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Interviewee: Bruce McEyla (BM)
Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)
Subject: Bruce McEyla recounts his years as a river guide in the 1980's, conversations with Georgie White, and taking large format cameras on ten solo river trips through Grand Canyon. This is Part One of a seven part interview.
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TM: Today is May 13, 2019. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElay. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning Bruce. How are you today?

BM: Hey, good morning, Tom, how are you?

TM: Very good, thank you. May we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

BM: You sure can.

TM: Oh, thank you so much. Bruce...what year were you born?

BM: 1951. 68 years old now.

TM: Where was that? Where were you born?

BM: Dallas, Texas. Born and raised there until I was 18 and left for New Mexico after that.

TM: What were your folks doing in Dallas?

BM: Well, their story is...they met in Los Angeles at the Naval base at Port Hueneme at the end of World War II. My father was a civil engineer working on secret systems that they were building out there in coastal defense systems. And my mother was a secretary...civilian secretary working for the Navy. And that's where they met.

TM: Okay. And when did they get married then? Sometime between '45 and '51?

BM: They did. My mother's father was a mean abusive drunk. And he did not want any of the children leaving the family. He wanted them out working and bringing money back to the family so he could buy more liquor, but, he was a bad situation, very bad situation there in the family. And my grandmother snuck my mother out one night of the house at two or three in the morning. And Mom ran down the road as hard as she could a couple of miles to Dad who was in a car waiting. He rushed her off back to Port Hueneme. And then from there they drove all the way back to Dallas and got married in 1950.

TM: Was your father from Dallas?

BM: Yes. Yes. All of his family is there. They're a family of engineers. Civil engineers.

TM: Okay. Nice. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

BM: Sure do. I'm the eldest. I've got another brother and two sisters.

TM: Okay. What was growing up in Dallas like?

BM: Well, I didn't know any different. I thought growing up there was like anywhere else. We just had a nice, reasonable childhood and didn't have a lot of money. Dad was starting out in business. And the most outdoor activity we ever did was we had a little ski boat, little runabout, and we'd go to the lakes and water ski and stuff like that. That was about it. I was good at math and sciences in school and was going to study engineering and take over the family business. And that was my goal in life. So I left high school. After high school, I went to college at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas...Lively Lubbock , Texas, Hub City of the South Plains and went to school there. Civil engineering. They had a very good school for that and still do, I believe. And that was what I was to do.

TM: Let's go back for a minute to the little ski boat. Were you a good swimmer?

BM: Oh, man. Yeah. I learned how to swim. Mother was deathly afraid of one of us falling in a creek. You know, we had many creeks in the area, and then we would swim there and spend our summers in the creeks and there around Dallas. And she'd had a relative that died drowning, and she was deathly afraid of us drowning. So she put me in swimming class when I was three and a half years old. I was good swimming. By the time I was four years old, I was a pretty good swimmer and there was no risk of me dying in the water at that point. And she did the same thing with the other children. She put them in early and got them swimming. You know, as soon as soon as we could, three or four or five years old, we were all swimming. And so we felt comfortable around the water and it wasn't a danger and that was a good thing. It made her feel much better about things.

TM: Did you compete in any high school activities, swimming at all?

BM: No, I was a...I ran track. I was...I seem to be pretty good at the 880 distance. I could run that one. I was not good at sprinting or long distance, but I can do those 880's. It's what they called them back then. And I competed there and competed that way in college as well. And that's about it for sports really.

TM: So the boat on the lake...I'm assuming that summer vacations were like just a couple of weeks long for your father, trying to keep the business going or shorter, but did you kids, you and your brother and your two sisters, did you base out of the house or did you guys like go move in at a lake somewhere?

BM: Oh, no. Everything happened from home. We would...Dad bought a really cool boat. It was a 1964 Boston Whaler. Wonderful boat, and we still have it. I restored that vessel and I own it today. Just as good as it was when it was new. We would go for...you know, we would go for weekends almost every weekend. We'd go somewhere to a lake and we would camp out on the sandy beaches 'cause we couldn't really afford hotel rooms and things.

We would load the boat and all, everybody up and go camp out with....we had neighbors that did the same thing. So we would go have big beach parties on the weekends. And once in a

while we would take off for longer. We would go for a week, we'd be at the most we would ever leave. And we do that once in a while, go somewhere and stay for a week with the boat and camp out. That was our life and it was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed that as children.

TM: Nice. And your friends in junior high and high school, would they come along or would you pal out, you know, do things with them on the side?

BM: Well, you know, you always have a best friend or two, you know, growing up. And my best friend was also my next-door neighbor and they didn't have a boat, but they would go with us often. And...so yeah. They were big into the water ski thing and we'd pal around doing other stuff, but mostly it had to do with, you know, cars, because when we were 16, 15...15, 16, they'd let you drive at 15 and a half back then. And the big deal for a long...for a few years was, you know, getting an old car or some sort and fixing it and making it run. And learning how to drive it and getting a job...getting jobs to buy gas for the car. And that was our life pretty much.

