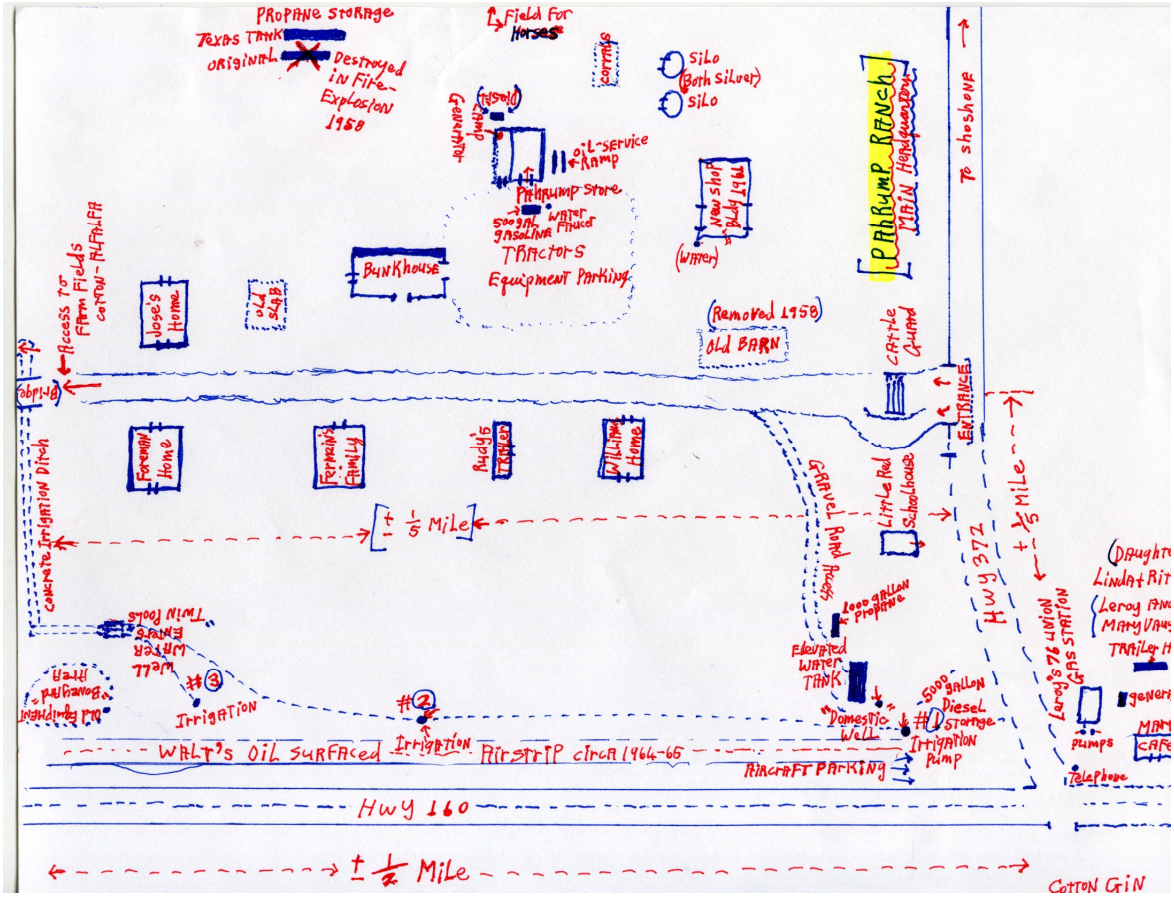
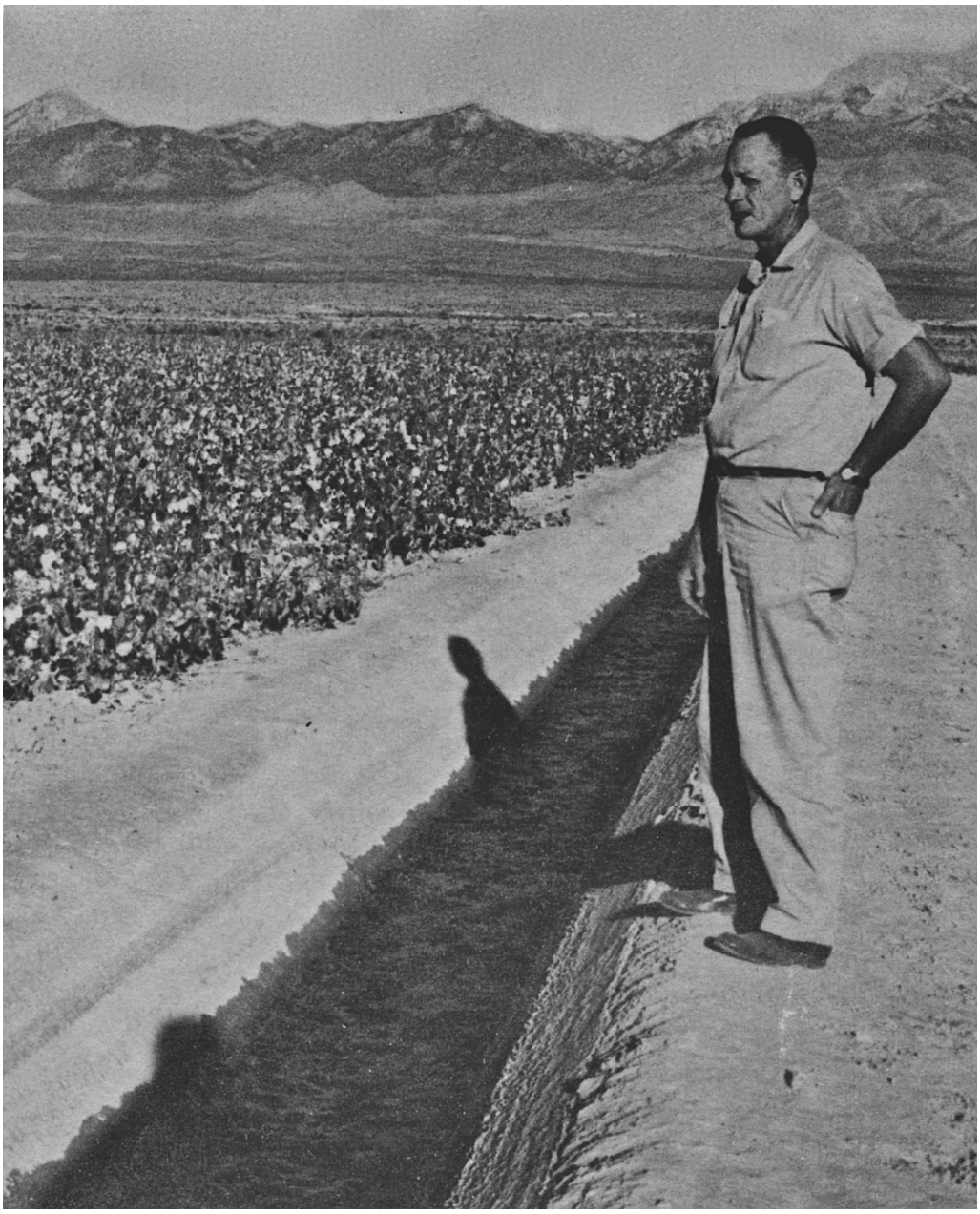
An Interview With

Mark Williams

An Oral History produced by
Robert D. McCracken

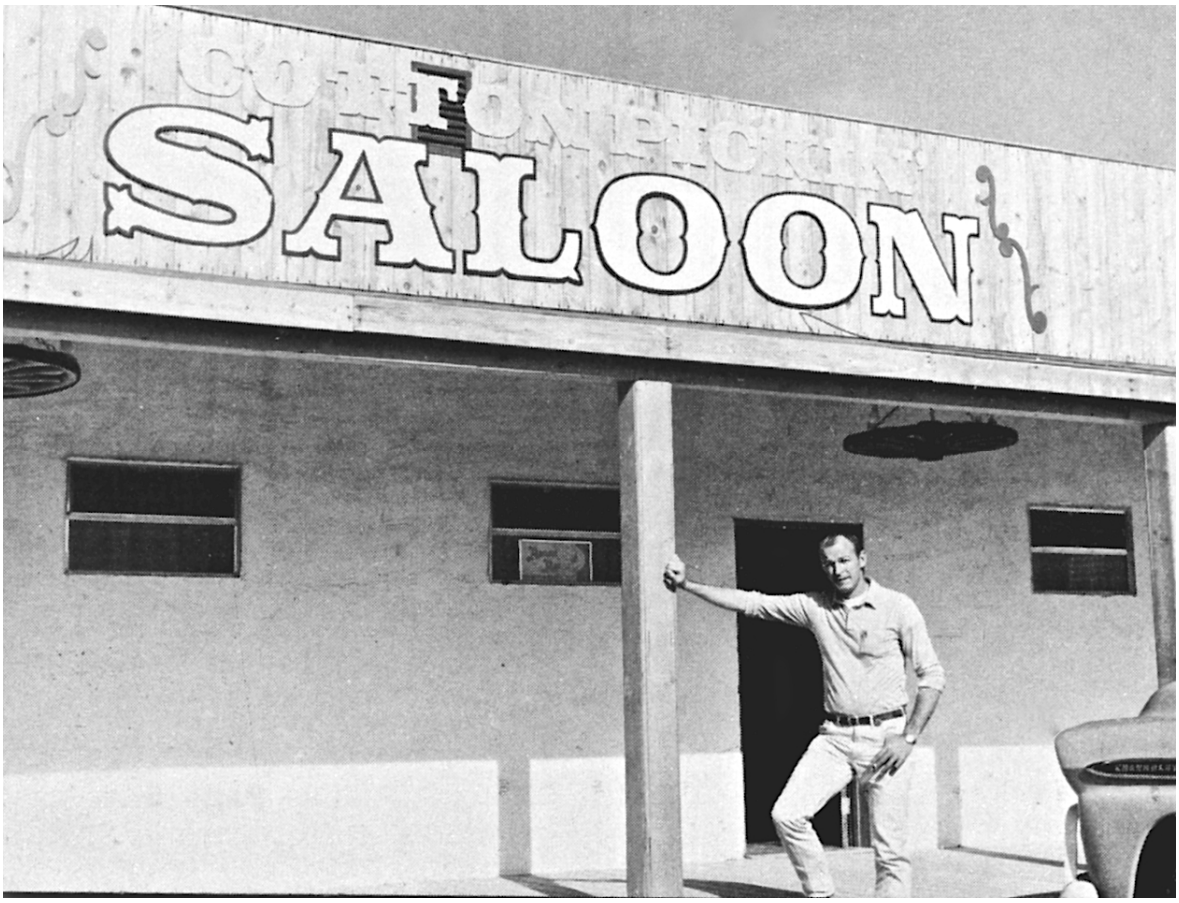


Map of Pahrump Ranch, Pahrump, Nevada, showing the barracks/bunkhouse circa 1960. Not to scale. Drawn by Mark Williams in 2012.



Walt Williams, owner of the Pahrump Ranch, standing by irrigation ditch in a cotton field, Pahrump Ranch, Pahrump, Nevada, May 1957. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

Walt Williams beside the airstrip located on the Pahrump Ranch, Pahrump, Nevada, circa 1960. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

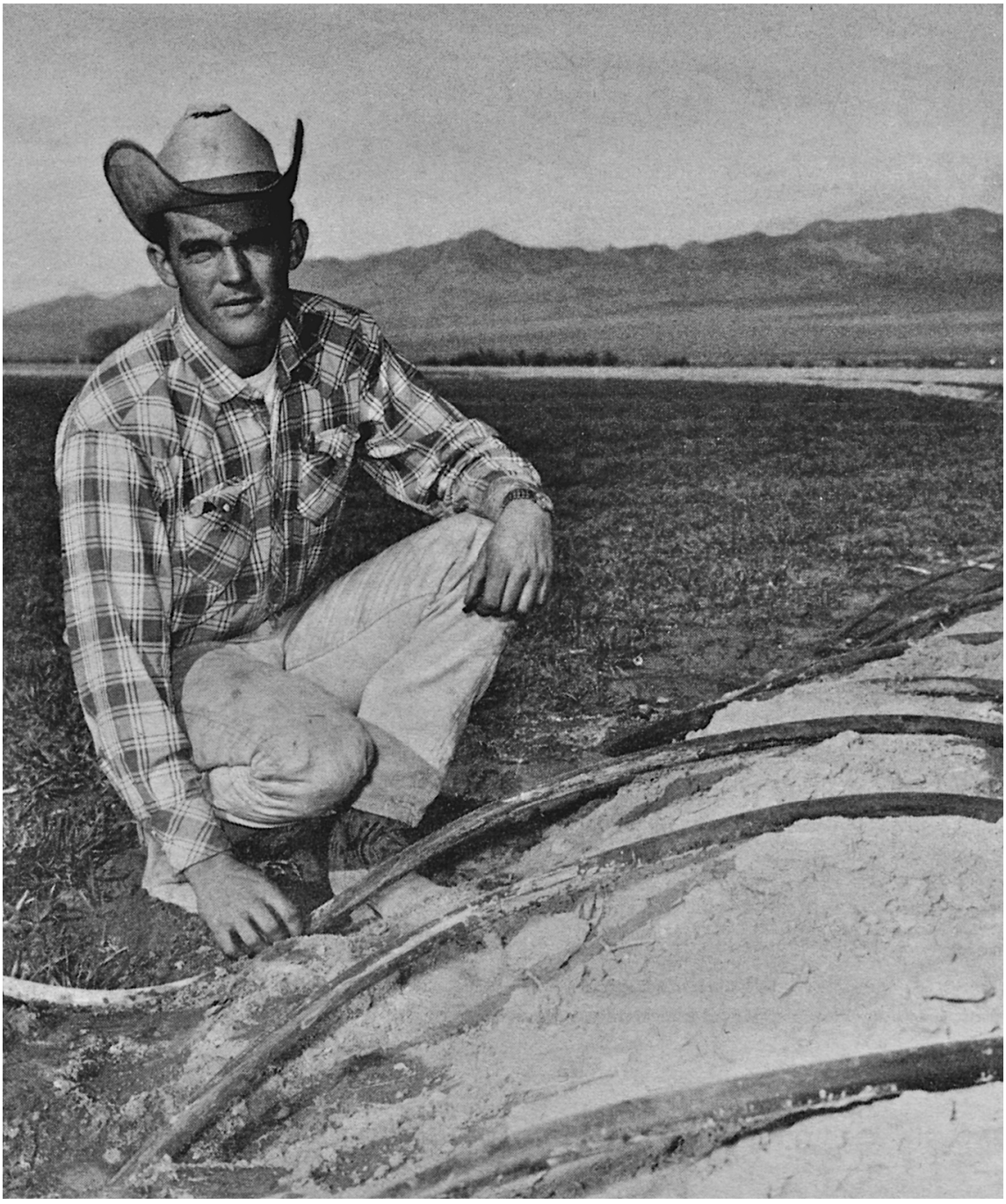


Rick Williams, son of Walt and Nancy Williams and brother to Mark Williams, circa 1962. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

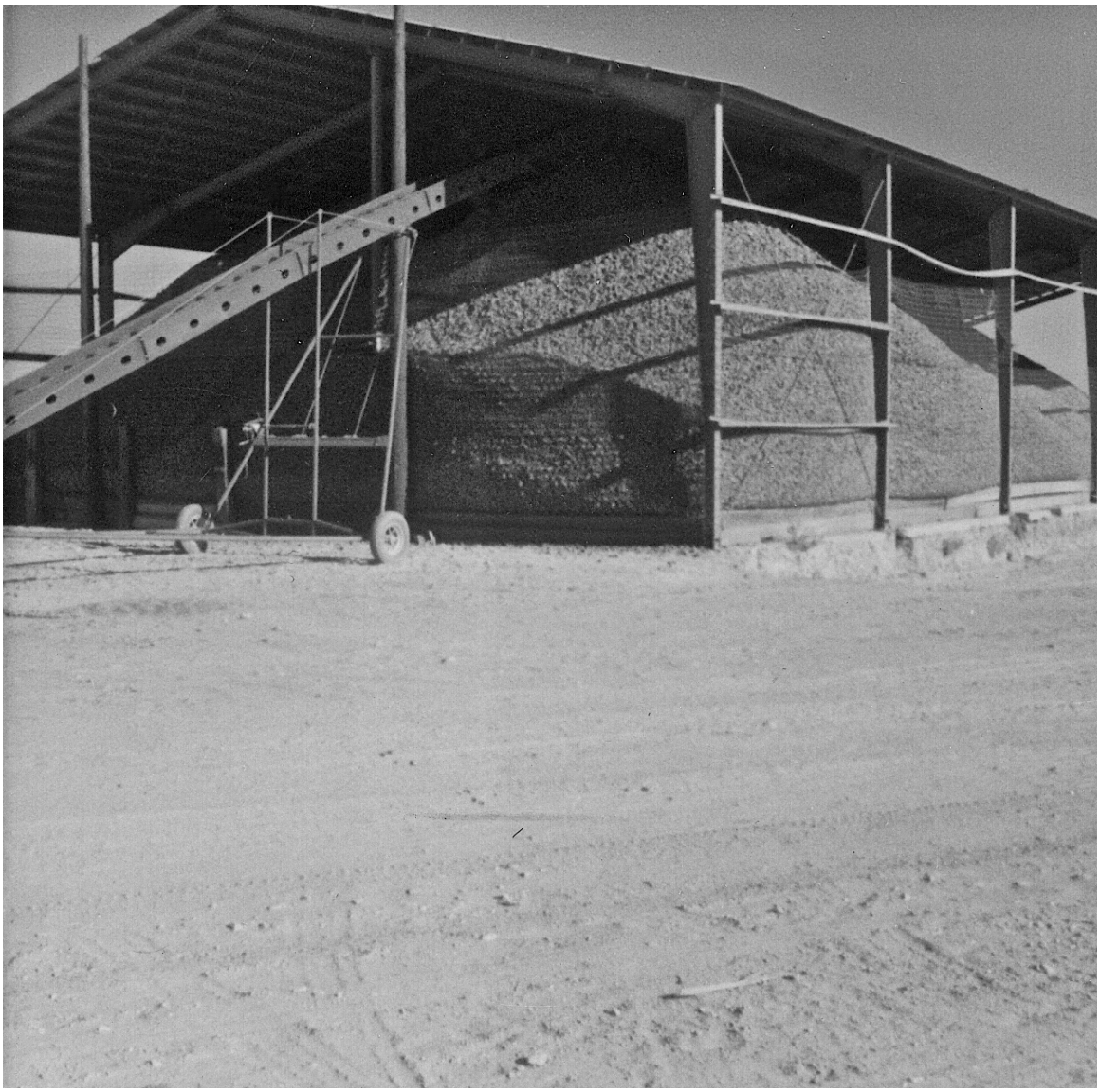
Trailers filled with Pahrump Valley cotton, circa 1960. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

Preparing the land for planting cotton, Pahrump Ranch, Pahrump, Nevada, circa 1960. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

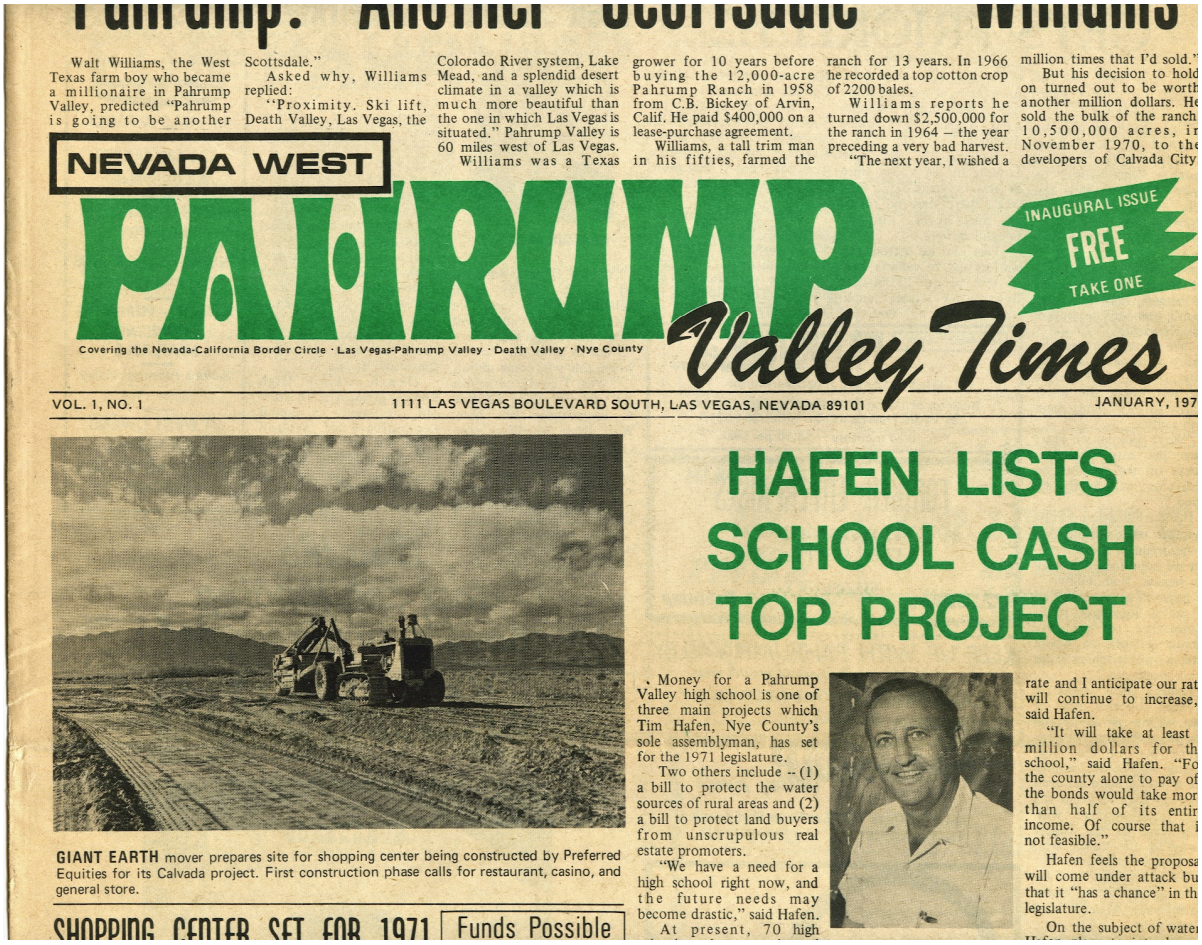
Pahrump cotton gin, looking east toward Mount Charleston, early 1960s. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.



Frank Woner, foreman of the Pahrump Ranch, beside an irrigation ditch, May 1967. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.



Cubed alfalfa stored under a shelter, Pahrump Ranch, circa 1968. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.



Walt Williams, the West Texas farm boy who became a millionaire in Pahrump Valley, predicted "Pahrump is going to be another Scottsdale."

Asked why, Williams replied:

"Proximity. Ski lift, Death Valley, Las Vegas, the Colorado River system, Lake Mead, and a splendid desert climate in a valley which is much more beautiful than the one in which Las Vegas is situated." Pahrump Valley is 60 miles west of Las Vegas.

Williams was a Texas grower for 10 years before buying the 12,000-acre Pahrump Ranch in 1958 from C.B. Bickey of Arvin, Calif. He paid $400,000 on a lease-purchase agreement.

Williams, a tall trim man in his fifties, farmed the ranch for 13 years. In 1966 he recorded a top cotton crop of 2200 bales.

Williams reports he turned down $2,500,000 for the ranch in 1964 – the year preceding a very bad harvest.

"The next year, I wished a million times that I'd sold."

But his decision to hold on turned out to be worth another million dollars. He sold the bulk of the ranch 10,500,000 acres, in November 1970, to the developers of Calvada City

NEVADA WEST

PAHRUMP Valley Times

INAUGURAL ISSUE FREE TAKE ONE

Covering the Nevada-California Border Circle · Las Vegas-Pahrump Valley · Death Valley · Nye County

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HAFEN LISTS SCHOOL CASH TOP PROJECT

Money for a Pahrump Valley high school is one of three main projects which Tim Hafen, Nye County's sole assemblyman, has set for the 1971 legislature.

Two others include -- (1) a bill to protect the water sources of rural areas and (2) a bill to protect land buyers from unscrupulous real estate promoters.

"We have a need for a high school right now, and the future needs may become drastic," said Hafen.

At present, 70 high

rate and I anticipate our rat will continue to increase, said Hafen.

"It will take at least million dollars for th school," said Hafen. "Fo the county alone to pay of the bonds would take mor than half of its entir income. Of course that i not feasible."

Hafen feels the proposa will come under attack bu that it "has a chance" in th legislature.

On the subject of wate

GIANT EARTH mover prepares site for shopping center being constructed by Preferred Equities for its Calvada project. First construction phase calls for restaurant, casino, and general store.

SHOPPING CENTER SET FOR 1971 | Funds Possible

Inaugural Issue, Pahrump Valley Times, 1975. *Courtesy Mark Williams*.

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PREFACE

The Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) engages in interviewing people who can provide firsthand descriptions of the individuals, events, and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the recordings of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are *not* history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiography as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the NCTHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the NCTHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts, and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherence. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often largely unreadable and therefore a waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the NCTHP will, in preparing a text:

a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the *uhs*, *ahs* and other noises with which speech is often sprinkled;

b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;

c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context;

d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered but have been added to render the text intelligible; and

e. make every effort to correctly spell the names of all individuals and places, recognizing that an occasional word may be misspelled because no authoritative source on its correct spelling was found.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As project director, I would like to express my deep appreciation to those who participated in the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP). It was an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to obtain oral histories from so many wonderful individuals. I was welcomed into many homes—in many cases as a stranger—and was allowed to share in the recollection of local history. In a number of cases I had the opportunity to interview Nye County residents whom I have long known and admired; these experiences were especially gratifying. I thank the residents throughout Nye County and Nevada—too numerous to mention by name—who provided assistance, information, and photographs. They helped make the successful completion of this project possible.

Appreciation goes to Chairman Joe S. Garcia, Jr., Robert N. "Bobby" Revert, and Patricia S. Mankins, the Nye County commissioners who initiated this project in 1987. Subsequently, Commissioners Richard L. Carver, Dave Hannigan, and Barbara J. Raper provided support. In this current round of interviews, Nye County Commissioners Butch Borasky, Lorinda A. Wichman, Joni Eastley, Gary Hollis, Fely Quitevis, and Dan Schinhofen provided unyielding support. Stephen T. Bradhurst, Jr., planning consultant for Nye County, gave enthusiastic support and advocacy of the program within Nye County in its first years. More recently, Darrell Lacy, Director, Nye County Nuclear Waste Repository Project Office, gave his strong support. The United States Department of Energy, through Mr. Lacy's office, provided funds for subsequent rounds of interviews. Thanks are extended to Commissioners Eastley and Hollis and to Mr. Lacy for their input regarding the conduct of this research and for serving as a sounding board when methodological problems were

worked out. These interviews would never have become a reality without the enthusiastic support of the Nye County commissioners and Mr. Lacy.

Jean Charney served as editor and administrative assistant throughout the project; her services have been indispensable. Debra Ann MacEachen, Robert B. Clark, Lynn E. Riedesel, Marcella Wilkinson, and Jean Charney transcribed a number of interviews, as did Julie Lancaster, who also helped with project coordination. Proofreading, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Joni Eastley, Michael Haldeman, Julie Lancaster, Teri Jurgens Lefever, and Darlene Morse. Joni Eastley proofed all the manuscripts and often double-checked, as best as possible, the spelling of people's names and the names of their children and other relatives. Jeanne Sharp Howerton provided digital services and consultation. Eva La Rue and Angela Haag of the Central Nevada Museum served as consultants throughout the project; their participation was essential. Much-deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

All material for the NCTHP was prepared with the support of the Nye County Nuclear Waste Repository Office, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed herein are those of the author and the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect the views of Nye County or the U.S. DOE.

—Robert D. McCracken
2014

INTRODUCTION

Historians generally consider the year 1890 as the close of the American frontier. By then, most of the western United States had been settled, ranches and farms developed, communities established, and roads and railroads constructed. The mining boomtowns, based on the lure of overnight riches from newly discovered mineral deposits, were but a memory.

Although Nevada was granted statehood in 1864, examination of any map of the state from the late 1800s shows that while most of the state was mapped and its geographical features named, a vast region—stretching from Belmont south to the Las Vegas meadows, comprising most of Nye County—remained largely unsettled and unmapped. In 1890, most of southcentral Nevada remained very much a frontier, and it continued to be so for at least another twenty years.

The spectacular mining booms at Tonopah (1900), Goldfield (1902), Rhyolite (1904), Manhattan (1905), and Round Mountain (1906) represent the last major flowering of what might be called the Old West in the United States. Consequently, southcentral Nevada, notably Nye County, remains close to the American frontier; closer, perhaps, than any other region of the American West. In a real sense, a significant part of the frontier can still be found in southcentral Nevada. It exists in the attitudes, values, lifestyles, and memories of area residents. The frontier-like character of the area also is visible in the relatively undisturbed quality of the natural environment, much of it essentially untouched by humans.

A survey of written sources on southcentral Nevada's history reveals some material from the early 1860s through 1900. Austin had a newspaper, the *Reese River*

Reveille, starting in 1863 and the Belmont area starting with the *Silver Bend Reporter* in 1867. Ione had a paper, the *Nye County News*, for a few years in the 1860s. More information representing the boomtown period from 1900 to about 1915 is available; from local newspapers after about 1920. The volume of available sources varies from town to town: A fair amount of literature, for instance, can be found covering Tonopah's first two decades of existence, and the town has had a newspaper continuously from its first year, starting with the *Tonopah Bonanza*. Goldfield had the *Goldfield News*, which began in 1904. In contrast, relatively little is known about the early days of Gabbs, Round Mountain, Manhattan, Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and Pahrump. Gabbs's only newspaper was published intermittently between 1974 and 1976. Round Mountain's only newspaper, the *Round Mountain Nugget*, was published between 1906 and 1910. Manhattan had newspaper coverage for most of the years between 1906 and 1922. The *Rhyolite Herald*, longest surviving of Rhyolite/Bullfrog's three newspapers, lasted from 1905 to 1912. The *Beatty Bullfrog Miner* was in business from 1905 to 1906. Amargosa Valley has never had a newspaper. Pahrump's first newspaper did not appear until 1971. All these communities received only spotty coverage in the newspapers of other communities once their own newspapers folded, although Beatty was served by the *Beatty Bulletin*, published as part of the *Goldfield News* between 1947 and 1956. Consequently, most information on the history of southcentral Nevada after 1920 resides in the memories of individuals who are still living.

Aware of Nye County's close ties to our nation's frontier past, and recognizing that few written sources on local history are available, especially after about 1920, the Nye County Commissioners initiated the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) in 1987. The NCTHP represents an effort to systematically collect and preserve information

on the history of Nye County. The centerpiece of the NCTHP is a large set of interviews conducted with individuals who had knowledge of local history. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then edited lightly to preserve the language and speech patterns of those interviewed. All oral history interviews have been printed on acid-free paper and bound and archived in Nye County libraries, Special Collections in the Lied Library at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and at other archival sites located throughout Nevada. The interviews vary in length and detail, but together they form a never-before-available composite picture of each community's life and development. The collection of interviews for each community can be compared to a bouquet: Each flower in the bouquet is unique—some are large, others are small—yet each adds to the total image. In sum, the interviews provide a composite view of community and county history, revealing the flow of life and events for a part of Nevada that has heretofore been largely neglected by historians.

Collection of the oral histories has been accompanied by the assembling of a set of photographs depicting each community's history. These pictures have been obtained from participants in the oral history interviews and other present and past Nye County residents. In all, more than 700 photos have been collected and carefully identified. Complete sets of the photographs have been archived along with the oral histories.

On the basis of the oral histories as well as existing written sources, histories have been prepared for the major communities in Nye County. These histories have also been archived. All oral and community histories and photographs collected under the NCTHP are available on the Internet.

The town history project is one component of a Nye County program to determine the socioeconomic impact of a federal proposal to build and operate a nuclear waste

repository in southcentral Nye County. The repository, which would be located inside a mountain (Yucca Mountain), would be the nation's first, and possibly only, permanent disposal site for high-level radioactive waste. The Nye County Board of County Commissioners initiated the NCTHP in 1987 in order to collect information on the origin, history, traditions and quality of life of Nye County communities that may be impacted by the repository. If the repository is constructed, it will remain a source of interest for a long time and future generations will likely want to know more about the people who once resided at the site. And in the event that government policy changes and a high-level nuclear waste repository is not constructed in Nye County, material compiled by the NCTHP will remain for the use and enjoyment of all.

—RDM
2014

This is Robert McCracken talking to Mark Williams at the Wimbledon Apartments in Las Vegas. This is August 19, 20, and 21, 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

RM: Mark, I really enjoyed the interview you had with the late Harry Ford at the Pahrump Valley Museum back in March. I'm glad you've agreed to do an oral history interview with me. Let's start with a little demographic information—tell me your name as it reads on your birth certificate.

MW: It's Philip Mark Williams.

RM: And when and where were you born?

MW: May 11, 1947, in Brownwood, Texas.

RM: What was your father's full name, and when and where was he born?

MW: My dad's full name is Walter Jackson Williams, and he was born April 9, 1916, in Comanche, Texas. My mother, Nancy Ann Long, was born November 4, 1923, also in Comanche, Texas, and my brother, Rick, was also born in Brownwood, Texas, March 1, 1944. That was our family.

RM: Let's talk a little bit about your mother's family, and her background. What were her parents' names?

MW: My grandfather's name on my mother's side was Emmett Harris Long, and her mother's name was Jonnie Burt Long, and she had one sister by the name of June. They were also from Comanche, and she and her sister grew up on a farm outside of Comanche. I don't know exactly how large that farm was. I didn't know either one of my grandmothers because they were both gone when I came along. I knew both of my grandfathers, but never knew my grandmothers.

RM: What did your mother's family do for a living in Comanche?

MW: Farming.

RM: What kind of farming were they doing?

MW: Just dry-land farming. There wasn't any irrigation going on back in those years, the '20s and the '30s.

RM: What were they raising?

MW: I don't know for sure. They maybe had some livestock, but what I remember my mother talking about was her memories of the Depression era when she said they always had plenty to eat because they were living on the farm but they didn't have any money. Those were the days, Mom said, when you could go down to town and buy a gigantic hamburger for a nickel if you had a nickel, but it was very hard to come by any money.

RM: Did they own their own farm?

MW: Yes, sir.

RM: Do you know how many acres they had, roughly?

MW: Probably 160 acres, something like that.

RM: In the ’30s, was that in Dust Bowl country? Where is Comanche, exactly?

MW: Comanche is in central Texas, roughly 100 miles west of Austin and due north of San Antonio. If you take, I think it’s Highway 281, you go up a couple hundred miles north of San Antonio. It’s kind of dead center of the state; they call it Central Texas. It’s really pretty country. It’s kind of arid, low humidity, but with a lot of vegetation around. They grow a lot of pecans and peanuts and now they’re growing some cotton in that country, dry land farming. They’re subject right now to that terrific drought; it’s encompassing the whole state.

RM: Yes, it must be awful. In the ’30s, did the Dust Bowl get that far south?

MW: I don’t remember my mother talking so much about the Dust Bowl, because that was more or less up in Oklahoma.

RM: Okay, but was it tough to make a living in Comanche in the Depression?

MW: It was really tough. I remember my mother also speaking about a car—I guess my grandfather had an old car that was somehow or another made available to her and her sister, and it didn’t have any brakes or the brakes weren’t very good, but at the ripe old age of nine or ten they were driving around in that old car on the farm and going up and downhill with no brakes. Those memories may have had some influence on her later on when she gave me my 1950 Chrysler on my twelfth birthday.

Mom lost her mother at a pretty young age. I think her mother was only in her late 40s when, as I understand it, she was kicked by a lamb and the injury turned cancerous and she died. In those days and those circumstances, medical treatments were limited.

RM: That's awful.

MW: Yes, her passing was devastating for the family. My mother was very bright. They put her ahead in her classes and she graduated from high school when she was only 15 or 16 years old. That was on the eve of World War II, and she had some pretty poignant memories of the boys that she knew and that she was close to going off to World War II and not coming back. That really affected her view of sons going off to war. Later on she was pretty adamant that if she had sons they would be able to go into the military and serve their country in a way that survival odds would be enhanced—as officers or something like that. My brother consequently went to the US Naval Academy and I attended New Mexico Military Institute.

My dad had attended New Mexico Military Institute his last year of high school and his first two years of college, and he graduated from there in 1936. He was all geared up to go into the military, especially on the eve of World War II, and could have been commissioned directly into the army as a second lieutenant because that school is a prep school for the service academies. But when he went to Fort Bliss in El Paso and had his physical, they found that he had a heart murmur and they disqualified him from military service, which was a real blow to him because he was ready to go fight the Huns. In his discharge documents, however, Dad is referenced as "Second Lieutenant Walter Jackson Williams."

Anyway, my parents were married in 1942 and went to California, and my mother worked for Douglas Aircraft in L.A. as an executive secretary and my dad worked for Lockheed. He was part of the team that was designing and manufacturing self-sealing gas tanks for the P-38 Lightning fighters.

RM: They were self-sealing so if they got hit they wouldn't leak?

MW: Yes. Previously, if the aircraft took a round in a metal tank and it didn't catch fire, you'd lose all your fuel and you were down. They used different layers of composites of rubber and neoprene and fabric and different types of glues, I guess, to formulate these tanks so that if they took a round, the hole would close and they'd be able to get back to the base. I guess if they took too many rounds, it wouldn't work, but that was a real lifesaver and he was part of that effort.

