

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bruce McElya recounts his first visit to Grand Canyon on his way to working on the Alaska Pipeline, his years as a river guide in the 1980's, conversations with Georgie White, and taking large format cameras on ten solo river trips through Grand Canyon. This is Part Two of a seven part interview.

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TM: Today is Tuesday, May 14th, 2019. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Bruce. How are you today?

BM: Good morning, Tom.

TM: This is Part Two of an oral history interview with you, Bruce, may we have your permission to do this interview over the phone?

BM: Of course. Sure.

TM: Thank you so much. Yesterday we were...you had got us up to Seattle. You'd driven up there with your uncle and had spent the night in a slip cover factory on your way to Alaska. Can you pick that story up and keep on going?

BM: Sure. Be happy to Tom. Yeah, we drove from Los Angeles. I picked my uncle cause he was...he had worked there and I don't know. There was something I kind of left out, which had a big impact on my life. Little things sometimes, small turns on the trail, can really change your life. So we're driving and my uncle was an alcoholic so I did the whole drive and he drinks beer. When he's finished with a beer he throws the bottle out, which really...that bothered me a lot, but he didn't want to get caught in the car with an open container. So that was why he'd keep throwing those bottles out. So anyway, we got to Seattle and I go to the employment office for..., the Alyeska employment office there in Seattle. I'm not hired yet. They have to interview you, of course, and all of the hiring pretty much happens out of Seattle. So the first thing I did was they sent me to a psychologist. The psychologist sits me down and for about an hour he's asking me personal questions about my life. And, you know, it's a kind of a good old boy, "Yeah we're just having a conversation here." He's probing to find out who I am and what I am and I don't know what's going on. So the conversation ends

and then I went to lunch or something and come back and they sent me to yet another psychologist. At that point, I'm afraid. I'm thinking, uh-oh, something's wrong here. They don't like me. There's something about me that they don't like. So I sit with this guy, the second psychologist, for another hour. He's talking to me about everything in my life. At the end of it, I said, "Sir, why have I seen two psychologists? Is my employment in trouble here? I'm scared." "I'm thinking I drove all this way. He says, "No. Here's the deal. We send high paid people into remote locations and that's the reason that we like single guys is because they don't worry about family. They don't have to be concerned about what's going on at home. We want to make sure, as sure as we can, that you're not going to crack up mentally out there and we have to go in and extricate you and then put another person in your place. And all the while there's no work getting done for the day, two, three days that it takes to replace you. It's a very expensive thing for the company and we just want to be as sure as we can that you can handle this mentally." I went, "Oh man, what do you think?" He goes, "I think you're fine." [laugh]

So I thought, okay, I passed that test, I guess. I go back to the employment lady and she sits down, she says, "Okay, sir, you have to purchase two cold weather uniforms," this is down head to toe, "...at \$250 apiece and you also have to purchase a Smith and Wesson 44 sidearm." I went, "Wait a minute, why do I need to carry a gun? I don't own a gun. I don't know how to use one." She said, "Well, sir, three of our land surveyors were killed and eaten by polar bear on the traverse survey last year and it's now required that you carry a sidearm." I went, "Oh man, you've got to be kidding." So I march down to the chief of parties. I said, "Hold it, I got to go talk to somebody." So I went and talked to the chief of parties, and this is the guy that hires me. I said, "Hey, Russ, what is this business with the surveyors getting killed? You didn't tell me that." He goes, "Yeah, well, the north part of the survey is in polar bear country and they have no fear of humans because the native population does not hunt polar bear. They never have. They have no fear of humans. You are just part of the food chain." I went, "So you're going to make me carry a 44? What's the risk?" He said, "Well, what we did is we identified, along with the tribal members, we identified as many of the polar bear clans as we could and then we went in and shot one polar bear from each clan so that they would understand that humans can hurt them." I went, "Oh my God, you've got to be kidding." He goes, "No, that's what we did and the attacks have gone down to zero." I went, "Oh my gosh. Okay." He says, "Don't feel bad." I said, "Look, that's another 20 pounds of gear I got to carry on top of the cold weather uniform and the rest of it." He says, "Yeah, it's a lot of weight," he said, "but don't feel bad. The party chief has to carry a .30-06 with a scope on it." I went, oh man, what have I gotten into here?

