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Interviewee: Dennis Endishee (DE)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Sunday. It's March 12, 2023. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Dennis Endishee. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Dennis. How are you doing today?

DE: I'm good.

TM: Great. Dennis, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

DE: Yes.

TM: Thank you. Dennis, what year were you born, and where were you born?

DE: My birthday is 12/27/1959 over in Goulding, Utah.

TM: Okay, Goulding. So that's Four Corners, Monument Valley country.

DE: Yes.

TM: Cool! Hey, how did your— Do you know how your mom met your dad?

DE: I don't know. All I know is that we've been together to the day that my mom, you know— She's gone now. And I was working over there at Navajo Bridge, you know, back in 19—oh, geez—96 or something like that.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Ninety-five, '96. So did you go to school there at Goulding?

DE: No, I went to school in Monument Valley.

TM: Okay, cool. And how did you get into iron?

DE: My brother is, uh— Monument Valley High School, that's when I graduated back in '86, '87. Then I went to Tuba City in '77 and '78. That's where I graduated. Got in the ironworkers in '79. I graduated, and I went into the apprenticeship from there.

TM: So that was down in Phoenix?

DE: Yes. I went to Chicago, you know.

TM: Was that your first job, apprenticing in Chicago?

DE: Yeah, I went to school down there, and Mike Charley was one of the guys that, you know, he was there, too.

TM: Really? So Mike was doing apprentice apprenticeship as well at the time?

DE: Yeah, yeah. At the time back in 1979. We graduated back in 19— I think it's 19— It was only, like, six months or something that we went to training, you know. But from there, I got on this job. I already had experience before I even got into the Navajo Bridge.

TM: So tell me about your first job in Chicago. What was that like? What did you do?

DE: It was like an environment thing. It was like a bar joist and all this, you know. And later on, I got into it, you know.

TM: What was that first job in Chicago like?

DE: Just the experience with bar joist and things like that. There was two people that got killed. I got on that job because a bar joist contacted to a power line or something like that, and both people got killed. I already knew that it was a dangerous job, and both of them got killed. From that point, you know, I always been cautious about what I'm going

to get into. And a long run, it wasn't nothing close to what I'm doing on our bridge job, but then we're dealing with the 520 feet above Colorado River, you know.

TM: Yeah. Hey, before we get to the Navajo Bridge, where did you go after the Chicago job? Tell me a little bit about the experience you got in the 1980s working iron?

DE: I was working at Four Corner powerhouse with no— This is back in the not even being tied off or nothing like that.

TM: Oh, back in the old days. Wow.

DE: Yeah, riding the heavy ball and things like that, you know. I was working at San Juan generating station, and from there I got there I got into a— A guy that got, he fell 50 feet, you know, under the turbine deck. Then I took his place. And this is my early 20s. He died seven days later. I took his place. I was, like, 20 years old, and I wasn't even scared of nothing. I used to be walking around on the structural and everything else, and I used to be a connector. From there, I got my experience and everything, you know. This is no tie-out days. Up to this day, that change, you know. Back then, I wasn't scared. I never used to walk in the corner. I used the boom, boom, boom, boom, just like a cat clear across. I used to unhook it and, uh— A lot of things I have done that I looked at it back in my younger days, they don't even consider that up to this day that, you know, that it was unsafe.

TM: Yeah. Okay, so as connector, that's like the bolt-up crew?

DE: No, it's putting up the iron. The iron used to come up, and I used to bolt it up.

TM: So a raising gang.

DE: Yes.

TM: Cool, and that was working on the San Juan generating station, that big power plant.

DE: No, the Four Corner powerhouse back in 1981. I was, like, only 20 years old.

TM: Where did you go from there when that job was over?

DE: From there, I was sitting at home, and all of a sudden, I got this call, and I worked in the valley for a long time there doing rock busting.

TM: What was that job like?

DE: That's all rebar, you know. That's the only job there was.

TM: Ah. So, concrete.

DE: Yeah.

TM: Yeah. How long were you in the valley doing that?