RM: That's great. To go back to Texas a little bit, how big is Comanche?

MW: I'd say probably in the order now of roughly 5,000 people. It's fairly small; it's the county seat. There are 256 counties in Texas. The courthouse is historic and impressive. Pretty much all of my family are from there, my cousins on both sides. My mother's sister had three children, Pat, Carolyn, and Sharon, and they actually grew up in the Houston area. I'm still in close contact and on very close terms with them as well as my kinfolk in Comanche.

RM: What can you tell me about your father's family and his years growing up in Comanche?

MW: His father's name was T. J. Williams. As a young man he had the opportunity to join up with the Higginbotham-Bartlett Company, initially cleaning kerosene lanterns for the store. Over a period of years he worked his way up within the company until he eventually became the chief executive. During the process people in the Higginbotham family would from time to time give him the option of buying stock in various aspects of the company and various enterprises that came along. He ended up doing quite well financially and was a very positive influence within the community.

My first cousin John Earl Williams and his wife, Helen, drove from Texas all the way up to California about a month ago and then spent some time with us in Oregon. He

and his brother, Tom, were at the helm of Higginbotham-Bartlett for a number of years. I wish we'd had a tape-recorder because John Earl has an encyclopedic grasp of everything that I'm kind of abbreviating about my grandfather and our family origins and his company. My dad shared with me how as a youngster in that community he experienced that my grandfather was very much a pillar of the community. The store was a general store that had about everything from groceries and staples to things like lumber. They were a major supplier to the farmers and everyone in that vicinity. And there was a mortuary as well as automobile dealerships.

RM: Really, a mortuary too?

MW: Yes, it was almost like everything under one roof. When everybody was doing well money-wise during the '20s, my grandfather had a new home built at 701 Wright Avenue. It was a southern style two-story brick home with terraces on an acreage, a very elaborate setup. That was the degree of success that he had achieved at that point in his life. In 1926, he and my grandmother went to St. Louis and ordered furniture custom built for the home. It had its own library, dining room, large kitchen, huge living room, den, and several bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs; it had everything that was available in 1926 that could go into a new home. In other words, he and his company were enjoying quite a level of success during those years.

RM: Now, this was the general store?

MW: Yes. The company had several stores in Central Texas and he was the president of the company. I'm trying to remember what the connection is with the Higginbothams. My grandmother's maiden name was Evridge, Julia Camilla Evridge. I believe that one of the major Higginbotham figures was an uncle to my grandfather and gave Grandfather the opportunity to go to work in the company store. The uncle spoke to Grandfather on

the street and said, “Tom, would you like a job?” My granddad started cleaning lanterns for the company and from that humble beginning stuck with it and he was very bright, very disciplined, and very focused, and as he progressed, the uncles who were the commanding authorities within the company kept giving him additional responsibilities, with which he did quite well.

And as I said, when opportunities came along in the form of stock options, they said, “There’s some stock available here. Would you like in on it?” As time went on, the success was such that they were tapped into a vibrant growth cycle. My grandfather was very willing to invest his money as he earned it, and those investments did quite well, including some mineral rights that still exist today.

RM: By mineral, you mean oil?

MW: Yes, sir, oil and gas.

RM: Was there oil there?

MW: There is oil and gas production in and around Comanche, but some of the rights that he acquired were in other counties that were even more prolific.

RM: And he did all right with them?

MW: Yes. Actually, he did well with just about everything that he touched; he was just that kind of a guy. He was very, very focused. I knew my grandfather on my father’s side better than I knew my mother’s dad. He was a very intelligent guy. And in the Roaring ’20s, the whole country was riding on a wave of prosperity; the Williams were living pretty well and had nice automobiles. My dad had five siblings—there were four boys and two girls. They all had access to the schools in Comanche as well as schools and universities in Texas and other states.

I do remember my grandfather from my mother’s side as being very kind. We

called him "Gabby," as he was kind of like Gabby Hayes in the movies back during those years.

RM: Did your dad meet your mother in school?

MW: No, they didn't know each other then. My Uncle Herbert, my dad's brother, loved to tell the story of how one day he had the opportunity to introduce my mother to my dad down at the local Higginbotham-Bartlett store and "saw the sparks fly."

RM: Oh, a love at first sight story.

MW: Yes. My parents were a very attractive couple. In West Texas in the '50s when Hollywood was making the movie *Giant* with Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson, a lot of it was filmed in a location called Marfa, Texas. At that point, my dad was farming in West Texas so my parents went out to watch some of that filming. For a period of weeks or months, not infrequently when my parents went into a restaurant or a café in that vicinity, people were mistaking my mother as Elizabeth Taylor.

RM: She looked like Liz Taylor?

MW: She surely did—they were pretty close to the same age and had the same features. I always thought my dad had kind of a Tyrone Power appearance about him. They could have fit into Hollywood quite nicely.

RM: Now, your mother grew up in Comanche; is there anything you want to mention about her growing up?

MW: Just that she was exceedingly bright. However, Mother described herself as being rather shy. I have a hard time fathoming that my mother was ever shy because in our households in both Texas and Las Vegas, she spearheaded the entertaining on behalf of our family. We had some fairly notable figures in and out of our homes, and she had such a command not only of the culinary talents, but table settings and linens and crystal and

all that, and had such a gracious manner about her. She knew how to make everyone feel very comfortable and welcome. That was her forte; she was kind of the vice president in charge of the social agenda.

Looking back, I see how important that was to my dad's efforts out in Pahrump because it involved politicians, it involved bankers, it involved all kinds of people, from Governor Paul Laxalt and Las Vegas Mayor Oren Gragson and his wife, Shirley, to our mailman here in Las Vegas, Herb Galloway, and everybody in between. My parents knew a broad cross-section of really fine folks.

RM: Were there any notable names that we might recognize in their days in Texas?

MW: Maybe. In Pecos, the notorious Billy Sol Estes; otherwise, not that I know of. In Comanche my dad's parents were probably close to the preeminent family in town because of the ownership of the store and so on. My dad described going to church every Sunday, and that the minister was always very subtle but very skillful at reminding everybody, and especially my grandfather, that tithing was a good thing, and my grandfather was very dutiful about doing that. He really consistently participated in the community; he was very civic-minded.

I'm staging this image and the prosperity they had because when the 1929 stock market debacle hit and initiated the Great Depression, as those months went by the community was hit very hard. The whole country was plunged into a depression and agriculture was very hard hit. My understanding is that the farmers were among the earliest casualties of the Depression.

RM: And it was mainly an agricultural community, right?

MW: Yes. I read about the farmers in various parts of the country dumping their milk because the cost of production was above what they could sell it for. It's hard to imagine,

but their conditions worsened steadily. Many of the farmers lived on credit. My grandfather would extend credit to them throughout the crop year, and at harvest time the crops would be sold and they'd come in and pay off their debts. So he was carrying a lot of those families on the books virtually the whole part of the year. My dad described his father as spending endless hours every night standing up at an easel doing the ledgers night after night after night and having that enormous burden on his shoulders regarding all those people he had employed, all those people he had out on credit, and having to make decisions where if he felt that if somebody wasn't going to be able to make it, he'd have to give them that kind of news.

RM: You mean, he'd have to cut off their credit?

MW: Yes. But also where some other fellow had exceptional drive and potential and showed promise, he would be able to go in the other direction. This is what I remember my dad mentioning. He said that rather than lay people off or fire them, because of the dire economic circumstances he cut everybody's salary in half, including his own, to keep everybody employed. He said at that time my grandfather was earning $1,000 a month as a chief executive of the company, which was a lot of money in 1929. Eventually, he cut his own salary in half and did the same all the way down the line and kept everybody on the payroll. I thought that was a pretty astounding piece of information given what we have happening in this country today, just by comparison. I haven't heard of anything like that happening lately.

RM: No; today, the chief executive would raise his salary and fire the others. It was a completely different world then.

MW: Anyway, the company survived the Depression and made the adjustments it needed to make. And World War II hit, and of course that kind of began to turn things

around.

RM: That's quite a story. Now, when did your folks go out to California?

MW: In, I think, July of 1942; it wasn't long after they got married.

RM: And did they go to Long Beach? That was where Douglas was, wasn't it?

MW: It was in that area. And the nightly blackouts were common. They said when you drove around at night you could hardly see. It was an extremely exciting time in this nation's history because everything was so uncertain. The news from overseas was bleak and scary, and the Nazis were sinking ships off of our shores with the U-boats. The nation really hunkered down to confront that menace to our national security and my parents were part of that. My dad would have been overseas doing what he had been trained to do except for the heart murmur so the next best thing he could do was to involve himself in the military effort on the home front.

RM: What exactly did he do at Lockheed?

MW: My understanding was that he was part of the team that designed and manufactured those self-sealing gas tanks that were going into the P-38s. I'm sure that same technology was being applied to all of the aircraft at some point.

RM: Is there anything you want to say about their life in Los Angeles? In a lot of ways Southern California was kind of a paradise then.

MW: It was. They loved it there. It was a really exciting time. They were both young, beautiful, handsome, involved in the war effort, had their hearts and souls in what they were doing. My mother spoke of being given briefcases of very sensitive top secret documents that she would ferry from one destination to another, and she took that quite seriously. They were newlyweds and they had a little apartment in a suburb close to where they were both working. I think my dad had gotten an old piano—he always

aspired to doing something with music, writing music.

But about a year after they got there, a fateful event occurred. One of my father's brothers, named Colquitt, passed away. My dad was very close to him. Colquitt had stayed at home with the family and was overseeing one of the family endeavors at that time, which was Central Texas Oil and Gas. It was an affiliated business that my grandfather owned that utilized a spudder drilling rig as the primary equipment used in drilling oil and gas wells.

RM: What is a spudder?

MW: The main component featured an up-and-down rocking beam. It had a steel cable, and at the end of it was an extremely heavy several-inch diameter bit that was used to chisel out the well hole through constant up-and-down motions via the mass of the bit and lengthening cable. They would flush the filings out with the drilling mode with a constant flow of water and it just kept chipping away. That's what they mean by "spudding in" a well. When Drake drilled the first well in Pennsylvania in 1860, it was this type of cable tool drilling, and the technology grew. Howard Hughes's family innovated the Hughes drilling bit that drastically enhanced rotary drilling capabilities and made the Hughes family enormously wealthy. Howard Hughes, of course, ended up in Las Vegas.

RM: It's funny how things are linked, isn't it?

MW: It is. I don't know if it's a genetic thing or not, but as a consequence of the oil and gas industry and my dad's affiliation with it, and growing up in Texas, I have always had an enormous love for the petrochemical industry and almost a reverence for the products, especially gasoline, because they make our lives so much easier. But anyway, Colquitt passed away about a year after my parents were in California. Because my dad was sort

of a key figure in this little offshoot, Central Texas Oil and Gas, my grandfather summoned him to come home to fill in this gap that was left by my uncle's passing.

This uncle who passed away was the father of the two boys who ended up running Higginbotham-Bartlett later on. John Earl Williams, who came up to visit us recently, was sharing all of this encyclopedic knowledge of the whole family. He and his brother, Tom, ran the company as a team for several years quite successfully.

CHAPTER TWO

MW: But at my grandfather's behest my mother and father came back to Comanche around 1943. They bought a small home in Brownwood, 26 miles west of Comanche, and my dad filled the position that had been vacated by my uncle Colquitt's passing, and for the next four or five years, he tried to gain traction and help that entity develop. The oil company was something that my grandfather had set up as kind of an offshoot of his other activities. My grandfather involved himself financially as an investor in several different types of enterprises. This was something where he saw potential.

There was a key figure, whose name I can't recollect offhand, who was a figure of authority with Central Texas Oil and Gas and my dad was convinced early on that he was not being really up front and square with the whole endeavor—that he was kind of a crook and a shyster and was not doing justice to the whole effort.

My dad was so frustrated because my grandfather was fairly domineering and stubborn in his views, and he felt, apparently, that this guy was not all that bad. My dad was caught in the frustration of saying this guy's really screwing up, and my grandfather would say, "Oh, he's all right. Just do what you're supposed to do." According to my mother, it was a terrible time for my dad because he was so frustrated in what could or should have been going on and wasn't. This guy just was, Dad would say, flubbing the dub.

He did that for a few years from a sense of loyalty. My parents went from having a glorious, romantic, on-their-own adventure in California, the two of them away from all that, to feeling almost like he had a ball and chain around his ankle. My dad was ready to get out and go on to other endeavors and he felt so suffocated and smothered by this

situation. He didn't have the authority to do what he felt needed to be done and then follow through with it because his father would veto almost anything he said about what was going on there regarding operations at the drilling sites.

Meanwhile, my dad had a long-time admiration and reverence for farming, and he had heard about the dynamic farming that was going on in the El Paso Valley over in far West Texas. My mom and dad enjoyed driving around, so when they had two or three days to relax and take a little time, they put my brother and myself in the car—I was just an infant—and drove over to El Paso, and my dad looked longingly at these wonderful, prolific farms one after the other in the El Paso Valley. The land and everything was so expensive at that point. That was just after World War II, in late '47, probably.

He looked at it all and thought, "This sure is neat. Sure wish I could be doing something like this instead of what I'm doing." On the way back from El Paso there was a little hole in the road by the name of Van Horn along old Highway 80 going though West Texas toward Midland and Odessa about 80 miles west of the town of Pecos.

They stopped at a truck stop and while they were having lunch my dad struck up a conversation with a truck driver, talking about agriculture. I think my dad said, "I sure would like to have a little piece of that action."

The truck driver said, "You know, there's a place where they're opening up a whole lot of land; they're just getting started over in a place called Pecos, right up the road here. I understand that there's even an old boy over there that helps people get started who'll finance their endeavor."

My dad's ears perked up and he finished the lunch, put us in the car, and we roared back to our home in Brownwood, which was at least 250 miles away, dropped my mom and my brother and me off at the house, filled up the tank, and drove back to this

place he'd never been to called Pecos, east of El Paso.

Pecos was just a small town; it had been there since Judge Roy Bean in its less cantankerous days so there was some history there. When my dad drove back to Pecos, he saw a guy by the side of the road working on a tractor and he pulled over. The guy was named D. H. Armstrong. He started talking to D. H. Armstrong and introduced himself, and D. H. Armstrong and he later became very good friends.

D. H. Armstrong said, "Yeah, all of what you heard is true. The guy that you want to have a visit with is a guy by the name of J. C. Wilson. J. C. Wilson is part of . . ." I think he said Texas Cotton Industries, "and he's here as a promoter because they want to build gins, and in order to build gins they need the product. He is in a position to help you get started buying your land and drilling your wells and all that."

My dad looked up J.C. Wilson and they talked, and J. C. saw in my father somebody who had a burning desire to get out and do something, was willing to take a risk, was very quick, very intelligent, and had a good countenance, and J. C. said "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll get you going. If you can front $10,000, we'll go ahead and give you the backing."

So my dad drove back to Comanche and went in to sit down with his pop. I'm sure the conversation was from the heart: "Dad, I found something out there. I'd really like to do it. You know, this thing with Central Texas Oil and Gas and so and so . . . it just isn't working for me, and I really want to do this."

My grandfather floated him the $10,000, which was not chicken feed in 1948. He went back and cut a deal with J. C. Wilson to finance at least ten times that amount in order to buy his land, drill his wells, and so on. My grandfather had a ranch on which I think he had M and H Farmall tractors that he donated to the effort. Grandfather's ranch

was several hundred or maybe a couple thousand acres, and part of that's still in the family today, the Dudley side of it.

RM: What do M and H stand for?

MW: International Harvester, Farmall—Farmall M was a little bit bigger and more powerful than the H model. They were gasoline-powered tractors from the factory, pretty much state of the art in those years, [laughs] very primitive by today's standards, but they didn't cost $100,000 each.

To kind of abbreviate the next few years, my dad did not know Spanish and he didn't know much about farming, but he had been able to convince J. C. Wilson that he had a desire to make it work, and he got the financing. He went out and shopped for a piece of dirt. It was pretty optimum timing because a lot of land was being opened up and there were still some good parcels around.

As a byproduct of the years he spent with Central Texas Oil and Gas, he learned a certain amount about what constituted drilling a well. If you drill a hole in the ground, you can drill it for the purpose of obtaining water and you also drill for obtaining oil and/or natural gas. So as frustrating as the oil and gas experience was on the whole, he learned quite a bit about well-drilling and the importance of casing and gravel packing and all that. So when it came time to have his wells drilled, whoever was doing the well-drilling understood that my dad had a well-drilling background, and he consequently ended up with irrigation wells that were done right.

RM: Did he find a tutor or just start from scratch? It seems pretty intimidating to embark on something like that.

MW: I don't know any other way than just by his sheer guts and hunger. He was so hungry to have his own enterprise, his own vehicle. This sounds kind of weird, but I have

always seen my father as a kind of a stallion figure—powerful and fiercely independent with a deep-seated need for freedom. He was willing to take the risks involved, and would say, "I've got to be able to do it my way without anybody shackling me or telling me what to do."

RM: I think that's part of his whole Pahrump experience, too.

MW: Yes, I think so. As a side note, when he was looking for land he went to an area outside of Pecos known as Coyanosa. He got an option on a piece of land and had a well drilled. The well was only putting out maybe 600 gallons a minute, and my dad was looking for something more on the order of at least twice to three times that much. It happened that the mineral rights were available on this property, and a fellow by the name of John Dorr, who was also farming in Pecos, had an oil and gas background and had kind of a sixth sense for that type of thing. He was talking to my dad and said, "Walt, you might want to reconsider this" (keeping the minerals).

My dad said, "No. The water's not that good. I need something better than this." So he walked away from it and found a different farm; I think his first farm was what they called Section 42. They drilled two or three wells that were very prolific and gave him the basis to do some good crops right off the bat.

Years later, he and John Dorr were having a visit, probably in the late '60s or early '70s. John said, "Hey, Walt, you remember that section of land over there in Coyanosa that you were tinkering with back in '48 and you decided to pass on?" My dad said he did. John said, "Well, for what it's worth, if you'd kept that, the royalties on that little piece of ground today are something in the neighborhood of about $10,000 a month because there's oil and gas on it." My dad reflected on that very philosophically with humor instead of beating himself over the head.

Anyway, he had to learn every aspect of how to farm. The crop of choice was cotton, but alfalfa was an item that was doing well there because Pecos had a nice long growing season, lots of water, and the crop price was right. I remember him putting in an alfalfa crop on one of the portions of Section 42 for the seed. Alfalfa seeds are little tiny little suckers. I think he said the crop he took of that yielded two rail carload lots of alfalfa seed, if you can imagine that.

RM: And he sold the seed?

MW: Oh, yes. Alfalfa is a legume and it puts nitrogen back into the soil, whereas cotton extracts a lot and needs to be fertilized. When you rotate from alfalfa back into cotton, you have richer soil.

RM: So you rotate the two, right?

MW: Yes, at certain intervals. That's a very common practice. In West Texas they were doing a lot of fertilizing using ammonium nitrate, the stuff that was used to blow up the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. The ammonium nitrate that the farmers in West Texas used came in 50 or 80-pound sacks. It was dispensed into the irrigation ditches and irrigated onto the crops or else directly spread onto the soil of the crop. I remember for the irrigation ditches they had these little paddlewheel dispensers with a hopper; they'd put the fertilizer into the hoppers where it would meter into the water.

RM: And your father had to learn all this technology from scratch, didn't he?

MW: Yes. The other thing was that the primary source of labor was from across the border. Even in those days there was some scrutiny of the people coming across from Mexico. In '48, I think the term "wetback" was not uncommon; it came from the idea of folks swimming across the Rio Grande and coming into the United States. My dad was a very discerning judge of character; he was a quick study on anyone he was talking with

and could pretty much separate the wheat from the chaff in a person pretty quickly. Consequently, his workers were generally very loyal.

He had quickly understood that he needed to have an abundance of labor that was ready, willing, and able to work under long, hard, difficult circumstances—heat, cold, long days. I think the ranks of workers varied. The highest number would be during the summer growing and fall harvest season when they were handpicking cotton for a penny a pound. The workers had these long cotton sacks that they would drag along the rows as they filled them with the cotton that they were pulling from the plants. This method was common during those early days in Texas and other cotton-producing states in the South during the late ’40s and early ’50s.

RM: How many pounds could they pick in a day?

MW: I don’t know the answer to that, but at a penny a pound they had to pick quite a bit of cotton to fill those sacks up. My brother and I as little kids would go out there; it was something that my dad wanted us to understand, what the real silver coins that were being paid to us meant, that they equated to the effort that we were making picking up cotton. It was itchy, scratchy, dusty stuff. They would weigh the sacks and someone would make notes of how much this person was weighing in with each time they brought a sack, and at the end of the day they’d be paid on the spot. In order to be paid $10, a person had to weigh in sacks totaling 1,000 pounds. That required considerable effort.

Then the cotton sacks would be dumped into cotton trailers, and when the trailers filled up, they would be towed to the gin. That’s how J. C. Wilson was completing the cycle because cotton was the commodity he needed for his gin complexes. All of the pieces were falling into place, so to speak.

RM: And this is all in the Pecos area.

MW: Yes, sir. Texas is still a huge cotton-producing state, but Pecos at that time was opening up as a Mecca because it had a lot of the right components as far as cheap labor, cheap fuel, plenty of water, the right climate, and high yields. The Korean War economic impacts spiked the price of cotton up. Fuel was cheap because you had the oil fields on the Permian Basin in the proximity and the butane and propane that were byproducts were very abundant; a lot of it was being flared off. Suppliers could sell it to the farmers for, like, three cents a gallon. They in turn converted their farm machinery, tractors, pickups, and other equipment from gasoline to propane and cut their fuel costs from 19 or 20 cents a gallon of gasoline down to three cents a gallon in propane with hardly any oil changes necessary because engines ran a lot cleaner.

My dad did not know Spanish in the beginning, but he learned it quickly on the job from the Hispanics and Mexicans that he had on his payroll. He was teaching guys who'd come from the depths of Mexico who had never learned to operate anything mechanical or to use machinery. He described walking alongside those guys, teaching them how to drive the tractor and cultivate. (Cultivators had plow shanks that would open up the furrows so the crop would irrigate more effectively. This also helped to reduce and retard weed growth as well as oxygenating the soil and cotton plants.)

Anyway, Dad would have a hoe handle about three feet long and he'd be walking alongside the tractor's left side. If the driver was tending to ride the clutch, he'd kind of tap on his left foot to keep him from riding the clutch so he wouldn't burn out the clutch throw-out bearing. It wasn't meant to hurt him, just to kind of help him understand what not to do: Put it in gear and start off; keep your foot off the clutch; don't use it for a foot rest, you know? That was one tiny example of the amount of detail that Dad was having to watch. Minimizing equipment repair expenses was and is vital in farming. I.e., the less

the clutch is used, the longer it lasts, and so on.

So the farmers were using internal combustion engines to run their irrigation pumps because they didn't have electricity available and the fuel was cheap. My dad had to have a very good grasp of things mechanical in addition to the nuts and bolts of the wells and all of the machinery and apparatus involved in deep-well turbine pumps. To this day I have a deep love and affinity for deep-well turbine irrigation pumps. When you consider that out in the middle of nowhere you can have a two-inch natural gas line coming out of the dirt that goes over to one or two engines connected to a drive shaft connected to the gear head that transforms kinetic energy 200 feet below the surface into a 12-inch column of water flowing at 2,000 gallons a minute that goes into an irrigation ditch that turns that desert into an oasis; it's miraculous stuff!

RM: It's amazing, isn't it?

MW: It really is. It transformed the entire region around Pecos from 1948 to 1968, engendering approximately 300,000 acres of prime cotton production. But the water table started out as 60 feet in 1948 and as more and more irrigation systems came on, it started to draw down the local portion of the Ogallala Aquifer, which comes down through Nebraska. It started to draw it down and consequently, the requirement for larger and larger horsepower engines grew because farmers were lifting the water from deeper depths and using more fuel, so up went the cost. Pecos was also subject to the boll weevil, the red spider, all the natural parasites of the cotton crop; they had to counteract them with crop dusters spraying insecticides and other measures.

During the growing season, a hail storm could have come along and destroyed the crop. That would happen from time to time—you could have a beautiful crop that was going to turn into a wonderful outcome, and half an hour later a hail storm would wipe it

out. A lot of the farmers would buy hail insurance to protect against that possibility.

Nothing is static in the world. In those early days when everything was kind of getting started it was fresh and the soil was at its optimum and the water was at its optimum. Between 1948 and 1952, my dad had some spectacularly good crops. He had listened carefully to good advice and had worked very hard, had taken huge risks, had not been hailed out, had good employees, and consequently had ended up with some fabulous crops right off the bat that yielded him some terrific returns. He felt that he had been very fortunate during those years.

In 1952, my parents built a brand new home at 1730 Washington Street, in a nice part of Pecos. It was 1,700 square feet, built on a 100-by-100-foot lot with cinder block construction, a white rock roof, three bedrooms, two baths. My mom and dad's master bedroom had a large walk-in closet for my mom. The den had a nice varnished brick floor with a fireplace on one side, and on the other side an opening for a gas fireplace in the living room. There was also an office for my dad. Off the back side of the office outside, there were two huge evaporative coolers to cool the house. All of that was a consequence of his first four years of farming. They had that brand new home custom built; it cost $25,000.

RM: That was a lot of money then.

MW: Right. It was as nice a home as you'd find anywhere in town. That was the level of success that he had achieved starting out with no knowledge about farming at all. He had achieved it through sheer guts and hard work and long hours, but he always made it look so easy.

RM: How many acres did he have in Pecos?

RM: I remember him alluding to Section 42 initially, and I don't know if it was a full

section, 640 acres. I don't know that he was farming a full section at that time but he was farming at least 200 or 300 hundred acres at any given time. Then he sold that and bought what was called the south farm, south of town, and the north farm, north of town. Those were the last two pieces of dirt that he owned and farmed in Texas.

RM: So he didn't stay on the same property.

MW: Not the whole time, no. I think he had an opportunity to sell that initial operation and make some money and then open up some new dirt, drill some new wells, and start again. The south farm did not have the same level of prolific success as the north farm did, and this was in the years along about '54 or '55, '56 where things were shifting and changing, but he was still doing okay.

RM: Was the Pecos area deteriorating as a way to make money?

MW: Yes, I think it was becoming more difficult. But most of the farmers were still doing okay.

RM: Were there factors other than the declining water level?

MW: Yes, there was a combination of things. After the Korean War was over, I think the price of cotton dropped a little bit. The water was certainly becoming more expensive to lift and it was expensive to spray and to dust for insects. So the equation was shifting somewhat, but farmers could still do okay if they had a good crop. A good crop was anywhere between two and three bales to the acre. With that yield you were going to make out quite nicely, even with the costs beginning to increase, if you were resourceful enough.

RM: How many pounds are in a bale?

MW: There's about 500 pounds. The cotton that they were farming tended to be the long staple—Pima, I think, was the higher-quality cotton and it tended to be a higher-

value product. But anyway, as the years went by it was becoming more challenging to maintain the profit levels that they'd enjoyed initially.

There was a guy by the name of Billie Sol Estes—I mentioned him earlier—a friend of President Lyndon Johnson's. He was part of the initial cluster of people that got into farming in Pecos. My parents knew Billie Sol slightly; my dad remembered him walking around town in a Stetson, and he said he always carried a briefcase with him. Billie Sol kind of sidelined as, I think, a Presbyterian preacher. But he got involved with cotton and I guess was a pretty smart guy because during that same time frame Billie Sol was having a lot of success and opening up farms along that highway, out toward Fort Stockton. It was mile after mile after mile of gorgeous fields of lush green cotton crops with beautiful irrigation installations every so often; they were Billie Sol's farms.

Billie Sol was also key in instigating a ten-year contract with the major natural gas supplier for all of the irrigation wells for that region and he locked in the price of natural gas at 32 cents a thousand cubic foot. So that held the price of natural gas down for everybody in the area because the gas company wanted large volume in order to have economies of scale and higher profits.

As the years went by and things became more difficult and more challenging with the insects and the boll weevils and the red spiders and other issues, the farmers were still able to more or less eke out a living because the price of cotton was adequate relative to the cost of the fuel they used to pump their irrigation water. When that natural gas contract expired along about 1972 or '73, the cost of the natural gas jumped from about 32 cents a thousand to $2.40 a thousand cubic feet overnight and that was literally the "death knell" for most of the farming in Pecos. If the more marginal operators were still farming and they didn't shut down right then, they eventually went belly-up.

RM: Plus, they were pumping the water from deeper levels.

MW: Yes. A typical irrigation well in the mid-'50s with that natural gas contract would cost maybe $10 a day for a well at 32 cents a thousand cubic feet in a 24-hour period. If you multiply that out, you can see how just one installation would go up in a multiple.

Billie Sol also had a sizeable anhydrous ammonia fertilizer business. There were literally scores, maybe hundreds, of thousand-gallon anhydrous ammonia trailers in his complex in Pecos and a lot of the farmers were involved in using those tanks. I guess some of those folks were involved more deeply than as just users, and when the scandal blew up, the IRS did an audit, and a lot of those tanks only existed on the books. The FBI also became involved.

That's when the scandal hit the town, and a lot of the farmers, totally without intent to defraud, were sucked into that mayhem and very seriously affected. I was in Pecos last year and they have a really nice museum there. It has a lot of history dating back to the 1800s about all the different things that had happened. I found it curious that I couldn't see anything about that vast cotton operation that was going on in all those years.

When I was in Pecos visiting, I asked a lady at the museum about it and she said, "That's a chapter that the town would just rather forget because when the Billie Sol Estes scandal hit and blew up, it destroyed so many families and so many lives that we just don't want to go there."

RM: How interesting—so they just took that chapter out of the history. And that was a very prosperous era for them.

MW: Yes, it probably encompassed 20 to 25 years of that cycle. Some people hung on but had to shift to other crops in terms of water table, in terms of dirt. Even now, I think

there's some alfalfa there, but nothing like the vast tracts of cotton that were there 50, 60 years ago.

RM: So Billie Sol Estes was engaged in a huge fraud there.

MW: Yes, as it turned out.

MW: Anyway, the years went by and my dad saw that eventually the farming in Pecos was going to tilt in a direction that was not going to be real lucrative.

RM: What did he think would happen?

MW: He saw the increase in costs, the water table dropping and dropping and dropping, becoming more and more expensive to lift the water—that was his biggest concern. The other thing he said that I think was extremely profound was he did not want my brother and me to grow up in a situation that had such a limited horizon. I didn't think that much about it some years ago, but now with my own two sons I think, wow, what a marvelous outlook on life.

That was kind of laying the groundwork in his mind, the seed, that the family was going to need to do something different before long. Some time in early to mid-1957 he saw an ad in the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* referring to a parcel of land in the Pahrump Valley, Nevada, that had a huge amount of acreage and was on more or less a distress sale. And that got his attention.

Some friends of ours who were also farming—Joe Frank Crews and Mitty Sue, his wife— and my mom and dad were friends. My mom and dad always said there wasn't anything to do in Pecos so you had to make your own entertainment. Those were the days when laughing, joking, drinking, and smoking was good, clean entertainment in West Texas. And most of those guys were World War II vets—they went off and fought the war and won it and kept our country free, and they were gutsy and they were tough, and they enjoyed having fun. Those were the kind of people farming Pecos, the very top cream of the crop of our nation's society. They liked to party, too, and have a good time.

I think Frank Crews had been in the air force. He was a pilot; he had a plane that he flew around in and he was enjoying success in his own right. They were close friends and Dad said, "Hey, why don't we take a trip out to Vegas and have a look at this property in Pahrump, because we can write it off and have a good old time." So they did that.

RM: As I understand it they drove, which was a long ways.

MW: Yes, about 700 miles. My brother and I stayed at home with the babysitter, Mrs. Mills or Mrs. Miller, and I don't know if they drove or flew. I think that they probably drove in my parents' 1955 Chrysler.

RM: Would they fly commercial, or use Crews's plane?

MW: They would've flown commercial. But anyway, they made the trip out to Vegas, partied it up—because in those days, in 1957, Vegas was just like a small town. There were perhaps 60,000 people in the whole Las Vegas Valley. The Strip ended at the Hacienda and the old Highway 95 went to Los Angeles; there was no I-15.

To make the trip "expensable," they drove out to Pahrump to look at the ranch and they took some water and soil samples back to Texas with them just to be able to say they did it as a business trip. I guess they were both really impressed with the quality of the water and the soil in the Pahrump Valley, and the climate and everything. They saw that it was conducive to cotton.

RM: What were they looking for in water to call it high quality?

MW: Cheap, shallow, and pure.

RM: What impurities would be disqualifiers?

MW: In West Texas, the Ogallala Aquifer had quite a bit of salinity. The soil was very good, but over time the irrigation was not exactly enhancing the soil because of the naturally occurring salinity and alkali in the water. By comparison, in Pahrump the water

is very pure, and it was not going to be so contaminative to the soils. Over time, the soil quality held up better.

RM: What were they looking for in soil?

MW: Not too sandy or too much alkali. If you had an underlying layer of caliche, that wouldn't have been good at all. My dad was not impressed with the Sandy Valley as an area to farm because of the sand being so porous that it didn't hold the moisture for crops the way the dirt in the Pahrump Valley would. So Pahrump had some fundamentals that were very appealing, even though it did not have power or telephone, and the pavement from Blue Diamond out to Pahrump had only been in for a couple years. Before that Highway 160 had been gravel, so that would've been discouraging.

After they had those results from the analysis of the soil and the water, my dad and Frank were both sort of intrigued—especially my dad, because he was looking for a way to make a transition out of Pecos while the going was good. Things were still okay in Pecos; everybody was still farming and natural gas was still 32 cents a thousand cubic feet because of Billy Sol Estes's contract.

My dad felt like Pahrump was an opportunity that presented some potential for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow because of its proximity to Las Vegas. Even then, he was looking ahead to something that would be akin to the Scottsdale story with its proximity to Phoenix. He felt like Pahrump's proximity to Las Vegas was going to be enhanced value-wise over time. As the population and prosperity of Las Vegas grew, that was going to spill over into Pahrump, provided some of the amenities could be enhanced—i.e., electricity and telephone and some of the other things that weren't there yet. I think the price of the Pahrump Ranch, when you divided it all out, was like $30 an acre.

RM: Was that cheap?

MW: Oh, extremely cheap. Farms in West Texas were selling dirt for maybe $200, $300 an acre.

RM: Was that raw ground in Texas, or did that have wells on it?

MW: I think that was probably developed land. You've got to remember I was about 10 years old. [Laughs] I'm reaching back to things that I remember hearing as a child!

RM: It's amazing how much you know from having been a kid. Most kids aren't paying any attention at all.

MW: Well, I loved being with my dad, and I loved doing the stuff that he did because it was so fascinating to me. I have always loved the smell of crude oil and the throb and thunder of big industrial engines and pulleys and big V belts and drive shafts and the sound and the energy that goes into producing an enormous amount of water that comes out of the ground.

RM: Did your brother have that?

MW: Not as much. He had a totally different sort of a path. Now, my brother liked to go out to the Pecos farm. One thing that was fun—periodically my dad would have to shut the pump engines down to service them. By the late 1950s, much of the water was deep. Many of those guys were using paired-up Minneapolis-Molines, either 605s or 800s, belted pulleys and multiple belts, and the outboard engine and then the inboard engine with the drive shaft and the gear head.

So he would have to shut the engines down from time to time for servicing. My dad's pickups were all running on propane, and the tank was in the back of the bed just below the rear window. One of the games we used to love to play was to get in the back and sit on the propane tank up against the cab so if he had to stop short, we wouldn't be

thrown out—you never sat in the very back by the tailgate. And in those days nobody cared; it was all wide open and free.

On the north farm, Dad had a pair of GK-145 Waukesha (pump engines). The GK-145s were orange in color and they had great-sounding exhaust, and they would run day and night, 24 hours a day. At night you'd see their red hot exhaust manifolds glowing cherry red, just sitting there pumping. I had an affinity for this dependable, reliable engine; I just loved it. They were made in Waukesha, Wisconsin, I believe—that's where they were based. These were GK-145 models, inline, 6-cylinder, overhead valves by the late '50s. One engine wasn't sufficient because of the water depths. When they first started pumping in '48 they could use automotive engines because the water was so shallow that that was all that they required. As the table dropped, they had to lower their pumps deeper in the wells and had to put bigger and bigger engines on them.

On Section 42, on his No. 1 well, he had a V-10 Climax engine, just one engine. As a kid, I really liked being out there but when they started that thing up and ran it up to speed, I got about 50 feet away because it was so loud it hurt my ears. God, I'd love to go back to that now. Then they went to multiple adaptations where they used smaller engines, belted. There were several different choices, variations and combinations of irrigation power units.

But I didn't see any other farm in the area of the south farm except for my dad's that had three Minneapolis-Molines on one well! The center engine had the drive shaft to it, and it had a double pulley, and each of the outboard engines was belted to the center engine. I wish I had photos of that because that was quite a piece of engineering.

RM: And it took that much power to pull that water out of there?

MW: Yes. I guess the two 800s weren't quite muscular enough for that well so he put

three 605s on it. And the price of natural gas was cheap enough that it made it viable. But I think he had two different outcomes on the south farm over a period of years. On the one hand, he had an extremely good outcome; one year he had a crop that was very successful and prolific. But at the other extreme, I do know that he said one year on the south farm he lost $100,000 because the crop just didn't pan out.

RM: Why would a crop not pan out? What could happen?

MW: It could've been hail, it could've been just a lousy year, it could've been a number of things. I don't remember exactly what it was, but he made reference to the fact that he had lost $100,000 one year on that particular piece of dirt. Perhaps the weather, a short growing season.