TM: What was your first car? And what jobs were you doing to get gas for it?

BM: [laugh] Well, my first car, I wanted my Grandfather's car and he had a 1957 Port Hull T-Bird. And he never drove the thing, it was a beautiful car, but...and he never drove it. He took it in trade. He often took things in trade for his engineering jobs. And I wanted that. I wanted him to sell me that T-Bird. He wouldn't do it because he thought it was too much of a sports car and that I was going to wreck it and hurt myself. And he...I was so disappointed. And so anyway, I ended up, he wouldn't sell it. So I ended up buying a 1957 Chevrolet off of a farm outside of Dallas. Cost me 350 bucks. And I've been working at a Dairy Queen for 85 cents an hour, and let me tell ya, that's a lot of hours.

TM: [laugh]

BM: ..to buy a $350 car. It took a long time.

TM: 85 cents an hour. Yup.

BM: I did finally get it. And I also worked for my father and my grandfather in the engineering business. I learned how to...what they needed. And the only thing I could really do at that age was learn how to draft. I wasn't smart enough, didn't know enough about, you know, physics and statics and dynamics and fluid flows and all those kinds of advanced things. But I could learn...I learned how to draw, and so they taught me how to draft. And so I did engineering drafting, starting when I was about 10 years old. And worked for them off and on and worked at the Dairy Queen and worked mowing lawns and just the usual kid stuff back then.

TM: Did you...for drafting or using, you know, ink lettering sets, rapidographs, all that sort of thing?

BM: Oh yes.

TM: Okay. All by hand?

BM: One of my early purchases was a set of rapidograph pens, and they go from triple ought all the way up to number three. And there's like about eight pens in there, and you have to

work to keep those things running. They'll hang up on you if you don't, you know, treat them right. I kind of learned patience with small mechanical things (laughs) when I was a draftsman.

TM: Okay. Did...and did you take that working with pen and ink...did you take that into art at that time?

BM: Never did. Still, I'm not an artist. I'm a draftsman.

TM: Alright.

BM: But as good as I can do.

TM: In high school, did you get into photography at all?

BM: No. Had no interest in photography to speak of except to document some things around me. I... My mother gave me a little camera one time and you know, I would just shoot pictures of my brothers and sisters doing things. It's all black and white back then. And that's what I still prefer. That's where I learned about the beauty of a black and white picture. Color came along later and for some reason it didn't appeal to me the same way as that black and white film did. Polaroids mostly. And I love shooting those things. I really love shooting those black and white Polaroids. I just liked the look of it and that stayed with me.

TM: But that wasn't in high school or was it? I mean, we're...we had this...

BM: That was...oh, no. When I started with that, my first camera...Mom gave me one of us probably eight, nine years old, something like that.

TM: And so it wasn't like, oh, this is really neat. It was like, hmm, okay, well that's nice and I'll take some pictures of my brothers and sister and that's it.

BM: That's it. I didn't pursue it any further than that now.

TM: Were you in art classes in high school at all?

BM: Hmm. No. I was never interested. Never really felt like I had the skill to do that. I tried, you know, we had to take art and you know, part of our curriculum was, you know, art and sciences and I never did any good in the art side of it. I was real good in the science side of it and so I pretty much gave up on trying to do any artwork. I just wasn't any good at it.

TM: How much work did you have to do on that '57 Chevy to get it going once you got it?

BM: Well, it was a constant thing. I was working on that thing every day after school.

TM: [laugh]

BM: I couldn't drive it because I was only 14 years old.

TM: [laugh]

BM: But I could work on it. So Dad had let me work on it and he'd drive it once in a while.

TM: Okay.

BM: And I...it was a big deal and I loved the work. And that was my calling. I just loved working on cars. And I loved working on that '57 and talking with all the adults about how do I fix this or that, or what do I do here and on and on. And I drove that thing for...let's see. I was 19 before I got in a bad car wreck and totaled the thing.

TM: Oh no.

BM: But yeah. But it was a really fun, neat car and I really enjoyed having it. It taught me a lot. I learned a lot.

TM: What did it teach you?

BM: Taught me how not to be afraid to do new things. To work on things that I didn't know about. And mostly people are afraid to work on cars. Even today, you don't find people really working on their cars that much. Mostly I take them to the shop and have whatever needs to be done to it, but I loved it. I was not afraid to take a motor apart of any kind. I...you know, I would take a..., you know, an old electric fan apart and just to see how it works and then see if I could put it back together and have it still working. And I loved the mechanical things and love fixing them, modifying them, building new things. I liked doing that. Probably should've been...I probably should've been a mechanical engineer instead of a civil engineer.