DE: That was the only job at the time. If you don't work— That was the only job, that rebar work.

TM: Okay, and that was in the 1980s?

DE: Yes, up to '85, you know.

TM: And then what happened in 1985?

DE: I kind of lost interest in a lot of things because of marriage and all that, you know. But when it came down to Navajo Bridge, I just took off, and I went on that job.

TM: So between '85 and '95, you're kind of a family guy, raising a family?

DE: Yes.

TM: Okay. How did you hear about the Navajo Bridge job?

DE: I knew that was coming up. It was something people were talking about. And then I looked into it, and I got on. Ever since then, that Navajo Bridge, that was a good job that was steady, close to home.

TM: Okay. Did you get that through the Arizona Union 75 Ironworkers?

DE: Yes, I knew it was coming up. I heard about it, and I looked into it. And I wanted to get on, and I got on, you know.

TM: Cool. So who was your boss when you were up there? Do you remember?

DE: All I know it's a guy named Dave. He was the floor super or something like that.

TM: Okay. Was he from the South? Was that Dave Meche?

DE: Yeah, he was from the South, you know. He was the guy that was my boss, and then he gave me the blueprints and everything else like that. I had to touch the iron from when it first came. I touched it about five times before it went into, you know, to the bottom of the erection. So each time I have to go one, two, three, zero. If you look at your hands, you have to go from the bottom to the top to the bottom to the top. Each time I had to think how the blueprint tell me how to, you know, each one of those erections gonna be, you know, to the point that we only had a certain amount of room. So each time I had to turn, it has to be on the bottom and on top, the bottom, on the top. But when I have to go put it up on the— It had to be on top; it's gonna be on the bottom, you know.

TM: So your job on the Navajo Bridge was as a rigger, or were you in the raising gang?

DE: I was in a rigger. Each time I touched the iron, whatever's on the bottom had to be on the bottom, the top on the bottom and the top. But when the— With that skip coming up, whatever is on the bottom it's going to be on the first one that's going to be going down, you know. The bottom core was 16 tons. And I meant that sure that, you know, that one goes on first. Everything else is going to be on top.

TM: Who do you remember was driving the crane?

DE: I don't even remember that far. But the company of the people that was there, was there; and all I did was just my job.

TM: Okay, so your job was to make sure that now that this steel— Steel's on the ground. It goes from the ground out to this, kind of, flat car sort of thing that then went out to where the crane was.

DE: They call it a skip. It comes back, and then I have to load it all up. But when it goes back, when that crane turns around, I have to have everything that was on the bottom be on top because whatever was on the bottom is going to be, you know, on top.

TM: So it has to be the first down to the—

DE: Yeah, the first down—

TM: Got it. Alright, so that's a lot of thinking on your part to get right.

DE: Yeah.

TM: Yeah, cool. You know, Dennis, when you first got out there to that job and were looking around, what were some of your first thoughts?

DE: I was young. I was young, about 30, you know, at the time, and I was active. And they gave me the blueprints, and I told him what needs to be done. The man just told me that, you know, I want these iron over here, and I had to start thinking right off the bat. I had to figure everything out my own, you know, what I had to do.

TM: Do you remember an older guy named Ed, Ed Kent? He was tall and wiry, thin guy. Kind of the super of the job.

DE: Yeah, he was the bolt-up guy, and I don't think he's around no more. But he was there. But then he was the bolt-up guy, but I heard that he was gone.

TM: Yeah, that's right. What do you remember about him? What was he like? He was also from the South.

DE: Yes, I'd never really, you know, contact with them because I'm always out in the yard. As far as I know, he had a lot of experience. He'd tell me about ironworkers back in the South. Other than that, you know, I really didn't have contact with them because I'm always out in the yard.

TM: Okay. Were you driving the small crane there to load up the skip?

DE: Well, there was an operator that's always, you know, lifting up things and that, so I'm always on the—more like moving things with the choker and everything else like that.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so you're rigging for the operator on a land crane, on the rubber-tire land crane.