So at any rate, I had to purchase the 44. We had to go to a gun school and learn how to use it. Then we were instructed on what to do for a polar bear attack. Basically what they told us to do was to sit down. If one makes a charge, we see one coming, we sit down and we hold the gun firmly between our legs. When the polar bear gets within 20 or 30 feet, you empty the magazine into its chest. Probably not going to kill it, but it will slow it down or stop it. And at that point, it is the responsibility of the party chief to have a bead with his .30-.06 and that will kill the bear. That was the theory. And oh man, what if the guy misses? You know, I mean, I'm dead. So

anyway, we had to go through that whole thing. I passed the gun test and everything's ready to go. I didn't have the money, of course. No one had the money for all of that gear. It was \$250 apiece for the cold weather uniforms and another \$250/\$300 for the Smith and Wesson. We're looking at \$800. I said, "I don't have it." She said, "That's okay. Most of the people don't and we just take it out of your first check." I said, "Well, okay, if you're willing to do that." She says, "You're not going to see any money anyway. Here's how it works. We give you a sliding scale percentage of your money/your paycheck each month. You have a nine month contract and you get nothing the first paycheck. You get 5% on your first paycheck is all you get and then the next paycheck you get 10% and the next one you get 20%. I said, "Well, what are you doing with the rest of my money?" She says, "We put it into an interest bearing account here at the bank in Seattle. Your last paycheck, you get your full amount of money, plus you get everything that you held back during your contract period plus interest." That's the way they keep you there. They keep you there for your contract period by holding money back.

BM: If you leave ahead of time, you are severely penalized financially. It's all in their contract. So no one leaves early because they don't want to lose all of that money, of course. [laugh] So anyway, my Satellite Seabring stayed in Seattle with my uncle and his friends. They just covered it up and put it away cause there's no need for a car up there. No need for it. And they will not pay to ship it either. So off I go. We fly in, get the crews together and we start surveying. We start land surveying and it's just remote.

TM: Where did they fly you to, do you remember?

BM: Sure. They started in Valdez surveying up and the other crew started at Prudhoe surveying south. We were to meet at a certain point hoping that our calculations closed and we actually met. It's like building a railroad and hoping that the tracks line up when you get there.

TM: Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense.

BM: I was on the north crew so we start at Prudhoe. And the traverse survey has already been done. That's the go from point A to point B as quickly as you possibly can go. Then the baseline survey is a calculated line that comes off of the traverse survey. The baseline survey is pretty much where the pipeline is going to go. That was the survey that we worked on.

TM: Can you describe Prudhoe Bay when you got off the plane? What did it look like?

BM: It was a battle zone. There's D-8 Cats all over the place. There's 55 gallon greasy drums of diesel fuel that's... It's a kind of a messy affair. The pipeline was very destructive to the environment there but no one really cared because they hadn't seen it, didn't know about it, didn't care about it one way or the other. And we wanted the oil, that was the overarching concern for the American public. We were tired of King Faisal yanking our chain on gasoline. It wasn't very pretty. They're building things up there so there's construction stuff. A lot of damage to the surrounding permafrost and everything else in the area is being damaged by roadwork, building of dormitory rooms. Our dorm was built to be movable. We averaged about seven miles a day on the survey so the dorm had to be moved. They would move it one of three ways. They

would either drag it across the permafrost or they would pick it up on a big trailer and drive it to the next place. The worst case scenario was they would have to come with a big Sikorsky and lift it and drop it down seven miles later or however far we got. That's the way they moved that dormitory.

In the upper part of it, in polar bear country, the bear wouldn't attack us. They never came for us, but we could see them. They were on the horizon waiting for us to make a mistake. They were waiting for two things. They were waiting for a person to be isolated from the group or they were waiting for an injured human because they'll go for an injured animal. That's what they're waiting for. They never came for us because they knew we could hurt them. But they were always there.