TM: [laugh] Okay. What modifications did you make to the Chevy?

BM: Well, it had a bad transmission. So finally had to, you know, well, it was very, very old. It was pretty used up by the time I got it. Three speed column transmission...oh no, wait a minute. It didn't have that yet. It had a, what we call a slush glide. It was a two speed, power glide transmission. And it was so icky, we just call it a slush glide. And I hated that thing and it finally quit working. And I couldn't...there's no way I could fix an automatic transmission and they wanted a lot of money to fix one. So I went to the junk yard and found a three speed standard transmission for that same year and put it in my '57, cut a hole on the floor board so I could put a floor shifter on it. That's what I had. And I had to learn how to...that thing wasn't, you know, it's junkyard transmission and its synchronizers were no good and it was grinding between shifts. And so the biggest thing, the first biggest thing I ever did was to take that transmission apart and put new gears in it, and bearings and synchronizers. Took a long time to do it and it didn't work right the first time. And I put something in backwards or something and it didn't function, so I had to take the whole car apart again. You have to take the drive shaft off, you've got to take the motor mounts off and undo the transmission and pull it out of there. It's a big deal. And it took it apart again and fixed it right. And that worked after the second time. I fixed it and didn't have to worry about it after that.

TM: Nice. How did you finally wreck that car?

BM: Oh, I was working for my father. I was delivering land surveys to the different title companies all over Dallas. And they had put in a new turn lane at this area and I missed it. I didn't realize that they had redone the road there. And I just went straight ahead like I had been doing all along. It was three lanes and they had changed this one lane to turn left instead of going straight. So I went straight, has always did, and somebody else was turning left legally. And I smashed into it. It was a lady in her station wagon and...and I was going about 30 miles an hour when it happened. And I hit her at an angle, spun the car around, I slammed into a light post...light pole and it threw me out of the car, pretty violently.

TM: This is the days of no seatbelts?

BM: No seat belts. And I rolled in the street for quite a ways. And the last thing I remember was looking up at a car that had slammed on its brakes and was coming at me. [laugh] Fortunately, it stopped before it ran over me and...yeah. Anyway, they called the ambulance. I wasn't hurt very bad. It didn't hurt the lady at all. And that...but the '57 was toast. Wasn't worth trying to fix it back up. So I was without a car for about a year and a half, and then a knew Camaro came out. That was pretty neat. They had these things called z28 Camaros. And I took out a loan from the bank and from my father and both grandfathers. Then everybody chipped in and I bought one of these things used and drove that thing for many years.

TM: What happened to your grandfather's T-Bird?

BM: He sold it out from under me.

TM: [laughter]

BM: He didn't want me to have it. Anybody but me.

TM: Well, to your credit, you know, when you...

BM: He was just...go ahead.

TM: Well, when you wrecked the '57 Chevy, you weren't speeding, you weren't doing anything out of the ordinary. So it sounds like you were a fairly prudent driver.

BM: Oh no, I...we would hang out at the places on the weekends and drag race on the back roads and stuff. I wouldn't, I mean I was a pretty conscientious driver 'cause I didn't want to wreck my car or anybody else's.

TM: Okay.

BM: But come weekends, we were out street racing.

TM: So were you modifying the engine, were you playing with the carburetor to try to get the car to go for speed?

BM: Absolutely. I ended up as a drag racer for a spell. And we ended up building drag racers. The street thing was like, this is ridiculously dangerous and we're going to get tickets and they're going to take our license away. And so our parents said, look, boys, you know, you need to just get on the drag strip if you're going to do that. You're not going to make it if you do this on the streets. So we did. We...there was four of us got together and we had various parts and we went to the junk yard and we built a dragster and a rail dragster, very fast. And actually we held the record. There, at the time, there were two sanctioning drag race bodies, the AHRA and NHRA. And we raced in the AHRA in a very strange, unusual class. And we held the record. We held the record. These kids...we're just poor high school kids. We held the drag race record for almost a year. No one could beat us.

TM: Wow. How'd you do it?

BM: And we finally....well, we picked a class that...where there was no competition. [laugh]

TM: Like what was the class? I mean, high school kids in a drag racer? [laugh]

BM: Yes sir. That's what it was. The...you know, the guys down the street got us interested because they were big time drag racers and they moved up to a newer, better, you know, frame for their dragsters called a flex frame. And they gave us their old frame.

TM: Oh wow.

BM: A rigid frame. So they said, here, we can't do anything except to cut this up and make scrap metal out of it. And if you guys want this, you can have it. So we took that frame and it had a transmission in it. And it had a lot of things. So we put a...it was called...the class was called B Experimental Dragster. And the rules were very simple. The rules were less than 310 cubic inches, and it had to be normally aspirated, which means you had to have a carburetor. Not fuel injectors, not a blower, only a carburetor. So that meant we could use it. Any old 283 Chevy motor, which is what we got. And oddly, very few people raced in that class. And that's why we were able to win it was because there was very little competition.