DE: Yes.

TM: Alright, and how did it all fit together? I mean, did it go pretty good or was it a little bumpy to start?

DE: Well, yeah, everything I did— What I did is just always what the blueprint tell me what to do, all the sequence and everything. And that's the only thing that kept me going, it's just the blueprint itself. Other than that, you know, I touched the iron when it unloads. When I touch it about five times, you know, before it even goes up inside the erection itself. I touch it about five times.

TM: Wow. And somebody was telling me that the iron came out from, I don't know, Indiana or somewhere on semi—

DE: Yeah.

TM: —just enough to keep ahead of you guys.

DE: Yeah, it came out, and I had to unload it. And then I go through what the blueprint tell me to do. That's the only thing that, you know— And then from there, I had to take it by sequence, you know, one, two, three, four or even whatever's on the bottom is gonna be on top, you know, by the time it goes inside the erection itself.

TM: Oh, wow. Okay, so did that start, like, when the semi came up, the first stuff you took off the semi wasn't going to be the first stuff that went out on the skip necessarily?

DE: Yes, I had to load it up, then whatever's on the bottom, whatever is going to be on the top. All that I had to do and, you know, think about it. Five times, five times because there's no room for no—my cherry picker, his crane, I had to pick it up. And whatever's on the bottom is going to be on top again. I had to do it at five times, you know, every time we go up to the skip. Whatever is on the bottom is going to be on top before even the crane comes around and picks it up, you know.

TM: Got it. Okay, and then did you— Where did you stay when you were working there?

DE: I had a brother that was commuting in Page. That's where I had, you know, my lodging and all that came from him. I was just, kind of, carpooling.

TM: That makes sense. And then on the weekends, did you go back to Monument Valley?

DE: No, I went back to Kayenta. That's where my family was.

TM: Okay, back to K-Town. Alright.

DE: Yeah, Kayenta. Yes.

TM: Cool. So not that far away to commute. Was your brother working on the bridge too, or was he doing something else?

DE: No, he was working at Navajo Generating Station there in Page. I think he had a trailer on the backside, and that's where I was staying at, you know.

TM: Who else do you remember working on the job with you?

DE: There was—ah— Boy, there was all kinds of guys that, you know, the Navajo guys like Woody Nez and then, uh, Smith—geez, let me see. yeah. Boy, I know Mike Charley and, uh, geez. There was just a bunch of Navajos that were working on that job. you know. It's been a long time. I'm kind of losing my memory, you know.

TM: Well, that's why we're talking now is to get it down. Louie Begay was there.

DE: Louie Begay and—

TM: Cal Tso

DE: Cal Tso, yes, and Mike Charley.

TM: Right.

DE: Woody Nez.

TM: What do you remember about Woody?

DE: Woody Nez, he was the oldest one. I think he's still living, and he lives out there in Page, Arizona, you know, and he was there.

TM: What was he doing? Remember what his job was?

DE: He was just working with the apprentice, but at the time, the apprentice did all the work, you know. But he was there supervising and telling him what to do and everything else like that.

TM: That's neat. And he's still living in Page?

DE: Yeah, he's still living as a LeChee, you know. I remember him being out near there then he's still living.

TM: Wonder how I get in touch with him.

DE: Probably go with the LeChees, you know, the chapter house and try to contact him.

TM: Okay, I'll try that. Yeah. What do you remember about Mike Charley?

DE: Mike Charley? Me and him, we went through apprenticeship in Chicago. We took that training, and that's where I knew him back in 19—oh, geez—1979 or something like that.

TM: Was he also from Monument Valley?

DE: No, he lives in Chilchinbito.

TM: Where's that?

DE: By Kayenta.

TM: Okay.

DE: So that's the last time I really got in touch with them other than that, you know. But he's from that area. Mike Charley has been around the ironworkers for a lot of years.

TM: Cool. And then what do you remember about Louie?