It was very hard work. We worked 10 days on and 10 days off and the 10 days on were 12 hour days. Really hard work, really. That's a long time to be working in that environment. At the end of the day we would go to our dormitory and get ready and pick some meals and we would shut the thing up. The problem at first was the polar bear would come in the night and try and break in. They would pound on the side of the trailer. They would rip the screen doors off, they would rip the screens off the windows. It was just not cool. So we complained and said, "We need to do something. I don't know what. We need to do something." I don't do that, the party chief does that. So what they did was they built the dormitory room up on a stilt affair about eight feet higher. At this point, the bear can't do anything. They can kind of slap at the walls, but they can't really grab a hold of anything and hurt anything. So they kind of pretty much gave up on it and quit harassing us at night. That was better. You don't like to think about a bear being outside and slamming on the walls. Each night we would always push the stairs away from the dorm room so they couldn't crawl up the stairs. But life didn't really get safe until the dorm room was eight foot higher than it was. Then they quit bothering us. After a while, you're out of polar bear country but now you're into grizzly bear country. So we had a holster with a 44 in it and we had a holster with a 150 DB horn. That really hurts their ears.

TM: Yours too. [laugh]

BM: Yeah, oh yeah. That's a harsh thing. Never had to use it. Never had a bear come for us. I was, of course, very happy about that because they had eaten and killed three of us the year before.

TM: So the countryside you're trying to run a survey line through I'm assuming was fairly flat, so your foresights and backsites would be pretty long. How did you move? How did you move the operation along? How'd you move the K&E transit along? Did you have like snowmobiles or some sort of motorized equipment? How did that work out?

BM: No. We were pretty much on foot. We had three measurement devices, two of which we used. At the time, they were just beginning to develop DME equipment. This is electronic measuring equipment. Keuffel and Esser had a device that would go for 11 miles accurately. Hewlett Packard had a different device that would go for eight miles accurately. In addition to those two devices we had the standard steel chains, 100 foot, 300 foot steel chains. Any surveyor will tell you that when you mix measuring devices, you're going to introduce error because they have different accuracies. But we weren't really needing to have great accuracy. It wasn't necessary for this. What we needed to do was get from point A to point B as quickly as possible

and as accurately as we could go. So we were mixing our distance measuring equipment between the Hewlett Packard and the chains. We would use the Hewlett Packard when we could see a long distance. Then when we had to go through creeks and up through hills and mountains, that device didn't help us. So then we're using a 300 foot chain. It was slow work. Like I said, we averaged seven miles a day, sometimes more or sometimes less. I was in the field for six months and the crew coming up from the bottom was coming at us. I wasn't there for when the two lines met. They pulled me out of the field and put me in the office in Fairbanks. What I was doing there was plotting the baseline survey onto the maps so that it could go to the next step, which was to build the thing. Because I could draft, none of the other surveyors could draft, they pulled me in. They pulled me in early so that I can get the drafting going so that the plotting would sort of coincide with the end of the survey and it pretty much did. I finished that up in about a month. Took me a month to do that. Then they were finishing up their surveys and they corrected for the... They didn't quite hit each other, the two, but it doesn't matter.

TM: How far off were they?

BM: What was that? 30/40 feet, something like that.

TM: That's not bad.

BM: No, no. Because we're going such long distance, the curvature of the earth is a factor. For your normal surveying, curvature of the earth is not a factor cause you're not going very far. But it was here. So every five days the party chief was responsible for either shooting the North Star if it were visible, or shooting the sun if it were visible with a sextant. For the sextant you'd have to take five readings and average them for something that was going to be close. If you got the North Star it's much better. It doesn't move. It's a great point of reference. So you only have to shoot that a couple of times. That's how we would correct our surveys. We would go and go and go, and then the curvature of the earth... You can calculate for it as you go, which we'd do, but to be sure about it, the really good correction is to shoot the North Star. Then you correct it in the field and from that point on then you go for another five days. It worked fine when you could see it. Alaska does not have good weather. There's not that many clear days in Alaska. There's not. It's mostly overcast and it's hard to get a fix sometimes even on the sun.