RM: And he had the three Minneapolis-Molines pumping all of the water for the south farm?

MW: I believe so. I don't remember any other irrigation wells on that south farm, because that unit was right by the highway. Any time you drove down the road to Saragosa there were farms up and down the highway, and that one was right there. You couldn't help but see it.

RM: Now, those engines you're talking about were built as gas engines, but you were running them on natural gas, right?

MW: Or propane or butane. However, I do believe that they were designed with certain features and metallic assays specific for natural gas operations.

RM: Can you run a diesel engine on propane?

MW: It's interesting that you ask that. My dad kind of enjoyed experimenting. He had a 1954 diesel TD-18 International crawler that they were using to work the dirt with. That particular piece of equipment was unique because it was an in-line six engine with dual

exhaust, and up on the left side of the engine on the cowling, the hood, was a small gas tank that held about three gallons. The gasoline line ran to a carburetor on the intake manifold of the engine. And on the same side were a distributor and six sparkplugs and the generator and the starter. I think the diesel injection system was on the left side of the engine.

Anyway, it had a kind of a unique feature—you pulled a lever that was down low on the firewall out completely and you'd stick out your foot and hold the lever out with your heel and your toe. It was a decompression release for the engine. Diesel engines have to have somewhere between 18 and 22-to-1 compression, and the decompression release lowered that by about half. Then there was an ignition switch that you'd pull on, and you had the main throttle turned all the way off and there was a choke and a starter button. You would turn the switch on, pull the choke out after you turned the little valve on in the gasoline tank, and you would start it. The engine would start up on gasoline. It would sit there in kind of a preset idle speed and you let the thing run for a few minutes to get it warmed up. Then, shove the decompression lever in and move up the main diesel throttle lever to switch it in to running on the main diesel mode.

As I said, my dad was a very innovative guy, always looking for ways to do things a little differently so they might work a little better. The cost of the diesel was quite a bit higher than the cost of the propane, by three or four or five times. So he saw an opportunity to convert this TD-18 to propane. The fuel-injection components were removed from the engine and metal plates were fabricated to cover those areas of the engine block. Then, the gasoline carburetor was replaced with a propane carburetion unit. The original diesel tank was removed and replaced with a 200-gallon propane tank. At this point the mechanic installed a heat exchanger regulator into the cooling system of the

engine. The existing ignition and sparkplug layout was not changed. However, diesel engines are distinguished by very high compression levels—maybe 22 to 1, whereas propane engines run well with around 10 to 1 compression levels. So the six pistons were removed in order to access and remove certain compression rings.

I guess they took off two or three of the compression rings that were removed from each piston to lower the compression down to the desired 10 to 1, which would have been optimal for propane. The engine was all reassembled and Dad said the TD-18 ran like a bomb. It got out there and really cooked for about 100 hours and then the thing just kind of self-destructed. So the TD-18 was taken back to the shop and again disassembled. It was determined that the diesel oil in and of itself is a lubricant, whereas propane burns hot and dry. So every time there was a down stroke in each of the cylinders, the pistons were scraping every bit of lubrication off the walls of the cylinders, and within about 100 hours of running time, the cylinder walls were badly damaged.

So the engine was again disassembled and the cylinders re-sleeved or rebored. This time around, only one oil ring was left on each piston in order to allow some lubricant to remain during each piston stroke. They buttoned it back up, put it back out, and it ran like a bomb for about another 100 hours, and then cratered again. Dad said at that point he just decided, “Well, this isn’t going to work too well.” So he took what was remaining of that ’54 and traded it in on a brand new 1956 International TD-18 crawler, the same model but two years newer.

And that one, he left alone. He left it in a stock configuration and used in it Texas. I remember going out to the south farm one day, and I always loved starting things up. We were going to start it up but the batteries were down, and the batteries are under the seat. We took the seat off and took the caps off the batteries and they were bone dry, so

that's why they had run down. Ideally, batteries are serviced and topped off with distilled water periodically.

Anyway, in 1958 that TD-18 was trucked to Nevada and it was critical in doing a lot of work on Pahrump Ranch. Actually, I ended up operating that crawler at the tender of age of 12 and 13.

RM: You were running a 'dozer at that age?

MW: Yes, pulling a disk. One day my dad sent me out to pull a disk in that same field with an M Farmall, and I could see that what it was doing wasn't real impressive. I saw the TD-18 nearby, just sitting there, so I shut the M off I walked over to the TD-18 and it was all ready to go. And I remembered how it all worked.

RM: At 12 years old?

MW: Yes. Well, it was already on site; it was all ready to go. I should have checked the fuel in the tank and I didn't, but as it turned out it had plenty of fuel. Another employee was operating that TD-18 in the early stages of the ranch. I used to go out with him and sit next to him and kind of watch what he was doing. It had steering clutches and the main clutch and the steering brakes and the high and low range and the main gearshift and the throttle and all that. I had been able to watch what was going on, and by osmosis, kind of absorbed it. That's what kind of equipped me to go out there by myself and fire it up and start working with it. My rows were all crooked, but I knew how to go up to the other end and turn around and come back and work a pattern.

RM: I wonder what your dad thought. He must have been proud of you.

MW: I guess he was kind of impressed because he had never actually said, "Okay, here's what you do."

I don't know if it was the same day or not, but within a day or two of that, my

dad, in the ’58 turquoise GMC pickup that had come up from Texas, drove up. So I slowed the TD-18 down and idled and stopped. A guy was with him wearing a cap, and they both got out and came over and it was Frank Crews; he had come from Texas to visit and to look over the ranch. I was sort of like the son Frank never had; he had two daughters. He and I were great friends. Frank would later reminisce how fun that day was for him because my comment was, “I knew who it was because of that cap and those ears.” He got a big kick out of that.

RM: Was Crews a partner in the Pahrump Ranch?

MW: Yes, a silent partner because my dad wasn’t financially able to do it all on his own. He had to borrow the money. They had debt that had to be paid off, and that was split right down the middle with the Crews family. So basically my dad was earning wages while running the ranch operations. The Williams family moved to Nevada; the Crews family stayed in Texas.

RM: So Walt got wages and then they split the profits.

MW: Or the loss or whatever. Frank made out quite nicely because by the time the Pahrump Ranch sold, Pecos was in a downward spiral. It was very fortunate for the Crews family.

RM: Has Pecos ever recovered?

MW: Not at present. The water table has recharged itself somewhat. I’ve gone back there a few times over the years, fairly recently in the last couple of years. One of few people still alive there—she’s in her 90s now—is Hope Wilson, J. C. Wilson’s wife. I reconnected with her and we had a chance to visit about all these memories. Back when I was a little kid, my mother used to have her friends over, playing bridge and so on. Hope was a real close friend of the family; she has known me since I was seven months old.

I told her, “I always used to check you out because you were so pretty, and you’re still pretty.” She gets a big kick out of that. But she was living in Pecos before any of that farming boom happened. She and her family date back to the 1800s and she’s still there. She’s as feisty as a billy goat. She still has her ranch; she still drives around in a pickup. She’s a remarkable lady. I am grateful to still be connected to Hope and her brother, Cole.

RM: Are they growing anything in Pecos now?

MW: A little bit of alfalfa and maybe a few select melon crops. Hope and I talked about the farming. She used to farm cotton, a little bit of alfalfa, some melons. Pecos cantaloupes were very famous—something about the soil and the salinity of the water combine to make the best-tasting cantaloupe you’ve ever had. I asked her not long ago about the cotton, and she said at one time there were 25 large cotton gins in that radius.

There were perhaps 300,000 acres of cotton. We had one gin in the Pahrump Valley with 5,000 acres compared to 25 gins in that 50-mile radius in Pecos processing all of that production. That’s why the water table went down so fast. She says they’re all gone now except for one gin in either Balmorhea or Saragosa, about 30 miles south of Pecos. She knows the guys who own that gin. She said, “If you manage to grow some cotton, then take it over to them and they’ll gin it for you.”

Pecos is rather like seeing the rise and the fall of an ancient civilization in your own lifetime. When we moved there it was just getting going and then in its zenith there was a lot of prosperity—new homes and new cars and living it up-type thing. Then it crested and fell and the town now is a shell of its former self. I think one of the major television networks did a special segment not long ago showing Pecos as an example of a town that’s fallen on hard times. The main restaurant is the truck stop out on the

Interstate. There used to be several restaurants.

Now, however, Hope says there is a resurgence of oil and gas drilling all around Pecos. Perhaps another stage, or cycle, is beginning for that community. Hope knows of my interest in the oil industry. She's kind of riding herd on those areas around Pecos, watching and listening to see what's going on with drilling activity.

When I last talked to her, she said, "It's kind of interesting because right now there are approximately 25 or 30 drilling rigs in and around Pecos drilling for oil." They've discovered new stratas of oil that have been there all along, but nobody knew about them. So now the fortunes of the town seem to be turning around a little bit.

RM: They are finding oil there?

MW: Oh, yes. That Permian Basin is one of the most fabulous petroleum formations in the whole world. They've been pumping it for years, and they're still drilling it and they're still finding oil.

RM: That's interesting. Now, let's talk about the transition. Your mom and dad and Frank Crews his wife, Mitty Sue, came out here, checked it out, and ran tests on the soil and water. What happened then?

MW: Well, they went back to Pecos, and I guess they made a plan. By late in '57 everything had been kind of folded up for our family in Pecos and we made the transition out to Las Vegas and Pahrump in early '58, in time enough to get in on that crop year. You start doing all of the dirt work and preparation soon after the first of the year in order to plant a crop early in the spring.

RM: What did the family in Comanche think?

MW: I never really heard anyone say one way or the other what they thought about our family going to Nevada. I guess my granddad would have preferred that we'd stayed in

Brownwood, but he was willing enough to stake my dad to that initial outlay. And when my dad took that and ran with it and succeeded, I think he had to be pretty impressed with him.

We used to go back to Comanche for Christmas and at other times. I remember my granddad had his chair in the living room by the door with a lamp, and he was always reading. Even in his 80s and 90s, he was a voracious reader. He always smoked cigars so the house kind of had that permeated essence, which I thought smelled kind of good if you didn't get too much of it.

There was a footstool nearby, and I remember my dad sitting and talking to his dad at a very elevated level of voice because my granddad was a little hard of hearing. I was doing my own thing playing outside or whatever and I would walk through, and my dad would be very seriously talking—I'm sure about what he was doing in Pecos or Pahrump or whatever, and my granddad would be listening. I never paid much attention to it because I was a kid, but I'm sure my dad was kind of reporting on his progress, what he was doing and how he was doing this and that and whatever.

Grandfather is said to have been very successful. During his lifetime, he worked very hard and provided well for his family. I'm grateful to have been a beneficiary, not only materially but especially by the work ethic examples of my grandparents and parents. I have told my two children, Rik and Lorin, "There's something that I read in *Forbes* not too many years ago, and that was that the first generation makes it; the second generation, if they're lucky they hold onto some of it; and usually by the third generation, it's all gone. I'm telling you, not on my watch. Whatever you guys do, it's up to you. But I know how hard it was for my parents and I know the sacrifices that were made to earn this, and I'm going to do the best I can to be reasonable and maintain what we have

here." We're very, very blessed in having what we have to work with. And at this point in time, both of my children are showing so much responsibility and having such wonderful success in their own right, I'm so proud of them! So very proud!

RM: That's impressive. So your dad had to do two things—disengage from Pecos and then engage out here. Did he sell the farms in Pecos?

MW: Yes, he ended up selling the farms. I don't know the timetable, but it was the optimum time to sell because things were still going good. I don't think the house sold immediately and I don't think it sold quite as well as it might have. That was kind of a tough transition for my mother because she loved that home; it was her dream home. She was the president of the PTA and very involved in the upper echelon of the society there. My dad was the president of the country club. It was really tough for my mom because she had her friends, Rick and I had our friends. But in my dad's mind, it was now or never. When they came out here, first of all, my dad took my mother out to look at the ranch in the valley.

RM: Oh, she didn't go over to look at it when they first came?

MW: I don't think she saw it until after the die was cast. The words she used were kind of inappropriate, but she said something like, "You'd move me out of our new home in Pecos for this son of a bitch?" [Laughter]

That kind of set the tone for the dynamic that then was established. This wasn't discussed with my brother and me but I think the deal they cut was, "Okay, Walter, we're living in Vegas instead of Pahrump because the schools in Vegas are where my kids need to be. I'm going to find a house in a neighborhood with a school where I think that my kids are going to be okay with their education."

Dad probably said, "I'm fine with that. You're the vice president in charge of that. I've got my hands full right here." So before they made the move my mother found

920 Bonita, at the corner of 10th and St. Louis, right by John C. Fremont Junior High and within two blocks of Gorman, which was the premier high school, even though we were not Catholics. On the St. Louis side there were vacant lots and across the street and as far as you could see to the south it was desert and sagebrush. Sahara Boulevard wasn't Sahara Boulevard; it was called San Francisco Boulevard. It was two lanes from the Strip all the way down to the Boulder Highway. And after you got past Maryland Parkway it became very bumpy because the asphalt was all heat damaged. I think that it was renamed Sahara Boulevard within a year or two after we moved here.

RM: That's interesting. They named it after the Sahara Hotel.

MW: Yes. At that time they had that old Thunderbird horse racetrack out there. They tore it down about a year or so after we moved here. I remember the Sahara Hotel and then that racetrack complex was kind of right across from where the Hilton is now. San Francisco Boulevard was two lanes, and all that was desert. And certainly everything beyond that was in the "middle of nowhere."

RM: I see. Now, was your mom adapting pretty well and liking it, or just toughing it out?

MW: Well, she had been through this once before in the Brownwood exodus. She said she knew that staying put was going to destroy my dad. He was going to end up with ulcers and be miserable if he didn't get out of Brownwood in order to find an opportunity that he felt would work well for our family. They went out to Pecos and it was a great, great life. In my mom's mind it was like, "I'm very happy here but, oh, time to go." And she went along with it. She was sad to leave her friends and her new home in Pecos, but my dad was pretty much, "Come on, let's go, we're going to do this." I'm sure that underneath it all, my mom knew that Dad was right.

She picked out the house at 920 Bonita, which was I think was not quite as nice a house as the one in Pecos. It was on a corner with a driveway with access from Bonita onto 10th. It had three bedrooms and two baths and a living room and a den and a kitchen with kind of a booth seating arrangement and a small utility annex, then an outside closet with an air conditioning compressor unit for the house and a gas furnace. It was a nice home in an excellent location and neighborhood, especially being within easy access to the major parts suppliers, banks, and businesses Dad needed to frequent regularly. It also gave easy access to Highway 160 via old U.S. 95 by making the right turn onto the very rough Blue Diamond road.

So it was very adequate; it's a nice home but it was a step down from what she had with the new home in Pecos and all of her friends. In the move to Las Vegas, her status was now as the wife of a dirt farmer in Pahrump. But she went ahead. My dad was extremely focused on the tiger by the tail he had out in Pahrump; he had his hands full out there big time.

The Pahrump Ranch had a primary home on it. That railroad tie home, the main residence, was our ranch home. It had two bedrooms and a pretty good-size kitchen and a bath and a shower and a living room area. It was very adequate, but didn't have all of the amenities that we had in the other home—certainly no telephone or TV.

RM: Was your dad thinking initially that the family would live out there?

MW: He alluded a few times to the fact that if he had really done it right, he'd have had us out there living on the ranch, and he'd have had my brother and me working alongside him.

RM: But your mom said no way.

MW: In so many words. It has practical aspects. And I think Dad understood that that

was not going to work as well. I think he understood the schools out there were pretty isolated. They had to take the high school kids to Shoshone High School every day on the bus.

By living in Vegas, Dad had access to all of the essentials to keep the ranch functioning—suppliers such as Bearing Belt Chain, Clark County Wholesale, General Auto Parts, Cashman Caterpillar, International Harvester, James Engine Rebuilding, and so forth. (That was Ron and Verne James's; Dad met them early on. The building is still there. I think it's on Commerce off of Main Street. They had the state-of-the-art equipment for rebuilding engines and re-machining components.) All those things were critical to an operation like Dad's because as things wore out, you had to have them repaired and rebuilt. So all of that infrastructure that wasn't in Pahrump was in Las Vegas.

And my dad was always used to driving. I'm sure that he thought it was best to live in town because "certainly Nancy will be happier, certainly the kids will have a better situation in school, certainly their horizons will be expanded beyond what they would be out here," and certainly the daily drive out and back let him have time by himself to collect his thoughts about what was going to be waiting for him when he got out to the ranch.

He always had a notepad and a pen in his pocket and he lived by that notepad. He always wore khakis and white short-sleeved shirts—that was kind of his dress for work.

RM: What kind of footwear did he wear? Boots?

MW: He had brown Wellingtons early on.

RM: And a Stetson?

MW: Not so much after we moved from Texas. I've got a neat picture at home of my

dad in Brownwood with my brother standing next to him. My dad's kneeling down and he's got me on his knee, and he's got a Stetson with a Camel hanging out of his mouth. It's a beautiful photo with an orchard behind him. But by the time we got to Vegas, I don't remember him wearing a hat very much at all.

He always referred affectionately to his cars as his "bucket of bolts." In 1955, while we were still in Texas, he bought a new Chrysler New Yorker, a kind of a metallic green four-door, and he had an ARA air conditioning unit installed in the trunk. It had Plexiglas flumes up along each side of the back that blew the cold air forward; it was a six-volt system. This was one of the very first aftermarket air conditioning units that they put in cars; Chrysler didn't have a factory version yet. In the summer of '55 our family drove into old Mexico and spent about six or seven weeks driving all over. I've always remembered that. It was kind of a romantic thing for me because I remember songs out of that era that you'd hear on the radio even in Mexico. It was a totally different world then—it was a very neat trip. As a child, I took this trip somewhat for granted. But even then—and now—my memories of the experience seem almost as a Hollywood movie! It would be difficult, probably dangerous, to repeat that by automobile in these times.

At any rate, in 1956 he bought a new 1956 Pontiac so my mom had the Chrysler and my dad had the Pontiac. It had in-dash factory air conditioning because it was a 12-volt system; maybe it was the first year for that. Then in late '57, he bought a brand new 1958 turquoise GMC pickup. It had the inline six cylinder engine and the three-speed on the column. He had it converted to propane in Midland or Odessa. In the back, instead of one tank, he had double-decker tanks, one tank on top of the other behind the cab, and they both were filled from the driver's side. The fuel system was arranged whereby the engine could also run on gasoline. Dad was looking ahead—that truck could make a trip

from Pecos, Texas to Nevada non-stop, fuel-wise. When that truck was brand new, one day I asked him if I could take it down and get myself a haircut about a mile from the house. He said, "Yeah, here," and handed me the keys. I was 10 years old. It was brand new!

RM: Oh, my God. Ten years old! This was in Texas?

MW: Yes. I have to confess that I wasn't totally well-behaved with it. I'm always struck by the fact that my dad had that level of trust in me, even as a 10-year-old. What I did that annoyed him that day was, I wasn't content just to pull in the driveway and park it afterwards. I did a little bit of tire-squealing up and down the driveway three or four times, and that left tracks. He called that to my attention and said that wasn't part of the deal. He didn't spank me or anything. He just said, "That wasn't too cool." Anyway, that truck played a pivotal role on the ranch; it was really important. And it made several round trips to Texas during the transition to Nevada.

After we got to Nevada he also had the Pontiac converted to propane. He was able to purchase transport loads of propane for 10, 11, and 12 cents per gallon. Even with the road tax, it made that commute between Pahrump and Las Vegas much more viable because he would be commuting anywhere from 50,000 to 70,000 miles a year back and forth.

RM: And that was a fun commute then. You had the road to yourself and it was paved.

MW: Right. The people in the valley were a close-knit community and everybody was watching this family from Texas, especially this individual with balls of titanium and guts and nerves of steel who gambled on Pahrump Ranch and might fail. They were watching to see if he was going to fall off his horse. The local humor was Walt burning up the highway at 70, 80 miles an hour; back then, there was no speed limit. Dad had places to

go, and lots to do.

Dad had a tiger by the tail. I swear, the older I get the more I think, I do not know how in the world he got all of that done. It's just unbelievable! I've been out in the world enough now and fought my own battles and I think, "Holy cow, how did he do all of that? And how did he make it look so easy? And how did he always not bring all those troubles and burdens home with him?" And in the midst of it all, how did he manage to have such a great sense of humor?

RM: He left all the troubles and burdens out there?

MW: He left them there.

RM: So you came into the area and moved into the house and you kids were in school. Where did you go?

MW: My brother and I enrolled at John C. Fremont Junior High. I was in the fifth grade, and I went into Mrs. Zaphien's class. My brother was in, I guess, the eighth grade. John C. Fremont was fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth in those years and John S. Park was first, second, third, fourth. I was in the middle of my fifth-grade year.

RM: Okay, so you're set in school. Now, what was the first thing your dad had to do to get things going out there?

MW: He had to get all the equipment trucked up from Texas and staged and on hand. He brought a cadre of people up with him. Nick Nuñez had been with my dad in the early years in Texas and he had three sons: Santos, Jose, and Fermine, and they all had families.

The primary ranch headquarters, dwellings, and equipment were accessed with an asphalt entry road from Highway 372 about a quarter-mile from the intersection of highways 160 and 372. The old Pahrump Store building, silos, bunkhouse, and numerous

dwellings and other structures were situated on both sides of the street for about a quarter-mile stretch and radius. The new shop building was completed in 1960. The first Harvest Festival was held there.

Then further up Highway 160 going towards Vegas maybe two miles, kind of in the middle part of the ranch, was what we called the Mizpah. There was another house and it had the No. 8 irrigation well next to it. And on the far end of the ranch, on the main road up from Gamebird, was basically a border at the end of the ranch. The No. 10 irrigation well was there, and there was a trailer house with kind of an appendage added onto it. Actually, the home had the trailer as additional living space adjoining the house.

That's where Virgil Bateman and his family lived. Virgil was the one key employee left over from the previous ownership who chose to stay. He was the mechanic who played a huge part in the ultimate success of the Pahrump Ranch. Virgil was remarkable with his knowledge and his cleverness and his work. He was very intelligent and resourceful, with a broad range of capabilities, and was able to keep everything going mechanically.

RM: What do you know about him? What's his background?

MW: I'm still in contact with his son Everett Bateman, who may have been born in Pahrump. Virgil I think originally worked in the woods up in Oregon as a Cat skinner; I'm a little bit hazy on that. Somehow or another, the Batemans migrated down and ended up on the ranch. I don't know how long he'd been there before my parents took over the ownership, but he was there. And thank God he was. My dad would have been the first to nominate Virgil as being hugely important to the success of the operation. So many mechanical things depended on this one man and he had so much dexterity and knowledge and he could improvise so well and he was so committed and willing to do

what had to be done. And he had a great sense of humor. I spent a lot of time with Virgil as a kid. He was a wonderful friend and mentor.

RM: Was he an older man or middle-aged at that time?

MW: In his 40s, I suppose. His kids were pretty young. I remember Everett and his shock of blond hair and his blue eyes and his smiley face, and I'll tell him to this day that's how I remember him the first time I met him; he was maybe three or four years old. I guess his dad was probably in his late 30s or early 40s. Everett's older sister, Jeanita, was 17 and Sylvia was about 14. And there was Barbara, the third daughter, and Michael, and then Everett. Virgil and his wife, Grace, had five children and they lived in the previously described home at the end of the ranch. They had a supply of fresh water from that irrigation well and a little generator plant that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't work, but they had kerosene lamps. That was just part of what folks did out there in the valley—when the sun went down, if you wanted light, you either had kerosene or you had a generator.

As I recall, Nick Nuñez's son Fermine and his family ended up living in that Mizpah house by the No. 8 irrigation well. The three Nuñez sons, Fermine, Jose, and Santos, all had families. For a time, Fermine and his family were in the house adjacent to the highway at the Mizpah, the midpoint of the ranch. Jose was in the house as you drove into the ranch on the far end on the right-hand side across from the foreman's house. Fermine's first house was located in between the Williams home as you drove into the settlement and the foreman's residence down on the other end of the camp structures, closer to the cotton fields and irrigation ditches. Over the years, some of the families shifted from one home to another. Virgil and his family ultimately also ended up living in the Mizpah home by the No. 8 irrigation well. Families adjusted their accommodations as

necessary.

Also, there was a trailer in between the Williams home and Fermine's first home, all on the left side of the road. The bunkhouse originally was kind of a hotel. It had a couple of big evaporative coolers up top. When you walked in the front door, there was a big open area rather like a large living room. Then there was a hallway down each wing and a kitchen annex off the big main room. Then on the other side of the hallway adjacent to the big room was a large bathroom with urinals, two toilets, and showers. There were rooms on each side of the hallway on both ends. On the end facing Highway 372, the doors opened out towards the equipment yard.

The main bunkhouse was where the single workers lived when we first came to the ranch. I don't know how many it would house; I suppose two men could be in a room, as necessary, depending on the time of the year and the work load and all that. There was probably a total of 12 to 14 individual rooms for the single workers to share accordingly.

Another person who came to the ranch was a fellow who had been the foreman on my dad's north farm in Texas; his name was Claude Parks. He came with his wife and son, Larry. Larry would have been five or six years old. He was their only child and had blue eyes and light blond hair. Larry and I became friends during his short stay at the farm.

RM: What was Claude's wife's name, do you recall?

MW: I don't remember her name. She was a big woman with horn-rimmed glasses and not terribly friendly, as I recall; I didn't know her too well. Larry and I played together because there weren't a whole lot of other kids around to play with but I didn't really know him too well until they came up from Texas. They lived in the foreman's house on the far end down closer to the fields. So that kind of set the stage as far as the hired help

to start off with. The ranch personnel fluctuated over time.

There were other individual Mexicans, some of whom stayed with my dad for 23 years because he was such a good guy to work with. He knew how to lead. He wasn't above getting his hands dirty; he'd roll up his sleeves and be out there. He learned the language—he could communicate quite well with "his Mexicans." He learned Spanish from his workers. They had a lot of respect for Dad because he spoke their language, and he was very comfortable with their culture. The respect was mutual as well as the goals of the enterprise: Get the job done!

They saw him, I'm sure, as an inspiring and very reasonable individual and a very generous man. He showed them respect, but also knew how to engender their respect and knew how to motivate them to perform at their very top level. I think you call that leadership by example. Sometimes there's somebody that you're so inspired by that you want to go out and do your very best for them because you have so much respect for this person and want to please them. That's been my experience from time to time. Certainly, my dad inspired that in his employees.

That first year, he had his hands full with getting all of the equipment up from Texas and lining up the financing for the crop year. He used to jokingly refer to putting on his knee pads to go see the bankers. The bank that he dealt with a lot was at 15th and Charleston, First National in Las Vegas. The bank manager's name, I think it was something like Marshall Crenshaw. The thing that was distinctive about him was he had one arm. He was the main manager. The other thing I always found fascinating about that bank was that in those days, many people inside the facility, even the girls behind the counter, were smoking. That was a very common thing when you walked in the bank. And even Marshall Crenshaw had an ashtray on his desk for himself and his business

patrons; it was just something I noticed.

Prior to Dad's arrival, as an agricultural unit, the ranch had fallen on hard times. There were a number of reasons for that: lots of weeds, lots of Johnson grass, no concrete irrigation ditches, not enough irrigation wells. It was not doing too well, but the ranch had a lot of history to it. And it had lots of land with potential and a sizeable cotton allotment.

I remember when you turned into the entrance of the ranch off of State Road 372, the road to Shoshone, there was a cattle guard and a big white overhang with black letters, Pahrump Ranch, and it had a symbol, like a brand. I wish I had a picture of that. The road surface entering the ranch was asphalt and you could go across the cattle guard or it also had a paved access that bypassed the cattle guard to the left that went down in to the ranch main entry road. Then the main drive down through the ranch went all the way past the last two dwellings and turned to gravel and went on out to the fields.

In those early days several large palm trees lined the left side going down that road across and into the ranch. Those palm trees had been there for several years and they were quite large with that kind of shaggy growth at the base of their fronds. At some point in the '60s, my dad decided that they should transplant those palm trees to along the front of the ranch, parallel to Highway 372, to dress up the property. They moved the palms with the old GMC A-frame, which utilized a cable for lifting and hoisting things. (That A-frame was a crucial piece of equipment for the ranch, as it turned out.) Somehow or another, moving the palm trees didn't work out too well since most of them eventually died when they were transplanted.

The initial challenges involved getting everyone organized for preparing the land and putting in the crop. Water that was available from the existing wells utilized earthen ditches improvised by Virgil Bateman using the Caterpillar road grader; concrete ditches

would come the following year. That first year, where he had been making anywhere from two to two-and-a-half to three bales to the acre in Texas, Dad ended up netting maybe half a bale to the acre.

RM: Why was the yield so reduced?

MW: Because of all of those things I mentioned, like the Johnson grass, and there probably were some insects. It was just a combination of things that reduced the yield that year. There could have been a late planting because of all the transition complications. Maybe they were behind by a calendar month or six weeks and the crops weren't planted early enough to have the optimum time to grow.

RM: Was that yield really disappointing to him?

MW: Well, I don't think that it caught him totally by surprise. I think he knew that first year was going to be tough. But at the same time, I believe he knew that the reason the purchase price of the property was so low was that the ranch was "on its ass" financially. He picked it up kind of as a fire sale, he and Crews. And he saw this as a way to get out of West Texas, as a way to get his kids into a more optimum area where their horizons could be expanded. In short, he saw opportunity with risks.

Truly, the timing of my parents' move to southern Nevada was really smart. Yes, it was a huge gamble and, along with the other challenges, the economy was slipping into the recession that started early in 1958. The decision to leave Texas was very gutsy!

At the same time, Las Vegas was really just starting to come into its own dynamic growth cycle. For example, very soon after our arrival, the original "flying saucer" convention center building was constructed. A few years later, right across the street (Paradise Road), the unique structure of the Landmark Hotel tower and casino was constructed. I remember when it was just a huge hole in the ground before all of the

cement was poured during its construction. Those were only two examples of the enormous exciting endeavors sprouting up all over Las Vegas.

So during those first years after my family's arrival in Las Vegas and Pahrump, really amazing things were just beginning that would shape the future of southern Nevada so dramatically for the next several decades. These were marvelous times for both Pahrump and Las Vegas. I can't imagine how my parents could have timed the transition from Texas to Nevada any more perfectly—really amazing!

Anyway, my dad didn't start farming until he was 32, 33 years old, learning from scratch. When he made the transition to Pahrump, he was 42. That's getting kind of late in life to start something brand new with that level of risk and make it all work. So it was like, "There's no failing here; it has to work. I'll do whatever I have to do to make it work." I'm sure that's what he was thinking.

RM: Did he walk out of Texas with a pretty good bunch of cash after he sold the farms?

MW: I think he was in good enough shape that he was able to, with Frank Crews, make the deal on the ranch.

RM: Was the ranch financed?

MW: They had financing, I'm sure. I think there was enough money between the two of them to make the down payment that the banks required.

RM: And again, how many acres was it?

MW: From what I remember my dad saying, it was approximately 12,000 fee simple and another 16,000 of leased BLM land; the total cotton allotment was somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,000 acres. That is my understanding; I don't remember all of the boundaries, but the property certainly encompassed portions of both sides of highways

160 and 372. It included the area where the Nugget Hotel and Casino is now, which is where the gin was. He deeded 40 acres for that facility without any kind of clause of reversion that I know of.

RM: Did he regret that?

MW: I never asked him about that. I think at that time, maybe he was "dirt rich and cash poor." There was so much dirt that he was using parcels of dirt as sort of cash, or in lieu of cash, to accomplish other things that were critical. That was one way he was able to entice investors in Arizona Cottonseed Products to come and construct the cotton gin. The gin was crucial; before, the farmers were taking their cotton to Blythe, California, or elsewhere. They were using hay balers to bale it, which made it really difficult. He knew the first order of business was to use his contacts from West Texas to put in motion factors to entice an entity to construct a gin that would make cotton farming much more viable, not only for himself but for the whole valley.

A lot of what Walt did was certainly in his own interest, but it was also in the interest of most everyone. I think, for lack of a better expression, he had kind of a godfather view of the community: "There's no reason why we can't bring everybody to benefit." Dad did that with the electric power, the telephone, the gin, the community center, the first Harvest Festivals, and so on. I'm pretty sure that he got those traits very much from his dad's modus operandi.

RM: That's very impressive. Now, he's got all this land, but he's not going to put in 10,000 acres of cotton. It would be against the law, wouldn't it?

MW: Yes. My understanding is that Nevada had a cotton allotment total for the entire state of only about 3,800 acres. I believe that Pahrump Ranch held one of the larger portions in the state of Nevada.

RM: I think he had 1,000 acres or so, didn't he, or maybe 2,000? Did he have ideas about what he was going to do with the rest of that land? And how did he figure on timing that usage?

MW: Well, he told me that his whole game plan was, "I wanted to go in and shore it up and get it up on its feet and viable long enough to be able to sell it as a package to subdivide it because I felt the proximity of this big chunk of land to Las Vegas would make it very lucrative to someone," in so many words.

RM: So that was his foresight. Ultimately, he saw it as a subdividable property.

MW: That's right. That was his end goal because of his age and he knew it was going to be an exhausting, risky endeavor at best. He wanted to get it up and surviving long enough that a buyer or buyers with deep wallets, heavy-duty hitters, would come in and take it off his hands and make it work.

RM: Your dad certainly had a vision.

MW: That's a good word—he was a very visionary guy from day one.

RM: Yes. But I was wondering, with all that land, did he think he might run some cows or grow other crops or something?

MW: My understanding was that cotton was what he knew and understood and loved, and that's what he was geared up for. Alfalfa went hand-in-hand with the cotton and he loved both of those crops. At one point later on toward the end, in the late '60s, my parents were involved with purebred horses. They were registered Appaloosas, and they had quite a few of them out there. I remember them in the pastures close in the proximity of the silos. During the summer of 1968, I completed construction of some corrals for those horses.

RM: So he was dabbling in horses?

MW: I think dabbling is a good word. That was kind of a sideline for having my mom involved and interested, what with the papers and the registration and all that. Mom was really great with paperwork requiring a lot of attention to detail; and she was so intelligent.

RM: Did he have any other side endeavors? Was he doing any goats or sheep or pheasant?

MW: No, none of that. They had geese for the Johnson grass, but only for that reason. No, his comment to me was that "My idea was to get the thing viable, shape it up, keep it going, and within four years or so find that buyer to come in and cash me out." He was going to be pushing 50 and he wanted to be going on to something else that was a little less stressful and intensive. He also had a fairly lofty financial goal that would put him in a position to do what he wanted to do after that because he knew he had to split the proceeds and pay off any loans. That was a big order, to survive and shape it up to the level he wanted to achieve, along with bringing in the power and all the things that had to be done before it would be worth more than $30 per acre.

RM: Did you and he talk about what they wanted to do after the ranch was sold?

MW: I don't know the answer to that directly because something occurred that drastically impacted my family. That was the death of my brother at the very time that the ranch sale was being consummated. Rick was a remarkable individual and we were all just devastated by his loss.

To give you some background about Rick, after we got to Las Vegas in late January of '58, Community Chevrolet one day ran an ad in the *Las Vegas Sun* about the first soap box derby that would be held in Las Vegas. My brother took his $15 and signed up. My dad improvised a tarpaulin shelter off the patio roof over to the fence by the air conditioning exhaust outlet where Rick could have a work area and also a covered patio space in which to build his soapbox derby racer. The rules then were different. Now, anybody and everybody can work on the cars but back then, each entrant had to do all of the work.

RM: The kid had to build it himself?

MW: Yes! Period! No cheating, nobody else helping him at all. Rick did it all by himself, and you've seen that car in the Pahrump Museum. There also are pictures of my family from the newspaper. When you see that car and you realize that Rick was 14 years old when he built that it—it's astounding! And we had only been in Vegas for three months; I guess the race was in May of that year. He won the Las Vegas event. On the back of the racer are Pahrump Ranch and the *Las Vegas Sun* and PAL, the Police Athletic League—those were his sponsors. PAL flew Rick and Mom and his car to Akron, Ohio, where he was in nationals. Dad and I flew commercial to Akron for the national races.

That was going on in conjunction with this tiger by the tail that my dad had going in Pahrump. It was a very big event in our lives and for Las Vegas, also.

Anyway, in the early summer of '69, my dad already had in motion the ranch sale with Preferred Equities. I just happened to be home from college and I remember the night of June 30, 1969, that the doorbell rang at 10:00. My dad went to the door—I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth. He walked back towards the bedroom and he had a telegram in his hand. I thought it must have something to do with the sale of the ranch. A minute later I looked over and he was in the bedroom sitting on the edge of the bed. I sat down beside him; I had no idea. He handed me this telegram, and I read these words: "Regret to inform you Richard Paul Williams died 8-so and so, blah-blah, Kingsville N.A.S., Texas, result of aircraft . . ."

RM: He was in the military, wasn't he?

MW: Yes. Congressman Walter Baring had sponsored his entrance into Annapolis. When my brother was in his junior year at Gorman he joined the naval reserve and went to boot camp. That, in conjunction with his academic performance, was why Baring sponsored him for a congressional appointment. He got into the Naval Academy and he graduated, and that was unimaginably tough in those years. Do you know Roger Staubach of the Dallas Cowboys?

RM: That's right, he went there.

MW: Roger Staubach had gone to school at New Mexico Military Institute, where my dad and I attended, and had gone from there to the Naval Academy on a football scholarship. He was a year ahead of my brother, but in the same wing in Bancroft Hall. As an upperclassman, they couldn't fraternize or anything. Those older midshipmen were really tough on the incoming class. That's part of the system—they call it the "plebe"

system. It's a very, very rough induction that they endure the whole year. All of the service academies are similar in that respect.