TM: So you limited 310 cubic inch and a lot of motors are bigger than that, and this wasn't a fuel injected or nitrile (?) burning or some weird thing like that. So it was sort of the, if I could say that the go-carts of rail racing and everybody probably walked right past it because it was too small maybe.

BM: They weren't fast enough for a rail job. People wanted to go faster than that. And because the rules were so simple, our competition was only one other guy. Old fella. And we've raced a lot of people, but our only competition really was this old guy. And his thing was not a rail job. He had a Jeep and he had two engines on this Jeep. That did not add up to more than 310 cubes. And one engine drove the front wheels and the other engine drove the back wheels. And he had four great big giant slicks on all four wheels because all four wheels were drive wheel. The fourth wheel drive dragster, and man, that guy would kill us out of the hole because he had all this traction and we had to play catch up every time. We'd have to catch up with him at the end of the drag race. And sometimes we beat him. Sometimes he'd beat us. And the last time we saw this fellow was at a nighttime race at Kennedale Drag Strip out Temple, Texas or somewhere. I'm not even sure what town that was in. Temple had a Temple Academy Dragway, so it wasn't in Temple Tech...it's somewhere else. But anyway, it was a nighttime meet [laugh] and here he was. Same guy. We're going to have to beat the Jeep. And we took off and he didn't outrun me at the start of the race. And I went down and won the race and came back around and what he had to...what happened was he took off and when he did, one of his engines blew.

TM: Oh.

BM: When it did, the whole crank shaft dropped out of...blew out of the bottom of the engine. And on the strip, he was cleaning up the mess. And on the pavement was a crank shaft with all of the...

TM: The piston still on it?

BM: All of the pistons and rods are still attached.

TM: [laughter]

BM: Just laying there on the strip and we never saw him again.

TM: Oh.

BM: Or saw him again.

TM: Oh. So that mean you had no more competition for you?

BM: Well, we did, but not him anymore.

TM: Was there a little parachute out the back to slow this thing down for breaks or...how did you manage that?

BM: We had a parachute, but we didn't use it very much because we had to repack this thing and it was a time...we took a lot of time. So if the strip run out was long enough, we would just use the breaks. But if it was short...a short run out, we'd pull the chute and use the brakes both. But we didn't use that shoot unless we had to. We had it. We had to have it. It was the rule. We had to have a parachute and so did he, but we didn't use them because we weren't going all that fast, not like the big rail jobs. They were going 200 miles an hour back then.

TM: How fast were you guys going?

BM: We were going about 140, 150.

TM: That's fast enough.

BM: Well, yeah, it was. That's just, you know, when you're that close to the ground, going that fast, it's pretty thrilling.

TM: Mm-hmm. So were your...did your Mom and Dad come out to the events to watch this?

BM: Well, at first they did and [laugh] they just left us alone after that.

TM: [laugh] How old...

BM: The kids found something safe, they'll be fine.

TM: [laughter] How old were you when you were doing this?

BM: That started at 16 and went until I was 19 and then life got in the way and we had to get rid of all that stuff.

TM: Was that because you ended up going to a school in Lubbock?

BM: Well, that was part of it. And then the other part was these guys were getting married and having children and they didn't have the time or the money, and the wives were not very tolerant of it. So we sold all of it and quit.

TM: Okay. Moved on, huh? Alright. So civil engineering in Lubbock, how did that workout?

BM: Well, it was going fine. I was getting my coursework done. It was really more than I really ever thought. You know, calculus, physics, statics, dynamics, all that stuff coming at one time was just a tremendous amount of study. And because I wasn't that smart, I wasn't that good. And I had to really, really work at it. And in 1972, I left school. I left for school in '69 and my parents were able to help me some in college, but in '72 the other children were needing help in school at that point. And there was a big recession. There was a big housing

recession which really affected my father's business in a negative way, financially. And he couldn't help us anymore. Mom and Dad couldn't help any of us in school anymore. So I ended up, you know, getting a 40 hour of work, you know, regular job in Lubbock, paying $2 an hour. Nothing. And trying to go to go to school in engineering. Well, it wasn't working. By that time, only taking six, seven, eight hours of coursework and working 40 hours a week at this, not a very good job.

TM: What were you doing?