Anyway, when I finished up the plotting and the mapping of the baseline my contract was over. I wanted my money and I wanted to go home. They offered to let me stay and keep on working because there was quite a bit of land surveying yet to do. You would go on with that because there was a lot of construction surveying that had to be done. You just do that as needed. Like, "Oh gosh, we've got to survey a pad for this pump station. We didn't know where it was going to be until today, so let's go out there and survey that pump station pad." So things like that, but I wasn't interested.

There was another guy... I learned how to read aerial photogrammetry maps because that was part of my job as a draftsman. The pilot, we're working together because he's doing the photography and I'm doing the plotting. He wanted to form a new company. He wanted to have his own aerial photogrammetry company. He was going to buy the airplane. I was going to buy all the special cameras and do all the photographic end of it and he was going to do the flying end of it. We were going to get rich doing aerial photogrammetry in Alaska, Canada, Washington state, anywhere that we could make

money. It was a pretty interesting option. I thought about it but the problem with it is I was going to spend all the money I made in Alaska to buy these cameras and now I'm broke again [laughs] and I didn't want to do it. So I thought about it and didn't do it. My job was over and I left.

TM: So let's back up a minute, I got a little confused. It sounds like these contracts were nine month contracts and you're at six months. Is there going to be a penalty for you to step out now. How did that sort out?

BM: The survey kind of went for six months and I continued working in the office for the remainder of my contract period.

TM: Okay, got it. In Fairbanks.

BM: So I finished at nine months. I wasn't about to give up any money. So anyway, I flew back down and then now it's time to drive home. I've got a pocket full of money. I got lots of money.

TM: What was your final paycheck takeaway out of that for nine months, 12 hour days, 10 on 10 off?

BM: Oh, gosh. It seems like \$8- or \$9,000 cash is what I had, which at that time was a quite a lot of money. It was way enough money for me to go back and finish school without having to work and that's what I was after. It was the most money I've ever had in my life. I was just like, oh my gosh. Oh, oh, oh, there was one... I got to tell you this, this is funny. This is kind of fun. The old timers there, they knew how to... You know, it's harsh work and the company, Morrison-Knudsen and Brown and Root, all of them, you can fly free anywhere in the world you want to go. They made that option available for the people that had family. So on their 10 days off, it was free for them to fly home to their families anywhere in the world and it didn't cost them any money. Also, if you needed to stay in a hotel room, your hotel room was free as well. The only thing that we had to pay was the tax on the airline ticket and the tax on the hotel room, which wasn't a lot of money. So here's the gig, here's what we did. A lot of us that didn't have family, on our 10 days off we'd fly back to Fairbanks or we'd go to Anchorage, whatever, and we would catch... There was a TWA flight that came in to Anchorage on its way to Tokyo and there was hardly anybody on the airplane. It was deadheading. It would make money once it got to Tokyo and it would stop in Hawaii. So what the plan was, was on our 10 days off we'd go down there. We'd get there at 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon and the plane comes in at 6:00 or 7:00. We get on the airplane and we fly all night long to Honolulu. We get off the airplane in this sunny tropical environment. We'd go get a hotel room, three or four or five or six of us, whatever, and we would pile into this hotel room and lay on the beach drinking pina colodas for 10 days in this beautiful, sunny tropical environment. Then we'd have to catch that plane back to Anchorage and go back to that snowy, cold tundra. But it was a great getaway and the old timers showed me how to do it. They'd say, "Here's how you do this," and we had big fun. There was a guy at the company that did something. He was on our crew. He was an old timer, been working at the company for 20 years. He had been writing things and working things out calculating. He wasn't playing dice or cards with us. We said, "Hey, what are you doing? What are you planning here?" He says, "Oh, I'm not saying yet. I'm not saying yet." Well, finally he sprung it on us. He figured out that he could fly all the way around the world and be back in 10 days.