But Rick remembered Roger Staubach as being a really nice guy who did not go out of his way to be mean to anybody. He was there to play football. In Rich's first year, Navy had a great football season. So any day there was a game and Navy won, life was a little bit easier on the plebes that night. And when they had the Army/Navy game, especially when Navy beat Army, life was a whole lot easier for everybody, especially the underclassmen, or plebes.

But anyway, my brother was a remarkable, wonderful individual. I have always been so grateful to have had the honor of being his only sibling.

RM: How much older was he than you?

MW: Three years and two months.

RM: Okay. So to continue, he went to Annapolis and then went into the service as a pilot?

MW: Not initially. His first assignment after he graduated from the Naval Academy in '66 was on the *USS Agerholm*, which was a destroyer out of San Diego. His ship went over into North Vietnamese waters. That was during the period of intense conflict. They were off the coast of North Vietnam for several months. He described it later on when his ship returned. He said, "You know, we were sitting in that boat with enough firepower to blow up half the goddamn country of North Vietnam, and they wouldn't let us fire a shot! In the meantime, this nation is sending our young men over to Southeast Asia with both hands tied behind their backs, and they're coming back in body bags. This is not right." That was some pretty strong language for a young naval ensign.

Rick was always extremely patriotic but, in his opinion, he saw there was

something extremely out of line with the way US combat operations were being conducted. I think that in his mind and certainly in mine—you don't send people into a conflict unless you send them in with everything you have in order to win as quickly as possible and bring our troops home. That way, you minimize collateral damage to everybody.

After that, Rick cross-trained into naval aviation. He did a portion of his flight training and schooling in Pensacola, Florida. And while he was in Pensacola, he married a girl that he met in San Diego by the name of Suzanne, and then he finished up that phase in Meridian, Mississippi, and was at Kingsville Naval Air Station in Texas down by Corpus Christi. He'd done his "carrier qual" and completed that part of his training. He was marking time. Just waiting to be assigned to whatever aircraft, Skyhawks or Crusaders or whatever, and he would be going on from there.

So Rick was within two weeks of getting his wings. He was participating in a night exercise and something went terribly wrong in the final stages of his landing at the airport. He was in an F-9 Cougar, a Korean War-vintage fighter that was known to have killed a lot of pilots. The F-9 had all kinds of different issues that made it not a real safe or reliable aircraft. It had the old axial-flow turbine engines that tended to flame out. Thirty years later I talked to a man who was at that very airfield during the same period of time. He worked out there and he said, "We had a lot of people killed out there because those planes were just that treacherous to fly." But they were being used as trainers for the navy in those years. There's a movie with William Holden that was made about in the '50s . . .

RM: *The Bridges of Toko-Ri*?

MW: It might have been. But they're flying these F-9 Cougars. I mean, these are big

planes. They had kind of a high elevator in the back end, and it was a jet. You see those jet planes throughout the whole movie with actual footage from Korea. (Actually, they were great-looking aircraft.)

RM: So he was coming in and he crashed?

MW: Yes. It was a night mission. After they've done a mission, they typically do three touch-and-goes and on the last one the pilots stay down. It's done as practice. He'd done his first touch-and-go, had turned and was downwind coming in and turning the base leg to final approach. The tower radioed to alert him that there was an aircraft 500 feet above him, and he acknowledged the transmission. And then turning that base leg to final, he lost altitude and came to the ground and exploded, and that was that. They don't know whether it was a flame-out, whether he had vertigo, whether it was instrument error, altimeter setting, or whatever.

But, of course, the navy tends to just chalk things up to pilot error. I don't know if that's what the investigators did, but many pilots are lost routinely in training. He and Suzanne had only been married a year and they had no children. Earlier that year, during Easter vacation, I had driven down to Kingsville from Lubbock where I was at school at Texas Tech to spend time with them and it was a wonderful visit; we had such a great time. And two months later he was gone. I am just really thankful that we had that time together and I savor those memories.

In fact, just a couple of weeks before that happened, he and his instructor did a flight out to Vegas as part of a training exercise and landed out at the north Las Vegas terminal in the F-9 and parked his aircraft there. Suzanne flew out commercially and he and his instructor and Suzanne were in Vegas for two or three days as a weekend thing. The instructor was a highly seasoned pilot; I mean, these guys have a lot of time under

their belts. I was kind of palling around with him because I was thinking how cool it was to be hanging out with this impressive naval aviator.

I remember the day that they left—of course, we all went out to the terminal. My brother was in his flight suit and his helmet and looking like the nation's best. My mom and dad and Suzanne and I stood there watching, and he climbed into that impressive airplane and fired it up. He was just so awesome. My mother was crying and my parents were probably thinking, "What a marvelous level of achievement for our child to have done." And all on his own. My brother was always on automatic pilot. From the time he jumped out of the crib, he was doing his own thing. He didn't require a lot of attention from my parents. And, when growing up, Rick tended to prefer activities in Vegas more than in Pahrump.

RM: Pahrump was more your thing?

MW: Yes, I think so. Now, he did spend some time out there. I think I talked about rebuilding the cotton-pickers that one summer. My dad and Virgil organized us in kind of like a production line. We did that, but my brother early on was kind of in his own thing and didn't need much supervision or guidance.

RM: He was like your dad in that sense.

MW: Very much. He was a self-starter. I felt like my brother always knew exactly where he was going. When I look back, I have had a wonderful life but at times I had a tough time knowing where I was going and why. He always knew where he was going. A remarkable individual!

RM: What a tragedy.

MW: Yes; it was devastating. It was only three or four days after that that Armstrong landed on the moon. My brother died June 30th of 1969 and within a week Armstrong

was walking on the moon. That was so profound. When my dad handed me that telegram and I looked at it and I looked at him, the first words out of his mouth were, "This is going to kill that woman" (my mom). That was his immediate concern: He knew that Rick's passing would hit Mother very hard.

We eventually composed ourselves and went into the kitchen. Dave Hibbert, who, as I told you, was the first gin manager in Pahrump in 1959 and had gone on to other activities—crop dusting in Honduras and south Central America, working for the North Las Vegas terminal as the lead mechanic on the first Las Vegas police helicopter—was so close to the family. My parents had room so he was living in one of the rooms in the other part of the house.

While my dad and I were in the kitchen kind of figuring out what to do next, David walked in in his t-shirt and his shorts, wondering what was going on, and we told him. He was blown away. The three of us were standing there and then my mother came walking in—the master bedroom was in the far end of the house. She had a little nightie on and as God is my witness she said, "I had this dream that they discovered a new star. What's going on?"

My dad went over to her and he took her in his arms and said, "Nancy, we've lost Ricky." I will always remember that image of my parents during that very difficult moment. It was so tender, so touching and so sadly profound.

RM: What a beautiful dream she had. It's like the Southern Paiute Indians from the Pahrump area, almost.

MW: Yes, really. My mother was part Indian. She was very proud of her Indian blood, probably Comanche; that's where she lived.

RM: Well, the Comanches are related to the Paiutes distantly.

MW: Oh, I didn't know that. Well, I had traveled home from school at UNLV; I was out there taking some classes. I was in my Volkswagen with my window down and I remember driving up Edgewood. Even before any of this happened, I was thinking what a beautiful night. It was just so calm. There was something about that night that was so serene. I guess the word I would use would be ethereal. It's a very profound thing in my memory; you don't forget things like that. The next morning when I woke up after we finally went to bed and I realized it wasn't a dream, I got up and dressed. My mother was making calls, calling people in Texas, and my dad was doing whatever he could to assist my mother in her efforts. The first place I went to was down the street to 1700 West Charleston to the person who is to this day my dearest friend, Clark W. Coleman, Skip Coleman.

We're still close all these years later. This is a footnote to this story: five or six years ago, Skip asked me to find him a Crown Vic, a Ford Crown Victoria, up in Portland because he couldn't find one here in Las Vegas. I found him one and told him what it was. He said, "Go ahead and buy it and then I'll fly up and drive it home." I had it all ship-shape—everything was right.

He flew up and spent the night with us at the farm. We were sitting at the table that night having Early Times and Coke and talking about how wonderfully things had turned out. Their son, Christopher, was doing so well and our sons, Rik and Lorin, were doing so well, and what a great life we had. The next morning bright and early, he hopped in the car and took off back to Vegas. It was Saturday and I thought, "It's too early to go to bed, I'm not going to go to the office; I'll do a load of clothes."

I was in there was doing clothes and the phone rang. I thought I hope Skip didn't have any problems with his Crown Vic because he was going through Mehama, Oregon,

which was up in the mountains. I picked up the phone and it was his wife Karen, and she was hysterical. Their only son had been killed that night. Skip had been here for one night and while he was gone his son was killed in Las Vegas. He was their only child. Do you see some eerie things here? He was the first person I went to when my brother was killed and he was here when his son was killed.

The local police met him in Reno and got him booked on a flight home and Las Vegas Metro officers met him at McCarran. I said, "Karen, what can I do?"

She said, "He needs you." So I got on a plane. I was in Vegas for a month with them through all of that. That's the level of relationship that Skip and I have. Our parents were best friends; of course, they're all gone now. He and I were roommates at school in Roswell and again in Vegas when he first joined Metro. We've always gotten along so well, even as roommates. As I say, Skip was the first person that I went to when my brother was killed.

It seems as though everything that was already in motion with respect to family activities was thrown awry after the death of my brother. Certainly that included whatever my dad had in his mind about what we were going to do or what he was going to do—I'm sure that he had visions of my brother and me being part of an ongoing family enterprise; that was always his long-term goal.

RM: Of course, for his kids.

MW: Right, for his sons and grandchildren. And I always thought of myself as sort of my brother's right-hand man. My brother always knew where he was going and I always felt very comfortable being his "co-pilot." We had always worked well together. We would have made a great team and continued to have a great time with each other. I am so grateful for his life and for the times that we did share. Thank you, Rick!

CHAPTER SIX

RM: I think that we should talk some more about people who came up from Texas with your dad. You've mentioned some of them; do you want to tell us more about them, and are there any others you want to talk about?

MW: Okay. As I told you before, there was basically what I refer to as a cadre of folks who came up from Texas—the Nuñez father, Nick Nuñez, and then the three sons and their families. They were crucial because the three sons were experienced tractor operators. Nick was kind of a ramrod—he knew how to ride herd and supervise the irrigators and the field hands out chopping cotton. He was part of that Hispanic culture and there was mutual respect.

The other person that I might say more about is Claude Parks, who had been the foreman on the north farm in Texas. His role at Pahrump ranch would be as the foreman also, and he would be living with his wife and son in the sister house to ours at the opposite end of the ranch entry road. Claude was at the ranch for about a year, and I guess it just wasn't working out for him; maybe his wife wasn't happy. They were living in fairly austere circumstances compared to what they'd been used to in West Texas.

The day that they left, Claude and his wife and son said their goodbyes in front of the old Pahrump Store. At that time, it was being used as the central location for maintenance and equipment repairs. The store has since been moved to the Pahrump Museum. The original portion of the store had bins of nuts and bolts and inventories of various parts. There was no other shop building on the ranch until a couple years later. On the Highway 372 side of the building there was a ramp with which to drive a vehicle

or a piece of equipment up to do oil changes and lubrication. And on the opposite side of the building there was an annex with a lean-to, a shelter, facing out to the front. On the outside, there was an air pressure gauge—150 pounds was what it usually indicated when full—and a valve and an air hose coiled up that was used for airing up tires.

On the opposite side of that wall as you walked through the door there was an old air compressor that had been left as part of the equipment that went with the ranch. To the left of that on the other wall were 55-gallon drums of oil with spigots for the equipment. Then as you walked to the back there was a Caterpillar engine and it was connected to a Gray 50 kW generator that supplied the power for the entire camp.

I think that I recall mentioning that generator back in March, when I spoke briefly at the Pahrump Museum. When I was at the ranch early in the morning, I loved being the one who went out and started up the generator for the day. It would run throughout the day and provide power for all of the homes on the ranch and the shop. At night, one of the folks in the bunkhouse or Nick or another person would come along about an hour or two after dark, or at dusk in the summertime (because it would be about 9:00 or 10:00) and shut it down. It had a throttle on the back side of the engine, and you would throttle it down and then throttle it up in sort of a sequence two or three times. The lights would dim in the homes, and that was a signal for the folks to get their kerosene lanterns going. This gave the residents time to prepare for power off.

RM: Why didn't they run it until 10:00 or something, when people went to bed?

MW: In the wintertime, the hour was earlier, and in the summertime it would be later. I guess in general it seemed practical, because my pop was paying for all of that diesel oil. Working hard, as they were, most of the ranch employees just went to bed because they had to get up early to start their day. And if they wanted to stay up, they had the option of

using kerosene lanterns. All of the cook stoves and refrigerators ran on propane but the electricity was subject to being shut off.

I think the idea behind leaving the electricity on for a while in the evening was reasonable, to allow people to have the lights on for a while, and maybe wash clothes or run other appliances. Having electricity at all was a real luxury out there because a lot of the individual homes around the valley didn't have that kind of power available on a day-to-day basis.

RM: During the cotton-growing season, how many people would have been residing in that camp during the week, say?

MW: I would say anywhere between 20 and 40 ultimately, because it wasn't too many years later that my dad had another bunkhouse, a smaller one, constructed further down the road, out closer to the fields. That was additional housing for the folks who would rotate in and out during the seasons of heavy work.

RM: Are any of those buildings still standing?

MW: No. The only building that is still standing—and I just dread the day that they rip it down—is the shop building that Virgil Bateman and a handful of the fellows put together where the first harvest festival was held in 1960 or '61. That is a brilliant piece of engineering—the slab was poured and finished with big rotator finishing tools, and then it had anchor points around the perimeter. My dad had a truckload of 3/4-inch steel oil well sucker rods trucked to the ranch from Texas that he'd picked up on the cheap, and that was used as a main part of the structural components throughout the building. I think there was also three-inch pipe that he'd brought in that he'd found in a scrap yard. So the skeleton of the building was comprised of the three-inch heavy wall pipe and then these oil well sucker rods cross-braced and welded. Virgil Bateman was the one who did

all of that, and the trusses up on the top were all constructed by Virgil. He worked on that building day in and day out in between all his other duties.

RM: What is the building being used for now?

MW: It's not being used for anything. All of the remnants of the main camp are now gone. I think both silos were moved over to the museum site, along with the old general store and the little red schoolhouse that used to be facing 372. That also was used at one point. Before we came to the ranch they were using it to house, I think, workers periodically.

RM: That reminds me—do you want to talk about the Bracero Program?

MW: Sure. That was a critical link for farmers in both West Texas and Nevada because it gave them a competitive source of labor, cost-wise, and the individuals were well conditioned to endure harsh working conditions in terms of heat and sunshine and long hours of menial labor. They were a godsend for anyone trying to do that kind of a program—you know, farm work.

RM: Why don't you briefly describe the Bracero Program for folks who aren't familiar with it?

MW: As I understood it, the Bracero Program was an agreement within the US Government—the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Immigration—whereby they allowed a certain number of individuals to come into the United States to work in various agricultural areas. The program was closely supervised and monitored. These folks would come in and be employed by farmers in various regions for a period of time at various times of the year, and they were able to send a pretty good chunk of their earnings, if they chose, back to their families in Mexico.

RM: So they did not bring their families as a rule.

MW: No, sir.

RM: So you didn't have to worry about housing farm worker families.

MW: Right, only the ones who were nationalized. My dad assisted several individual workers who had been with him to become American citizens; they were the ones that had their families. Others were transient and went back and forth. If they worked for my dad once, they did everything they could to be available to go back with him because he was the type of individual they really wanted to be able to work with. He was fair, he paid fair wages, his housing and his amenities were very adequate—probably much more adequate than what they'd ever known in their own country in terms of hot and cold running water, toilet facilities and showers and kitchen facilities, and the warmth in the wintertime. It was not real cool in the summer, but who was in those days? The bunkhouse, our home, and the others in the camp did have evaporative coolers for those very hot summer months and there was a large swamp cooler on casters in the shop for Virgil and those folks working there.

But to get back to Claude Parks—the day he was leaving, he pulled up to the old shop, the old Pahrump Store, and there were just a few people standing around, workers. Virgil Bateman had his ever-present steel hard hat on and his Lucky Strike in his lips. Virgil and Claude had never really gotten along too well—there was a little clash of egos or something. Claude had come up from Texas and he had this supervisory authority to issue certain orders and directives to the people as best he could to get things done.

But Virgil was kind of a self-starter; he had been at the ranch from the beginning, and pretty much didn't need to have anybody haranguing him to do this or that. He was doing what he knew needed to get done. So he and Claude weren't terribly friendly; they just kind of coexisted. The day that Claude drove up to the shop on his way out of the

camp, he got out of the car and said, "Well, so long, everybody."

Virgil came out of the shop or out of the room with the oil drums and walked up to Claude and he said, "Good luck Claude, it was real good to see you." And he had a gob of grease hidden in his hand when he stuck it out and grabbed Claude's hand for a goodbye handshake.

RM: Deliberately?

MW: Oh, yes. It was kind of a mean joke, and everybody was standing around watching. Claude didn't say a word. He just got a rag, wiped off his hand, got in the car and drove off.

RM: That was a nasty trick, especially as a goodbye.

MW: I guess it was Virgil's way of saying so long and good riddance and better luck elsewhere because you didn't fit in here too well at all. You made my job harder than it needed to be, and obviously you're not very happy here because you're leaving. My dad told me that story. I wasn't there, of course, but I can just visualize how it came down. Claude was the butt of that joke, and it would have been sort of humiliating to him, but these were two grown men, and if Claude had popped him or whopped him . . . Well, that could have happened.

RM: What was the difference in size between the two guys?

MW: Claude was the bigger guy.

RM: I think in a mining camp, that would have led to blows.

MW: Maybe. But maybe Claude was just too big a man to do that. Claude was kind of a quiet guy. I'm talking from the perspective of a child, but I knew Claude from the time I was probably six years old. When my dad turned my brother and me loose on the north farm in a pickup or something to roar around on 200 acres, a lot of times it was Claude's

pickup that we were driving. He always wore a Stetson-type hat. He had dark hair, kind of tan, large brown eyes, kind of average, a nice-looking guy with of a very soft-spoken southern demeanor about him.

RM: Now what was Claude's job, again?

MW: He was the foreman.

RM: And Virgil was the mechanic who kept things running?

MW: Yes, but to label Virgil as a mechanic is an understatement, though I can't think of a better word. He worked on anything that required fixing, from an air conditioner to an Allis-Chalmers combine. Pulling an engine out of a vehicle, rebuilding an engine, fixing pumps—the man was terrifically capable in a whole array of ways. I would label Virgil Bateman as probably my dad's most critically important ongoing employee over those 13 years.

RM: Who did your dad replace Claude with?

MW: A fellow that my dad had employed on the Section 42 farm in Texas, a guy named Bowen. I don't remember his first name because everybody always just called him Bowen. My dad looked him up after Claude left. On Section 42 my dad had described Bowen coming in to work for him early on, and being pretty hand-to-mouth and awfully glad to have a job. He was a good guy. He had a very nice manner; I remember him well. He was very friendly, and I guess had a certain amount of mechanical dexterity, as well as the foreman supervisory knack that he had honed in Texas on that section 42 farm back in the early '50s. My dad said after a few years, when Bowen left and went elsewhere in Texas, he was in pretty darn good shape. "He had a new set of teeth and a new car and new clothes and he had done pretty well for himself while he was with me."

Well, my dad somehow or another knew how to locate him. I think he was pretty

glad to hear from my pop. Dad said, "I've got a situation here. If you are game, come on up, and we've got a job here for you. It'll be in the form of a position kind of like you were doing on section 42 as foreman, except we're a little more challenged because instead of 200 or 300 acres, we're working with about a thousand or more, and we've got some fairly austere circumstances."

Bowen said "Yeah, okay," and came up with his wife and his son Jerry, who was well into his 20s or early 30s, and maybe one other son, and settled into the foreman house that Claude had vacated earlier. Bowen settled in to assume the duties that were laid out for him. Of course, my dad would commute every day. When he would come in from Vegas he'd kind of eyeball things from the highway coming in and make notes about what he was seeing or whatever, so by the time he would get down and meet up with the foreman—in this case Bowen—they had the discussion about, okay, here's what we need to do today. They'd have a little "Lahoonta" and then my dad would go on his way, or did what he referred to as his "rat killing."

RM: Rat killing?

MW: Chores; he called them rat-killing. When it was payroll time, he would come out with his checkbook, pull up at the ranch house, go inside, sit down, and spend however much time he had to spend writing out all the checks for everybody. He'd do that about every other week.

Sometimes he'd make a double trip to town and back. There was no telephone. Somebody couldn't just call up and say, "Hey, we need so-and-so" if something had broken down. Dad would be out there and Virgil might say, "You know what? We lost a magneto on this M Farmall tractor that's out in the field there. We don't have a spare." So Dad would get in the car and go back to Vegas for the magneto or other needed part

that was crucial at that moment.

Anyway, at the end of the day he would have made his notes and lists about what he needed to bring out to the ranch from town the following day. Dad would spend time in Pahrump liaisoning with different folks in the valley. From his first day at Pahrump Ranch, he was already in his mind, if not actually, laying the groundwork to put things in motion: the cotton gin, electric power, the telephone, and other goals.

So that was his format, and at the end of the day, he'd go back into town and have that commute, car time, to be able to kind of incubate and digest what was going on. If I was with him, I would be instructed to drive no more than 40 until we'd gotten past the last ranch boundary so he could kind of eyeball things, and then we took it up to 75, under the usual ideal driving conditions.

RM: And how old were you?

MW: Starting early on, at age 11. If we left the house on Bonita, he would drive on St. Louis Street to either Las Vegas Boulevard or head out Paradise south, then cut over to Tropicana. Do you remember the Dunes Hotel?

RM: Sure.

MW: If he needed to fill up, right next to the Dunes there was the Texas Independent gas station. There were four rows of three pumps each. In fact, one summer I worked there.

RM: Where the Jockey Club is now?

MW: Yes, very close to that. That guy was probably in competition with Terrible Herbst, where my dad was ultimately buying transport loads of fuel. This was a little later on, when he was not using propane in his commuting vehicles anymore. He'd gas up at the Texas Independent station and then he'd go on out the Strip. If I happened to be

driving before I had my driver's license, like age 11 or 12, he would drive out to the Blue Diamond turnoff, which was out in the middle of nowhere in those days—it was the old US 95. He'd make the turnoff, pull off, and we'd switch places and I'd drive from there. And coming back we did it in reverse. I never got in trouble for that. I don't remember ever seeing a police or highway patrol vehicle on that road.

RM: No, things weren't like they are now. It was a different world, wasn't it?

MW: For sure. If I had seen a police vehicle, I would just sit up real big, you know? At least, that was my plan.

RM: They knew what was going on. When I was 15 I was driving in Ely and got stopped by a cop. He didn't even ask me for my driver's license. "What's your name?" That's the way they were in those days.

MW: It was a wonderful time to be alive as a child.

RM: I'd like to talk a bit more about the financing. Did he have relationships with banks and loans?

MW: I don't know precisely. As I told you, we would go to First National Bank of Nevada at 15th and Charleston. I think at least a big part of his operations money needs were being met there. Also, Western Cotton Oil and Arizona Cottonseed Products provided additional funding early on.

RM: They didn't pay cash for the ranch, did they?

MW: No. The price of the property was something on the order of $400,000, utilizing a lease-purchase arrangement for a certain number of years, I believe.

RM: I wonder how much of that was cash up front, and the rest was carried.

MW: I never asked and I don't remember that he volunteered that information—he would have if I had asked—but I'm sure that there was financing. He probably put down

the minimum because he needed to be capitalized for what he was doing day to day. I know that he would use the terms "long-term" and "short-term" financing. From '58 when he produced a half-bale to the acre, the next year it doubled to up to pretty close to a bale to the acre, and the following year—by that time the gin was up and running—things were looking pretty good. By '62, '63, '64 he was bumping up toward the two-bale to the acre average.

I think the farmers in Pahrump were pretty astounded that this guy could come in from West Texas raw and upgrade that facility and that property to that level so quickly. For example, Dad described his round-the-clock operations during January and early February to prepare the fields—then planting, harvesting, and certainly irrigating during the growing season. Apparently, no one else in the valley found it necessary to operate 24 hours a day. Given the limitations of Dad's equipment and the amount of acreage, it was necessary at that time in order to maintain the timetable and maximize the utilization and efficiency of his available machinery.

RM: How was he getting that kind of production? What was his secret?

MW: He was just really good at what he did. Dad brought a lot of what he had learned with him from West Texas. And also, being adaptable and quick to innovate and improvise.

RM: But what was he doing that the other farmers in Pahrump weren't doing?

MW: Well, to a large extent, activities that I mentioned earlier—24-hour operations, etc. Also, I think he was working a much bigger tract. I remember a lot of things my dad said. In all this time I spent with him going back and forth, I did a lot of listening; I loved it. He said, "It does not matter what you do in life, it doesn't matter how little or big it is, you're going to have headaches so you may as well make it big enough to make it worth your while." That was his philosophy. When it came to taking on risk, from time to time, referencing other people, he would say, "This fellow's boring with a big auger," meaning whoever he was alluding to has really got something of a magnitude that is not peanuts. Not small stuff, but really, really up there, out there on a limb doing a gutsy-type thing. He admired that. The guy was doing something on a scale that was quite substantial, quite burdensome, with considerable risk.

The farmers in the valley, except the Perry Bowman and Elmer Bowman families, ran somewhat similar-sized smaller operations. The Bowmans had been there for years. They and their families were doing all the work and they were quite successful and my father admired the Bowman families and their farming techniques. So I think that for the most part, the crop yields per acre for many farms were not dissimilar. The scale and size were major factors.

Oh, and speaking of people in the valley, Leroy and Mary Vaughn had the café on the corner and the 76 Union station. They were there when we came. That was a great place. The café was not much bigger than this room here—fairly cozy, but very comfortable and adequate.

RM: Maybe 20 by 30?

MW: Probably. There was a grill and she made the best cheeseburgers and milkshakes. It was a fairly basic menu, but hey, out there on a hot day, the cafe had an evaporative cooler folks could go in and cool off. They were very friendly. Mary was so nice. She had two beautiful daughters, Linda and Rita, that I always "noticed." When you walked in the door, there was an old nickel slot machine right by the door. And even though it was against the law because I was under age, they wouldn't be too upset if I slipped a nickel in it and pulled the handle. Mary and Leroy were so kind to me, always. But their slot machine never "rewarded" me. Maybe not a bad thing.

One day toward the end of the 1962 crop year, my dad was sitting there at mid-day, cooling off, having a glass of iced tea or something, and Elmer or Perry, one of the Bowman godfathers, happened to be in there. There was a little bit of an unspoken rivalry because the Bowmans had always been in Pahrump and here comes this new guy from Texas and he's taken over this big chunk of dirt, Pahrump Ranch, and of course, everybody's waiting and watching to see what's going to happen—is he going to succeed or not? Well, at this point Walt's operations were looking pretty good.

Anyway, there was a little bit of perfunctory conversation, and Perry (or Elmer) kind of meandered around very casually, asking my dad how his crop had turned out that particular year. My dad very matter-of-factly said, "Well, we got about 1,600 bales." He said Perry (or Elmer) almost fell off his stool. [Laughter] Mr. Bowman was so astounded

because they'd never had any idea that that kind of production was possible, at least up to that time, on Pahrump Ranch.

How he did it was by making good decisions, being gutsy, being willing to spend the money to accomplish whatever was necessary: weed eradication, fertilizer, and plenty of water on a timely basis. It took a lot of money to make money, and Walt was gambling that that was going to pay off. Four years into his program, those measures were beginning to pay off.

RM: Now at 1,600 bales, that's on a thousand acres? So he's getting 1.6 bales?

MW: Probably so, at that point in time. The yields varied from field to field, affecting the average.

RM: And that was really good in Pahrump at that time?

MW: It was good enough that it certainly shocked Elmer (or Perry) Bowman. He was visibly astounded. And my dad wouldn't have described that if that hadn't happened; he was not a chest-thumper; he was not prone to exaggeration at all. And, of course, it was all in good faith and humor. Clearly, Dad and the Bowman folks had mutual respect for each other. And this respect translated into and resulted in cooperation in other endeavors.

RM: What else was he doing that the other guys weren't doing to get the higher production? You mentioned chopping Johnson grass and continuous plowing and cultivation.

MW: And fertilizers—the anhydrous ammonia. I don't think the other farmers were using NH_3 because it wasn't easily available or they weren't set up at that time to viably use it. They may have been using some other kind of fertilizers, or maybe rotating crops, but my dad lined up railroad carload lots of anhydrous ammonia to the railroad spur at

Blue Diamond. He made an arrangement with the folks at Blue Diamond in 1959. Dad had probably six or eight of the 1,000-gallon anhydrous ammonia tanks mounted on trailers: no fenders, no taillights, only the trailer tongue with a standard hitch and the tank fittings necessary to fill them safely. By that time the '58 GMC pickup was a couple of years old; it was the vehicle available for the towing task.

A number of times I did those NH_3 runs with him. If we had empties at the ranch, he would tie the pickup to one, and once or twice I was with him when he tied another trailer behind the first trailer because both were empty. The trailers had no license plates at that time and happily, there weren't any police on the road. Going back up the shallow side of the hill with those empties, it was about all that old pickup could do to get up the Mountain Springs summit on Highway 160 going towards Las Vegas.

RM: That'd be the Pahrump side, right?

MW: Yes, sir. The pickup would want to pop out of gear, so Dad would "hoe-handle" the gearshift to wedge it solidly in gear so that he didn't have to hold it in gear continuously. And the same thing for second gear. Eventually he converted the three-speed to a four-speed transmission with a granny gear, but had the same problem: it wanted to pop out of gear. Going downhill was quite exciting, too, because it still wanted to pop out of gear. He was very, very careful how he used his brakes because if anything went wrong on that steep side with two trailers behind you, look out! It took a lot of skill and daring to do what he did. It was quite an experience. But I had total confidence in the outcome. I mean, I knew my dad: I had no apprehension whatsoever. He was very focused and it was all going to be okay. And he always made it look so easy!

So we'd get the empties down the hill to the Blue Diamond staging area (he was able to leave one or two empties at the siding). In the back of the pickup we had a Briggs

& Stratton-powered NH_3 transfer pump with two lines on it. It had a larger liquid line and a smaller vapor return line. We would have the trailer up next to the big railcar on the siding and he would connect the various lines of the NH_3 pump to pump a load from the big railcar into the smaller 1,000-gallon tank. Have you ever taken a big whiff of ammonia?

RM: Yes.

MW: Well, anhydrous ammonia is much more powerful, much more concentrated. If it gets loose in the air you're literally not able to inhale. It's deadly because you can suffocate if you get caught in a cloud of it and can't get out. You just can't breathe. So you make sure all of your connections are tight and then pump a load. The tank's got a gauge on it so you fill it to the safe limit, disconnect everything, and when you disconnect, of course, some of that NH_3 is released. So you step back, and if there's a little bit of a breeze, of course, you stay upwind. At any rate, now you've got a full tank. Also, if your skin comes in contact with NH_3 liquid, the result is a cold burn—not good! Liquid NH_3 is similar to liquid propane, except more lethal.

Anyway, Dad would have somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000 pounds of load on that trailer behind the '58 GMC pickup that was probably rated for something less. You aligned the hitch and trailer tow bar and used a long bolt to secure the trailer to the truck. Then you started back up that steep hill using second gear and not long after that, using first. On the very steepest parts, you'd be going about 10 miles an hour; that's about all she could do. If anything had gone wrong it would have been very, very tricky because the parking brake in the truck had burned out long before. The driver would have had to sit there with his foot on the brake until some solution or assistance arrived. Meanwhile, other two-way traffic would compound the situation.

It's hard, I think, for the average person to comprehend what a tricky gamble that was. My dad was always very cognizant about boundaries and what would and what would not work but he had to get that ammonia out to the farm. Who was he going to have do it otherwise?

RM: And you were along for the ride.

MW: Yes, on some trips I was with him. We'd get to the top of the hill and then going down the other side, you've got 8,000 pounds pushing you. But that was the shallow side. So we would get out to the farm and he had two H or M tractors rigged up with 50-gallon NH_3 tanks mounted on either side of the engine up front. The liquid NH_3 was plumbed back to a draw bar and then the tubing going down right behind it—so that when the ammonia went down into the ground, it was injected right into the dirt. Then following those were implements that would cover up the furrow. NH_3 would go right into the dirt and stay there and greatly enhance the yield.

RM: That was probably the key, wasn't it?

MW: I think so. NH_3 definitely played a large role in enhanced crop yields.

RM: When did he start using the anhydrous ammonia?

MW: I think in the 1959 crop year; no later. But within a year or two after the gin was built, there was a big 15,000-gallon propane tank that fueled the Climax engine that ran the gin and a similar-sized anhydrous ammonia storage was installed parallel to the existing propane storage. I would suggest that my dad played a role in having NH_3 available to all the farmers in Pahrump at that point.

RM: Sure, because he wasn't in competition, really. He wanted everybody to do well.

MW: Absolutely. He was doing anything he could to propel the progress of the whole valley because his ultimate goal was to have things shaped up so that the ranch and the

valley in its entirety could benefit. It was a win-win thing for everyone.

Those anhydrous ammonia runs were really fun for me while they lasted because of that old pickup. On the driver's side upper portion of the cabin, where it kind of curves down the sides just above the door jamb, every time Dad completed a trip with a full trailer load of NH_3 out to the ranch, he took his ever-present pocket knife and made a little scratch, a little indentation with a Roman numeral. He had a whole set of Roman numerals where he kept track of the number of loads he had completed. It was similar to the notches on a gun belt for the old gunfighters. I have vivid memories of that because I could appreciate, even as a child, the viciousness of the substance that he was handling and the potential for disaster from start to finish, and how gutsy he was. I don't think anybody else out there would have even thought about trying to do that under those conditions. He did that for a year or two and then the valley got that big storage unit at the gin so that big trucks could haul the NH_3 out to the valley, and that was a much, much better method.

RM: Is anhydrous ammonia a liquid?

MW: Under pressure. It's very similar to propane or butane. When you have a propane tank, typically, your appliances in the house run off the vapor. There is a valve that's screwed into the top of the tank and the vapor is above the liquid level. As long you don't take too much vapor off, you won't have any problem. If you take too much vapor off, your tank will ice up because of the physics involved. For liquid access, there's a line going down into the tank very close to the bottom so it's taking liquid from near the bottom. With gravity and the internal 150 to 180 psi, the liquid feeds upward. The flow of liquid propane out of the tank does not result in the tank icing, as is the case with the release of too much vapor.

The properties of anhydrous ammonia and/or butane or propane are such that, in its liquid form, it maintains a vessel pressure something on the order of 175 to 200 psi. A propane tank by law has to be pressure-rated up to 250 pounds psi. There is a tag on any tank that gives the year built, where it was built, what company built it, and the psi that it is rated for. I think the anhydrous ammonia tanks are very similar. They would've had to have had at least a 250 psi rating, if not more. Propane and NH_3 have similar characteristics—both are beneficial and both are dangerous if mishandled.

RM: So when it was injected into the ground, it was liquid?

MW: Right. Like propane, if you draw a lot of vapor off an NH_3 tank, it also will ice up and that will curtail its flow. In the vehicles, like on the pump engines or the tractors, the liquid propane line from the tank runs into a heat exchanger or regulator that has coolant from the engine circulating through it. Hot antifreeze or coolant vaporizes the propane and reduces the pressure level to one that's better for the carburetion into the manifold. That's very well understood—they're just now getting around to rediscovering propane in this day and age of alternative fuels. Farmers were doing that way back in the '30s, '40s, and '50s. Propane is truly a marvelous fuel!

Anhydrous ammonia has the same properties, but the liquid is injected into the dirt. I saw them do that in West Texas and at the ranch, also. Farmers would put that NH_3 liquid line right into irrigation ditches feeding directly into the water, and then siphon hoses would channel the H_2O/ NH_3 mix right down the rows of cotton. It's kind of like the difference between flood irrigation and sprinklers. You can get a good crop with sprinklers, and you use a lot less water. It may have been that you got more mileage from your anhydrous ammonia with the tractor application by metering it out along the way according to the flow or the speed of the tractor.

RM: That's fascinating. Getting back to the financing, there was something called production credit corporation or something that helped finance farmers, wasn't there?

MW: Probably so. I think he may have had a primary or secondary source of financing and it could have been something like what you're talking about, or Western Cottonseed or Arizona Cottonseed Products might have been a primary source, and then First National might have been a secondary source, sort of a fallback. After the initial set of good years that he had early on, a combination of things happened in the 1965 crop year that he said almost undid him—he was caught with a lot of short-term debt and the crop wasn't good. Dad described the 1965 crop as a real setback.

RM: What happened to the crop? Was it weather or bugs or something else?

MW: I think it was an excessively hot growing season. Consequently, the crop came in short of what he had been experiencing up to that point, and it caught him kind of in a whiplash. But he rarely talked about that. My dad wasn't a whiner at all. I never knew him to stay home sick a day in his life. He might have had the flu or something, but he'd never say anything, he just went out and did what he had to do. However, I do believe that many of the Pahrump farmers had a tough year in 1965.

Rick and I weren't living like the "casino family" kids, driving new cars and having real exotic luxuries. But we always had nice Christmases. And at Christmas time and Thanksgiving, Dad would buy several frozen turkeys and goodies. I remember specifically going to Vegas Village—you remember Vegas Village down on East Main?

RM: Yes, it's still there.