DE: Louie? I haven't heard nothing about Louie because I think he does rock busting, you know. And I haven't seen him over at the union halls because I worked at the stadium over there, Raiders Stadium. And then also I worked over there at the— Oh, gee, it's a Chinese, you know, it's a Chinese—geez, I forget what the name was. Anyways, I worked in Vegas about two years, and then from there, you know, I just kind of hung it up right now, you know, 'cause I'm retired now. Royal Resort, that's where it was. I worked about close to a year over there before I even started working iron you know, because I belong to the boilermakers too.

TM: Alright, and what do you remember about Cal?

DE: Cal Tso was connected for a lot of years, and I just all of a sudden heard about his passing, you know.

TM: Oh, I'm sorry.

DE: I knew him back in apprenticeship. He went to— A lot of guys, they all went to Vegas for more money, you know, and he was one of them. So was Al Francis and a lot of guys that I know.

TM: Okay. And then, umm— Let's see, who else? Oh, Al Bigman.

DE: Al Bigman, he was young. he didn't know how to read the blueprint and all. He's the one that I was breaking in. Up to this day, everybody wants him, you know. He goes to California. He goes to Las Vegas. He goes to you know Arizona and everything. That's all he does is rigging. But at the time when I was breaking him in, he didn't know nothing. Up to this date, he's the number one guy, you know.

TM: Cool. Well, you did good.

DE: Yes.

TM: Well done. So once the first half was out there, then you all moved around to the to the Marble Canyon side, to the lodge side.

DE: Yes.

TM: What was that moving around like? Did it go pretty smooth?

DE: Yes. I didn't stay there, you know, but I commuted from Page, so I've never stayed there. Some of the guys that used to commute there just stayed there in their vehicle, and that's where they stayed, you know, but I didn't stay there.

TM: Alright, yeah. You got a place to stay in Page that would be a lot more comfortable than sleeping in your truck or whatever. And then building out from the Marble Canyon/lodge side kind of repeated what you've done already on the Flagstaff side just again.

DE: Yes, I had a family out in Kayenta, and that's where I'd go back every weekend when I'm not working.

TM: Nice. What else do you remember about that job? I was thinking, was it pretty easy to understand those guys from the South? They would have had quite the accent.

DE: Well, what I've noticed is that all Navajos, and a lot of them were adjusted to the heights and things like that, you know. I didn't have no fear back then, but up to this day, I think about it and doing all that. And it is complicated where that you're dealing with height, and you're dealing with net down below, but then we're not tied off or nothing like that, you know, so you can walk around. Everything is more, like, you know— It's just courage, probably, you know. Self-discipline. And a lot of things that happened out there, everybody was focusing on not falling down or nothing like that. There was a treacherous job site and everything that, you know, but everybody knew about what's going on and their surrounding and trying to be safe.

Communication is one of the things that, you know, the key things that we have. I knew my job, what I had to do. I was a rigger, and a lot of the things that I learned from that job, I still try to teach people that, you know. It's their apprenticeship and things like that, what I've gone through. I was young. I already had experience in a lot of things so— And Navajo Bridge was one of the steppingstones that, you know, that I actually knowledge and to teach other people.

TM: Very cool. Let's see—were you there the day they hooked the pin in, put that centerpiece in and brought the two halves together?

DE: No, that day I was on foot. I didn't have the vehicle to go home, and the guy that I'm riding with, he said that “I'm going home.” So I just jumped in with him, and I didn't do the last hookup because I didn't have a vehicle, you know. I was on foot the whole time.

TM: That makes sense. Let's see, I'm trying to think of who it— David Meche was there. He was your boss. And Andy, Andy McLeroy was running the crane. He was running the big crane out there on the bridge.

DE: Okay.

TM: And there was a guy named Ronnie Mac, Ronnie “Mac” McFarland. He was also from the South. He was there. Do you remember him?

DE: I know all the guys that were there. It's more like a discrimination, like, you know. I had the radio for a while, and then I was told that I can't hold the radio because of— I don't know. It's just more like discrimination, you know, to me, it was.