Be back in Anchorage in 10 days. So he did it. He got off, he hopped on a plane, he flew to Tokyo, and he kept going. He flew all the way around the world and came back on time and made it back up to the North Slope and restarted. Well, he came back and he's all proud of himself. It's a great story. Three days later management flies in. They came in and they said, "Look..." I forget what his name was, let's call him Bill. He said, "Look, Bill, you just pulled a stunt that we don't appreciate or approve of. You abused the system here. You didn't fly home to see family, that's what this is for. You just abused the privilege here and if you do it again, we're going to fire you." It was a real serious conversation and the conversation wasn't for him, he knew, it was for us. They would have fired us, the newcomers, right away. So they were telling us, if you try and do that, you're off. You're out. So we thought, hmm, guess we better not do that. So no one did it. No one tried, no one thought about it. [laugh] I thought it was pretty interesting. He flew all the way around the world in 10 days. That was back in '72 when it was hard to do. There was the Iron Curtain you had to fly around. He did it, he did it.

TM: You take your 10 days and you sit in an airplane for 10 days. It's interesting to see who did what with their time off.

BM: Well, it was intended for people to go see their families. I didn't have any so I did the Hawaii thing a few times. That was a great getaway. We got out of that cold into some nice sun and we'd come back with a little bit of a tan. It was really a great, good thing to do. I think I did it about three or four times we did the Honolulu thing. Didn't cost us anything either. We had to pay for meals and drinks and stuff but the flight and the hotel was free.

TM: Yeah. It seems like it'd be good for your mental sanity. Do you remember the distance of the pipeline from Valdez to Prudhoe?

BM: Yes, it was 748 miles. 748 miles of a long survey. I think that's what it ended up. That's the number I heard was 748. Could be a little more or less. It's long way, man, long ways.

TM: Yeah. Yeah. It's interesting, you think about the dynamics of working with a small group out in a remote area and that sort of reminds me of wilderness travel. You have to rely on one another, there are creatures out there that will eat you and you have to keep an eye out for them. Yeah. Curious just seeing that and pondering.

BM: It was more than I bargained for. I didn't really know what I was getting into but I did it anyway.

TM: At the end of the nine months, looking back, were you like, "okay, I'm glad I survived that. I'll never do that again" or what were you thinking? It was like, "well, that's another thing you do with your life. Move on. What's next?"

BM: I had no interest in returning to Alaska. It was blood money. It was hard work. I accomplished what I wanted to do. I made the cash and I wanted to go back home, back and finish my college. So I went back to Seattle and got in my car, it was still there. Tires were rotted out so I had to get some new tires on it and took off. Started driving and this time I drove a different route because I wanted to see a different part of the country. I pretty much stayed off the interstate because it was a lot more fun and more interesting. Drove down through Montana and Idaho. I looked on the map

and I thought there's Grand Canyon, well I'm going to go on the north side of it and see what that looks like. So I found this place called Toroweap. I saw a little road that went right out to the edge of it and I thought, "I'll go there, that's halfway down into it and I don't even have to walk far."

TM: What year was this?

BM: '72 or -3. '72 or -3. I'd have to go look at paycheck stubs or something to get the right year. '73 I think it was.

TM: Okay. Fall, winter, spring, summer?

BM: Boy, it seemed warm. It was warm. Summer. Had to have been summerish. Yeah. So I get there and the ranger was nervous about it. He says, "Yeah, you can drive out there. You can drive out there right to the edge of the Grand Canyon. Drive your car off the edge if you want. But if it rains, you can't get back cause you'll be stuck at this point here and I'm not going to come get you. I'm not going to drag you out of there."

TM: So where did you meet this ranger? Who was he and what'd he look like? Do you remember?

BM: Ah. What was his name? He...you know him.

TM: Was this a guy named John Riffey?

BM: No, not Riffey. He has an airplane. What's his name? He flew his airplane back and forth to Toroweap. That's how he went to work. They transferred him. Later in the 80s, they transferred him from Toroweap to the South Rim. I think he brought his airplane to South Rim. What was his name?

TM: Yeah, I'm drawing a blank as well but I know who you're talking about. He was out there for a while. Actually he was out there for quite a while after Riffey.