MW: Is it still? Well, Market Town at Oakey and Las Vegas Boulevard, where White Cross is, that big complex where it says Myers Market on it, that was Market Town, and that was the big "supermarket" in town and Vegas Village kind of served north Las

Vegas. I remember going to Vegas Village with the pickup to buy hams and turkeys and baskets of apples and oranges and nuts and fruits and candy and all kinds of things. We'd go out to the ranch and he would parcel all these things out to the families and the folks in the bunkhouses, and he'd have bonus checks written for the families.

That may not have been a common practice, but Dad wanted his people to know that he really did appreciate the efforts that they were making on the ranch and he wanted everybody to have a good Christmas, the kids and everybody else. As young as I was, it was very heartwarming to be a part of that process and to see how those folks reacted. They were so overcome with the kindness that was being shown to them and many of them had probably never experienced this before at the hands of anyone they had worked for previously. Both my parents' example in this and other positive respects have been especially beneficial in practice throughout my life in my dealings and interactions with different folks—a day-to-day reference to the Golden Rule.

RM: That's very nice. Now, let's talk about how he got the gin going.

MW: It was actually a Murray gin (there were a number of signs with that name throughout the building.) I think that was the equipment there, kind of like the labeling on an International Harvester tractor. In West Texas, J. C. Wilson had put in a number of gins on behalf of, I think, Texas Cotton Industries. My dad went to his Texas contacts and described what he was involved in, and described the valley and the potential that he saw for X number of bales of production in a given period. He signed over 40 acres as an enticement for an investor to come in and put up capital for a facility that would be ready for the 1959 crop year.

RM: Wow, so he did that early on. Was it ready for the '59 crop?

MW: Yes, I believe it was because that's when I remember the gin gearing up, the fall of '59. Dave Hibbert was the first gin manager out there. There was a trailer house set up on part of that land for him and his family to live. They drilled a well and there was a small, propane-fueled engine to pump the water. You've got to have water at a gin site because a cotton fire is pretty serious. There's a lot of dust, but also, cotton burns. The water tower is at the Pahrump Valley Museum at present. I believe that "Nevada Ginning Co." is still visible on the tank bottom.

The gin complex had a big propane tank, probably a 20,000-gallon tank, off of the Las Vegas side of the building. The building in and of itself was a pretty good-sized complex. As gins go it was somewhere in the middle between the biggest and the smallest. Technically it was adequate and it was geared to take care of the projected production of all the farmers in that valley. Not having electricity in Pahrump, in the first

year, there was a generator. It was next to the same wall facing Las Vegas, inside, in the main room, the front room, which was about 40 by 40 feet. That side of the building was closest to the big propane tank, which was about 200 feet away.

The Allis-Chalmers generator set, with about a 40 kW yield, supplied the needs for that building: the lights and electric motors and things like that. The propane storage supplied the primary fuel for the various needs of the complex: to run the V-12 Climax engine powering the gin machinery itself, fuel for the electric generator, and fuel for the cotton gin's other miscellaneous requirements—cotton dryers and the like.

The V-12 Climax engine sat in the center of the front 40-by-40 portion of the building and supplied most of the mechanical kinetic power required for that entire complex to operate. The Climax engine was fueled by propane from that 20,000-gallon tank outside. It had a massive pulley on the rear clutch assembly that probably had anywhere from 10 to 12 large V belts, and it was belted to a larger-diameter (four-foot) pulley that had a massive shaft and maybe a pair of additional shafts in conjunction. There was sheet metal separating the engine room from the generator and the Climax, and then the main power shaft ran through that sheet metal wall and it was connected to a series of pulleys, belts, and drive chains throughout the whole building. That powered the entire set of saws, dryers, compressors, blowers, and related equipment. The Climax had an exhaust pipe 10 to 14 inches in diameter plumbed to the outside of the building, going out toward the propane tank.

When the Climax was running at normal speed, you could hear it all over the valley. It was a veritable symphony, if you love internal combustion engines. Talk about several hundred horsepower under load—it just really sat there and roared. The Climax engine's cooling system was daunting because the engine generated so much heat. In

fact, to start it a small four-cylinder engine about two feet long was mounted on the side of the mother engine. You had to start the small four-cylinder engine first, then that would rotate the mother engine. An electric starter wasn't adequate to start it; that's how big the behemoth was. That engine was probably ten feet in length, four feet wide, and about five feet in height, weighing perhaps 3,000 to 4,000 pounds.

RM: And it was a V-12, you said?

MW: A V-12; 12 cylinders, six on either side. It was a massive engine and it was running almost everything in that whole building. You needed all the horsepower. At the front of the engine where the main crankshaft stuck out was an accessory pulley. There were two water pumps V-belted to it for engine-cooling purposes. The engine-cooling system was plumbed with two- or three-inch diameter pipes to the outside and in the very front of the building was a huge wooden cooling tower. It was square, probably eight to ten feet square, and it went up probably 20 or 30 feet. And there were louvers—you know how an evaporative cooler works?

RM: Sure.

MW: There were wooden slats all the way down on all four sides. The hot water from the engine, probably 180 degrees or whatever, would be pumped up to the very top and it had a labyrinth of small discharge outlets. The hot water would come down, and as it came down it would cool and collect in the bottom of the concrete reservoir. The cool water was returned to the engine; that wooden cooling tower served as its radiator. That engine was consuming a few hundred gallons of propane per day.

RM: More than a gallon a minute?

MW: Yes, easily, I would say. You're talking about several hundred horsepower running under full load, probably on the order of 1500 to 1600 rpm a minute, and an

exhaust discharge that was rather like a Bunsen burner. If it was dark in there, the manifolds would be red hot. There were openings in the engine room along the walls where you could get some air circulating.

All that the little Allis-Chalmers generator did was provide lights and 110-volt electricity for running odds and ends; 95 to 98 percent of the power requirement for that whole building was from the Climax engine. If the Climax wasn't running, the gin machinery was at a standstill. The whole complex essentially ran on propane. There were dryers in the gin section that also ran on propane in terms of reducing moisture content from the cotton so that when it was compressed and baled, the moisture content was minimal.

RM: And they were growing long-staple cotton, right?

MW: Yes, Pima cotton. And I believe there were other varieties by different names.

RM: Who put up the money for that gin?

MW: As I said, my dad deeded over the land. I believe that a man by the name of Charlie Piercy, in conjunction with Arizona Cottonseed Products, provided the financing. Actually, I remember meeting Mr. Piercy; he was in our Las Vegas home and out at the ranch a number of times.

RM: What was 40 acres worth then?

MW: In a smaller tract in that location, it probably would've been a pretty good deal in 1959 even at $1,000 an acre, but I don't know what kind of value you could assign to it at that time. In the big picture, Dad saw this as a necessary step to take in order to entice them to invest in the complex so that all of the farmers could get down to the business of cotton farming. I believe that Charlie Piercy and Arizona Cottonseed Products bankrolled the gin; that's what they were doing in other areas of the country, particularly the

Western US and California.

RM: And when did your dad leave the ranch?

MW: The ranch was sold in 1970.

RM: So he was there 13 years. What happened to the gin? Did it close?

MW: Yes, eventually. I believe that the last year that the gin was in operation was some time around 1982 or 1983. When Preferred Equities came in, I believe that they continued to have some agricultural operations for a while while they geared up to do what they wanted to do with all of the other interested property owners in the valley. Their agenda, of course, was property development and sales.

But the water became more and more of an issue because of growth within the valley in general and politics—the politics of water in Pahrump are pretty serious. I think that cotton as a crop, the viability of it, diminished rather steadily. I think Tim Hafen could clarify these facts; he is very knowledgeable regarding the issues of water and Nye County.

RM: When did the cotton-growing peak?

MW: I'm going to guess about the time that the ranch was sold.

RM: And then after that it declined. So your dad got out of cotton just in time in Pecos, and then he got out just in time in Pahrump.

MW: Yes, but that was meeting his agenda in Pahrump also because of the enormous personal workload. He was ready to go on and do something else. You think about the strain he was under: He didn't appear to be. I've said over and over, the older I get, the more I just shake my head in amazement at all that he accomplished because he made it all look so easy. Everything he did was so focused and well disciplined. And he had a great sense of humor through it all. He shared that generously throughout those years.

RM: So the gin was owned by Arizona Cottonseed? And it ran for several years as cotton production kind of dribbled out?

MW: Yes. As I recall, there was a steady decline after the Pahrump Ranch sold. With the advent of electricity in the valley along about ’64, ’65, those electrical conversions were applied not only to the irrigation wells but to the gin. That was part of the deal with the Valley Electric Co-op—“If we’re going to put it in, you’ve got to prove that you’re going to use it,” so to speak. Converting those irrigation wells over to electricity was expensive because the diesel engine-powered units had to be pulled out of the wells and electric power units purchased and installed.

RM: Did you have to put in a new pump?

MW: Yes, more or less a whole different apparatus. I was in school in Lubbock at Texas Tech in ’68 when my dad started acting on his obligation to start converting some of his wells. He asked if I could try to help locate some electric turbine pumps down in Lubbock because Lubbock is a large cotton-farming region, also. There were a lot of electric irrigation components down there and I was able to help him out by checking the want ads and making calls. When I’d located them, he ultimately lined up the purchases for motors, bowl assemblies, casing, etc. Then Dad sent one of his large trucks with a flatbed trailer to Lubbock and the components were hauled back to the ranch.

RM: Let’s talk about that in a minute. What happened to the gin? When did it finally toss in the towel?

MW: As I said, I believe the last of the gin operations was somewhere in the early ’80s—1982 or 1983, somewhere along there. The buildings stayed there for quite a while. They stripped all the equipment out of the inside. Those components were likely resold, perhaps shipped to other countries.

The original Allis-Chalmers electric plant was inadequate and troublesome and gave Dave Hibbert a lot of mechanical trouble, so in 1960 the owners of the gin anted up money to build a small cinderblock building adjacent to the well and the water tower, and they put in two large diesel electric units. Then they were able to start adding additional electrical features because they felt it was more practical. They would run one diesel unit all the time and the second unit was a backup. They'd alternate running them back and forth. I believe that when they did that my dad was also able to negotiate a deal where they strung power from that facility down to the ranch so it no longer was necessary to run the little Caterpillar unit at the ranch. He paid for the electricity since they had surplus power and lots of it. That was kind of a stepping stone for the ranch electrical needs before Valley Electric came in.

RM: What happened after they shut down the gin? It's the site of the Nugget now, right?

MW: Yes. It sat there for some time. I have photos of the building. My wife, Sarah, and I were married New Year's Day of '95 and we were out in Pahrump within that time frame, and the shell of the building was still on the slab. It had been pretty much cleaned out, the equipment all removed.

RM: That's interesting. Well, eventually they built the Nugget there, and I sort of consider that the center of Pahrump now.

MW: Yes. That dirt has some interesting history because after the gin went its way, the Binion family comes along and they ended up with that chunk of land.

RM: How did they get it?

MW: I suppose they purchased that at some point in time.

RM: From the gin people?

MW: I'm not sure; I don't know how many transfers of ownership there were. However, here's a footnote to this story: My brother and I were in Gorman High School in Las Vegas; I was there my freshman and sophomore years. During my freshman year my brother was a senior. Many of the children in school there had celebrity parents. A girl in my class by the name of Jessica James was Harry James's and Betty Grable's daughter. And her older sister, who was in my brother's class, was Vicki James. The James sisters were really nice and blended in, just like everybody else.

There was also a girl, Becky Binion, who is the daughter of Benny Binion—a beautiful girl in my brother's age group. She's still here in Vegas. She had a brother, Ted Binion. The Binion family was rolling in money and they ended up with that land. A few years ago the brother had a concrete bunker dug kind of near the leading edge of the property, near the highway. The land had not had anything built on it then. As the story goes, he proceeded to store and stash umpteen million dollars' worth of silver bars and silver dollars down there in a kind of underground safe. It was very subtle; it was very camouflaged, was my understanding. I believe the Nye County Sheriff's units discovered a flurry of activity there one night, which was rather unusual and bizarre. Many folks no doubt remember those details from television and newspaper coverage. It was quite a sensational story.

Anyway, it hit the news not many years ago—Ted met a girl at a casino and she became his girlfriend and there was an overdose and Ted died and there was somebody else involved, and there was an ongoing dramatic media event. There have been a number of televised made-for-TV movies and crime dramas drawing upon that history.

Anyway, the 40-acre ginning complex was on the land where the Nugget is now. I don't know who owns the Nugget. Is that the Binion family still?

RM: I don't know.

MW: That's the same piece of property that my dad signed over to Nevada Ginning without a reversionary clause.

RM: It would sure worth a chunk of money now.

MW: Yes, I reckon it would have been worth several times what the original ranch was purchased for. Those little tiny parcels along the highway were selling for amazing amounts of money at the peak of the market.

RM: Okay, let's back up and pick up. Were there any more people who came up from Texas?

MW: Bowen and his family were there for about a year. Bowen was acting in the capacity of the foreman. His son Jerry was an experienced tractor hand and equipment operator. He was in probably his early 30s by then. They were all living in the foreman's house, but I think they were only there for about a year, maybe two at the most, after Claude because, once again, I guess the conditions out there were austere enough that they felt like it was time to move on. But that parting was amicable. I think that Bowen and Virgil got along a lot better. Bowen was a real easy-going guy. And for several weeks some time in that time frame, Arnold Boline and his family were in the home. Arnold drilled two or three wells on the ranch during that period.

RM: And then there's Frank Woner?

MW: Yes. After Bowen and Arnold Boline's family left, Frank Woner and his family moved in and he became the foreman of the ranch until it was sold. Frank Woner was a great guy. He and I became very close. He was rather like a brother figure to me because when I was out doing things at the ranch, he kind of kept an eye on me, covered me if I did something a little marginal, got in a little bit of trouble or something. My dad always

considered that Frank had a great "countenance." That was his word—a great countenance. He was an excellent people person and a great person to represent what was going on at the ranch in my dad's absence. Frank had a certain degree of authority in appropriate circumstances.

He had his origins, as I understood it, in an agricultural area of California, the San Joaquin or Imperial Valley. Frank described being raised by his grandfather. They were very close and his grandfather taught him a lot that he valued highly all through his life. When he came out to Pahrump, I think he already had some family there, Jacque and Bob Ruud. Jacque Ruud, I believe, is Frank's sister and Charlotte Floyd is also his sister. I don't remember exactly how the connection was made between him and my dad.

RM: Was he there when your dad got there?

MW: I don't believe so, no. I think there was kind of a timely occurrence. I've referred to Nick Nuñez, and Nick was kind of a stopgap acting foreman after Bowen left. Now, we haven't yet discussed the tragic shooting where Nick was involved. Nick was saddled with the responsibility of being an active foreman, but that was something that wasn't really up his alley so he had chosen to disengage and go back to old Mexico after the unfortunate events that we will talk about a little later on. Rather shortly thereafter, Frank Woner entered the picture and he became the foreman of the ranch and acted in that capacity until the ranch sold.

RM: When did he become foreman?

MW: It was about 1961. He was there for quite a while.

RM: And he moved in with his family?

MW: Yes, into the foreman's house. Frank remained at the ranch and was under the employ of Preferred Equities for a period of time after we were gone. He was a good-

looking man—a tall, slender, dark-haired man with a crew cut, blue-eyed, kind of the Marlboro Man without the Marlboro. He had a great sense of humor, a great laugh. My dad considered him extremely intelligent. He had a quick grasp of things mechanical. New technology was something that Frank was very quick to grasp ahold of. He was very sharp on new agricultural technology.

And my pop considered that he was a very good front man for the ranch. When Dad wasn't there, somebody had to be the contact person, and he had a lot of confidence in Frank as far as his demeanor and his intellect and his people skills in dealing with whoever might come along in the form of other personalities—a person knocking on the door of the ranch, so to speak.

And he covered for me a number of times. I remember once when I was down in what they called the "slough." It was where one of the original artesian wells had been. There were one or two in the valley at that time. There was one down at the No. 4 pump. In the wintertime, when the pump was shut off and the water table was at its height, it would actually come out of the ground on its own.

In the summertime, of course, the water level in all the wells would go down. This particular pump had a small Cat diesel engine, the same kind of engine that was on the light plant, the generator for the camp. I was down there one day on my tractor, "Floyd," that I used to use as a four-wheeler for gallivanting around. The No. 4 pump was minding its own business, pumping the water into the irrigation ditch. And for no reason other than just curiosity, I went up and started fiddling with the throttle, the same type of throttle on the generator that you throttled up and down to dim the lights. I did that; as you diminish the power, the flow of water would drop and if you raised the power, it'd go back up and down according to the engine rpms.

After I did that for a while and decided to go on, I left it running a tiny bit slower than it had been originally. Well, all of the siphon tubes in the ditch were geared to the volume of water that had been pumping at the previous volume. So over a period of time, after I was off doing whatever, the water in the ditch diminished to the point where the siphon tubes broke suction, and then the ditch filled up and overflowed, which created a mess. I don't know how long it was before they discovered what happened. Of course, that required a shutdown and restart of the irrigation well while the ditch break was corrected and siphon tubes restarted and calibrated.

I was oblivious to all of this until Frank caught up with me somewhere and said, "I want to have a little talk with you here for a minute." He told me what had happened and he said "Now, I want you to remember next time it's best that you leave that alone. But for heaven's sake, if you're going to play with it, make sure you get it back to the right setting. And this is between you and I. Your dad doesn't have to know about it." So he covered for me. That was one in God knows how many instances where he was like a big brother to me. God bless him!

RM: How old a guy was he at that time?

MW: Late 20s to early 30s, relatively young. Really a good-looking man. My dad said he'd bat those blue eyes at you, and he had a very contagious personality, a great laugh. He and my dad made a good pair. Frank said he felt that my dad was like an older brother that he'd never had; he learned a lot from him, and my dad had that big brotherly overtone. Even though Frank was an employee, my dad would work with him to help him understand certain things and to share information with him. The more they worked together the better things were all the way around; it was kind of a symbiosis. The relationship was very mutually beneficial and enjoyable, all in all. Likewise, his family

was very kind to me and I spent a lot of time with them in their home.

RM: What happened to Frank?

MW: He eventually ended up parting company with Preferred Equities. I am not sure of the particulars, but Frank eventually moved to Idaho. A few years ago, Sarah and I drove to Idaho and had a really nice visit with him. I had not seen him in several years and it was really good to see him.

RM: Is he deceased now?

MW: Yes, he is. That was not that many years ago. I had been in Nevada taking care of some things out in the valley and I had heard that he was in ill health, that he had had a heart condition that necessitated some machinery being hooked up to him. I was told that he was in Twin Falls so on the way back to Oregon, I detoured around and was really thankful that I did. I had another nice visit with him and we were able to reflect on the way we were all those years past. I was able to confide things to him about my parents and he could talk to me more directly as an adult and vice versa. I was really thankful that I got to see him and visit with him again.

RM: That must have been very nice. What did he do for Preferred Equities?

MW: I think initially he was doing more or less the same thing that he was for my dad as that ownership transition was taking place. As Preferred Equities started coming in with their own people and setting up their agenda, I think he was sort of repositioned and relocated to different types of authority within the company. Frank would have been very valuable in the continuing farming operations with his knowledge of the agricultural functions and complexities.

RM: Was he still in charge of growing cotton and that kind of thing?

MW: I think he was, initially. But as they phased out of the farming business and into

developing their agenda, his role shifted into, I'm sure, activities involving subdivision engineering and all that. And as the project morphed and shifted more into subdivision legalities with paperwork and all that, I think at a point, he positioned elsewhere, probably continuing his managerial functions.

RM: When was Preferred Equities finally out of agriculture there?

MW: I don't know the answer to that. I'm going to say within four to five years, probably. They phased it out, but they continued until it no longer made any financial sense for them to continue. Jack Leavett, the surveyor, who had done work for my dad, somehow or another connected my dad with Preferred Equities. He was part of the Leavett dynasty here in Las Vegas. He did a lot of survey work for my dad. Jack was a very nice guy and superb in surveying activities.

In the early '60s he and my dad jointly acquired a 320-acre tract along Valley View in the Amargosa, and Jack Leavett spearheaded the homesteading of that by doing the survey work and my dad funded the drilling of a well and put in a cover crop to qualify it for the homestead criteria. After they owned the land in fee simple, they cut it into two 160-acre parcels. One parcel had the irrigation well that my dad had funded, and the other parcel did not. When the time came to say okay, we're all done here, Jack said, "Why don't you go ahead and take the 160 with the well on it because that's obviously the most valuable piece?"

Dad said, "Nope, we'll flip a coin for it." And at his insistence, they flipped the coin and my dad lost the coin toss. So Jack Leavett and his family ended up with the 160 with the well. At that time, Valley View was just a gravel road and there wasn't much out there. Years later, Valley View is paved, so it has paved frontage, and lo and behold, the power company comes in, Valley Electric, and there's a power line right there on the

corner of my dad's 160. So that all evened out. And I still have that property. But anyway, Jack was a major connection with Preferred Equities.

RM: How did he know Preferred Equities?

MW: I don't have any idea.

RM: Do you think he got a finder's fee from your dad?

MW: Most likely. I think that Jack was happy with the outcome; my dad wouldn't have done it any other way.

RM: And Jack knew that your dad was wanting to sell?

MW: I think so. I think there was a moment years earlier when my dad had the opportunity to sell the ranch for a million dollars. At that time he declined it because that amount wasn't enough to meet his goals. He was going to have too many expenses and he probably thought, "I need to get this a little further up the road until it meets my needs."

Jack Leavett, as I understand it, was the link that brought the Preferred Equities people into contact with Dad. Negotiations ensued and they struck a deal with my pop on behalf of Dad and Frank Crews. It was going to be a seven-year payout. One of the things that haunted my dad for some time was that he was scared to death he was going to get the ranch back. He didn't want it back. A default would have been a financial and logistical nightmare.

But in the final negotiations one of the big shots made the comment, "Well, gee, Mr. Williams, we're really sorry that, you know, you were a failure at your endeavor here."

And my dad shot back, "Hey, buddy, I've had a few hundred thousand dollar years; you don't need to worry about me." He had a few hundred thousand dollar years in

Texas as well as in Pahrump. I always remember that because as I said before, my dad was not a chest-thumper. He was very matter of fact, but he very quick on the draw.

RM: Did Leonard Rosen say that, or Jack Soules?

MW: I don't think it was either of those fellows. I have the impression that one of the assistants made the comment. There was a fairly tense atmosphere surrounding negotiations with Leonard Rosen and Preferred Equities. But then, that is somewhat to be expected with stakes that high.

RM: Let me ask you to look into your crystal ball and think about what would have happened if Leavett hadn't have found Rosen and your dad's ownership had continued for longer. Pahrump was going to take off sooner or later. I think Preferred Equities accelerated the subdivision, but what would have happened if Preferred Equities hadn't have come in and your dad would have kept on farming there?

MW: The feedback that I had from my parents, and my dad particularly, was that it was just a very opportune moment. When my brother was taken June 30, 1969, that just knocked the wind out of my family. It caused a huge dislocation of each of our lives and in my parents' relationship; it was very devastating. As I told you, upon learning about my brother, the first words out of my dad's mouth were, "Oh, that's going to kill that woman."

RM: Was your brother her favorite, really?

MW: I think in some ways, yes. But my parents were extremely equitable. I got more than my fair share of attention. They cut me a lot of slack. And he was the coolest brother. I mean, I was a lot meaner to him than he was to me when we were little. He was a great big brother. I think I was feeling inferior, because I had a speech defect when I was a kid. I outgrew that somewhat, but it was a labor to communicate clearly. When you

have that type of a thing you're struggling with, it's kind of tough. My parents were very magnanimous to me and very gracious. For all that my brother achieved in his short life, I was not cast by the wayside whatsoever. I am so thankful for my time with those wonderful, loving, understanding folks. They were so good to me. My parents provided for my education and gave me several opportunities along the way.

However, Rick had such potential. When he was attending the Naval Academy, he formed his own corporation as a 21-year old. His classmates were investing money and he was buying and selling tracts of land in the Washington, D.C., area. That's how fast off the block he was. I always knew that I was going to be with Rick and Dad knew that he was going to be able to work with us and set something up—that was his dream: an ongoing family enterprise.

From what I remember with my dad in our conversations, Pop was ready for the ranch to be sold. He was tired. He had all that stress. He didn't look like it, but he was pushing 53 and he basically said the timing of the sale of the ranch couldn't have been better because we were pretty much at the end of the road and could not continue farming; he said he'd have gone broke.

RM: Why would he have gone broke? Hafen and the Bowmans and the other farmers out north weren't going broke, so why would your dad have gone broke?

MW: Well, that was his comment. He said the same thing about Pecos. He said, "If I hadn't gotten out of Pecos, I'd have gone broke." I believe that he was referring to the circumstances in Pahrump regarding his particular operations, expenses, labor, etc. Big changes were needed, in his mind.

I challenged him on that. I said, "Dad, it wouldn't have mattered. If you'd have stayed in Pecos, you'd have made it work one way or the other because you're just that

kind of guy. You're a survivor." But he was a much younger man then. Take Pecos: Oil was eventually discovered, but in the meantime, Pecos went to hell in a hand basket. At Pahrump, he had had such an enormous load on him for so long, and strain, that I think he was looking for the exit. He wanted to become involved in real estate investments in southern Nevada and that worked out quite well for him.

When Preferred Equities came along and the ranch sold, he was concerned they'd give that back. He didn't want to deal with it because he felt like the viability of the whole cotton thing was over. He wanted to go into something else. In his mind, it was time to sell the ranch.

RM: I'm interested in the underlying processes that drive history. You got Elmer Bowman coming in there, and he's got a lot of kids. He's an older man, too, but he's got grown children, a large family. They made the transition from cotton to development. Your dad was a younger man than Elmer when he came in, but he didn't have the family, particularly after he lost your brother. So he didn't have the ability to hang in there and diversify vis-à-vis family members.

MW: Yes. And probably I would not have been that useful because at that point I wasn't that interested in anything except going to school; I had other things on my mind. But then, I was never approached with that idea. I was doing what my parents encouraged: staying in school at Texas Tech and the Vietnam War was still raging; that was in the background.

RM: Well, you were little more than a teenager. Elmer had several grown children with spouses and so on.

MW: Yes, I was very young. And I didn't have the same dynamic. If my brother had lived, it could have been a different outcome. But even then, my brother was not

interested in Pahrump Valley. When I was out with my dad, my brother was in town. In high school, he found a job at one of the banks. He always had his own thing going. As I said, he was a self-starter. He wasn't disrespectful, but it clearly wasn't his bag and my dad did not impose that on him. Rick was on his own path.

RM: That's an interesting difference. We're talking about the two big ranches in the Pahrump Valley, the Pahrump Ranch and the Bowman's Manse Ranch, and how they each took a different route.

MW: Yes, that is interesting. The Pahrump Ranch was much more suitable for what Preferred Equities was going to do because it had lots of water and it had that intersection of 372 and Highway 160, that main focal point in the valley. That was a much better position from a real estate development standpoint at that time.

RM: Did 372 split your dad's ranch or was it the northern border? I'm not clear on that.

MW: I'm not either, because there were 160 acres on the other side of Highway 372 that he sold off separately later, and regretted having done so. And of course, the 40 acres that he'd parceled off to the gin was on the other side of Highway 160, so I never had a real clear understanding of where those boundaries were. But there was land on both sides of Highway 372 and 160 so there must have been defined boundaries. It would be interesting to have documents and plat maps/legal descriptions from that era to accurately address that in complete detail.

CHAPTER NINE

RM: Getting back to your days in Pahrump, were there any other people who came in from Texas? I think we've got all of them from your list. Why don't we talk a little bit about some of the people who were there when you guys got there? You've mentioned Leroy and Mary Vaughn.

MW: Leroy and Mary Vaughn were some of the first folks I met because they had the Union 76 franchise at the corner of 160 and 372 and the little café. They had a trailer house out in the back where they lived with their two daughters. As far back as I can recall, there was a lone phone booth sitting back off the pavement of both of those highways, kind of by itself, and it was not a wire line. It was some kind of a microwave setup from Southwestern Bell. I don't know that I ever heard of anybody using it, or if it worked. Certainly, there must have been times when it did.

Leroy was the primary source of motor fuel for everyone and anyone in or passing through the valley and repairs for everybody's automobile, tires, and mechanical needs. And people would go to eat at Mary's cafe. As a kid, especially when I would stay out there by myself, I'd be up there almost two or three times a day. I'd always charge. If I had my tractor or my little go-kart, I would go up to the pump at Leroy's, and if I bought a couple gallons or a dime's worth, he was always real sporting about keeping a tab. I'd go into Mary's café and she'd make me lunch and run a tab, and my dad would settle up with them on whatever kind of basis he had. I believe that running a tab, or monthly billing, was pretty normal during those years.

They were extremely nice people. Leroy had blue eyes and was always very tan, very muscular. I think he had spent some time in the armed forces at some point. He had

that look, that demeanor, about him. He was a very patient guy. He smoked those Marlboros like many folks did in those days. Mary was a real pretty blue-eyed brunette, a nonsmoker. They were real nice folks, real nurturing. I think they saw me for who I was. Out in the valley, you know, everybody in those days was very close-knit. They were both so kind and patient with me.

RM: How far was the restaurant from your house?

MW: Oh, a quarter of a mile. You went from the corner down 372 to the driveway into the ranch, and the house was there.

RM: How far down 372 from 160 was the driveway?

MW: Approximately a quarter of a mile to the entrance.

RM: And how far past the entrance gate was it to where this compound of houses was?

MW: The first house that you came to was the main home that my parents had as a base, on the left-hand side. That was about 100 yards from the highway. The little red schoolhouse was at least 30 or 40 yards off the highway, facing Highway 372, and then it was probably the same distance back to the first home.

RM: On the ranch side?

MW: Yes. Coming down 372 towards Shoshone, you'd turn left to go to the ranch and the little red schoolhouse was sitting off to the left, facing 372. The main ranch drive was accessed by turning left off Highway 372. There was a slight downslope over a cattle guard under the Pahrump Ranch sign. As I told you earlier, a bypass allowed traffic around the cattle guard.

RM: It's hard to visualize that now.

MW: The next time you're in Pahrump, turn the corner and go down a ways. It's all congested in there now, but if you drive kind of slow, you'll see that shop building—

that's the only landmark remaining as a reference point for me. The driveway was probably 100 yards off that end of that building that went down through the camp, and the first dwelling was kind of offset off of the shop building. When we first moved there, there were an old barn and some corrals alongside the driveway that were all rickety and kind of rundown. Early on, my dad had that all torn out because it was serving no purpose. The land would be adjacent to the future shop building site.

RM: Where was the Pahrump spring? It was still running then, right?

MW: There were two on the ranch that I knew of. The first one was near the corner of 160 and 372, down not too far from the back of the house where there was the ranch's well with a railroad tank that supplied the water needs for the whole camp. Down a little ways from that was a gulley and in that gulley they had dug a well that had an old three-cylinder RD6 Caterpillar engine on the pump. It didn't need much power because the lift was so shallow, and I believe in the wintertime it flowed artesian. The No. 4 pump down in what they call the slough area farther down was the other artesian source that I remember.

RM: So it wasn't a big artesian spring?

MW: Not a huge thing, no. I only remember those flowing artesian during the winter months.

RM: Those used to be huge springs. A year or so ago, Harry Ford took us down where he thought these springs were, and of course there was nothing there but open ground.

MW: Between the main casing of the No. 4 well and the pump column there's a gap all the way around the perimeter. In the wintertime, or when the pumps in the valley weren't running and the water table would come up, the water would come up and out and flow artesian. It wasn't a huge amount of water, but it was definitely artesian. I've never seen

anything like it.

RM: They were massive springs at one time.

MW: The artesian flow would probably return if there was no pumping in the valley.

RM: I think it would. We were talking about the Vaughns. Anything else you want to say?

MW: They had two daughters. Linda was the older daughter and Rita was the younger one. Rita was fairly close in age to me, and I was girl crazy from the time I was a little kid. The first year I was there the old barn was still there. I hadn't been out there very long, and they certainly didn't know me too well, but one day I broached the idea of getting together with Rita in that old barn. [RM Laughs] Leroy quickly vetoed that idea. Well, I was so young, I had no idea.

RM: How old were you, probably?

MW: Ten. I loved girls at that age, too, but there was nothing else there. He was real sensible about it. He said, "No, I don't think it would be a good idea to have anybody meeting up at the barn. If you guys want to come up here to the café and sit down, you all can get to know each other here." Which was totally reasonable. I wasn't offended by it at all. As it worked out, I never really got to know either one of those kids too well. Rita is now, I think, back in Wyoming and her sister, Linda, is in Reno, where her parents ultimately ended up. I think Leroy just passed away a few years ago.

RM: He did. They actually ended up in Pahrump at the end.

MW: But they moved back up to Reno, didn't they?

RM: In the last year or two?

MW: Yes, sir.

RM: Oh, they did? I interviewed Leroy in Pahrump a couple years ago.

MW: I think Leroy passed away just within a few days of Harry Ford.

RM: He did, yes.

MW: Which is kind of symbolic. Months ago, Harry set up a rendezvous for the first time in over 30 years, maybe 40 years, where we all got to meet. Harry and Leroy and Mary and I got to sit down and have lunch and talk about the valley. Harry was so nice. He made that possible and I'm so glad he did. What a marvelous fellow—a good friend to so many.

RM: Yes, he was. I wonder where Mary is now.

MW: I think she's in Reno with her older daughter. I've spoken to the daughter and she was very gracious, and I'd like to see her again sometime.

One more little footnote with Leroy. I was with Leroy one day in the summer of 1958 and he was pretty stressed out; he had a lot going on. They had a generator for their facility. Electricity was all important because they had to pump gas with electricity to run the pumps and the café. That little building had a diesel generator set, and I happened to be up there when all of a sudden there was all this commotion, with steam and smoke and everything coming out. Leroy ran over and I followed him. He shut it off, and I guess a radiator hose had busted and steam and everything was going everywhere. I reminisced with him about that, and he remembered it and remembered that I was there that hot summer day in 1958—this was 40 or 50 years later.

Anyway, he patched it up and restarted it. That's what it was like out there. If something really critical broke down, you were dead in the water till it got back and running. People can't relate to that now because you call the power company and say, "My power went out; fix it." You were on your own out there. Okay, who was it next?

RM: Next on your list are Frank and Katie Burkett.

MW: Frank and Katie Burkett had the general store; I believe it was near Basin Road. I know the elementary school building was fairly new and then there was an older wooden community building that was used for movies and various activities. As you turned and drove toward the store, it was facing you. The road going to it off Highway 160 was gravel. It was the proverbial out in the middle of nowhere general store. They also had their own generator set to keep the freezers and the refrigerators going for the perishable items because they have to stay cold when it's 110 outside. They had all of their staples, the basic food stuffs and maybe oil and kerosene, lanterns, odds and ends that people would need. I think they also had a way to slap together a sandwich or various snacks. It wasn't a restaurant grill but they did have some fruit, so if you were hungry you could go in there and get your can of Vienna sausage or Spam or pork and beans or some bologna and some bread, soda pop, whatever. And I think that they were able to warm and cook certain items.

They had one son who was much older than I. He was a teenager or in his early 20s when I was there so I didn't have any affiliation with him. I remember he was not around often, at least when I was there. I don't remember him being there or working with them at all; he was just coming or going on his own. Anyway, that was Frank and Katie, and I'm sure my dad had the same arrangement with them to run a tab and pay up whenever they wanted to be paid. I'd be in and out of there, too. They were elderly and always very gracious and kind to me.

RM: Okay. What about Bill and Dutch Turner?

MW: Bill was the law enforcement official for the valley and Dutch was the postmistress. They had three or four sons. I knew Walt, the oldest, and I knew Tommy; Tommy was closer to my age. In those earlier days, I got to know those guys pretty well.

Bill and Dutch were really nice. We had horses on the ranch that we brought in from Texas, and they had their own horses. The whole valley was yours to ride around in, you know? There were no boundaries at all, to speak of. There were very few fences in the valley during those days.

Bill figured in that momentous night when we had that episode at the ranch involving the accidental shooting. All of that was thrust upon his shoulders to sort out, and it was a situation where they were able to pretty much analyze it and solve it and resolve it within a matter of hours. Nowadays, it would be much more complicated.

RM: Do you want to tell that story now?

MW: Sure. As I described, the middle dwelling between the main ranch house, my parents' home, and the second structure was a trailer house that was covered by a sheet metal shelter to keep the sun off. That was kind of across from the end door on the main bunkhouse on the other side of the street. A Hispanic family was living in the trailer house; the fellow was an employee of the ranch by the name of Rudy. I didn't know him very well, but he was a nice guy. I don't remember exactly how he came to be at the ranch, if he was there when we came or if he came along at some point. At any rate, from time to time after a long, hot day in the fields the Hispanics in the bunkhouse wanted to have a little bit of relaxation—and the most prosperous economic ventures in the valley, of course, were the bars. I think the main bar was the one further down Highway 372 owned by Joe Halliger. It was just down maybe a half mile from the ranch entrance on the opposite side of the road from Pahrump Ranch.

Anyway, one fateful night, I guess fairly late in the evening, some of the Pahrump Ranch Mexicans were tossing down a few beers. And in those days, some of the Native Americans that were in the valley and the guys from the ranch didn't always get along.

That night, there was some kind of a disagreement between the two groups, whether it was three and three or four and six or whatever the number was. It wasn't a huge number but it was enough to spell trouble. I guess after an initial encounter, a scuffle at the bar, they were shown the door, thrown out or whatever, and the Pahrump Ranch Mexicans came back to the ranch. I'm sure they had some kind of a vehicle; maybe they used a farm truck.