TM: Tell me about that. What was going down?

DE: It was more like natives and that they don't want me to hold the radio and things like that. The people from the South, they don't want me to hold the radio. There was, like, discrimination, you know. That's the way I felt. They took the radio away from me, you know.

TM: Huh!

DE: Everywhere is like that back then. it's the discrimination, you know. They don't want me to hold the radio.

TM: Huh. That's stupid.

DE: Yeah, that was back then.

TM: So it was like that back then.

DE: Yeah, it was back then, you know. They didn't want me to hold the radio because, you know, I don't know. They probably looked at it where that I can't hold the radio just like them, you know, so they took that radio away from me, man.

TM: Huh. Alright—

DE: Even though I was in the top hand, you know, where the iron goes and all that. I was one at the top guys that should be holding the radio but then they took that away from me.

TM: So when the steel was all loaded up on the skip, would you then go out on the skip with it and then rig it up to the big crane?

DE: If I didn't have nothing to do, I'd be up on the skip, getting all the chokers and cleaning the house and everything else. And, you know, When the crane comes around, I already had to choker and everything all ready, you know. I did a lot on the skip when I was not doing nothing, you know. I'd catch up and everything.

TM: Cool. How did the skip get out to the crane out there?

DE: With cable, cable that was, you know, air tugger. It pulled itself all the way out there to where it needs to be at. And then once it's all, you know— All the iron goes down,

and I already had the skip all ready, and I'd just loaded back up. I'd load everything, you know, and have it ready.

TM: Cool.

DE: That was my job, you know, to have it ready. All I had to do is just load everything back up so whatever is on the bottom is always on top, ready to be lowered down into the job itself. I had a lot in my hand.

TM: Yeah, I bet you did. How many pieces of iron would you typically get on the skip? Do you remember?

DE: Close to 30 pieces of iron.

TM: Thirty?

DE: Yeah, 30. At least small iron, everything. Cross braces, and then the bottom skip and 16 tons, the bottom core. Those are number one, you know—

TM: The big ones. Yeah.

DE: —that goes down first, you know.

TM: Okay. And then slowly on moving more and more stuff out there.

DE: Yeah. By the time I get most of it out of there, and then I go back up to the yard and wait for the next skip to go out there, you know, constantly, constantly iron being going down.

TM: How long would it take you to load up that skip?

DE: Two days.

TM: Wow.

DE: That's moving things and everything, you know, and then up to the point that it's ready to come back, and I'm already ready, you know, because the blueprint tells me what to do. That's the only thing.

TM: Cool. That makes sense to, like, alright, this is the next one and this is the next one.

DE: Yes.

TM: And you have to figure that out because you can't have something underneath another piece, and if they need the piece underneath, that doesn't work.

DE: That doesn't work. Everything's gotta be within sequence. Whatever's at the bottom's gonna be the last one that be going in, you know. Whatever's on top, it's got to be the one that be going in first. But I got to figure that out, you know, how to stack it. It was more like complex job because you're working within the confined area that you have to go in, top, in, top. And the last piece that goes in, it's going to be on the top again because that one there is on the bottom of the iron, you know. But when the crane turns around, that one's going to be on top, you know.

TM: That's got to be the first one off.

DE: Yeah, that'd be the first one off.

TM: And you got to make sure that stuff doesn't move once you set it on that skip. You don't want it falling or sliding or do any of that stuff.

DE: Yes, everything that I did over there was, like, five times when it unloads and to the point that where it lowers down to the bridge, you know. I touch it five times, you know.

TM: Okay, alright. What else do you remember about that?

DE: It was a good job. And the guys that were actually doing all the bolt up and things like that, I never got my hands in that position. But then I was in charge with the crane. I was in charge with all the pieces that go in, and I was a rigger, you know. There's a lot of things that, you know, that happened on the job that I didn't really know, but all that did is just my job itself, you know. And I appreciated everything that I did there, but I was already experienced.

TM: Do you recommend young kids in high school there at Kayenta or Monument Valley, do you recommend those guys get into iron work?