BM: Yes, he was. Yeah. Yeah. He was a really nice guy, but he was not going to rescue me out of the muck if it rained. So I drove my car right out there to that... It's a famous rock, everybody shoots pictures from that grooved rock up there. I sat on that rock with my binoculars. I'm looking down at the river and guess what there is down below? Lava Falls rapid and he told me about it. He says, "You go to the end there and you can see the biggest rapid in Grand Canyon. You can watch them run it." I said, "No kidding?" So I'm sitting there and I'm watching boats go through this rapid. It seems like it's in slow motion, you know, way up high like that. Every once in a while they go over upside down and it's like, oh man, what happened there? Hmm. So I thought, well, I gotta go down there. There's a trail of sorts. It's not a trail it's a route from Toroweap down to the river. So the next day, I put some stuff in a pack and I hiked down that trail. The little book said that you needed a 10 foot rope in order to do this so I thought, okay, I'll take a rope. So I took a rope and by golly you need it. You need it. So I tied the rope off and scurried down that bad spot and kept going, left the rope.

Got to the bottom and man it's a party. There's boats coming in and people coming and going. It's just active, there's a lot of stuff. These boats, they come in and everybody gets off the boat and then they walk up this little trail to the top of this hill.

There's people crowded in up there. "Oh, okay, well, I got to see what they're doing up there." So I go up to the top of the hill and they're looking at the falls and talking about this and that and I'm asking the boatman people, "What's the deal here? Is this a hard one? They said, "Yeah, this is a tough one." I said, "Ah, it's pretty wild looking down there. There's some really ferocious, noisy stuff." This one guy says, "Do you want to run it on my boat?" He was a motor rig. I said, "Is it safe?" He goes, "Yeah, yeah, it'll be fine. I'll give you a life jacket and I'll set you down on the right-hand side, right below there. You can easily hike back up to the top there." I said, "Sure." So I got on this boat and rode through Lava Falls rapid on this motor rig and it was fun, [laugh] it was fun. I had a great fun time doing it. Gave him his life jacket back, walked to the top. The next motor rig people came by, I initiated it, I said, "Hey, I've never done this before. Would you take me through here?" The guy said, "Yeah, sure, sure, I'll be happy to." So I got a ride with another motor rig and then walked back up. I went through Lava Falls, I ran it four times in one day. Ran Lava Falls four times in one day. Never done that since. It was two times with a motor rig company, one time with a commercial row rig company, they let me. And then I went with a non-commercial bunch and they let me go through. They all dropped me down at the bottom and went back.

TM: Do you remember the names of any of those people?

BM: Nah, I didn't ask. And it was too late in the evening. I was having so much fun with this rafting thing [TM laughs] that it was too late to hike out of there. It was like, "Oh God, I can't do this." So I sat there and just curled up in the sand and went to sleep sorta. First light I hit the trail and walked back up there. Got my rope and carried on. That was the first time I had ever run a river and it was fun. I mean exciting, really was exciting. I thought, ah gosh, I got to do this. Anyway, went back home and finished up college and...

TM: So hang on a second, before we leave Toroweap that name is coming to me. Mike Ebersole?

BM: Ebersole. Yes. That's him, that's him. He'll remember me.

TM: What do you remember about him?

BM: He was all alone out there. He enjoyed the conversation. He enjoyed me being there. I asked him about things and he told me about the human history and the geology. We'd walk around, he'd point things out to me. Here's this rock layer and here's this. He was just a pleasant guy. I really enjoyed his company and still do. I went out there more than once and Mike was there. He was just the most accommodating guy and very helpful. His biggest complaint was that he had to maintain the restrooms, the porta-john thing. He had nothing but trouble with people coming there and throwing trash into it and that wrecks it. You have to get it out of there. He really hated that part of the job and he hated people that would do such a thing. I said, "Yeah, that's pretty bad." He's got signs all over it and everything, you know. There's no excuse, no excuse, yet they would continue to do it. They would throw all manner of trash down in that thing and he was the one that had to get it out of there. [laugh] I thought, "Man, sorry. That's a crummy part of the job, man, I'm sorry you had to do that." So Mike Ebersole, I think he probably retired by now. I don't know. But I remember they moved him to South Rim. I don't know what he did after that.