BM: Not a high pay. Well, I was working in food service and I was also working as a draftsman for an engineer. And I was tired. I was worn out mentally. I couldn't do it. I could do it. I didn't want to do it anymore. I just couldn't. I had to leave. I had to stop and make a change in my life because I was not going to continue this. It meant another four years in college and working at a no big thing jobs in Lubbock, Texas, and I can't, I just couldn't deal with the prospect of it. So I quit. And in the meantime, in 1972 or 3, I think, I don't remember, the Alaskan pipeline became a reality. They were going to build it. And when they did that, King Faisal over in Saudi Arabia was pissed about that idea that somebody else was going to have oil. And to show the world who was in charge, he turned off the oil spigot in Saudi Arabia, and soon after that it was worldwide chaos. If you remember back then, there was gas rationing, odd and even license plate days and on and on. And that all happened at the time that I decided I didn't want to be in school anymore and it was like, oh my gosh, what a stinking mess. My life is a mess. So I looked around, I needed...what I needed...I needed to find a job that I could make a whole lot of money in a short period of time, and then either enjoy life doing something or go back and finish college without having to work a 40 hour week. And actually, I wanted to finish college.

TM: So hang on. I've got a question for you just about the period now. The Vietnam War was cooking along there in the 1960s into the early '70s. How did you manage through the draft there?

BM: They came out with a deal where they drew numbers. Right? They figured out the fair thing to do because it was very unfair before. Poor people and black people were going to Vietnam and well-to-do people that were in college. There was a college exemption back then. If you were in college, you couldn't be drafted. Well, that was unfair. And so they drew straws and whatever your number was, you know, determined whether or not you went to Vietnam or were called up or whatever. And my number was 228 and they started drawing straws for people and it went up. It didn't get there. It never got to my number. So I never had to go to Vietnam. I would have. Had no choice. But at any rate, I could have gone to work. I could have, you know, gone to work and engineering and probably stayed away from the front lines. It's hard to know though. You never know for sure. I had a number of friends that came back in a pine box and that weighed heavy on my soul for a long time. Each time this would happen, I was so mad and so upset at this, that all I wanted to do was, I wanted to go to Vietnam and kill as many gooks as I could. And that was my thought. It's not a good thought. It's not a good place mentally to be. That's hate and hate is a bad emotion. There's nothing comes good out of hate or jealousy or avarice and...but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to go avenge the death of my good friends that were dying over there and I blamed it on the North Vietnamese and I wanted to kill them. As many of them as I could. Of course, my mentality about that is all changed, and I don't feel that way anymore. But I did for a while and it didn't matter about the draft, I wanted to just go over there. But my parents talked me out of it, no,

stay in school. And I grew out of that whole thought process. And then the war started coming to an end anyway. And I left college because I couldn't do it anymore. And I ended up working on the Alaskan pipeline. And that's where I made my big money.

TM: So how did that come to pass? Where were they hiring? You were in Lubbock. Were there headhunters? Actually down in Texas there?

BM: No, no. Uh-uh. Not at all. My roommate...his father was a top engineer at the Exxon refinery in Baytown, Texas. Big refineries are all down in Baytown, Texas. And I called him and I said, look, I'd like to work on that pipeline thing, you know, do you have any ideas? And he goes, well, you know, Alyeska doesn't actually...is not actually going to do the work. Alyeska is actually a consortium of all of the big oil companies that got together to build it. They said, you need to contact the subcontractors that are actually doing the work. And let me give you the name and phone number of our top engineer in Alaska on the pipeline. So I call this guy, still remember his name, Ollie Klevinger. And I said, Ollie, my name's Bruce. I'm friends with a family here. And here's my skills and here's my experience. And can I go to work? Is there anyone there that you know of that I can work for? And he goes, yep, they're looking for land surveyors. Got to get the land surveys done. And I know that business like the back of my hand. I can do it. I can survey in my sleep.

TM: So hang on a second. Hang on right there. Because so far I've been thinking about you more as a draftsman doing draftsman work. And yet land surveying is about going out with a tripod and in a total station and finding corners and doing terms and angles and a lot of math.

BM: Correct.

TM: When did you do all that?

BM: Well, my family was in that business. My grandfather and my father were also licensed land surveyors.

TM: Were you...did you start up then as a rodman for them?

BM: Oh, I started out doing anything. You know, if they needed somebody in the field, I'd drop the pencil and go out in the field and survey. And I learned it. I learned how to survey with a really old...the really old stuff. K&E transit. These are not total stations. These are electronic devices.

TM: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. K&E transit which is, you know, you've got to get the thing very level. And you got a lot of different numbers to look at and read, and you've got a foresight and the backside and angles and...

BM: Correct.

TM: When did they start getting you on the station?

BM: Oh, I was out land surveying about the same time I started drafting.

TM: So 10 or 11?