They came back to the ranch and it turned out that these Indian fellows followed them back. And it was very dark; it would have been around 11:00 p.m. or later. The ranch generator had been shut off so everything was pitch black, and most everybody at the ranch was asleep.

They all ended up down at the end of the bunkhouse where the doors open out to the equipment yard, where the tractors and equipment were parked, and sort of across from Rudy's trailer. Nick Nuñez, the foreman, our man who came up from Texas, was kind of the guy who rode herd on the guys in the bunkhouse—as you walked in the main entrance of the bunkhouse you made a right turn down that hallway and his was the first bedroom on the drive access side of the bunkhouse. His room window was more than likely open and, up to this point in time, there had been dead silence in the camp.

Suddenly, all the commotion of the vehicles and the shouting and the yelling woke Nick up from a deep sleep. He knew something was going on that was not good and he happened to have an old Colt .45, an Army issue .45. Dazed and confused, half asleep, probably in his skivvies and a t-shirt, he grabbed his pistol and went down the hallway out the end of the building to see what in the world was going on and ran out into the darkness. I'm sure all that he could see would be shadowy figures, all skirmishing around. He looked off to the right and he saw a figure running at him in the darkness, and

he had no idea who it was in all the pandemonium.

He yelled "stop" in whatever language he used and this person kept running at him. He raised his pistol and again yelled "stop," and the person kept running at him. This dark figure running toward him was perhaps 15 or 20 feet away and he still couldn't see who it was. Nick fired once, and it was just an unfortunate shot—it hit a vital spot and killed the person rushing toward him dead, and it was his friend, Rudy. When they discovered that, of course Nick was absolutely devastated and heartbroken.

When the pistol shot went off, the Indians jumped in their vehicle and roared off and disappeared. Word was gotten to Bill Turner of this event, and Bill drove to Shoshone to call my dad in Las Vegas. That was about 3:00 in the morning. I remember the phone rang in the middle of the night. My dad got up and answered it. And I got up and asked what was going on and my dad said, "I've got to go out to the ranch." I heard all this later on.

My dad went out and he and Bill Turner and Nick and whoever the other witnesses happened to be discussed the event. My understanding was that it was basically ruled an accidental shooting. There was no malicious intent, no criminal intent, and that was the end of it. Bill did whatever kind of paperwork that he had to file as the sheriff and took care of it.

RM: And that was the end of it?

MW: That was the end of it.

RM: Do you remember approximately when that was, the date?

MW: It seemed to me that happened pretty early on, maybe within the first year that we were there, somewhere between '58 and '59.

RM: What was Rudy's name?

MW: I don't know; that's all I knew him by.

RM: And he had come up from Mexico?

MW: I don't know. I don't think he came up with us, because I had never known him before. I knew some of the others, like Nick Nuñez and Fermine and Santos and Jose, because they'd been down in Texas with us but I did not know Rudy in Texas. I had gotten to know him somewhat at the ranch. It could have been that he and Nick's family were friends prior to their arrival in Pahrump. Perhaps he and his family followed Nick and his sons up from Texas.

RM: How old a man was he?

MW: I think probably in his 30s. And he had a wife and one or two children. It was very sad.

RM: Oh, my God. What happened to them?

MW: I don't know. I think they probably went back to Mexico, to family. It was really tragic. And it just broke Nick's heart. That was the last thing in the world he would have done, ever. He got caught in a vortex of events that were going on so fast, and the circumstances were such that they just overwhelmed him, and he thought that whoever was running at him was going to do him bodily harm. He was in fear of his life, literally.

RM: And Rudy's family lived right there, right?

MW: Yes. Rudy was shot and died within 50 feet of where he lived.

RM: Good God. And he had been one of the guys down at the bar?

MW: No, he had been awakened, also. He was doing the same thing Nick was doing. He'd come out to assist and to see what was going on. I guess he heard some of his friends being beat up, yelling or whatever, and thinking hey, I need to go out there and help.

RM: Did he come across the street?

MW: Yes, running. So there wasn't time for Nick to really recognize or figure out who it was. It was pitch black. All you could see was maybe shadows, if that. I think that Nick probably wasn't even trying to aim to kill. A pistol is kind of hard to be accurate with, especially when there's motion and movement, and you're half asleep. It was just an unlucky shot.

RM: Was there ever any investigation?

MW: Only what Bill Turner wrote up and reported in his capacity as sheriff, whoever he reported that to. Remember, Pahrump in those days was still very much a frontier.

RM: I wonder if that paperwork is still available.

MW: It would be interesting to know how it was written up and what the dates were. I wonder if that's in the annals of Nye County law enforcement history somewhere.

RM: I might try and see if that can be tracked down.

RM: Was Rudy buried in Pahrump?

MW: I don't know the answer to that; probably he was.

RM: Yes, they wouldn't have had money to take him anywhere.

MW: Mary Ford might know the answer to that because she's been out there all these years. I think she would know about the old cemetery where people were buried initially.

RM: You're probably the only one left who has any recollection of the incident, aren't you?

MW: With any detail, yes, because I was right in the middle of it, figuratively speaking. Dad got the phone call and he got in his car and immediately drove out to the valley. And without going into a lot of gory details he related it later on to my mom and my brother and myself.

RM: Okay, returning to your list of names, how about Rusty Horgan?

MW: Rusty Horgan was a very neat, interesting guy. I know almost nothing about his background other than the fact when you turned left on 372 going down towards Shoshone, he had his home, a tin-covered house with a screened-in porch, on several acres. He had a very nice, totally stock but very well cared for ’55 or ’56 gray Ford F100 pickup that he was really proud of. He had a Weimaraner dog by the name of Soapy, and Rusty and Soapy were a familiar pair in the valley. I believe that Rusty had been in Pahrump for several years.

He and my dad got along really well. My dad really liked Rusty, found him to be a very interesting guy who was always really jovial. The two laughed a lot when they were around each other. Early on, it became clear that Rusty knew of a great fishing place up outside of Tonopah in the area of the old Belmont Mine. In those days, the gravel road turned off from the main paved Highway 376. From there, it was a fairly rough ride.

RM: The Belmont Mine is in Tonopah, right?

MW: Yes. This was a good ways out of Tonopah in the mountains near a place that we called Pine Creek. My dad and Rusty looked forward to going on those fishing trips because there was good trout fishing up there. Rusty and Soapy would pack their provisions. There was a camping shack up there with a place to cook your food. No electricity, just roughing it. Bunk beds and a place to stay out of the weather. A few times, I was there with Rusty and Ed Siri, who was Nye County Sheriff, and Leo Funk, and maybe one or two others. I think Leo Funk was the Nye County Assessor at that time. It was a place to hunt deer and fish. I went up there a couple of summers with Rusty and Soapy in Rusty’s truck for about a week at a time. We would fish and he was kind of like an uncle or a grandfather figure to me, always very pleasant and patient, encouraging

me when I became discouraged when the trout weren't biting.

Quite honestly, my heart was about halfway in it because I would much rather have been around engines and noise and machinery as opposed to fishing, I wasn't terribly interested or good at fishing. But he was a good sport, good natured, and knew how to put up with me; and I didn't give him a hard time. We all respected the man. He had to be in his 60s at least—not much hair, and it was real gray. My dad used to call him Horgan. "Hello, Horgan, how you doing?"

"Oh, hello Walt, I'm fine." He was just a quintessential Pahrump character. Looking back, I appreciate all the more my memories of Rusty and Soapy in that Walden Pond setting.

RM: Did he work for your dad?

MW: No.

RM: How did he earn a living?

MW: I don't know. At that point he probably was on Social Security. He was a bachelor. I don't know if he'd ever been married, and I don't know that he had any children; it was just he and Soapy. I'm pretty sure they lived out there until they passed away. I just remember spending time with him in those early years. I have a real fondness in my heart for those memories because he was a very nice guy and so quintessential a pioneer of Pahrump. A true Nevadan.

RM: He'd been there a long time?

MW: I believe so, yes; long enough to have that house and his acreage.

RM: Was the land that he owned formerly Pahrump Ranch land?

MW: It could have been. If it was, he acquired it before we got there.

RM: You've got Harry and Mary Ford on your list. I wonder if you want to say

anything more about them?

MW: Harry and I got to know each other perfunctorily because he was somewhat older than I. He remembers me a lot better than I remember him during that period, but I remember him always being really cheerful; he had a smiling voice to my youthful ears.

His work involved operating equipment for the highway department. Harry has been very gracious to reference all of the times that some situation would arise that they were able to come to the ranch and utilize the facilities or equipment to help repair whatever mechanical problems were occurring. My dad would help them in any way he could with the facilities at the ranch.

Otherwise, Harry says he remembers me spending nights out in that big house by myself as a little kid, and the next morning marching up the highway to Mary's Café and having lunch. He reminisced that he thought it was pretty impressive that I'd stay in that house all by myself.

RM: Were you at all scared in there alone?

MW: Not as long as the lights were on. I think I recalled with Harry about one night when I was out there by myself and I decided that I needed to have a shower. I thought I had at least another hour before the generator would be turned off and I was in the shower when suddenly the lights started the dimming process, going on and off. I shut the water off and panicked because my bedroom was down the hallway about 30 feet. Before I could get out of the shower, it went pitch black and I just froze. I don't know what I was thinking, but I stood there dripping wet in that shower for probably a good 10 or 15 minutes. I was listening to every little thing and I thought God, I can't stand here all night! I finally got brave enough to step out and get a towel and eventually made my way down to my room and crawled into bed, and that was the end of it. It's funny how things

that you remember a lot of times are something either very happy, very sad, very scary, or very traumatic. Looking back, it was actually pretty funny.

RM: Yes, something that makes an emotional impact.

MW: And those synapses jell. But most times I would be in my room or where I could get to my room fairly quickly when those lights would go out. Once I got into my bedroom, I'd be tired enough that I wouldn't lie there very long before I'd go to sleep. I'd wake up the next morning and everything was fine, you know. First order of business was to go find something to eat.

RM: That sounds pretty adventuresome for a young kid. Now, how about Arnold Boline?

MW: Arnold Boline and his family were from Bakersfield, and they were in the well-drilling business. In about the 1959 period, in between Claude Parks and Bowen, Arnold Boline spent at least a few weeks drilling two or more irrigation wells for my dad. He and his family were utilizing the foreman's house as a residence because it was not being lived in at that time and he was going to be there long enough with his rig, working day to day, that they needed some place to stay. They had two sons. I don't remember his wife at all, but Arnold was a big, heavyset, burly guy. As I recall, he always wore a hat to keep the sun off his head. He was not much of a talker; he was there to do a job. He was a cordial man and very good in his field of drilling irrigation wells.

The younger son's name was Jimmy. I didn't know the oldest son very well at all. I got to know Jimmy, and the family stayed at the ranch for a period of time until those irrigation wells were completed. Jimmy was about two years older and he and I kind of struck up a friendship to the extent that, at one point, Arnold needed to drive over to Bakersfield for two or three days, and I went with them in their pickup. It was in

summertime and it was very hot. We went through Shoshone along the back way to connect with Barstow and the old Highway 58 that took us over to Bakersfield, and to their home.

RM: That's how you got to Bakersfield in those days?

MW: That's how we went. We went to Shoshone, and from Shoshone along Highway 127 goes to Baker and Barstow on old US 95, then on to Bakersfield from Barstow on Highway 58. So instead of going to Vegas and going all the way around, there was a shortcut. There were no freeways then until San Bernardino.

RM: But you would go on to Barstow, and then north from Barstow up to Bakersfield?

MW: Yes, on old Highway 58, which is still a highway; I drive it occasionally. We were there for two or three days and came back. The Bolines were staying at the ranch until the wells were completed and then they went back to Bakersfield and that's the last I ever saw of them.

RM: Did he drill a lot of wells?

MW: Yes, for my dad, at least; I don't know if Arnold drilled wells for anyone else in Pahrump. Water rights were critical. The water rights came with the ranch but they had to be exercised within a certain period of time. Dad wanted to expand his available crop potential acreage and have the additional water available in conjunction with the increase in cropland. As the additional water came on line, Dad also had his concrete irrigation ditches constructed. The year 1959 was a very busy and transformative year at the Pahrump Ranch. He really had a big tiger by the tail.

CHAPTER TEN

RM: I'm interested in hearing more about what it was your dad had to do when he came in there. He bought the ranch, he's got 12,000 acres, and he's got to put 1,000 acres, eventually, in cotton. What were the steps that he had to go through to make that a viable cotton and alfalfa production operation?

MW: I believe that the total cultivation ended up being 2,000 acres. Initially it started off around 1,000 that the previous owners had been attempting to farm. So Dad initially went in and tried to get a grasp on the existing farmland, getting that cleaned up with his TD-18 and applicable implements. He eventually also purchased a D-7 Caterpillar, which is roughly equivalent power-wise, or maybe a little bit smaller. The "Cat-skinners," i.e. operators, would rip-plow and bulldoze land that had mesquite on it and put the mesquite into piles, then work that land and open up new dirt for farming, disking and leveling with the Fresno, a wheeled leveling blade.

RM: Was there a lot of mesquite?

MW: Yes, a lot. My dad spoke in terms of working around-the-clock—with the bulldozer, or crawler, operators out there. During that phase, equipment was running 24 hours a day. They had lights on for night operations and there was machinery noise and dust. Nobody in that valley had ever done anything like 24 hours a day work before that we know of. All those families would work dusk to dawn, but Walt had the gin on his mental agenda and knew what he wanted to put into cultivation for a certain calendar year, so he had to make it move along. It took a lot of work to get that all cleared out, burned off, plowed up, processed, and ready to plant.

I remember in the cold part of the year, January and February, when the fellows

would be running the M and the H Farmall tractors, especially at night, they would improvise canvas from each side along the rear of the engine radiators and attach on both sides along the engines. They would bring the canvas back alongside the side of the tractor but down low, all the way back to where the drivers sat, to create kind of an envelope so that the heat from the engine could filter back to help keep them warm. It was very cold, and the operators were out there working through the nights with the temperatures dropping down into the teens.

I know my dad had a warm spot in his heart for his Mexicans, as he referred to them. He knew that high productivity from an individual had a direct link with their comfort zones. So by making the effort to make it a few degrees warmer, those guys would appreciate being more comfortable because that was grueling work with that noise and that dust. If the wind was just right as you were working the soil, you'd be going a certain direction, and that dust would just hang in a cloud as you went along. It wouldn't go anywhere until you went back upwind.

So both when they were opening up that new land as well as at various times of the year during normal seasonal operations, they did round-the-clock farming. That is quite an undertaking. It was necessary to have ways to service and fuel and maintain the equipment during the darkness. Virgil had improvised and constructed a service unit out of a flatbed trailer that was like a portable maintenance facility. It had an air compressor and fuel—propane and diesel—grease guns, tools, and a few spares. A pickup or a tractor could tow it out to any given location and it would be on site for servicing so that operations could be continuous. It was a very ingenious and vital component in those circumstances.

RM: What equipment would he use when he did an initial clearing?

MW: The D-7 probably would have been the 'dozer, working mesquite and sage into piles for burning. Then as that land would be cleared, the TD-18 would utilize a root plow, or rip shank, and it would be making deep-cut furrows back and forth, getting the rest of the root structure up to where it could be removed and burned. Eventually, the process ended up with dirt that would then be disked and worked up and ultimately planted. It's rather a sequential process. When I spoke of the M and the H tractors, they would have been integral in the operations, where they would be cultivating or planting the crop or applying anhydrous ammonia, among other ongoing functions.

RM: Okay. Now, you know how they have those mounds, those little sand dunes with vegetation growing on them? They used to be all over the valley and there are still some left.

MW: Sure, they were naturally occurring.

RM: Did the Pahrump Ranch have any of those?

MW: I don't remember any. I just remember mesquite and tumbleweeds. I do remember those types of mounds in the vicinity of the school and Frank and Katie Burkett's general store.

RM: Okay, so after he cleared off the land, what was his next step?

MW: Well, whatever root structure was remaining had to be worked out with the appropriate implements. Some of that material was just decomposing nutrients. I suppose they would have worked it up with a disk with the TD-18. The irrigation ditches would, of course, have been in place in order to apply water to the crops at the optimum time.

RM: Did they level it?

MW: Yes.

RM: How did they do that?

MW: There was an M tractor connected to what my dad used to refer to as the Fresno. The Fresno was towed by the tractor, and as I recall, it had a long, elevated boom that went back several feet. I believe it had a wheel and a tire on either side of it, and there was a blade kind of in the center that was hydraulically activated, connected to the tractor's hydraulic system. The driver of the tractor had a control arm that would raise the blade if you pulled it, and then there's a neutral spot that would be stationary, and if pushed put it in the other direction, you would lower the blade. The angle of the blade could also be adjusted during operations as necessary.

As the tractor driver went along, he constantly monitored the process visually, and with his practiced skills he could raise and lower and adjust that blade to move that dirt, and to move it in such a way that it would level out wherever he felt he needed to level a certain area. The Fresno very much resembled a road grader in its design, except that it was pulled by the tractor, but the application and results were very similar.

RM: So they were leveling by eyeball? They weren't using a transit?

MW: Oh, I think yes, certainly in the initial clearing and leveling of new ground. On the established fields, I don't remember that being necessary. Back during those years, that's what my dad did, anyway. The fellows that he had operating his equipment were skilled enough and had done it enough that they were very good at it.

RM: Who would have done that work, do you know?

MW: I think probably Santos, Fermine, or Jose would have been doing it. Everybody had a certain set of skills they could bring to bear, and the tractor drivers probably had multiple capabilities. For the guy who would run the Fresno, that was probably one of his specialties. On the Mizpah portion of the farm, I think that there was a downward slope from Highway 160 going back towards Shoshone. The concrete irrigations ditches ran

parallel to Highway 160 and the siphon tubes would direct the water in that direction, away from 160.

My dad had a profound reverence for water in the desert, and also for not wasting it because of the expense and his experience in Pecos. They would irrigate using siphon tubes and the water, of course, goes downhill. At the very back side of those rows, there would be, for lack of a better word, kind of a berm or dike to catch the water and it would gravitate toward a collection point. There would be a significant enough amount of water that my dad went ahead and put in what he called a tail water pump. It was a trailer-mounted four-cylinder engine centrifugal-type pump, as opposed to a turbine. It would have probably been a six-inch inlet where the water would be at its lowest collection point, with a screen that would keep it from getting debris in it, and that water would be pumped back up and into the concrete ditch. It was a recirculating process to salvage the water.

RM: Was it a good bit of water?

MW: Oh, yes. If he got a six-inch column of water back into his ditch, then that was water that did not additionally have to be pumped out of the subterranean aquifer.

RM: How interesting. Now with the land level, how did he get water from the main ditch to the rows?

MW: Well, this was accomplished by using siphon tubes. They were bow-shaped and would straddle the ditch bank nearest the field and rows. There were both aluminum and hard black rubber types, each having 2 to 2.5-inch openings on each end. Any number, one or more, could be used on each row.

But I need to back up a little bit. When Dad first purchased the ranch, dirt ditches were being utilized and it was terribly wasteful. There might be an irrigation well with an

initial concrete bathtub-shaped basin with a 20-foot conduit to catch the water coming out of the discharge, but then the water would flow into a dirt ditch. Initially, Virgil Bateman would use the No. 12 Caterpillar road grader that would V-cut a ditch; that's how Virgil could form the dirt ditches. But in the 1959 crop year, Walt embarked on the ambitious and very critical construction of the concrete irrigation ditches, which would ultimately irrigate 2,000 acres and save large amounts of water, fuel, and money in the process.

So he had to (a) get plenty of water, and (b) he had to get that water out to the crops, and (c), he had to expand his crop land, and (d) he had to eradicate the Johnson grass. Dad had several factors that he was juggling and coordinating simultaneously that were crucial. Early on, he contracted with a firm out of the San Joaquin Valley to come and put in the concrete irrigation ditches, which was a gigantic improvement in terms of making the farming viable. That alone made it much better to work with those siphon tubes and drastically diminish the loss of water.

The concrete irrigation ditches were an essential element of water conservation. It meant that more acreage could be irrigated by a single well. Ultimately, the ranch had ten deep-well irrigation pumps and those ditches made it possible to irrigate upwards of 2,000 acres of cotton and alfalfa. Of course in the summertime, it was critical that they all remain operational because if you had a shutdown of a certain unit and that water suddenly ceased to come, then that area of the crop would be in danger because it wouldn't take long for that 110-, 115-degree heat to damage it severely.

RM: How long would you have to get that pump going again?

MW: Well, it was a top priority. Usually the problem would be some issue with an engine. He had basically two types of engines—the larger, deeper wells had D-13000 inline 6 Caterpillar engines. They were utilized originally for the D8 Caterpillars,

crawlers, of that era. The D-13000 was exceedingly reliable for that particular application. And the shallower wells had smaller engines, inline 4s. They were also extremely reliable. They would run 24 hours a day seven days a week for upwards of six or seven months. The irrigation started in late February or March, and it would go until the latter part of August, when they would cease irrigating and the cotton crop would mature for the harvesting.

Usually, a spare engine of each of those sizes was available in case one of them had an unexpected breakdown. They'd pull the engine off and then put another one in. We had an old GMC, an A-frame truck, that was purchased with the ranch that had a boom and a cable with a hook and a clasp. I remember up near the domestic well, the No. 1 irrigation well, when the engine had some issues and had to be taken into town. The cable on the A-frame truck was chained to the engine and it was hoisted up. A Mexican worker was riding on each side of the front hood on the very front of the A-frame while Virgil drove because the engine was so heavy that the truck's front wheels tended to float off the ground from the weight as they drove along. That engine was then transported to James Engine Rebuilders in Vegas, our primary source of repairs for those sorts of engines. They were on Commerce Street just off of West Charleston. Parts for the Cat engines were purchased from the parts department at Cashman Caterpillar in Las Vegas.

The concrete irrigation ditch system was pretty much completed in the 1959 to 1960 era. There were several miles of ditches that basically fronted the entirety of the land that would be irrigated and cultivated, ultimately approximately 2,000 acres. In the final years, that would be roughly 1,000 acres of cotton and 1,000 acres of alfalfa. Those crops were rotated every two to three or four years, depending on what seemed to be the most advantageous for the yields and the price of cotton and alfalfa.

RM: Where did they get the gravel for the concrete ditches?

MW: I believe there was a gravel facility in the valley somewhere off Highway 160 in the vicinity of the Bowman farms. But I don't know if the concrete was being transported from Stewart Brothers in Vegas or if the contractor had materials and equipment set up on or near the ranch to prep and supply the cement. Anyway, the ditches were in the shape of a V except that the very bottom was 14 to 16 inches wide and flat instead of coming to a point. On the top, both sides were flat and extended about five inches at the edge.

RM: And how deep were they?

MW: They were approximately two to two-and-a-half feet from the top edge to the very bottom.

RM: So they carried a lot of water.

MW: Yes. There was a combination of different wells that would channel into a single ditch. For instance, the No. 1 well, up near the corner of 372 and 160 and a second well further inland with the Caterpillar RD-6, which was ultimately upgraded. And a third well was drilled—we called it the No. 3 and all three wells channeled into a dual pool configuration. The No. 1 well, incidentally, is still in use today for the community. Perhaps all ten wells are being utilized.

There were two concrete basins that were like large concrete bathtubs, as it were, side by side. Then there were metal galvanized forms that flared out and in and out again that were parallel to each other. They formed and spilled into the main irrigation ditch that started down and into that portion of the ranch that was closest to the headquarters.

Those pools were fairly close to a bunkhouse that was constructed out on the edge of the fields later on and, during warm seasons, the fellows living in the bunkhouses

would utilize those for bathing facilities. And the children of the ranch, including myself, found those pools really nice on hot summer days. They were like miniaturized swimming pools. They weren't deep enough to have any problems with and the water was constantly flowing in and out of both pools.

As the summer months wore on, the ditches would form a heavy, slick layer of moss along the sides and the bottom. It was really fun to jump into that ditch and the current of the water was fast because you were looking at somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 gallons a minute flowing down that ditch. When you jumped in, you would be sliding along on your little hiney maybe three to five miles an hour because that's how fast the current was.

Usually you'd have a couple kids down the ditch line a ways to help you get out. Getting out was tricky: if you put your hands up alongside the ditch, unless you could reach the concrete portion, there was that moss and you'd slip. And as soon as you did that, you'd fall back in and the water would build up behind you very quickly and just keep pushing you along. So usually we had a couple of kids stationed at a certain point to help each other out. Then we would walk back and do it all again. It was really a nice amenity.

RM: It sounds fun. Were there ponds formed by the springs?

MW: I think so. The No. 4 well that was artesian in the wintertime formed a bit of a pond with water reeds and cattails on the lower part of the farm. That is the only one that I remember.

RM: Was there one major ditch for the ranch?

MW: Not exactly. The ditches were all pretty uniform in size. They would service all of the alfalfa fields and the cotton. The irrigation wells were spaced in order to flow into the

entire system spanning the total frontage of the crop acreage. There was a labyrinth of irrigation ditches that ran along the front edge of the fields on the high side closer to the highway. The irrigation water would go down where the slope of the land tended to be gradual. There were also some ditches in the system running perpendicular to the front canals. The siphons were approximately two inches in diameter. Hard rubber and also some aluminum siphon tubes were utilized. As I mentioned previously, the number of tubes used per row could vary.

The crops were irrigated by sections, depending on the amount of water that was being produced and the amount of water that was controlled in the ditches by the fellows we called irrigators. They were the guys who tended the siphon tubes and knew exactly where to position these kinds of V-shaped metal stops with canvas. The stops were contoured and would block the water, thus damming up the ditch. Then they would set siphon tubes equivalent to the total output of the irrigation wells that were feeding that particular section. Depending on what part of the farm it was, we had different irrigation wells that would be feeding into this labyrinth of irrigation ditches.

RM: Did every row have a siphon tube?

MW: Yes, at least one. Sometimes they would double up and have three or four or five that would be feeding into a single row. The process was variable depending on how quickly a certain area needed water and other factors. This flexibility enhanced the overall results for the needs of the particular area at any given time.

RM: How long were the rows?

MW: They could be upwards of easily a half mile, I suppose. You're talking about 2,000 acres; that's quite a long distance. They would stretch, I'd say, equivalent to several football fields.

RM: Did a row go from cotton and then turn into alfalfa? Or how did that work?

MW: No, there would be an entire section of several acres of cotton that would be separate and segregated from the alfalfa. The alfalfa was not a row crop as such. It was just planted to be flooded. I seem to remember contours that would channel and direct the water in the fields.

RM: They would flood-irrigate the alfalfa?

MW: Yes. Well, both crops were watered. But the cotton was in rows that could be cultivated, whereas the alfalfa was basically like a gigantic lawn with the ground being level so that the harvesting and processing of that crop didn't entail rows or mounds as such.

RM: How far apart were the rows for the cotton?

MW: They were roughly two feet; there was a berm in between.

RM: Two feet from the top of one berm to the other? They were close together.

MW: Yes, somewhat. The cotton plant, as it grows and matures, becomes very leafy and kind of shrub-like, and it spreads out. As I remember it, the optimum is to have not so much height as bulk. The goal was to expedite as much as possible each plant's flower or bloom that would eventually mature into the boll.

RM: If there's that much distance between the top of one row and then next, then it fills in with foliage, doesn't it?

MW: Yes. The irrigation water furrow would maybe be roughly a foot, and the berm itself. The plants were probably more like at least two feet between. If you've ever driven around those areas, you've seen that they're very straight, very uniform. They're cropped pretty close together, not unlike corn.

RM: How far apart are the cotton plants?

MW: I'd say about eight inches in a row. I think the spacing was probably somewhere in the order of six to eight inches. During the spring season, field hands would help to space the plants to this interval by using hoes to "chop" the plants. This spacing process encouraged optimal growing conditions.

RM: And you had a machine that probably put the seed in the ground.

MW: Yes, we called it a planter. In the early days in Texas it was mounted on the rear of an H Farmall. The planter had a series of round galvanized kettles with the cottonseed that fed into metallic-type funnels and then down into disc harrow devices that would dredge out the dirt as it moved forward and the seed would be dropped into the furrows, and then a trailing harrow would close and cover them up.

RM: Did it just plant one seed and then another seed and then another seed, or . . . ?

MW: I believe the seeds were metered out. Theoretically, you had seeds every few inches.

RM: And did every seed germinate?

MW: I doubt it.

RM: Did they have to thin them?

MW: Yes. That is the chopping process I just referred to. When I was about eight years old, I remember a fun day that my dad and I had with his foreman on the south farm in Texas, a guy by the name of Mexico Gonzales. Dad had the old H Farmall configured for planting. It had a wooden gangplank on the rear by the galvanized kettles. I believe that there were four kettles that would feed in, so you'd plant basically four rows at a time. And of course, the cottonseed was in burlap sacks and you'd fill up those containers from the sacks. Then the driver, who would have been my dad or Mexico in that case, would be driving down the rows. The tractor tires were set so that they would be following in

the furrow that was not on top of the seed. These were tricycle-configured Farmalls. The two front wheels were together in a kind of V shape, or there would be a single one. Most of my dad's tractors had the dual fronts close together. Whatever the configuration, the wheel spacing was correct for the furrows.

On that particular day, I remember how fun it was to be on that gangplank. I'd monitor those kettles to make sure that the seed stayed kind of flat and equidistant and was metered down evenly and that none of them ran out; we'd pull over periodically to refill with seed. We planted that entire farm, about 200 acres. That is a very fond memory from around 1955 or 1956.

RM: Did your dad produce his own seed, or did he typically buy it?

MW: He purchased seed specific for his optimum growing circumstances, and his crops produced seed when ginned. That's a byproduct of the cotton gin and the ginning process. You know, Eli Whitney, back in the 1800s, made cotton a viable item. It was extremely expensive and only for the wealthy until he came along with his gin. His gin was basically a series of rotary saw blades set very close together. As they rotated and cotton was fed in, the saw blades would snag the cotton and peel it off and separate it from the seed and the seed would go one way, the cotton fiber another, for further processing. That's what revolutionized the cotton industry for the South. (That, of course, is oversimplified. The actual process is more complicated.)

RM: Where did your dad buy his seed for Pahrump operation?

MW: Probably most all of the farmers would have been connected with the same company where they were having their cotton ginned, Nevada Ginning. That seed, I believe, would have been further processed, maybe some with chemicals for cleaning, cooking, or processing and then resacked in the burlap sacks and labeled accordingly.

They would buy it through that conduit. I believe it was shipped into the valley and allocated accordingly to the farmers.

RM: Were they buying the seed off their own land?

MW: Not necessarily, no. The farm owners specified the grade of cotton they wanted to work with. I think in the Pahrump Valley most of those guys were going with the long-staple high-quality fiber that tended to be a higher-value crop. They would aim to get two bales or more to the acre off of it; that would have been their optimum goal.

RM: How much seed did it take for an acre?

MW: I don't really know the answer to that. You're going back to when I was pretty little and I wasn't paying that much attention. I think that something in the range of eight to 12 dry measure gallons of seed for the acre; that sounds familiar.

RM: Okay, now you've got the seed in the ground and you've got to keep watering it. Did you water it 24/7?

MW: In the growing season the irrigation is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week process for an operation that's optimally balanced between the amount of water that you have available vis-à-vis the amount of land and crop vis-à-vis the heat of the summer. You irrigate a section of land, and then of course there would be a few days before the next irrigating. You would send a cultivator down, a tractor that had an implement that would kind of break up the crust and till it, as it were. When watered, the sun and heat would tend to "bake" the surface.

RM: The dirt would crust when it dried?

MW: In a sense. Cultivating it would let in air and open it up to oxygenate it so that the next irrigation would be optimum for the plant's water utilization. So the cultivation and irrigation cycles worked in concert with each other.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RM: So now you've got your seedlings coming up. Do you have to start hoeing and all of that?

MW: Yes—first to optimize the ultimate plants spacing. I believe that was sequenced according to what type of weed problems you were having so you wouldn't be putting more labor into any area unless you absolutely had to. Under ideal conditions you put that off as long as possible. But at some point, if there were signs of Johnson grass taking hold—and if you had the crew available—you'd have people with hoes go up and down the rows chopping that Johnson grass. That would prevent it from taking root and hampering the growth of the crop. And the chopping that was necessary for optimum spacing—I mentioned that earlier.

The farmers in Texas and Nevada also had the option of using different types of herbicides to control the weeds, including Johnson grass. In West Texas they ended up having horrific problems with red spiders and boll weevils, which necessitated insecticides.

RM: What exactly is the red spider?

MW: My understanding is that it's almost a microscopic little creature, but it does enormous damage to the leaf and the plant. Lyle Christensen, I think, is the guy out in Pahrump who had an airplane for spraying. He was available for hire in the valley for crop dusting or crop spraying, depending on what problem or issue a farm might have.

RM: What's the difference?

MW: In spraying, the aircraft would have tanks or a tank that was plumbed to spray

nozzles along the underside of the wing, and the pilot would make a pass at very low altitude and the liquid spray would come out directly onto the crop. That was facilitated by a small propeller near the front of the fuselage that would spin. It was connected to a pump that was utilizing the forward motion to pump that liquid from the tank through those nozzles. Then the pilot had a control valve; as he completed his pass and pulled up, he'd shut off the spray. Usually, there would be a fellow on the ground who was a flagger, and he'd move over so many rows after each pass of the airplane so that the pilot would know where he sprayed or dusted.

After Dave Hibbert left Nevada Ginning he spent some time in Blythe, California, crop dusting and spraying at Sergeant's Field. I spent a few weeks with Dave in Blythe during the summer of 1963 working with him. I assisted with fueling, maintenance, flagging, and other activities. He also taught me how to prop-start the old N3N, which was a Stearman-type aircraft. It was very important, of course, when doing your downward motion of that prop that you keep going away from it. That was a lot of fun. Thanks to Dave and my dad, I was given some pretty heady responsibility at an early age because they could see that I was pretty clear on what was important to do or what not to do. I am so fortunate to have had those opportunities and such wonderful mentoring during those years.

RM: What were you spraying and what were you spraying for?

MW: I think the red spider and the boll weevils. In the early days in Texas, of course, they were using DDT. I remember during the summers in Pecos, it was not uncommon for trucks to spray DDT in the residential alleys to control various insects.

RM: Did they ever use it in Pahrump?

MW: I don't think so. By that time, DDT was probably being phased out.

RM: Of course. Now, can you describe crop dusting? You're spraying a powder in that case, aren't you?

MW: That's right. The bags of dust would be emptied into a hopper in the plane. In the case of the N3N that Dave Hibbert and I were working with, the pilot sat in the rear cockpit and the front cockpit had been configured as a storage or bin for the dust, the chemical that was being applied to the crop. I believe that calcium arsenate would have been used on the boll weevils. Anyway, there was an outlet under the fuselage that extended two or three feet in width. As the pilot made the pass, some kind of a valve would be opened and the substance would be facilitated by the forward motion of the aircraft and the prop wash to go down onto the crop foliage at whatever speed was most effective. It was fairly slow for an aircraft, maybe 40 or 50 miles an hour. The idea was to get as close as possible to make a nice application evenly for optimum results. It was a very expensive proposition when farms had problems with insects and parasites that would damage the crops. But at times there was little choice if you were going to successful in farming. You had to meet those challenges head on or you wouldn't be farming long.

RM: So you had to spray and dust in Pahrump.

MW: I think, generally speaking, it is accurate to say that most if not all of the farmers that were working with cotton had to use these methods at some point or other—the insects and other diseases could affect an entire region. But I do not remember those problems with insects and other plant disease issues being especially severe in the case of Pahrump.

RM: It's kind of weird to think about it—Pahrump's out in the middle of nowhere, yet these bugs are coming in.

MW: That's true. However, in the Pecos area earlier on, they didn't have these sorts of issues. But by the time I remember, in the early to mid-'60s, when I was going back to spend time with Frank Crews, their problem with insects was so severe—I remember this vividly—farmers were having to resort to wiring entire fields with circular purple luminescent lights that attracted bugs. At equidistant intervals in a field, they would have a 55-gallon oil drum probably filled with two to three feet of old engine oil or some other liquid that would kill the bugs when they fell into it. There were four circular bulbs, one on each side of these metal cubes about 18 inches on each side. There was a fan mounted on it and each was powered by electricity. When driving at night, it was common to see maybe several hundred acres filled with these purple lights. The insects would be enticed by this certain type of bulb to come to it, be sucked in by the fan, and fall into the substance, where they would die. The problems with insects in Pahrump never even approached that magnitude.

So in the latter stages of the Pecos farming era, that had to have been extremely expensive, just laying out all that wire. I'm talking about 110-volt current to electrify these units in order to kill those insects. They had an insect infestation that they were dealing with, and it was quite severe. They had to spray or dust several times each year and they were looking for any other way to kill the insects. I never saw anything like that before or since and I never saw anything like that in Pahrump. The bugs didn't get that bad there—not even close, fortunately.

RM: That must have been something. Now, when did you start cultivating in Pahrump?

MW: That would start early in the year. Just after the first of the year, after the holidays, it was time to be gearing up, getting that land all prepped for the coming crop year. There was a balance—landowners wanted to plant as early as possible to get a good head start

on the long growing season, but there could be a late freeze. A farmer didn't want to have his crop in and coming up nicely and suddenly have a cold snap that would wipe it out so he would have to start all over again.

RM: When did you put seed in the ground?

MW: That was pretty much in the mid-April period, as I recall, depending on the weather conditions. If there was a lot of rain or if it was very cold, it was necessary to tailor it to those conditions. But ideally, the sooner the better. The longer the growing season, the better the crop.

RM: When had you cleared the land to be ready for the new planting?