TM: He was working overflights, the overflights issue for quite a while. He eventually retired.

BM: Wow. I really liked him. Pretty neat character. I really liked Toroweap. There was beautiful rock formations there. You can actually hike down to the river from there. He didn't call it Toroweap. That's what I saw on the map. He called it Tuweep Valley. For me at the time, it was a very complicated drive to get out there.

TM: In the Plymouth, 60 miles of dirt road. Yeah. Was it monsoon season and was that why he was worried about the roads and the road condition?

BM: It was not. It was early in the summer. Wasn't time for that yet, but a rain could come at any time.

TM: Do you remember were there planes flying in and out of the Toroweap airport at that time? Did you see any planes coming and going?

BM: No planes there but lots of planes over the ridge. What's that other airport out there where they fly passengers?

TM: Yeah, the Bar-10. And at one point they made the switch from landing on the airstrip...

BM: Toroweap?

TM: ...by the ranger station. They moved that out then over to the Bar-10.

BM: Ah. Okay. No, I don't recall any aircraft. Just his plane was parked out there is all I ever saw. He flew in there, that's how he got to work. It was a great gig. He could go to work. He offered to...probably against the rules, but he offered to fly me. Like if I wanted to go to Toroweap and it was time for him to go back to South Rim, he would fly me from Toroweap to South Rim and he would show me things about Grand Canyon from an airplane, you know, about how it's eroding and what's changing and all the things. The way the rocks moving and deteriorating. But I would have to find my own way for 10 days once we got to South Rim. That was a pretty neat offer. I couldn't do it. I didn't know what to do at South Rim for 10 days. He wasn't off that long, for however many days. So I never did it but it could have and it would have been interesting for sure.

TM: So what else happened on the road trip then from there back to Lubbock?

BM: Nothing much more. I was driving slow and just looking around at everything. It was wide open territory back then, Tom. There was very little traffic once you left the interstate through both Arizona and New Mexico. That's not true today. But back then all of the small state highways were pretty much vacant. It was a beautiful, wonderful drive. I was out there with the animals and the scenery and the beautiful clear sky sunsets. Smog hadn't set in yet and you could see forever. It was a time that I'll never get to see again. I probably should have appreciated it more for what it was. Slowly but surely, the view began to diminish. I couldn't see as far as I used to the year before. Pretty soon it got on my nerves and there's nothing I could do about it. Couldn't stop it.

TM: So back to Lubbock, by this time you are a junior or a senior in college. Where were you at there?

BM: Oh, I was half way through junior year, but if I went to summer school and took a full course load I could be out on a year and a half. That's what I did and in the meantime I sold the Satellite Seabring. I didn't need it. I wanted the money. I didn't want to pay the insurance or the gasoline so I sold the car and ended up in the little servant's quarters of a surgeon there in town. Nice little place. It was five miles from the campus. I got a really nice racing bicycle and I rode 10 miles a day on that bicycle back and forth to school, back and forth. Pretty soon I'm getting strong so one of the other guys says, "Hey man, why don't you join in our bicycle team and we'll race. You can race." So I did that. We got pretty good, we got pretty good. We were fourth fastest senior four-team in the state of Texas. We were pretty quick. I loved that bike, man. I still love bikes, ride them all the time.

TM: Nice. Nice. And graduated with a degree in civil engineering then? Was that right?

BM: I actually ended up with two degrees. I ended up with a degree in civil engineering and I ended up with... I'd changed my mind, you know, halfway through. I wanted to be in broadcasting so I ended up with two degrees, one in civil engineering and one in telecommunications, radio and television broadcasting. I wanted to be a broadcast engineer. I didn't want to take over the family business after Alaska. The Grand Canyon changed me. I wanted to do something that I could be out West and I could maybe shoot pictures of this and just be out there. Well, I couldn't do that. I couldn't take over the family business and do that. I wanted to get into broadcast engineering because those guys travel around all the time. That's what you do. You go from program to program, traveling all the time, seeing new and different places. That's what I wanted to do.