BM: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I'd been around it all my life. You know, as a kid, I was looking at these instruments, playing with stuff, playing with calculators. You know, fussing around

with things. So anyway, I also land surveyed in Lubbock. I was working for a small engineering office and they would take me out into the field whenever they needed it and putting in a draft whenever they needed it, which was good because I could do something the land surveyors couldn't do. None of them could draft. They were terrible draftsman. But I could see, I could go in the field and do work and then come back to the office and put it on paper better because I was actually in the field. I actually saw it. And so it was much easier for me to draw it because I actually saw it in the field. So I learned how to take field notes and do all of the drafting thing and do all of the land survey thing. And so I talked to two companies. All of the companies that built the Alaskan pipeline were based in an old office building downtown Seattle. All of them were in there. It was a four story building full of pipeline people. And so I called and I talked to Morrison-Knudsen, a big construction company and they said, we...yes. I do believe so. We have the...our subsidiary is...our land survey engineering subsidiary is called Quadrant. And you need to contact so-and-so over at Quadrant in the next floor down from them or whatever. So I called Quadrant. I said, yes, sir, we do. We need land surveyors. We want single men. It's what we're looking for because we're going to be up there for long periods of time and we'd rather not keep people away from their families and children. So we're looking for single guys. I said, I'm that. They went, well, that's good. We like that. So they offered me a job and I also contacted another company called Pacific Oceanographic. And they were responsible for surveying the shelf...the ocean shelf where all the oil is, and they go out in boats. And they take soundings and they determine where the shelf is and where the oil is on a boat. That's what Pacific Oceanographic does. So anyway, I ended up working. I ended up going up there and working for Pacific Oceanographic for awhile, getting sick as a dog on this damn boat.

TM: What kind of boats were you on?

BM: They're big research vessels.

TM: So this is way bigger than the family's bay boat. I mean, I'm assuming these are 50 or 60 foot long sort of shrimp boat-type size thing.

BM: It's an 80 foot research vessel. It was built for research only. And it was built especially for Pacific Oceanographic. They designed it. They built it. And I was drafting on this boat while throwing up. It was a hard thing. But I did it. And, so anyway, interesting is the drive out. I'm jumping ahead of you here. A very important part of my history in Grand Canyon is before that. And what happened was I left school...I left college and whatever I could not pile into my Satellite's Sebring Plus, I either gave it away or sold it.

TM: This is...hang on, hang on. This is a Plymouth Satellite?

BM: Yes. A Plymouth Satellite.

TM: [laugh] Four door? Or two door?

BM: Four door. Big car. And I filled it up and I took off. And I've never been out West. Never been anywhere. And so I start driving.

TM: Hang on. Oh, so you're heading to Seattle from Lubbock?

BM: That's right. And I cruise up through...I get up on the interstate and when I get to New Mexico, I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's just a land apart. I've never seen anything like it.

Seen photographs, but man, it was beautiful stuff. And I'm getting to drive through it and I drive and drive. And it was...I finished up in summer school and I finished up my summer school and it was the end of summer when I started driving. And it turns out that it was Memorial Day weekend, and I mean, there's a lot of people out there on vacation driving around. I get to Holbrook, Arizona, and I find out that all of the gas stations in Arizona are going to boycott the public. And they are not going to sell any fuel to anybody during the holiday weekend as a protest against their diminishing profits from the big major oil companies. We're squeezing them for more and more money because King Faisal had shut off the oil spigot. And there wasn't any oil. And they were charging more and more money for it, and the gas station people were making less and less profit. And they decided that they were going to make a statement and they didn't sell any oil, any gasoline. And so here I am in Holbrook, Arizona. I don't have enough fuel to escape this boycott. I can't go either direction. And so I thought to myself, I'm sitting here with all of these other people stranded on Route 66 and it's just a mad house. It's chaos. All the people in town that live in Holbrook are out selling their lawnmower fuel for $10 a gallon.

TM: Wow.

BM: And people are paying it, you know, gasoline was 43 cents a gallon back then and I couldn't afford it. And pretty soon the lawnmower gas is all gone and there's nothing. And so I look at the map and it's hot. It's hot. I mean, it's just uncomfortably hot in Holbrook and I'm thinking, oh my God, I got to stay here for three days. Are you kidding me? And I look at the map and I see Flagstaff, and I'm thinking, man, that thing's at 7,000 feet. It's gotta be cooler up there. If I'm going to have to do four days of this, I'd rather do it up there. And I had enough gas to get to Flagstaff. So I drove up there. And then the next day, and then people are stranded all over the place in Flagstaff. Everybody wants to buy everybody else's gas, right? And so I look around on the map and I find all of these small towns around Flagstaff: Pinetop, Show Low. And I made a phone call to each one of those places asking, you know, hey, are you guys part of this damn boycott thing? And they said, yes, we are. We're not selling gas. I'm like, aw man, come on. They said, no, sir, we're not selling. Ugh. So I look at the map again and I look up and there's Grand Canyon National Park. I like, well that's federal. You know, maybe they're not part of it since it's like a federal facility or something. So I called up to the South Rim. I've got a hold of the store there. What.. what's…

TM: The Babbitt's store?