MW: The earlier, the better. That process would begin after all the cotton had been picked and removed from the fields. In the very latter part of the summer, the irrigation would be shut off and the plants would be allowed to die. I think part of the standard process for many years was to spray the crop and defoliate it to knock the leaves off so that it would expose the bolls and the fruits of the plant for harvesting. That allowed cleaner, more efficient machine harvesting. The Farmall cotton-pickers could be used two or three times over a period of weeks as different parts of everything cotton became ready for picking at different times. Lastly, the rood harvesters would be used to pick up and salvage the cotton lying on the ground.

RM: What happened to the plants after you'd picked the cotton?

MW: It seems as though they would be mowed down or they would go in and disc them up and plow them under. The stems and the residue went back into the dirt, where they would decompose and add to the fertilizer. I believe that the stalks of the previous year's crop were cut and plowed under several weeks prior to planting, which was during April, as I said.

RM: When did you defoliate?

MW: They would shut off the water late in the summer and stop irrigating the crops, so that would kind of signal the plants that it was time to go to sleep permanently. As things dried up and the crops began to die, the leaves would brown out and the bolls of cotton would be ready to start their process with Mother Nature—they would start opening up. At any rates, it seems as though the defoliating was well under way by mid or late September.

I'm not certain how much of a link there is between the defoliation of the crop and facilitating opening of the bolls. They're going to open up either way. But I think that the science of that industry by that time was well understood enough that they had ways to enhance that process and speed it along to maximize and enhance the yields.

RM: And when did you put the cotton-pickers in the field?

MW: I believe beginning in September, since the fields would be picked more than one time. As soon as it was clear visually that the bulk of the crop had fully ripened and opened up. We had the Farmall cotton-pickers that had been in use for a number of years. They were on an M tractor chassis. The M tractor is basically modified and configured to accommodate the machinery that was the cotton-picker apparatus. As I recall, it would be calculated so that each interval pass of the cotton-picker got as much as possible. However, a certain amount of the cotton would end up on the ground. And I guess the cotton tends to ripen in stages, starting near the bottom and working up towards the upper part of the plant over a period of weeks.

At some point some inventive soul came up with an idea for, I believe it was known as the rood harvester, which I mentioned earlier. It was a series of rubber belts that had cuts about every inch or so throughout the whole belt. There were main rollers

on the leading front, where the belt would be in contact with the ground. As each came around on the roller, a gap was open and when it shut it would pinch and pick cotton contacted on the ground. Then it would rotate back up and open again. This process collected this portion, which was trailered and ginned separately due to contaminants. It was possible to salvage a large percentage of what was lying on the ground. That cotton would have enough contaminant in it that it would be gauged as a lower-grade product, but it was better than leaving it to go to waste. The value of the salvaged ground residual cotton more than covered the expense of the roods. Dad was constantly looking at the bottom line: net profit.

RM: And when did they start picking the cotton, typically?

MW: Each year, the harvest or cotton-picking would start and gain momentum in September, October, and the late fall.

RM: Before Thanksgiving.

MW: Yes, I believe so.

RM: Did it take a long time or could the picker go through there pretty fast?

MW: Well, machines certainly were faster than hand-picking, for instance. When my dad started farming out in West Texas, the going rate for the folks who were picking cotton by hand was a penny a pound. It wasn't too many more years before that became less and less affordable. That technology began to be steadily improved by John Deere and International Harvester and one or two other manufacturers. As the years went by, the technology and machines became more cost-effective.

So the speed of the machine pickers was variable, depending upon the yield or density of the cotton in the rows. Early on, Pahrump Ranch had six well-used older Farmall cotton-pickers on hand and needing renovation by the summer of '61, after our

new shop building had been completed. We were all so proud of that new facility—it gave us a place finally for all of the equipment to be worked on under cover and on concrete with compressed air, electricity, and water available as needed. My dad's approach that year was to standardize the used equipment and then overhaul and upgrade it during the summer months. All the machines were systematically disassembled and my brother Rick and I were set up to work with Virgil Bateman and Alvaro Troncoso.

RM: Who was Alvaro Troncoso?

MW: Alvaro was an employee of Pahrump Ranch. He was a big, happy, friendly Hispanic fellow and he and I were great buddies. Whenever I came out to the ranch and saw Alvaro, I'd run over and hug him. Alvaro was very intelligent and had a lot of mechanical knowledge. He was Virgil's right-hand man in doing a lot of the mechanical repairs. So Virgil masterminded and coordinated the agenda for meeting a schedule to get all six of these cotton-pickers completely rebuilt stem to stern—the engines, radiators, electrical systems, the entire picker machines, were to be ready for the cotton harvest that fall.

The cotton-picker mechanisms were comprised of several hundred of what they called spindles that were gear-driven at the base. There were three sides of very sharp little teeth on them. Basically, the spinning spindles and the sharp teeth would be the primary instrument that would snag and pull the cotton away from its resting place on the plant. The spindles were about three inches in length, coming to a point, and they were mounted on bars; a gear at the top of each bar ran a shaft all the way to the bottom. Each of these spindles was mounted inside of what we called nuts and the spindles were all gear-driven. So when the gear at the top was turning, all of those spindles on that bar were turning, and each side of the cotton-picker had banks of bars with these spindles that

were constantly rotating. There were several bars that would be rotating with several hundred spindles in a continuous cycle. So the process extracted cotton from the plants and continuously moved it into the holding area on the machines.

The spindles would grab the cotton as they spun around, and there were also rubber doffer stands. They were circular and they had a series of notched-out, squared-out intervals where they would interact with the spindles and knock the cotton and leaves off so the cotton would be captured. A blower in the cotton-picker would help to collect the cotton, moving the fibers through the entire process. Water-moistening pads reduced the dust and fire hazard within this very vigorous ongoing mechanical process. It was complicated but efficient.

That summer the four of us, Virgil and Alvaro and my brother and I, were set up in kind of an assembly-line process. My brother and I were at a long bench at the end of the shop building closest to the ranch house, facing the road. Dad had given Rick a time book by which he was able to record and keep daily records of the hours that he and I actually worked.

By virtue of the fact that I was the youngest and the least focused, I was given a job that was important but redundant and something that I could do quite satisfactorily. It was a little bit monotonous but actually really fun. Looking back, there were several five-gallon buckets of these nut assemblies, hundreds and hundreds of them. Each nut was probably two to two-and-a-half inches long. It had a bolt configuration on the base and it was threaded so it would be unscrewed and screwed with a wrench. Inside the nut there were two bronze bushings. The one at the base was flared out and notched for lubrication. At the top portion there was a hollow bronze circular stem. My first job was to get a certain type of tool, put the nut in the press, and with this tool squeeze the old bushings

out into an empty five-gallon container down below. The discarded bushings would later be sold for scrap since the oil-impregnated bronze had a significant salvage value. The processed nut casings were inventoried into separate five-gallon containers.

After I had squeezed out hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of those older worn-out bushings, and the nuts themselves were now vacated, several boxes of these same bronze bushing components, but new, were made available to me. I had another tool that I would use to compress or squeeze-fit the base with the notched end. I would do several hundred of those, then I would rotate that back around and I had a different box with the bushing for the other end. I would insert that bushing into the nuts. During the various phases of this process, the numerous five-gallon containers were facilitated and kept carefully in the proper sequence.

After the new bushings were inserted, I'd rotate back around again, get the completed bushing with the new components squeezed in, and fit it in through the press in such a way that I would run a sizer down through it. That sizer would push all the way through it and size both of those precisely through the outer diameter of a new spindle so that the clearances were absolutely perfect. It was like a brand new component. It wasn't new, it had been rebuilt, but it was new spec. These finished and checked rebuilt nut components were then given to Virgil and Alvaro for the final rebuilding assemblies—the spindle bars I described earlier.

RM: So you guys refurbished or rebuilt those six pickers and then you used them the next season and all the seasons thereafter?

MW: Yes, sir. Of course, they were checked, serviced, and repaired as necessary each season.

RM: And it took six to do that thousand acres?

MW: Yes. The Pahrump Ranch was geared up on such a scale that it needed the six cotton-pickers to meet the timetables at hand and to keep the harvests in balance with the ginning schedule in relation with the other cotton farmers in the area. This is another example that I think highlights my dad's overall approach to farming. He was very careful about being cost-effective with just about everything that he did. Now, he did not bring that mentality home to us and burden us with trying to penny-pinch. But for example, on the ranch he was buying transport loads of diesel fuel from the Golden Bear oil refinery in Bakersfield. He also purchased his propane and anhydrous ammonia (NH_3) in large transport quantities in order to keep costs down.

I remember hearing of a gentleman-type farmer in the valley who tended to drive new Lincolns while my dad drove Chevies. (After the Pontiac and the Edsel, Dad started driving Chevies for his Las Vegas to Pahrump to Vegas commute.) As the story goes, the other fellow bought two brand-spanking new cotton-pickers while my dad bought six old ones and rebuilt them. Ultimately, this other guy had financial problems: His costs outstripped his revenues and he did not continue to farm. My dad was extremely mindful about being as cost-effective as possible and not wasting anything. He planned so that there was work for employees. Dad made every effort not to lay them off. If there was something that could be done to keep them employed, every effort was made to do so.

RM: Did he ever pick cotton for other people, given that he had so many pickers, or did every farmer have a picker? And if they didn't, what did a farmer do? Get somebody else to come in and do it?

MW: Well, I think that his equipment was pretty much staffed by his own personnel and serviced Pahrump Ranch property. I'm going to guess that the people who were farming cotton out there probably had their own pickers. Some of them may have only

had one. The number depended on the size of the operation. Perhaps there were some folks with machines who were available to do cotton harvesting on a custom basis.

Also, I would hasten to add that even though my dad may not have been doing custom work for anybody else or loaning his equipment out, he was always very generous if somebody had some kind of a problem or they needed a hand with the shop facility on the ranch or they needed to borrow something. Some of Dad's machines may well have been used on other farms.

Another example: A friend, Charles, was kind enough to relate this to me not long ago. He was living and working in the valley during those years as an independent well-driller and knew my dad pretty well. I mean, most everybody knew Walt by his first name. Charlie told me that back in those early days, once he was running low on fuel for his drilling rig. It was important for Charlie for his rig to continue to run; however, there would be no delivery of diesel to the valley for a few days so he was in a bit of a jam.

Well, my dad had four irrigation installations where he had 5,000-gallon diesel storage tanks, big yellow tanks. They were located at the No. 1, the No. 3, the No. 6, and the No. 10 irrigation wells. At the No. 1 well, the diesel line was connected to that engine, then it was also plumbed down to the No. 2 well about a quarter-mile distant. So that 5,000-gallon diesel tank supplied fuel to two engines 24 hours a day.

There was a way to access the fuel with a valve at the base of the tank and a hose for supplemental use. Charlie said to my dad one day, "Walt, I'm a little bit short here. I wonder if I could buy a couple of barrels of diesel from you."

He said that my dad said, "Oh, hell, Charlie, go ahead and help yourself," so Charlie filled up his two 55-gallon drums. He went back to my dad to pay him, and he told me that Dad said, "Oh, don't worry about it. You're fine." Charlie was pretty amazed

that my dad was not at all concerned about nickel-and-diming him. That was my dad's gesture of, "Hey, we're all out here fighting our own battles, and if I was in the same boat, I'm sure you'd help me out." That's the way he was toward everyone. It was a rugged frontier and everyone was working hard just to survive.

Some months later, a situation arose with the tail water pump down on the Mizpah. This unit was an engine with a centrifugal pump that would pump the water back up to the main irrigation ditch at the end of the rows being watered. There would be some surplus runoff water and it would be collected. As it turns out, in putting that system in my dad had purchased a load of several lengths of six-inch iron pipe that needed to stretch the better part of a half a mile or more from the tail water pump back up to the main irrigation ditch. Charlie and my dad bumped into each other one day and during the conversation, Charlie picked up on the fact that all this pipe was there and Walt needed somebody to seam it all together. He said, "Hey, I'll take care of that for you." And that's exactly what he did. He went ahead and he welded all of the joints connecting that pipe. That's how he did the payback. It was one of those things, you know, scratching each other's back. In this case, it turned out to be a very timely good deed since the job of welding all of that pipe together was very helpful for Dad. It was a big job requiring several hours.

That was something that Charlie shared with me. I really appreciated it because that was his way of saying, "Here's a side of your dad you may not have heard of." He felt that it was pretty unusual that anyone would be that trusting.

I think that the prevailing attitude toward my dad for most of the people in the valley was kind of along those lines. They saw him as a guy who was a straight shooter, always had a great sense of humor, was very focused on whatever he was doing, but

always was mindful of and knew people by the first name, always courteous. If somebody was in some kind of a plight or predicament, he wouldn't turn a deaf ear if he could possibly help out. He knew Charlie well enough to know that if he ran out of diesel while drilling a well, that's not a good thing at all. So he didn't want Charlie to worry about nickel-and-diming, paying him back: "Here, take it, and get back to what you're doing because that's important to you." Short, practical, to the point.

RM: That's very nice. Now, when the cotton-picker has picked the cotton and it goes into that kind of screened wagon, do you take it directly to the gin?

MW: Yes, although the time element could vary somewhat. The blower on the cotton-picker would direct the cotton into the hopper and it would fill up. There's a sheet metal top on each of the woven steel mesh baskets. There were empty cotton trailers nearby for the pickers to unload into when filled to capacity. In the old days in Texas the trailers were wooden four-wheel trailers with two-by-six wooden sides. In Pahrump, most of the farmers were using mesh metal trailers, where the cotton was exposed but it was not going to fall out or leak out. The trailers were pulled by a tractor or a truck with a towing hitch. They would be parked along the edges of the field at intervals that were pretty much calibrated for a certain number of passes with the cotton-pickers.

When a cotton-picker was ready to unload, it would come out of the field and go up next to a trailer. A hydraulic ram would tilt the hopper, and the sheet metal cover was hinged so that it would fall open on the top and the contents would spill into the trailer. Then the operator would reverse the sequence: the hatch would come down and the picker operator would go right back into the field and start picking again. At the peak of activity during the harvest, 24-hour operations were common.

RM: How much did a hopper hold?

MW: I think several cubic yards.

RM: Would that be a bale?

MW: I don't know. A bale of cotton is about 500 pounds. It took quite a bit of cotton to get to a pound. Those hoppers on the pickers were perhaps 1000 cubic feet. I think that might have been just short of a bale. If the picker hopper was filled to capacity after picking approximately one-half acre and the yield in that field was close to two bales to the acre, then each hopper may have held close to a bale. I should have paid closer attention!

CHAPTER TWELVE

RM: Did the gin have a big backlog? Did you make an appointment with the gin, or did you just take your wagon up there and get in line?

MW: Yes, there could be a backlog during the peak of the harvest season. Farmers and gin personnel would coordinate accordingly. Jacque Ruud was the brains in the administration building; it was near the main gin operations facility. The gin yard and certain areas were designated for trailers—the trailers were identified by the name of the farmer. Trailers full of cotton would be pulled over to the administration building. Outside there were scales and a concrete pad several feet in length and width. Cotton trailer loads would be pulled up onto the scales, where the weight of the cotton minus the weight of the trailer was calculated. So that particular load and the owner were identified, what day it came in and what time and all that.

Then that trailer would be parked in the yard so that it would be in line for being driven up under the side of the gin complex that had these huge suction ducts. I think they were four ducts, two and two. There was room, as I recall, for two trailers at a time. There would be one fellow on each of the flumes. The flumes had handles and they were accordionized. The worker would climb up in the trailer on top of the cotton and literally vacuum out the trailer. One or two guys would be working with each trailer, and when very busy, two trailers were being emptied at once.

As the cotton was processed, it eventually worked its way back through the labyrinth of the gin to the rear of the building, where a large rotating table with a press was located. It was a pneumatic or hydraulic mechanism, which would compress a given amount of processed cotton. The actual cotton bales would materialize during this

operation. In a continuous cycle, uncompressed quantities of product were fed into the compressing mechanism, resulting in several inches per cycle. Upon each compression cycle, the previous amount compressed was held in place by a series of latches. After several minutes and cycles, the bales would be at a standard approximately size and mass. Bales were said to be approximately 500 pounds on average and would measure about four-and-a-half feet in height and roughly two-and-a-half by three-and-a-half feet on the sides.

The cotton bales finally were secured and held together by at least six strands of a blue, extremely tough, tempered steel banding around the outside of the dark brown coarse cotton bagging that would enclose the cotton. The finished bales were then inventoried and placed in the areas of storage for most effective handling and shipping.

RM: Where were the bales shipped?

MW: I don't know the answer to that. Probably to buyers in California and Arizona.

RM: Did your dad own his own wagons, or were they owned by the cotton gin?

MW: Most of the farmers had their own trailers. The Pahrump Ranch, I know, had its own trailers. "Walt Williams" was printed in white letters on the lower corners. I remember that I enjoyed trailing those wagons back and forth between the ranch and the gin yard with my little tractor. It was a lot of fun at night because it was cool and the gin was all lit up. And the noise of that Climax engine during those busy nights really added to the excitement and atmosphere.

RM: Did the gin run 24/7?

MW: Yes, during the peak of the season when the farmers were all getting their cotton in; there was a lot of work to be done. I'm sure that the gin had a lot of that crop coming in all at once from all the farmers and each property owner was trying to maintain a

schedule for his own purposes.

RM: Do you have any figures on the top of your head of how many bales your dad's operation would have produced in any year?

MW: Well, I think that I mentioned the Elmer Bowman moment at the cafe, when my dad very casually commented that his crop that year had been on the order of 1,600 bales on 1,000 acres.

RM: Right. Do you have any idea what percentage of the valley's production your father's cotton would have been?

MW: I seem to remember that there were a certain number of acres of cotton allotment for the state of Nevada. Of that, perhaps most was given to southern Nevada and Pahrump. The Pahrump Ranch would have had a sizeable fraction of that total. I'm on thin ice here because again, I was pretty young. I believe that of the total production of cotton in the valley, the Pahrump Ranch was a third to a half of the total because most of the others were smaller farms. I think that the output from one farm to another would have varied depending on how much fertilizer they used and so forth. The more that was invested into a given acreage, theoretically, the more you'd get out of it. Maybe some of those guys were thinking, "I'm going to settle for a little less yield and not invest quite as much money up front." Certainly, many other variables could have been factors: soil quality, frequency of irrigation, weeds, insects, etc.

RM: For a typical farmer, other than your father, how many acres would they have in cotton? Was 200 acres reasonable for a big farm?

MW: I think 200 acres was certainly a respectable size. Ted Blosser, Bob Ruud, Tim Hafen, the Bowmans, and a host of other folks out there had to have acreages sizable enough to be economically viable. Folks couldn't live on five acres of yield. If the crop

was economically viable, it had to have enough of a yield for families to survive on.

RM: Where was your dad selling his alfalfa?

MW: Dad's alfalfa was sold in Seligman, Arizona, and in Los Angeles to Albers Milling, a division of Carnation, Inc. When he raised alfalfa, he did it the same way he did everything else. He really rolled up his sleeves and got with the program. He bought Peterbilt and White Freightliner tractors. They were what he alluded to as being single-screw, meaning not a dual-wheel setup but single drive. In other words, just the main drivers on the back, as opposed to having a dual differential; they only had one differential. They were configured to tow tandem aluminum bottom-drop hopper trailers. This was the most efficient configuration for the type of hauling that was predominant for the ranch agenda, the delivery of alfalfa cubes.

He was very proud of these trucks. The paint scheme was maroon with blue lettering on the sides, "Walt Williams Pahrump Ranch." And he was absolutely horrified to have paid the then staggering amount of $35,000 per truck, brand new. They had 335 Cummins engines, 13-speed road ranger transmissions, air conditioning units, and other amenities to enhance driver-operator comfort.

RM: Did they have sleepers?

MW: I don't remember them having sleepers as such, but they had an area in the back behind the front seats in which a person had room to crawl back and lie down. The alfalfa trailers were emptied by dumping onto a grid that they would be parked over. This system was paired up with the John Deere cuber that was newer cutting-edge technology. I think that my dad had the first one, if not the only one, in the Pahrump Valley. Instead of baling the hay, this cuber processed it. With the hot weather and plentiful irrigation and optimum conditions, the ranch could produce six to seven cuttings a year. It was said

that the first cutting wouldn't be as good as the subsequent cuttings nutritionally. When the alfalfa would reach a certain height, a swather would be used. The swather was similar to combine. It would cut it, and then the trailing end of the machine would windrow the alfalfa and have it all even and bunched up in nice long rows.

There would be a period of time that the windrows would be allowed to cure so that the moisture content would be optimal. And of course, unseasonable rain wasn't as much of a concern in Pahrump. In other climates, rain can be a problem. Anyway, when the windrows' moisture content was at an optimum, the cuber would go into the field. Its primary component was a large iron wheel with square openings around the outer edge. The cuber ingested the hay from the windrow, and it would be compressed and processed through this die wheel. There were several openings on the circumference of the wheel and it rotated slowly and the hay was compressed into cubes approximately an inch square by two to three inches long. A certain amount of moisture was utilized to minimize the dust residue within the cube. The cuber was powered by a 6V 71N Detroit diesel engine and was towed by a tractor, as I recall. The cuber could also be used in a stationary mode.

The advantage of this type of approach was that the end user didn't have to worry about a stray piece of baling wire or other contaminant that might injure their livestock. There also was a concentrated metric of the product in a much smaller volume for hauling. The trailers can haul a lot more of the same amount of product in a smaller volume. And it is easier to handle.

A large rectangular concrete slab was covered by a sheet metal roof open on all sides. The cubes were sheltered from the sunlight and other elements. This also allowed maximum access for storing after harvest and loading into the bottom-dump trailers for

transport. This storage-loading facility was located near the main irrigation ditch pools that were mentioned earlier, and close to the alfalfa fields. A new John Deere 4020 diesel tractor was purchased and Virgil improvised an additional expansion of the scoop on the front of it operated by a hydraulic lift. The operator could scoop up a large quantity of cubes, go over to the trailer, dump them, and load these trucks.

We had two drivers, Bill and "Acey." Bill, I think, was married to one of Virgil's daughters. These guys were also hard-working and good-humored and had great respect for my dad. We were all very proud of those trucks. Acey and Bill were excellent drivers. Anyway, the cubes were being trailered to two different destinations—as I said, one was the Carnation-Albers milling facility in the Los Angeles complex.

RM: Was that a dairy?

MW: No. I think that Carnation was processing these cubes for eventual shipment over to Japan. Albers Milling was one of his primary customers and some were to be blended and mixed into different feed products at that facility. The other primary customer was a purchaser in Seligman, Arizona, over the dam and down toward Winslow. I don't know what percentages went where, but those, as I recall, were his two main customers for the alfalfa cubes.

RM: When did he get the cuber and the trucks?

MW: I think it was around 1967.

RM: Before that, what was he doing with his alfalfa?

MW: Before that, Dad wasn't growing alfalfa. I think Walt's alfalfa program on Pahrump Ranch was some time subsequent to 1966. Prior to that there was the emphasis on fertilizing with NH_3, as discussed earlier. The acreage was phased into alfalfa in conjunction and in accordance with the cotton allotment apportioned to the Pahrump

Ranch. As I said, I believe that the Pahrump Valley had the bulk of the cotton allotment for Nevada and Pahrump Ranch had a large fraction of the cotton allotment for the valley.

RM: Do you know what Nevada's cotton allotment was?

MW: It seems to me that it was around 3,500 acres. That would have been very small by comparison to Texas or Alabama or other states in the Deep South with hundreds of thousands of acres of cotton grown in several regions.

RM: Where else in Nevada were they growing cotton besides Pahrump?

MW: I don't know where else they could grow it as well as in southern Nevada and Pahrump.

RM: Was the alfalfa operation profitable, as far as you know?

MW: From what I remember, Dad considered it to be a break-even endeavor in and of itself. The big pot of gold at the end of that rainbow was when an alfalfa field would be rotated after two or three years, back into cotton. By then, that ground had been all nitrogenized. Dad could expect it to have a bumper crop of cotton. But the alfalfa could carry itself along pretty nicely with all of the expenses covered, depending on the price that Walt was getting for the alfalfa and the yield and other factors.

RM: Was he growing anything else besides cotton and alfalfa?

MW: Not on a commercial basis. There was an area of five or six acres on the corner as you left the camp and started driving along the road into the first fields. These were available for the personnel in the camp to grow corn and different types of vegetables. They could be irrigated and those fellows grew some excellent corn as well as other vegetables. And I remember that the Mexicans would seed certain portions of the banks of the irrigation ditches with watermelon and cantaloupe. The natural seepage from the seams in the ditches would tend to moisturize the plants. The watermelons and

cantaloupes grew great since they had plenty of moisture and plenty of sunshine. When working in the field on a hot sunny day, and if you had a mind to, you could go over and break one of those melons open and eat the heart out of it and leave the rest for the birds. There was plenty for everyone. Those melons were so sweet, thanks to optimum soil chemistry and water.

However, the moisture was also conducive to the growth of weeds, and particularly tumbleweeds and Johnson grass. Eventually, during the growing season, there would be a rather abundant and prolific crop of tumbleweeds along the banks of the irrigation ditches for miles. So it was important to have weed control. That became another one of "young Mark's specialties" because it entailed the use of a tractor. Any type of work or activity that involved driving a tractor, I would enthusiastically volunteer to do; I really loved operating and being around machinery.

The first system, which I mastered easily, was when Virgil improvised a diesel spray setup that held two 55-gallon drums on the back end of an H Farmall, a tricycle-configured Farmall tractor. It had a rear power take-off shaft connected to a pump. The pump was plumbed into the barrels of diesel and there was a hose that was coiled on a couple of iron pegs on the back end of the apparatus. The length of rubber, oil-resistant hose line was about 35 feet in length, connecting to a squeeze valve and a long aluminum pipe, probably three-eighths or a half-inch in diameter. And on the end of it was a T boom with a pair of spray nozzles.

Dad's cost for diesel was around ten cents a gallon. I would drive out to the irrigation ditches that had weeds growing and the tractor engine would be fast idling with the PTO pump on after I got to my destination. The hose pressure would be adjusted to about 55 or 60 psi. Then I'd squeeze the valve handle and the diesel would spray out very

abundantly and saturate those tumbleweeds or Johnson grass or whatever was growing along the ditch banks on either side or both sides, as necessary, depending on how the weeds were growing, spotty or thick.

It was just a matter of minutes until that hot sun would be cooking those weeds and turning them deathly, sickly dark green. The tumbleweeds initially were kind of a light green and as soon as they were sprayed, they turned dark green. That same day, they would be starting to turn brown because they would be cooking in the sun. It was very effective. The EPA today would probably have huge issues with that approach to weed control. During those years, those concerns did not exist.

RM: How did you keep from hitting the watermelon?

MW: Well, if there were melons, I would try to carefully avoid spraying them. On the stretch that I was spraying on the Mizpah that particular summer, I don't remember there being any melons to speak of since it was isolated and a considerable distance from the main headquarters. And I don't remember there always being a whole lot of growth on the opposite side of the ditch. I tried to be careful so that very little spray would end up in the water. If it hit the water the spray would just dissipate so that by the time the water had gotten where it would be in contact with the crops, any contaminant from the diesel was minimal.

So that was one method of weed control on the Pahrump Ranch irrigation ditches. The other technique involved an H tractor towing a tandem trailer mounted with a 500-gallon propane tank. A 30 to 35-foot length of hose went to a similar type of squeeze valve and section of pipe having a burner with a pilot flame for intermittent bursts. There was the heat of the sun and intense flame—some distance from you, but still it was very hot. The blow torch-like flames were very effective for clearing out unwanted growth of

all types. Weed control systems, spray and flame, involved hot but satisfying effort.

RM: There was at least one summer where your dad used geese for the Johnson grass. Do you remember that?

MW: Yes. I remember seeing that system with the geese in the fields while the cotton crop was in the early stages of growth. The large white birds systematically would be used to clear and eat the Johnson grass while being rotated from one area to another. The Hispanic handlers, or herdsmen, were skilled in being able to control and monitor the flocks with impressive results. The birds were most active, eating the grass but not the young cotton during the daylight hours. During periods of darkness, the geese were contained in an illuminated area. A portable generator provided electricity for lighting in order to safeguard the geese from hungry coyotes. If one of those showed up as a "visitor," the fellows had .22s with which to dispatch the uninvited guests. In terms of effectiveness, the geese approach probably had mixed results.

RM: Why did they use geese as opposed to insecticides and spraying and dusting?

MW: Well, I believe that those substances were used at various times and over several years. I think on the one hand Dad had the impression that the birds were worth trying from a cost standpoint. In a sense, the geese were an experiment. I think that those birds were being used in other parts of the country and Walt was able to locate some of those people to find out what kind of results were being realized and who they were getting their geese from. So bottom line, the geese were purchased. They cost so much a head, and after they had served their purpose in the fields the flocks were resold. There may have, hopefully, been a profit. I don't know if the geese were profitable upon resale, but the main goal was to have those geese eliminate the Johnson grass. They wouldn't bother the cotton—the Johnson grass was their main staple. Quite simply, another idea, another

approach to weed control.

And I believe my dad was the person who first introduced that innovation of the geese to the Pahrump Valley. That was toward the end of his ownership in the ranch and lasted for perhaps a year or two.

RM: Did it have anything to do with the collapse of the Bracero program?

MW: It could have. I know that it was becoming increasingly difficult and expensive to continue the labor-intensive methods mentioned previously.

RM: That's kind of the end of my specific questions. Do you have any other things you'd like to talk about?

MW: Well, sure. You know, back in the late '50s or very early '60s, there was an incident that I recall as being rather unusual. There had been a big fire in the mountains up toward the Mount Charleston Range and several hundred acres had been burned severely. Not long after, there had been some heavy rainfall, enough to produce flash flooding.

One particular day in the late spring of 1959 or '60, this heavy rainfall flushed a lot of soil and ash residue from this forest fire across a sizable stretch of Highway 160 adjacent to the ranch near the corner of 372. Within a mile or so of 372, a significant layer of mud and ash, at least several hundred yards as a swath, had swept across the highway.

It was still quite wet and slimy in spots. My dad and I happened to be in Pahrump at the time and we started driving towards Vegas and came across a situation where a lady and her children had been driving in the same direction a few minutes earlier. Unfortunately, upon coming into contact with the slippery surface, the driver lost control of her vehicle. As a result, there were some injuries in the accident. Fortunately, the

injuries were not life-threatening and help within the valley soon arrived. Within a couple of days, the black muddy slime had been almost completely cleared from the road surface. Along the sides, however, I remember the desert sands being discolored along that stretch of highway for some time. One might say that had been a fluke of nature.

Another incident that I remember was when Dad and I were at the ranch one day in about the same time period, around 1959. One hot summer day, one of our ranch hands, one of the Braceros or other fellows who had been out in the fields working, probably chopping cotton, became deathly ill. He was in a great deal of pain and discomfort, all buckled over, and it seemed to everyone that this guy might be dying, he was in such agony. My dad and I put him in the back seat of the old propane-fueled '56 Pontiac and drove into Las Vegas to Southern Nevada Memorial Hospital on Charleston. We helped him inside and hospital personnel laid him on a gurney and took him into a room. Approximately an hour later, he walked out good as new.

What had happened with him was that he had physically run out of salt. When somebody says how evil salt is or how nasty or horrible, and that you don't need it, that's nonsense. If a person is out in the hot sun sweating a whole lot and they run out of salt, they basically shut down. Anyway, hospital personnel IV'ed him and also gave him salt tablets. As soon as that salt reached his system, it kind of re-activated him. Apparently, that was the only thing that was wrong with him. As an 11-year old, this guy in the back seat of Dad's car, moaning and groaning and writhing and looking like he was dying, made quite an impression on me. Then an hour later, we took him out of the hospital and it was like he had never been ill in the first place.

I have always remembered that, and something similar happened to me not long ago. I experienced sudden severe cramps in the back part of my right leg. I had been

outside working and sweating on a hot day and I remembered that incident from long ago so I quickly drank a couple of glasses of salty water and the cramps went away. A coincidence, perhaps, but the severe cramping in my leg did cease. I think that my system simply ran low on salt, also.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RM: Those are great stories. Now let's talk about your dad's role in getting power into Pahrump with Valley Electric.

MW: Oh, that was a major milestone for the valley. It was clear, I think, to most people, and certainly to Walt early on, that the sooner commercial power was provided to the valley, the better off the whole community would be. It would enhance the economic prospects for everyone. After all, in 1958 Pahrump was still very much a frontier community.

I don't know exactly when Dad began actively working on an electrification agenda for the valley. Probably within a year or two after arriving there, he was in contact with different sources. He probably went to Nevada Power in Las Vegas first to obtain information regarding agencies to contact. And wasn't that program from the '30s, the REA, ultimately involved?

RM: I think they were part of it.

MW: Well, thanks to my lovely wife, Sarah, and her computer skills, we have learned some of the specifics of electricity coming to Pahrump. It was, in fact, the farmers in the Pahrump and Amargosa valleys who initially organized and formed the Amargosa Valley Cooperative in 1963. The proposed service areas were expanded to a larger radius and, in April 1965, the combined entities were incorporated as the Valley Electric Association. The first board of directors numbered four and included Walter J. Williams and Elmer Bowman.

The original transmission line was rated at 138 kilovolts and ran mostly parallel along Highway 160 from the base of Mountain Springs near Mount Potosi. These

transmission lines were linked into the original VEA substation near the intersection of highways 160 and 372 on five acres of land deeded to Valley Electric from Walt and the Pahrump Ranch.

During the following years, electric power lines were installed, branching out to the various farms and businesses throughout the community. Among the initial recipients, of course, would have been the Pahrump Ranch headquarters, the gin complex, the corner cafe and filling station, all of which were located close to the newly completed substation.

In the arrangement with Valley Electric, the farmers, and certainly the Pahrump Ranch, all committed to convert a certain number of their irrigation pumps from diesel to electric power within a certain period of time. That would start making the line viable from the standpoint of electrical usage. The number of directors on the board of Valley Electric were stated not to exceed 15 or be fewer than three. I do not know the exact number of years that Dad served on the Valley Electric Board of Directors.

RM: Do you remember him interfacing with other people like Hank Records?

MW: Yes, that name is very familiar. I'm sure that I was introduced to many of those people as a youngster. They were always very pleasant but I didn't always pay close attention because I was so young. But I do remember Hank Records's name being mentioned frequently during those years, and he was certainly in our home in Las Vegas more than once.

RM: How long did it take the Pahrump Ranch to get converted to electricity after power became available?

MW: I believe that arrangement was for a certain number of pumps to be converted within a given period of time until a certain number was met. I don't know if, by the time

the ranch was sold, all of the ten irrigation pumps on the ranch had been converted. I do know that some of them had been because I was able to help my dad track down some used electric pumps and associated equipment in Lubbock, Texas, where I was attending school, as I mentioned earlier. Those were purchased and then trucked back to the ranch and installed, possibly by Ronnie Floyd. The shallower wells would have been preferable for initial conversions since they would have been the least expensive to convert and subsequently would operate on less electricity.

You know, Ron Floyd is still in Pahrump. He has played a large role in the history of the valley over the years. Ron is an in-law of Frank Woner's; his wife, Charlotte, is Frank's sister. I first met Ronnie Floyd when we were both pretty young. I believe that he was a well-driller and he is very cordial. Recently, he was very gracious in volunteering to me that when they first came into the valley, Dad suggested that they set up their trailer house on the ranch next to the road across from Frank Woner's house with water, septic, and power. He said that it was enormously helpful for him and his family during that period of time because it gave them a place to live and they weren't being charged for those services. Ron says that it helped him to get on his feet and get going in those early years when things were pretty tough. I really appreciated how gracious he was to volunteer all of this to me so many years later. I believe that Ronnie Floyd also worked with my dad on some of these wells with their electrification and mechanical conversions.

I have great appreciation for Ron and Charlotte Floyd. I don't get to see them very often, but I am aware of their successes in Pahrump with their endeavors like the hardware business; I think they owned the Ace Hardware franchise. They've also built a family enterprise in, I think, construction and excavation. They've done quite well;

they've worked hard. They're a major presence and a real credit to the valley. Ron and Charlotte's family has much to be proud of.

RM: What about putting in the telephone? What do you recall about that?

MW: Well, I believe that it was in that same time frame as the power line construction and utilized many of the same poles. The company providing service was Nevada Bell. I found the original telephone directory, which was one page, in my parents' memoirs. It was signed and autographed by several of the people who were in the valley at that time. Now it is part of the Pahrump Museum, where it is permanently displayed.

RM: That's wonderful.

MW: My parents kept it displayed in a gold frame with glass and it shows the telephone numbers of many of the folks that we've talked about today. The initial directory shows four digits for each subscriber. When a caller dialed, only four numbers were required for a local call during the early days of phone service instead of seven, as it is currently.

RM: And it was a dial phone, not an operator phone, wasn't it?

MW: I believe so, yes.

RM: Do you want to kind of switch back and talk about some of the names we have mentioned like Tim Hafen?

MW: Well, sure. Let me just say that from early on, I remember Tim Hafen as an all-around pleasant, very intelligent, soft-spoken man who was always very gracious and friendly to me as a child. Up to and including this day I have enormous respect for him. My dad always had high regard for Tim. I think that in different interactions during the farming years, they cooperated in certain activities. When the ranch was sold and farmers began to transition out of cotton, Tim and his wife, Jackie, became involved in the real estate brokerage business early on, and became extremely successful within that as well

as with their continuing agricultural activities. I believe that Tim has been in the valley since the early 1950s.

RM: He came in ’48 or something.

MW: Was it that long ago? Well anyway, by sheer intellect, hard work, and straight shooting he carved a name for himself. I playfully and good-naturedly allude to Tim Hafen as the “godfather” of the valley. He’s had such a huge presence and has been so instrumental in many of the major advances and improvements that occurred out there, including the four lanes that we now enjoy when we commute back and forth to Las Vegas. Tim, I believe, was the major spearhead of that being financed and completed.