So in my last years in Lubbock, I worked as a radio disc jockey. Then ultimately I worked at the television station there. I left college on a lark one day. Well, I went to go snow skiing up in the little town of Ruidoso, New Mexico...got a great ski area there...and I went snow skiing. I noticed that the town had a little radio station so I stepped in there just to say hi to the disc jockey. The owner came in and said, "You're looking for work?" I said, "Well, no, sir, I'm just visiting." He said, "Well, I'm looking for a disc jockey. If you want to come here and work, I'll hire you." I thought, well gosh, this is a beautiful place and I got work right out of college? Yeah, I'll do it, I'll do it. So I went home, packed up, said goodbye to lively Lubbock and went to Ruidoso, New Mexico and went to work at a radio station there.

TM: Okay. What year was this? What year and month roughly, do you remember?

BM: That I left Lubbock? '75 maybe, '76? '75?

TM: So winter of... I mean, if you went through summer school, you were kind of out of sync with the normal graduating in the spring.

BM: That's right. It would have been fall. It would've been the end of summer. The end of summer I went to New Mexico and turned the mic on and became a disc jockey.

TM: Okay, end of summer in '75. You know what let's do now, we're just about an hour into this. Not quite.

BM: Are you kidding me? We're an hour already?

TM: Maybe this is a good little place to wrap this up here. I've got a couple of questions cause it sounds like we can... I want to know about [laugh] radio in Ruidoso, New Mexico. How did you get out there? Because you'd sold the Satellite. Did you get another vehicle?

BM: I did, I did. I bought an old red, faded-out pickup truck. At some point I ended up living in a trailer, okay, on the other side of town. It was close to campus, it was in a bad section of town. This trailer park was mostly drug dealers and prostitutes. [laugh] Kind of a rough neighborhood. The guy that owned the trailer park, there was a red pickup truck one day showed up outside his office said for sale on it. So I bought it and fixed a few things on it. I was able to throw everything I own into the cab and the trunk of that pickup truck and that's what I drove to New Mexico with.

TM: Okay, alright, with two degrees. How much work did you have to do cause a lot of your work would have been for engineering. You'd have taken lots of math and all kinds of other stuff like that for that. The radio and television broadcasting degree, how many extra classes did you have to pick up for that or was it pretty simple to wedge that in?

BM: It was easy. All of the prerequisites I had, every prerequisite. In order to get that degree beyond the engineering degree, I only needed nine more hours. Three more senior level broadcast courses were all that I needed. The reason is they waived the beginner broadcasting courses because I was the only one in the department that was actually working in broadcasting. I was a commercial radio disc jockey and then from there I went to work for a television station. They were real happy, you know, to have a student who was out there actually working in the business. They said, "Look, we can't teach you anything in these beginner courses, so we're going to give those to you." That amounted to about nine hours of coursework there. They said, "We want you to take the senior level courses because those are more challenging and you need to do those in order for us to give you a degree." I said, "Sure that sounds good." I kind of cheated that way, or not cheating but that's how I got out so easy on that second degree. I had already done the work.

TM: Yeah, yeah. They gave you credit for work done. Very nice.

BM: Mhm.

TM: Excellent. Well, that's really great. Anything else you'd like to add before we get to New Mexico?

BM: Well, things really start happening when I get to New Mexico. Lubbock was just a grind. It's not that pretty of a place. There's nothing to do there. The big tornado of '72, I think, or '71 or something, rolled through there and killed 26 people and just tore that town to pieces. It confirmed in my mind at that point that I did not want to live in tornado country anymore. I don't care where I go, but I'm not living in Kansas or Texas or Oklahoma or anywhere like that. I'm not gonna do it cause I hate those things. So I looked at New Mexico and they don't have any tornadoes there.

TM: [laugh] Few and far between. That's right.

BM: Not many.

TM: Well, this sounds like a good place to wrap up Part 2 oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Today is May 14, 2019. And Bruce, thank you very much.

BM: Thank you, Tom. We'll continue whenever you wish.

TM: Okay. Look forward to it. Hang on a minute.