BM: Yes. Babbitt's. And they said, well, there's one gas station here in town. Here's the phone number and the name of the guy. You can call him if you want. So I'll call this guy at this gas station. It's up at South Rim. There was only one, and the guy said, yeah, I'm not part of that. We're on a national park and I'm not part of that. If you can get your car up here, I'll sell you all the fuel that you want. And I said, no kidding? He says, yeah, I will. I said, alright. And I didn't know if I had enough fuel to get to South Rim, but I took off. Driving 30, 35 miles, just slow. And I drift, put it neutral down the hills. And you know, I didn't want to get stuck because there was no help. No gas. No help. And so I made it. It was dark. And so I pulled into the first overlook cause I couldn't deal with being in town. The policeman told me I couldn't park on the side of the road, so I went to an overlook somewhere and threw the sleeping bag down on the pavement and went to sleep. I got up the next morning, oh, well here I am at the Grand Canyon. I guess I should look over and see down in there. And I looked down and it was at sunrise. And this...shadows are racing at hundreds of miles an hour

across the floor of the Canyon and I was hypnotized by what I was seeing. I was taken completely. It just took over my entire sensibility and I sat there motionless for, I don't know how long, Tom. I'd just sat there. I couldn't move and watch this thing unfold. And finally the shadows begin to slow down and it was just daylight. And I went, oh my God, what is this place? What is this? I've never seen anything like it. The pictures are not like this. And I thought, ahh, I've got to go down into this. I've got to down inside of this thing. So I drove to the South Rim and sure enough he filled me up with gas and I thought, you know, I'm not going anywhere. Not yet. And I went over to the camp ground and got myself a camp spot with a picnic table. And the next day I went to the Babbitts store and got some food and stuff and I had a little day pack. And I thought I don't need a sleeping bag. I like...I can just sleep on the sand. I don't care. I'm just going down there. So I got to my camp and I'm ready, you know, and I'm gonna try and make some dinner here. I had a little stove and this lady was in camp next to me and I glanced over and it was probably the most beautiful female I've ever seen in my life. Oh my gosh, who is that? And so I said to her, I said, would you care for dinner? Are you hungry? And she smiled at me and came over and said something, but I didn't understand her. She was a foreigner. She was from Denmark. And so anyway, I got to understanding her and I...we had dinner together and it was just a magic moment. And she had just hiked from the bottom...Phantom Ranch and she just hiked back up. She was in the United States to see the United States before she had to go to law school. And she wouldn't ever be able to do it again. So she was out discovering the United States, and she was at Grand Canyon at that point. And we just fell into each other's arms. And I said, well, I've got to go down there. I have to go see the place. And she said, well, I'll go with you. So she marched right back down there again. [laugh] And we ended up camping at the boat beach. No one cared back then. No one cared.

TM: What year was this?

BM: And we...1972.

TM: Okay.

BM: 1972. And her name was Vivi Knudsen. Most beautiful woman still that I have ever seen with my own eyes. And we fell in love in the Grand Canyon and stayed down there for three days. We ate breakfast over at the lodge in the morning cause we didn't have any food. And we would try and eat dinner over there if they would let us. We had money but no food. And we just had a wonderful, wonderful time together. And we were laying in the shade at the beach. We didn't have any clothes on. And we're just enjoying the shade of the Canyon right there at the boat beach. And in came these wooden boats. Wooden boats! And I'm thinking, what the heck, how can I do that? And it was Martin Litton. And he came to shore. And with his beautiful dories. They were so pretty. And we talked for a while and they were mostly interested in Vivi. Because she's so beautiful. And there was...they were supporting a bunch of kayakers and the kayakers came in, you know, directly and parked. And the kayakers were the East German Olympic Kayak Team. [laugh] And they were down there practicing to do the Olympics. They thought that that would be good practice.

TM: Uh, that's a lot of flat water. [laugh]

BM: Well, yes, but they were just, you know, they just wanted to do it. And they had...they were the best in the country and they had the clout and they came over. But they also had

their Soviet handlers to make sure they didn't defect. So here's these guys with pistols hidden in their, you know, stuff in the Grand Canyon. They're down there with guns and Martin Litton and his dories and the East German Olympic Kayak Team. [laugh] You never know. And I saw this. And I talked to them and we had a wonderful conversation. They've got their water and they left.

TM: So hang on a second. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you remember about the boats that Martin had and the types of boats that the Germans were kayaking?

BM: Martin's boats were beautifully painted boats. They each had a name on them that I didn't understand and they were like nothing I've ever seen, Tom. I've never seen a boat like this before. You know, sharply upturned on each end and just wide, really wide looking things. And they just bob around. They...every little wave that little boat just bobbing and moving around and the kayakers were just standard plastic looking kayaks.

TM: Well, were these a four meter long boats or had they shortened up by then? Were they running something on the order of 12 feet or 9 feet? What were they doing?

