming." I looked at Landfair and I was like, "You can take it out of his wages and pay me, or I'll take it out of his ass. One way or another I'm getting \$5,000. It's either gonna be cash or satisfaction. If I have to take it out of his ass, that's gonna be a lot of ass whipping." Landfair got up and went into the counting room and had them cut me a check for \$5,000.

TM: Wow.

RM: Then he told— I can't remember that guy's last night. Forest was his first name. No, it wasn't Gump, either. But anyway, he lasted about another year and Landfair run him off.

TM: So, most of this time in the '80s, it sounds like you're doing buildings. You're doing high rises and steel buildings and not a lot of bridges.

RM: Well, I helped to finish probably six bridges in that time frame. But that'd be, like, three months on this one. Then I'd go do a building, and then I'd go to Louisville, help them finish that one out. I mean, it was just wherever they needed the help out when they needed it.

TM: Yeah. One of the things I'm curious about is when the Navajo Bridge build came up, Kraemer was the contractor, and they subcontracted out the bridge build to Traylor.

RM: Yep, Traylor Brothers.

TM: And was Beasley still in business at the time?

RM: No. Part of it was— Bill Landfair sold it to Frank Williams. Frank Williams got more interested in trying to sell insurance than be a steel erector, and he sold the bridge division to Traylor Brothers. So that's how he ended up with J. Rollins, all Beasley guys on that. And before Frank had sold it to Traylor Brothers, J. Rollins and them guys was looking at the bridge to erect it for Beasley.

TM: Okay. So Beasley knew about the bridge. They knew it was going to be built, and then the bridge division was sold to Traylor.

RM: Yeah.

TM: Okay. Because I just couldn't figure it out because you and Ed and David and—

RM: Ed Cross.

TM: Ed Cross. You guys were all Beasley people.

RM: Yep.

TM: Okay, but that's going to be in, what, was that '92 or '93 when the bridge division got sold to Traylor?

RM: I think it was in '92.

TM: Okay. And did you have any thoughts about that? All the people you knew that you'd worked with for many years, you all must have kind of been in— I don't know.

RM: Here's the way that deal went. Bill Landfair sold Beasley to Frank Williams in, like, '87. Well, Frank come in and met with all of us superintendents, and he put on this dog-and-pony spiel about gonna make Beasley the biggest steel erector in the world. We're going to buy new cranes. We're gonna get retooled up. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then we'd go six months. He'd have another meeting. All he wanted to talk about was selling insurance. Now, if you buy this insurance, and if you buy this insurance— I stood up at that second meeting they had after they'd done their insurance spiel and they asked if anybody had any questions. And I stood up. I'm just like, "I think I speak for about everybody in the room. You remember when you first bought this, you come in here and you told everybody that you was gonna make us the #1 steel erector in the world? You was going to buy us new cranes, gonna get us retooled up, you know, make us a force to be reckoned with. Here we are two years later in this deal. I can't even get parts to fix the same shit that I've been working on for the last ten years. And now every time we have one of these meetings, it's about buying insurance." I said, "Are we gonna be an insurance agent or are we gonna be a steel erector?" Then I just got up and left the room. And as soon as I finished— I was doing a bridge job in Wheeling, West Virginia. As soon as I finished it, I was done with Beasley.

TM: Okay, what year was that?

RM: That would have been '91.

TM: Okay. Had you worked with Ed Kent on any jobs? I think I've asked you this already and maybe Navajo— Was Navajo your first job with Ed?

RM: No, I'd worked with Ed in New Orleans when he did that Greater New Orleans Bridge. And I've worked with Ed in Moundsville, West Virginia on that bridge.

TM: When was the Greater New Orleans?

RM: That would have been in, like, '83, '84. And it was one of them deals, you know, whenever I was bouncing around, and I was down there for about three or four months.

TM: Can you tell me an Ed Kent story from the '80s that you remember?

RM: Oh, God. There's so many. My mind just going to try to pick out—

TM: Well, we've been yik yakking for almost an hour now, so maybe that's a good question for next time, because pretty soon here—

RM: Ed always had a lot of stories about, you know, different bridges he'd been on and different things that happened. Most of the time it was they'd be laughing about some damn practical joke bullshit they played on somebody else or, you know— Because, I mean, the guys like Ed Kent; Ed Cross; Bob Peters; Jerry Kent, Lamar's son; they were notorious for fucking with each other.

TM: [Laughs] Okay!

RM: Just be ornery. Not ever meaning nothing bad by it, but I mean, they'd do something to piss somebody off and just laugh. And then when they started laughing, they'd know they got played. Ed's biggest story always was, you know, guys would be half-assing something, and Ed would just show up. And they've been trying to drive pins to line something up and half-assing pecking around on them. And Ed's biggest saying always was "Let me see your beater, boy." And it didn't matter if the guy was 10-foot tall and bullet proof, Ed had the same comment. "Let me see your beater, boy." The other guys would be trying to drive the pin and it would sound like tink, tink, tink. Ed would get that beater and go Whoom! Whoom! Ed would drive six or eight pins. He goes, "That's how you do it. Y'all just ain't putting enough ass behind it." And I've had to do the same thing out here on this bridge. Guys pecking around. I'm like, "Hit that damn thing like you're mad at it." And I'd get their beater. I'm like, "Just listen to the sound." And I'd start driving the pin. I'm like, "Don't that sound like Jimmy Page playing a Led Zeppelin song? You can tell by the sound it's different."

TM: Yeah, I like that. Hit it like you're mad at it. Well, I think we're about ready to get to Navajo Bridge here. We've gone through you're leaving—

RM: Yeah, we're right up there close to it.

TM: Yep. Leaving Beasley in '91. Okay. Well, maybe this is a good time to wrap up this Part 2, and we'll get into the Navajo Bridge good and proper next time.

RM: Okay.

TM: Is there anything else you want to add to the interview we just did?

RM: You're the one asking the questions.

TM: Well, I know. That's why I asked this general catch-all question at the end. If you're, like, "Well, he didn't ask me about X, Y, Z, and I want to make sure I tell him." I always ask, and most people say no, but I always ask. And if you're good with it, then we will wrap this up.

RM: I'm good with it.

TM: Okie doke. This will conclude Part 2 of a Grand Canyon oral history with Ronnie Mac. Today is Thursday, July 21, 2022. My name is Tom Martin. And Ronnie Mac, thank you so very much.

RM: Alright. Thank you.