RM: I think Tim is probably the senior male figure in the valley in terms of longevity since Button Ford’s passing. I don’t know of anybody who predates him there.

MW: And Tim’s in great shape. He’s in his office every day at the ranch and he’s still very active. He’s involved with a lot of projects. I think he still has a certain amount of farming that he does. I cannot say enough good about him—I have all kinds of respect and affection for the man. And I will forever appreciate the gracious eulogy that he presented at my dad’s memorial service in January 1994.

RM: How about Shorty Andrews?

MW: Oh, yes. Shorty and I became good pals not long after I moved out to the valley in 1958. Shorty had his property close to Highway 372 quite a ways below the ranch. I don’t remember exactly how I met Shorty. I believe that I was at the ranch one day and Virgil Bateman introduced us. His property, which covered several acres, ended up as being, for lack of a better word, sort of the valley’s wrecking yard. Over a period of many years, if a car broke down or was involved in an accident or was otherwise junked out, a lot of those cars ended up on his property. What really distinguished his property for me was that he

had dozens of cars out of the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s, and ’50s that were actually in pretty good shape; if they were still there today they’d be worth a lot of money. They had been stored out in that dry desert heat, so in those conditions they could last forever with minimal moisture for rusting.

One item he had that caught my eye rather quickly was a 1956 Cushman Motor Scooter. Before we moved to Nevada, I had gotten bitten by the Cushman Motor Scooter bug. Even though I was too young to ride one legally, Don Crossley, a friend of my brother Rick, had loaned me his Cushman from time to time and I had learned to ride it around. I could and did ride it as well as any 14-year old you could find, thanks to Don’s “training.”

RM: Imagine the lawsuit that could be filed against such people now if you’d have been hurt. It shows you how the world has changed.

MW: Yes. I’m just so thankful that I was there then. It was so wholesome and so innocent and so harmless. I think of the 1950 Chrysler Imperial that my mother gave me on my twelfth birthday that I was supposedly intended to just drive around the dirt roads on the farm; I was driving it up and down any road in the valley that I chose. I didn’t run into anybody, run over anyone, or have any accidents or anything. It was freedom that is unheard of today.

RM: They’d probably put your mother in jail today.

MW: And me, too. I’d be a juvenile delinquent.

RM: Is there anything more about Shorty that comes to mind?

MW: Yes. He was a short guy, kind of burly. A real toothy smile and just really nice. Everybody in that valley was so kind to me. I think a lot of it had to do with my dad and who he was. But Shorty and I had a mutual love of things mechanical that formed our

friendship.

RM: I think maybe they were just nice people, too. It was a nice environment.

MW: Yes, they are nice people and I had a hunger and a thirst for nice. I was pretty easy to get along with as a kid because I didn't have a chip on my shoulder. I wasn't puncturing tires and breaking windshields and causing problems. I was generally out there having a good time and anybody I met, in my mind I automatically knew that they were nice people.

RM: How about Bob and Jacque Ruud?

MW: Yep. I remember seeing Bob frequently at the ranch, talking with my dad. He and his family, I think, had been out there early on. During those early years, I believe that they lived in a trailer house, kind of bootstraps-type story. They worked very hard farming. Bob Ruud had a marine DI demeanor. He had a crew cut and he was very tan and muscular. He wore his sleeves rolled up. He drove, I think, a '55 Ford pickup, similar to Rusty Horgan's except it was a little older and ran on propane. He had two beautiful big black Doberman Pinschers that rode around with him in the back of his truck everywhere he went. Any time you saw Bob Ruud he always had a stogie, a cigar. He was a very masculine, good-looking, marine-type guy and friendly, a hard-worker. The kind of guy that is out there to provide for his family and to farm. I believe that their property was in the vicinity of Basin Road.

Bob and Jacque had a son, Ricky, and a daughter. Ricky and I became pretty close during that period of time. Their daughter's name was Joyce and I didn't know her too well; she was a few years younger than I and back then, eleven-year olds weren't supposed to like girls. Even though I did, I wasn't supposed to. Ricky and I would ride around on "Floyd," my Ford tractor; we had many hours of entertainment doing that.

Floyd was the predecessor to the modern-day four-wheeler.

Also, we would take our .22s and go out shooting. The section of the ranch close to those big pools had an area of a few acres that everybody alluded to as the bone yard. It was its own little microcosm of old farm equipment, old cars, and miscellaneous odds and ends of dilapidated vehicles that had been put out there and junked out. We could shoot holes in the fenders and the windows or whatever else because they were already wrecked. I was about 12 and Ricky would have been nine or ten. Can you fathom two young boys at that age with their .22s turned loose to go out shooting? We never hurt anybody. I had gotten my .22 for Christmas when I was 12 years old, a .22 Marlin. I still have it to this day. It's a lever-action Winchester-type .22.

Ricky and I haven't had a lot of communication over the last 50 years but I believe that he's still living in Pahrump. I hope that Ricky's memories of our adventures on the ranch are as pleasant for him as they are for me. We had a lot of fun.

RM: And then, what about Dave Hibbert?

MW: In 1959, Dave Hibbert became the first gin manager. He was hired by the company that owned the gin complex to come out and run it that first season. Dave's background was in California. When I met him he was probably in his late 20s and he and his family, as I said earlier, lived in a trailer home on the gin site that the company provided. He served the first year as chief mechanic and gin manager. As I told you earlier, Dave had extensive mechanical and aviation expertise and credentials, which served him well with the gin operations.

The fellow who came in subsequent to Dave Hibbert was George Slater. Dave became divorced at one point during that tenure but he remained a very close friend of our family's. Years later, after working in Central and South America he re-circulated

back to Las Vegas and became employed at the North Las Vegas Air Terminal as the lead mechanic on the first police helicopter in service in Clark County. Las Vegas P.D. wanted the best and David was the best.

So he would work by day and many nights, if not most nights. And he would spend time with my parents at our home as part of our family, hanging out. We were all very close. I spent a few weeks in 1963 working with Dave in Blythe, California, at Sergeant's field, as I mentioned earlier. I have very fond memories of that summer with him. We had a lot of fun working with airplanes and I learned a lot about agricultural aviation.

Dave was a good friend of our family until he passed away too young at some point in the '70s. His health may have been affected by the poisons and insecticides and chemicals that he was working with when spraying US stateside cotton and the crops in Central and South America. Dave also had a couple of fairly serious aircraft-related accidents, crashes, and had survived those. He was a very good-looking man and had a very contagious personality.

He was rather like a brother figure to me. As I said earlier, he was in our home the night that we got word that my brother had been killed; that's how close he was to all of us. He was also emotionally quite shaken by Rick's aircraft accident. With his aviation background, Dave could certainly relate closely to the dangers and hazards that were ever present.

RM: Do you remember anything else about George Slater?

MW: George, as I mentioned, was the follow-on manager of the gin after Dave Hibbert. He and his wife, Janet, had a son by the name of Mark. I didn't know Mark too well. I think initially they were housed on the gin site and then later on they had a residence

down off of Highway 372.

George Slater was not only the gin manager but he was also an aircraft pilot. Some time in the early ’60s my dad acquired a 182 Cessna, even though it would not have been practical to fly it himself because of his heart murmur. Dave Hibbert was a great pilot and George Slater was a good pilot, also. From time to time, Dad would need to go over to Kern County, California, by Bakersfield. He was doing a lot of business with the Golden Bear Oil Refinery, buying transport loads of petroleum products. George Slater would volunteer to fly us over there. It was good for George because that meant he could keep his flying skills honed and add to his pilot time. The same could, of course, be said for David and for Frank Woner. Walt was very generous with these guys flying his plane, and paid all related expenses.

The air strip that was constructed on the ranch served the whole valley; that’s where all aircraft flying into the valley could be tied down. I believe that this airstrip on the Pahrump Ranch served the community for several years. Its location was central to the intersections of highways 160 and 372. Folks flying into Pahrump were conveniently close to essential amenities. Local businesses and commerce benefited accordingly.

RM: That must have been fun. Now, do you want to talk about the first Harvest Festival?

MW: Okay! I think that the first Harvest Festival was held the same year that the new shop building was completed at the ranch. The festival was held, in any case, while the structure was still quite new. It was a major accomplishment to have that building completed because it greatly enhanced our ability to maintain our equipment. And while it was still new and fresh, my parents organized this event on behalf of the whole valley where refreshments—cans of beer, soda pop, large amounts of pinto beans, salad—were

made available. However, the main course was barbeque beef and pork Mexican style.

At the end of the building, not too far off the driveway on the ranch house side, two large pits were dug, probably six feet deep. They were filled with mesquite and set on fire; then the mesquite was allowed to burn down so there was a nice hot bed of coals in each one. The Mexicans who were involved wrapped several large portions of pork and beef in white sheets and burlap sacks and wet them down with water. I think there was a thin layer of dirt on top of the coals and then the meat bundles were layered there and covered up. It was a method that the Mexican cooks had learned and perfected in Mexico. Over a period of several hours the meat was cooking and once it was extracted and unwrapped it was just the tenderest, tastiest, most juicy meat—it was wonderful.

There was plenty for all who attended, including the folks that my parents invited to come from Las Vegas and other communities. Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson and his wife, Shirley, as well as other folks and their families. That was the first Harvest Festival and it grew from there to what it is today. There is an inscribed invitation from one of the very first festivals that I donated to Pahrump Museum that has an illustration of the entrance to the Pahrump Ranch and the shop building. The artwork and wording were very well done. My mother, Nancy, organized a major portion of the event preparations, including the invitations. Mom even arranged for musicians to perform; she was so good with orchestrating social events.

RM: Mexican music?

MW: Sure. I think there was all kinds of music, a mix of country/western and probably some Mexican music. It was really quite festive. I think that everyone had a great time.

RM: I've heard there were hundreds of people at the first one.

MW: I think it's safe to say perhaps 200 attended, maybe more. Of course, there was

plenty of parking space. And it lasted from mid-afternoon through 11:00 or 12:00 that night. People started leaving before that, but it was very well attended and was such a fun, rousing success that I believe it became a tradition from that point forward.

RM: I think it did. It was in September, wasn't it?

MW: You know, I think that for the first year it was late September, early October-ish because that one was toward the end of the harvest. The weather was still pleasant—it wasn't cold but it had certainly cooled off by that time. But I believe that one of the first festivals was held at the ranch, according to the invitation, on April 14th of that year.

RM: Any other recollections of the first Harvest Festival?

MW: No, only that it became a tradition that my parents initiated and that that's how and where it began. And I believe that Pahrump Ranch was the location for the festival for three years. Eventually, it was relocated to the new community building complex at Basin Road and Highway 160. I don't know of any other locations where it would have been held. I might mention that Walt did donate the five-acre site upon which the original community center building was completed in around 1965, I think. Anyway, the corrugated metal shop building at the ranch was where those events were first held. That building is the only remaining structure on the ranch that I've seen recently. I hope that it's still there.

RM: Who would own that now, I wonder?

MW: I've been trying to find that out; I'm not sure who to ask.

RM: I'd like to have a sculpture garden somewhere in Pahrump with sculptures of prominent figures in valley history.

MW: That would be wonderful. You wrote an excellent article proposing that.

RM: The ideal site, I think, would be the old Manse Spring because it's still flowing.

Gary Coleman has it, or takes care of it.

MW: That would be a great location if it could be made secure from vandalism. Vandalism is such a problem; it's a shame.

RM: Yes, that's certainly something to think about. Now, you mentioned an air strip. Do you want to talk some more about that?

MW: Certainly. That was a source of great pride for my dad. You've seen the photo of him standing next to his '64 copper-colored Chevy Impala on that air strip. His expression is such as to show the quality of something he was very proud of. I don't remember exactly what year it was, but it would have been in 1964 or 1965 and he made available that portion of land. It wasn't being farmed anyway; it was bare ground that lay between Highway 160 and the camp, as it were, in the corner near Highway 372 where the No. 1 irrigation and domestic wells were. That's where airplanes could be tied down. And from there, the runway continued parallel alongside Highway 160 for a considerable distance, with the camp area and fields on the opposite side.

Virgil Bateman, bless his heart, with his superb skills as an equipment operator utilized the Pahrump Ranch's No. 12 Caterpillar road grader. Virgil spent several hours in between his other duties blading and leveling all of that land for a distance parallel to the highway but far enough away from it so that it was easy for pilots to recognize. After it was all bladed and prepped to a certain level of smoothness and consistency, Walt found a source to truck out several thousand gallons of the type of oil that was applied to surface-coat it for dust suppression.

To my knowledge, that was basically the first airport, or runway, that was made available to the valley for anyone and everyone to use. From the air pilots could fly in and see the concentration of the complex—the gin, Leroy and Mary's corner, and the

ranch. I think eventually a windsock was located on it so that pilots wishing to land or take off would know which way the wind was blowing. Knowing the direction and approximate velocity of the wind is very helpful, especially so when the wind and temperatures cause the flying conditions to be even more treacherous, and particularly with medium to strong crosswinds.

RM: When did they build it?

MW: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I believe the runway was pretty much completed by mid-year 1965. Dad was driving a different Chevy in 1966.

RM: And whatever happened to the strip?

MW: As far as I know, it served the community until eventually Preferred Equities and their activities would have displaced it or another facility would have been constructed elsewhere. It was in use until the ranch was sold and for a period even after that. Ultimately, the caliber of the runway was such that even small to medium-sized twin-engine aircraft were able to comfortably do take-offs and landings.

RM: I've got another question for you. Roland Wiley and I got to be pretty good friends. He had a place outside Pahrump, Hidden Hills, and of course he was the Clark County District Attorney at one time. Tell me what you remember about him, even if your experiences with him were only in Vegas.

MW: Hmm, I must admit that I don't remember much about him to even comment on, other than the fact that he and my parents were pretty well acquainted.

RM: Because your dad lived very near him in that kind of circle.

MW: That's right. Dr. Chester Lockwood lived next door and Bill and Janie Green lived behind us. In the summer of '65, I helped my parents move from 920 Bonita to 1223 Park Circle. Roland Wiley lived on the corner right across from our home on

Westwood. Mr. Wiley and I would wave and say hi, you know, when he was in his yard and I drove past his home in my car. He came to some of my parents' get-togethers, but I really don't remember having any conversations one-on-one with him. I do remember Dad commenting about Roland from time to time, and Pop always spoke highly of him in every context.

RM: I interviewed Roland the first time on Park Circle, and I interviewed your dad there later. Okay, you said you wanted to talk about the propane tank fire.

MW: Oh, yes. Well, as I've said previously, when we first came to the valley there was no electrical service. The primary source of fuel for most of the equipment on the Pahrump Ranch in the way of tractors and rolling stock and pickups—even my dad's '56 Pontiac, his '59 Edsel later on, and then his '61 Ford pick-up—all were converted to run on propane. But propane also supplied the fuel for the homes for wintertime heating, cooking, and for the propane refrigerators because electricity was not available 24 hours a day.

So on the ranch, offset from the old Pahrump Store and the generator complex, probably 50 yards behind the bunkhouse, was an approximately 8,000-gallon propane storage tank that was in place when we moved to the Pahrump Ranch. It was plumbed in through all of the homes and the bunkhouse. It was also set up to provide convenient access for filling smaller propane tanks on the vehicles.

In those days the cost of propane was very low and the concern about codes and safety regulations was almost nonexistent. And in remote areas, both in west Texas and southern Nevada, there were circumstances where somewhat risky procedures were practiced. In these instances, with my father's operations in both states, there was no propane transfer pump available for daily fueling purposes. In which case, propane vapor

would be bled, or released, from above the internal liquid level of the tank being filled. The vapor being released reduced the pressure of the tank being filled, allowing the propane liquid to flow into the vehicle tank. The pressure differential was the key in the transfer of the liquid propane from the larger storage tank into the smaller propane tank(s) on the vehicles or tractors.

However, as I've said, this was accomplished by the necessary release of the flammable vapor into the air in the absence of a transfer pump. Okay, certainly not a perfect system, but it worked. And employees at the ranch understood the imperative: No smoking or open flames of any kind in or around the propane-fueling areas at any time, period!

Now, under ideal circumstances, a propane transfer pump would utilize two hoses. The larger hose would be the liquid line and there was a smaller vapor return line. The transfer pump would facilitate the tank being filled and the propane vapor would be returned to the mother tank. However, when no transfer pump was available, a brass coupling with an extended three-inch opening was utilized to bleed the vapor from the tank being filled. It was threaded so that when it was screwed on beyond a certain point, it would activate or press into a plunger valve. As the threaded portion of the coupling was tightened or turned clockwise, the tank vapor return valve would open and the propane vapor would be released into the atmosphere. I remember that in Texas as a little kid, it was fun to put your hands in front of it and smell it. (I always enjoyed the smell of raw propane). And when the smaller tank was filled to capacity, the coupling was simply removed by unscrewing it counter-clockwise.

RM: Would a lot go out as vapor?

MW: You know, I'm not sure exactly how much, but it was quite a bit of fuel.

Releasing all of that vapor might have expended the better part of a gallon or so of propane by the time that the 30- or 40-gallon tank on the tractor or truck was filled. And keep in mind, if a gallon of propane was expended in this wasteful fueling process, in those years propane was very cheap; only about ten cents a gallon. The point is, as harmless as it may have seemed, there could not be anything flammable around that fueling area at all—no flame, no cigarettes, no lighters—because of the gas.

Anyway, not long after we moved to the ranch the 8,000-gallon propane tank was modified to have two plumbed-in filling sites with railroad ties in the ground and the lines coming up with the hose coil. Both of those hoses had valves and were liquid lines only. And there were the two locations where two tractors could pull up simultaneously and fill with propane. I believe that these fueling sites were in line with and parallel to the large mother tank. The larger liquid propane line came out at the bottom of that end of the 8,000-gallon mother tank and was routed underground to both fueling sites.

So at the end of the work day, when the tractor drivers on the M and H Farmalls would come in from the fields, they would routinely go to this location and fill up their tractors with fuel. That way, the next work day early in the morning, fueling and servicing would already be completed and the drivers could just start their engines and go back out to the fields.

On this particular day, it just happened that I was out at the ranch with my dad—maybe a weekend or a weekday, I'm not sure, but I do think that it was some time in the late summer, maybe August, because Dad still had his '56 Pontiac that ran on propane. He owned that car when we moved from Texas and had driven it probably a year longer before he traded it for the '59 Edsel. By then, that old Pontiac had close to 150,000 miles on it. Well, about midmorning, Dad and I and Virgil Bateman were down at the far end of

the ranch on the Mizpah at the No. 10 well, working on the Cummings 220 diesel engine. That pump engine had a gangplank on each side of it and I don't remember exactly what repairs were being done but I was there with Dad and Virgil, up on that engine's gangplank.

Suddenly, one of our farm trucks came roaring up the gravel road towards us and the Mexican driver jumped out waving his arms, talking quickly, pointing. I did not know what he saying in Spanish, but basically he was saying that there was a fire at the main camp and that it was a serious one. I was facing my dad on one side of the Cummings engine and he was looking down at an angle to this fellow who had raced up and was talking. And I remember this so vividly. I don't know why—I remember all of a sudden I could tell by his eye movements and the way he kind of tipped his head in that direction that he had heard something. Later, he would say to me that he had heard an explosion.

This was all very dramatic and exciting to me at that age. [Laughs] I think that my dad thought, "Well, whatever happened another couple of minutes isn't going to make any difference," so he stayed behind momentarily. I jumped off the gangplank and ran over to his car and raced back to the camp, which was two or three miles away.

RM: How was he going to get up there then?

MW: You know, I didn't even think about that; I was just off and running. I roared back to the camp and drove up in front of the ranch house and parked the car under the old cottonwood tree and got out. (I was only about 11 years old by that time.) Anyway, I got out of the car and turned around facing the Pahrump Store—the new shop building was had not been built at that point. The bunkhouse was to my left and there were a number of large cottonwood trees in the camp that had been there for years. This was in the late summer so things were pretty dry. The first thing that I noticed was a bluish smoky haze

hanging in the air. There was no wind; there was just kind of a pall hanging in the air. And there was a smell that smelled like leaves burning. In fact, the next thing I noticed was that some of the leaves of the cottonwood trees were actually burning slowly; they had been singed. These trees were in the vicinity of the old Pahrump Store—they probably had been planted there for shade years earlier, and those trees likely were a good 30 to 50 yards from the propane tank that used to be there.

As I walked over to that area, the spectacle that first met my eyes was the charred corpses of the two tractors parked there that had been fueling up. And there were two large concrete cradles upon which the 8,000-gallon tank had once rested. There was a large mass of crumpled metal in between those two concrete cradles that had been a portion of the lower half of the tank that used to be there. The now rust-colored twisted remains were still hot from the fire and resulting explosion.

Taking a closer look, I realized that the rest of the mother tank that had been fueling the tractors wasn't there anymore. After I looked around a bit, it became clear that when the fellows were filling the tractors and bleeding the vapor off of the tanks to fill them, there was a pall of propane vapor hanging in the air. Probably there was a spark somewhere, an ignition source. There was a flash and as soon as that initial burst of flame occurred, these guys hauled ass. They didn't hang around. Perhaps one of the drivers had been dusting off his clothing and a small static electrical spark was the culprit, or a very hot engine exhaust manifold or other incidental spark. I don't know that we ever knew for sure.

RM: It's a wonder they weren't killed.

MW: That's for sure. I think that they were singed, but not injured seriously. If they'd been standing in front of that vapor release outlet, they would have been seriously

incinerated, but they weren't, fortunately. The tanks and the tractors had safety pop-off valves and as soon as they were over-pressurized, those caught fire. The main 8,000-gallon tank had been filled up only a few days earlier so it was almost full. It took a few minutes for all of this to happen but when the pressure in the storage tank reached its breaking point, perhaps 350 psi, it exploded.

At that point, additional physics in the form of kinetic energy came into play with some interesting and remarkable results. There were two silos on the Highway 372 end of the camp, off and to the backside of the old store. They were wooden and, during those years, painted silver. (Recently, both silos and the original Pahrump store have been relocated and are now permanently displayed at the Pahrump Valley Museum.) One end of the tank had blown off and had flown probably the better part of 60 or 70 yards. That was a very heavy piece of metal—circular, probably three-eights gauge, maybe five or six feet in diameter. The end of that had impacted against the side of one silo and was just leaning on it, resting there.

And when the remaining liquid propane whooshed out of the rest of the tank under great pressure, the momentum of the fuel and the ignition literally "airborned" it probably the better part of a quarter of a mile to where it landed. The bottom portion had crumpled but most of the tank was still intact; and what fuel remained launched it skyward. As the burning propane all whooshed, the result was quite a spectacle. I don't think that it flew like a rocket with a continuous trail; I think it was more like being shot out of a cannon, and it landed a considerable distance away in the open field.

I believe that this was the second summer that my parents owned the ranch in Pahrump. Fortunately, my dad had retained the 10,000-gallon propane tank that had been on the north farm in Texas from the sale of that farm. And a week or two earlier it had

been trucked up to the ranch because he needed additional propane storage capacity. It had been put in place on its own concrete cradles a few feet away from the existing tank, but as yet it had not been plumbed in or filled up. It was sitting there empty so in all of this carnage it had been totally undamaged.

So that was the good news: (a) nobody got hurt; and (b) the equipment that was damaged was expendable. I mean, it could be rebuilt. And (c) the other tank was already there. It would have taken days to locate and install another tank. When the propane source was suddenly gone, all of the refrigerators and appliances in the camp were no longer operable. All of the residents' food in the refrigerators would have been wasted. And all of the tractors and other vehicles and equipment that ran on propane on the ranch would have been immobilized. It was potentially a crippling situation and a rapid response for repairs was vital.

Lyle Gunderson was the general manager for Petrolane, which was the primary propane dealership on North Main in Las Vegas. I knew him pretty well because we were in and out of the Petrolane complex quite a bit. Dad contacted him and Lyle responded to the situation on the ranch the next day after the fire. He and two or three of his technicians brought all of the components that were needed complete repairs and plumb in the 10,000-gallon empty tank.

In addition, the refueling facility was completely reconfigured. A new creosoted railroad tie was relocated a safe distance from the main tank. On its top was firmly attached a steel quarter-inch, 18-inch square plate on which was bolted a Briggs and Stratton propane-powered transfer pump that would run off the vapor of the propane system to which it was connected. The system now had a liquid line and a vapor return line. If the fueling facility had been set up like this previously, the chances of having a

fire would have been less likely. However, there are always hazards present any time flammable liquids and vapors are in use.

Well, the following day a transport load of propane arrived from Vegas. The big tank from Texas was filled and we were back in business. The residents relit the pilot lights on their hot water heaters, kitchen ranges, and refrigerators. Probably nobody even lost any food in the time that it took for repairs, which was quite fortunate. There were no fire departments involved, no EPA, no OSHA; it was so simple. If a thing like that were to happen today, there would have been a massive federal and state response.

RM: Well, don't you think rightly so? I mean, what if you've got a next-door neighbor who's got a 10,000-gallon tank on his acre?

MW: Well, of course. We were just so fortunate with that event so many years ago.

RM: It's just a different world.

MW: It is. And in this case it was an isolated town in an isolated area. If there had been injuries or deaths it would have been a different story, of course. But as it turned out, none of these official agencies either existed or were called in to be involved, so the repairs were not hindered. The components were quickly patched up and things were back on line.

RM: There are no pictures of that, are there?

MW: Not that I know of; I wish there were. Only in my mind; it's still so vivid.

RM: Now, you mentioned a Christmas party in Pahrump.

MW: Well, it wasn't a party as such. It was just that a day or two before Christmas, we would get into the pickup and load it up with goodies and drive to the ranch. The folks within the camp may have purchased holiday treats on their own but, as I remember it, we just took those things out to distribute them to our employees at the ranch. Everybody

had a couple of days during Christmas and New Years to kind of relax and take some time off and be with their families.

RM: Another thing you mentioned was cows on the road. That was a huge hazard throughout Nevada, like up out of Tonopah.

MW: Oh! [Chuckles] This would have been about that same time period, ’58 or ’59.

RM: Did you guys hit a cow? Is that it?

MW: Not quite! We certainly could have. Again, I happened to be out at the ranch with my dad. That evening, we were driving the ’58 GMC back from the ranch to town. We had come down the steep side, the Las Vegas side, of the Mountain Springs summit. The highway had been newly paved in 1956. From Blue Diamond out to Pahrump it was nice and smooth and uniform. But as soon as it spliced into that old Blue Diamond pavement—if you’ve ever been out to Sandy Valley from Goodsprings, you know how that is; it’s really rough and kind of narrow. That’s how the Blue Diamond turn-off onto the old Highway 95 was from that point. Not quite as many dips, but it was pretty rough. There was lot of rock exposed in the pavement surface. That truck rode rough and the road was narrow and there were a couple of fairly abrupt steep knolls.

Off to the side of the most abrupt of the two hills, or knolls, was a fresh water source. It was made of concrete, like a cistern, and apparently served an important purpose. There was a water line coming from Arden out to Blue Diamond bringing fresh water to that location, which had also a cottonwood tree and scrub vegetation around it. The knoll was more gradual on the side coming down towards Vegas. When driving over the knoll, there was an abrupt steep drop down until it flattened out at the bottom. That particular knoll is not there anymore—in recent years, that portion of the road has been greatly improved.

But in those days, when driving fast towards Vegas, there was no way to know what was on the other side. So coming down the mountain that night, my dad was driving. It was very dark, we were hungry, and we were going home and just talking like we always did. We were probably going the better part of 75 or 80 miles an hour when we come over the knoll and the headlights lit up the other side. To our great surprise, there were a number of Herefords scattered all over at the base of the knoll off to either side and on the pavement. During the next few moments, I was given an actual thrilling demonstration of a topic that Pop had mentioned to me many times: the unexpected panic stop. He had instantly thrust his right arm across my chest.

RM: Of course, there were no seatbelts in those days.

MW: That's right. And simultaneously, he was steering aggressively with his left hand and breaking hard, intermittently. He and I had talked about that also. When just reaching the point of locking up the wheels, ease up and brake again, fast. The intermittent braking maximizes slowing and stopping efficiency because it allows the brakes cool a little bit. So he was breaking intermittently, hard, and finding a path and he missed every one of those cattle. And he did it one-handed. It didn't take long; it happened in a matter of moments, but it seemed as though everything was in slow motion.

What I remember most of all is not only was he so darn skillful and missed them all so cleanly, but that I wasn't in the least bit afraid. I knew that we were going to be okay. It was like a thrilling ride at the carnival. Afterwards, my dad later explained his arm across my chest. He said, "I wanted to make sure that you would not be thrown about inside the vehicle; you might have hit your head on something. What I wanted to do was to stabilize you so that you wouldn't be thrown around inside the cab." He knew that the violent gyrations that we were going through could have injured me. He didn't have to

worry about that because I was pretty well clamped to the armrest. I have to confess, looking back, that the actual experience was quite enjoyable and is quite a fun memory. After it was all over, we looked at each other and were laughing about it. It was a fabulous exhibition of driving; my dad was a superb driver. That night, we made it back home, safe and sound as always. I don't know that Mom ever heard that story.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RM: What a memory. Now, what did your dad do after he sold the ranch?

MW: Well, I'm going to refer back to the tragedy of my brother being killed just at that point in time. Then there was a period of flux or regrouping, emotionally, for my parents. My dad ultimately formed a company to use as a vehicle for buying and selling and developing real estate within the Las Vegas Valley as well as in other areas.

Within a year or two he had located property in Wyoming. It was approximately 550 acres in the Thane and Afton, Wyoming, area very close to Yellowstone. Back then that area wasn't developed; now it's quite well-known. His plan was to subdivide the land into smaller particles. Jack Leavitt may have been slightly involved with that but there was a fellow named Bill Castle who was a real estate person with knowledge of subdivisions. He was going to work with my dad in partitioning the property and coordinating with the county and the state on subdividing that into smaller parcels.

I believe that at a certain point in that process, and for his own reasons, my dad decided to terminate the project. He ended up selling the property to the Stewart brothers in Las Vegas. The Stewart brothers, I think, were in the concrete business in those days. They had very deep pockets and were able to proceed with their agenda in Wyoming.

By this time, after my brother's passing, my parents were looking to the future and getting on with their lives. My mother said, "Walter, if you're going to have property outside of Nevada, why don't we purchase a place in Oregon to go to?" This came about thanks to their friends, Mo (Maurice) and Mary Lee Winter. Mo was a musician on the Strip and belonged to the musician's union. He had traveled and performed with other musicians around the country as a young man. He was a consummate musician, a

trombone player. Mo, Marylee, and their two sons eventually settled in Las Vegas. During those "golden years," each of the hotels had their own orchestras and the musicians had their own Musician's Union building on Harmon. Times were good in Las Vegas.

Well, my parents met Mo and Mary Lee a few weeks after moving to Vegas in 1958 and they became very good friends. A lot of the fun and enjoyment that my parents had was with Mo and Mary Lee because, during those early years, they could go almost carte blanche to any place on the Strip with Mo's connections and have access to a lot of wonderful entertainment. In those days, Vegas was a lot smaller, a lot more intimate. Those were the years before Howard Hughes became a major influence.

Anyway, Mo had grown up in a little town in Oregon by the name of Silverton. Over a period of several years, he had shared with my mother many of his memories of Silverton. As a child, he had picked berries and didn't want to pick berries all his life so he learned how to play the trombone quite well and he and his family had ended up in Las Vegas. The memories of Oregon that he had described to my mother intrigued her, and she ultimately decided she wanted to own some property in Silverton. So Mom and Dad drove to Oregon and eventually purchased the farm where we now live. Mom wanted a creek, and it does have a "Silver Creek" running through it.

At the time that they bought the Oregon farm, I was living and working in Australia. I had worked with the Las Vegas Country Club golf course for a period of time after I graduated from Texas Tech and had saved my money. In October of '71, I boarded the *Orianna* in Los Angeles and sailed over—it took about three weeks—through Hawaii and Fiji and Auckland, New Zealand. In the fall of '72, my parents had opened escrow on the farm in Oregon—40 acres with a little river running behind it. It was my mother's

Oregon hideaway where she could go and vacation and fish and relax. Mother and Mo Winter really enjoyed this outcome of their many conversations.

My parents had gone to New Zealand in December ’72, and when I came back to Vegas in January of ’73, they had stayed there for a few weeks. I had gone back to school at UNLV and was taking a semester load of psychology courses to augment my marketing degree. My parents returned to Las Vegas and one day in late spring of ’73, April or May, my mother cornered me in the downstairs bedroom, and said, “You know, I talked about that small farm in Oregon that I have. Well, I’m in somewhat of a dilemma. You see, I have a home here and I have a house up there. I can’t be in two places at once. What are you doing? What are your plans?”

I said, “I’m going to school and I don’t know. I don’t really have anything major; why?”

She said, “I wonder if you’d be interested in going up there and commandeering that situation for me because I need somebody up there to take care of it and work it.”

I said, “Gee, Mom, I don’t know. I’ve never been to Oregon but I hear that it rains up there a lot.”

She said, “Well! I’d really appreciate it if you’d help me out with this one!”

I was a little taken aback, but said, “Well, okay.” Because I didn’t have any big burning agenda—and that’s how I ended up in Oregon. A lot of people ask me how I ended up there from here, and that’s how. My parents had presented a very generous offer that I could not refuse.

RM: And then you got into the real estate business up there.

MW: Yes. The fellow that they had purchased the farm through was Elmer Valkemaar. He had been an engineer for General Dynamics in Los Angeles when the bottom fell out

of the defense industry. He had become unemployed and relocated his family in Silverton, Oregon. Elmer then obtained his real estate license. He was very good at math and he had a great personality. He and my parents clicked. They purchased the farm through him as an agent, and one or two other properties, and that melded their relationship. They saw him as being the kind of guy that I would probably get along with pretty well.

My dad said, "When you go up there, you can get your real estate license and go to work with Elmer." He had been encouraging me in that direction ever since he sold the ranch because he saw a lot more potential in real estate than in agriculture by that point. He felt that my fortunes would be better served pursuing that course, especially since I had graduated from Texas Tech with an MBA in marketing.

So that's exactly what I did. My mother still had her '65 Oldsmobile that Dad purchased new during Christmas of 1964. We loaded a U-Haul trailer with some older furniture from my parents' Las Vegas house. And they set up a checking account from the bank in Las Vegas with checks specific to the Oregon property. In June of 1973, I pulled the trailer up there, met and got to know Elmer, and spent that summer working and shaping up Mom's farm. In August, I enrolled in real estate school. I studied Oregon real estate principles and law taught by Norman F. Webb, the premier real estate attorney in the state of Oregon. Happily, I passed the exam in November of '73.

RM: When did your dad pass on?

MW: It was New Year's Eve of 1993. He was pushing 78.

RM: And what about your mother?

MW: We lost my mother the week of Christmas of '84 from cancer; her mother had contracted cancer at the age of 48. There had been signs of it late in '83 and through

those months, Mom and Dad had gone back and forth to Scripps in La Jolla for her treatments. The thing that I'm very thankful for is that my sons were born before she died. We had been living in Vegas since early 1981. It is so fortunate that Mom and Dad and our boys had those years together; so fortunate.

RM: Who did you marry?

MW: I married a girl named Jackie. Actually, we were married in Gabbs, Nevada. The fellow who was in charge of the music department at Bishop Gorman High School—he was also the French instructor—was a priest by the name of Brother Joseph Drolet. Brother Drolet had been a very good friend to me during my freshman and sophomore years at Gorman. He was a wonderful teacher, stern but fair and caring. He organized the marching band at Gorman and encouraged me to get involved. I participated in the percussion department and I learned how to play a snare drum. Brother Drolet was such a wonderful influence and I had become very fond of him. So years later, when he was transferred to a small parish in Gabbs, Nevada, I thought it would be kind of neat to be married by him and that's what we did. It was a lovely ceremony with Mom and Dad and a handful of friends attending.

RM: And then, you had your children at the farm?

MW: Rik was born in the upstairs bedroom of the farm. When he was about a year old, in '80, we were so tired of the Oregon rain; we thought we needed a vacation. I had purchased a Silverado pickup and a 30-foot Fireball trailer and we drove to Vegas. We lived behind the Hacienda Hotel in the RV park for about six months until we found a home that was located about a mile from my parents'. It was a nice older three bedroom located at 1301 Barnard Drive.

I went to work for Lucky 7 Limousine because that was a business that allowed

me to go randomly back and forth to Oregon, where we owned rentals; I had also been involved in a subdivision up there. So at the drop of a hat I could go up there and put out fires and come back and not be fired or laid off. It was a commission-type job, commission and tips. I worked there for five years and our younger son, Lorin, was born at home, 1301 Barnard Drive, in June of '81, just a couple of months after I went to work for Lucky 7. Leading up to this, we had no inkling that just in a few short years we would lose my mother. I'm so thankful that we came back and that my parents, and my mother particularly, were able to know and be with their grandchildren, and they with their grandparents.

I'd like to say thank you, Dr. McCracken. I have truly enjoyed this experience with you. Now, of course, many years have passed. In the early '90s, Jackie and I went our separate ways. It was an amicable parting and I am pleased to say that we are still good friends and that she has done quite well and is very happy. I am so very fortunate to have married Sarah Jane and we have been together now for more than 20 years. Rik is an astrophysicist; Lorin builds luxury homes in Hawaii. We still live at Mom's farm in Oregon and the Amargosa land that Dad homesteaded in the 1960s is still in our family's ownership. I think that Walt and Nancy would be very pleased; we are so blessed as a family.

RM: I'm sure they would be pleased. Well, we've covered a lot of territory. Thanks so much for sharing your memories and stories with me.