DE: It's only, you know, up to the individual. But I did experience a lot of people that got in and they quit and things like that. But you're dealing with heights. You're dealing with emotional or, you know, stress and things like that. if you don't have that, it's not the right, you know, trade to be in because you're dealing with heights and the balance and

everything else if you're on the iron, you know. But I retired now, and I'm supposed to be withdrawing my pension and everything else like that. If you can go that far— Because I've been in the ironworkers since '79. I reinstated it back in '81, and I just barely hung up my belt just recently, you know. So in the long run, it's up to the individual. Yes, it is a hard job. it's the hardest job there is in the trade. People that get the foot in the door, it's up to them if they're gonna stay in.

TM: Okay, but it sounds like it's if you're good at heights, and you got to work under pressure— But it sounds like you can make a career out of it.

DE: Yes, it's up to the individual if they want to stay in or stay, you know, just retired. Not retired but, you know, move on to another trade because they can't be up in the area where they're not comfortable. The money is good and things like that. It don't pay no more than electricians. Electricians always [got] their foot on the ground, you know.

TM: Okay, and also as we get older, what's easy for me in my 20s, not quite so easy in my 50s or 60s.

DE: Yes. In my early 20s and 30s, I used to throw deck and do this and that, you know, throw rods being a rod hand and all that, you know. That's how I raised my kids, you know. Most of the bridges over there in Phoenix, I did it all. Up to this day I always say that, you know, my younger days, nobody couldn't throw a deck with me up to this day.

TM: Cool. Well, I certainly want to thank you for all the work that you did to build America's infrastructure.

DE: Yes.

TM: You know, we just don't think about the people who do the work to make the stuff done.

DE: Yes.

TM: Who else do you think I should talk with?

DE: Well, Woody Nez, if you can get a hold of him. He's a lot older than I am, but he's still living. He's still over there in Kachee by Page, Arizona. And then Wayne Smith. Wayne Smith that was his partner. He lives over in Gap area. I don't know if he's still listed under the ironworkers or things like that. He might be out of Las Vegas 433 Hall. You might get the phone number off them.

TM: Okay. I'll ask Sangster. I'll ask Jason maybe to help a little bit.

DE: Yeah, those are the people that was on the job. Other than that, you know, I just did my job at the time. But it's really good that you're doing some kind of documentary about this job, you know because this is all Navajo. Back in 1927 there was the first bridge, and then the Page bridge itself is all white people, you know. But now this is all Navajos that built that bridge.

TM: That's right.

DE: I am glad that I was upon that bridge itself, you know. There's all Navajos, nothing but Navajos that built that bridge.

TM: Cool. Yeah, I'm with you 100% and just trying to track people down and get their stories, so—

DE: The Navajos took over the Western Hemisphere. The Mohawks has got the East, but us Navajos, we're No. 1 because I looked at it over at the Raiders Stadium; Navajos can outwork the Mohawks.

TM: Cool. Cool. And anything else you remember about that job?

DE: Yes, I got a son that's an ironworker, too. He's following in my footsteps, you know.

TM: Nice. Congrats.

DE: He's at Derek Industries, and he's a journeyman. So he went through the apprenticeship and everything, so he's following in my footsteps, you know.

TM: Awesome. Good for you. You must be very proud of him.

DE: Yes.

TM: Alright. Well, with that, I'm gonna turn the tape machine off, and but let's talk a little bit before I go. But I will wrap up the tape by saying this will conclude a Grand Canyon oral history about the Navajo Bridge with Dennis Endishee. Today is Sunday. It's March 12, 2023. My name is Tom Martin. And Dennis, thank you so very much.

DE: Yes, I appreciate everything that you're doing for us. I never thought that anything's going to be in the oral history of things at the time, you know. But it's really nice. I look back in the days I was out there, you know, building the whole bridge itself. It's something that commemorates that I can tell my grandkids I built this bridge, you know.

TM: Absolutely. Absolutely. Very cool. Alright, hang on a second.