BM: 12 foot...

TM: So 4 meters is about 15 or 16 feet. That was...,

BM: No, they weren't that long. I don't think they were sure pointy on the ends. Like a kayak. But they were not... They were more than 12, 13 feet long. I could be wrong. It was the boats that they were gonna use in the Olympics, whatever that was. And they disappeared around the corner. So both Vivi and I scurried up. We'd put our clothes on by then, of course, but we scurried up and walked around the rocks. We just couldn't get enough of them. They were so cool. And we've watched them go around the corner and we've watched them go under the bridge and then disappear into the Canyon. And I stood there and that was a seminal moment in my life, really. I looked at them, disappeared down the river, and I thought to myself, where are they going? And what are they doing? Just what are those guys doing on this river? I don't know. I wanna know. I want to know where they're going and what they're doing. And that's when it started, Tom. That's when it started. I was...I watched Martin disappear into the Canyon and it's sparked a curiosity that never quit. Never left me.

TM: So then you were...you're still heading to Seattle and this is tough because you're with this beautiful woman in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. How did you leave?

BM: Well, we hiked back out and it was a tearful goodbye. I'm going to come see you in Denmark just as soon as I can get there. And she vowed to take time out of her life to go with me anywhere I wanted to go in Denmark or Sweden. And it was a hard parting, but we said goodbye to each other and I kept on going. And finally ended up... finally, finally drove and got to Seattle.

TM: So you had to get...you had a full tank of gas and you had to get to Nevada to get more gas.

BM: I didn't care. I...this woman came into my life and changed everything up for the weekend. And they were going to start selling gas as soon as the weekend... the holiday weekend was over. There is no more fuel problem. The boycott is now over and there everyone is selling gas again and no problem. And so I continued driving. I didn't drive

straight to Seattle. I had relatives in Los Angeles and one of them needed a ride to Seattle. So I drove to Los Angeles and picked up my uncle, and then we drove on up to Seattle together.

TM: The little car must have been really packed.

BM: Ugh. I had to get rid of stuff. I'm not a very efficient packer, so my uncle, he said, well, we need to make some room here. So he took every box I had and rolled every little piece of clothing up into a tight, tight wad and stuffed it into smaller boxes and said, do you really need this? Nah, I guess not. And so we left some things with my relatives and packed his things in there and we went on.

TM: This was your mother's brother?

BM: Uh-huh. Yeah. And he started his business up there. And he had work up there and so did I. So we ended up sleeping in a slip cover factory in Seattle. Sleeping on the floor of a slipcover factory with all those sewing machines and stuff. And we would have to, you know, get ourselves together before 7:30 when people would start coming in to go to work. And...

TM: How was it that he had the permission to sleep there?

BM: Because the lady that owned the sewing shop moved her business from Los Angeles to Seattle. And Henry, my uncle, had been working for her in Los Angeles. And she said, Henry, if you come to Seattle, I will put you to work. So that's how we knew her and the sewing factory. And she was patient in letting me stay there. It was only a few days. Only a few days.

TM: Right. You know what? Hey Bruce, we've been going off for about an hour and…

BM: Oh, you're kidding me. [laugh]

TM: …this seems like a like a good place to maybe wrap up Part One.

BM: Okay.

TM: And so, kind of looking back on just the travel up, cause I think we can start at the slipcover factory for our next interview and the work your way up to Alaska. Is there anything else about the drive up to the slipcover factory that you'd want to cover before we call this one good and then start another one down the road?

BM: Well, only to say that I was a wild-eyed kid in a candy shop after seeing the west. I'd never seen it. Never been there. I'd been to Los Angeles, but I'd never been in between Los Angeles and Dallas.

TM: Hey, wait, hang on a second. It's a really good point. Had you flown out to LA from Texas?

BM: Yes.

TM: And so you would look out the window and seen the country, but it didn't impress you...

BM: Yeah.

TM: ...like it did when you drove it.

BM: Well, no, not at all.

TM: Okay.

BM: I mean, it was interesting, but we were kids. We just wanted to play on the airplane. We didn't care much what was out the window and we just wanted to get there and get off that airplane. But yeah, we look down and see stuff and go, oh, isn't that interesting? Mostly what was interesting was bodies of water. A big river was interesting. A big lake, you know, was interesting. But all the stuff in between, not so much. Not terribly interesting.

TM: Not like boots on the ground.

BM: Not at all. No. No comparison.

TM: Okay. Well, with that, maybe we should wrap up this Part One interview.

BM: Okay. Okay.

TM: Alright. This has been...well this will conclude then Part One interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Today is May 13th, 2019. And Bruce, thank you so very much.

BM: Well, thank you Tom. And we'll continue with whatever you'd like to talk about. Have a good day now.

TM: Alright. Thank you. Bye-bye.