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Interviewee: David Meche (DM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Monday, July 18, 2022. This is Part 1 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with David Meche. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, David. How are you today?

DM: Good. And you?

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

DM: Yes.

TM: Thank you, David. What year were you born?

DM: 1959.

TM: And where were you born?

DM: Ogdensburg, New York.

TM: Ogdensburg, New York. And what were your folks doing there?

DM: My dad was working on the bridge.

TM: Was he? What bridge?

DM: It was over the St. Lawrence. I forget what bridge that was.

TM: Okay, so you were born into the ironworking business right from day one.

DM: Yep.

TM: Okay. That job requires a lot of travel.

DM: Yes, it does.

TM: As a small child, did you travel from job to job with your father?

DM: Yep.

TM: Okay. Eventually school's going to come along. Did you have any older brothers and sisters and younger brothers and sisters?

DM: I had one brother and three sisters.

TM: Where are you in that stack?

DM: I'm at the back end.

TM: Okay, you're the youngest.

DM: I'm the last one.

TM: You're the caboose. Alright. How did you work out your schooling?

DM: Wherever Dad was working at, that's where we went to school.

TM: And what attracted you to ironworking? Was it because your dad was doing it?

DM: Well, he asked when I was getting out of school, he asked what I was going to do that summer and about my age and I went out of the hall on a couple jobs. And then it just started from there, I guess.

TM: So let me make sure I get this right. So this was in high school, working summer jobs?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Okay. You know, between high school and being born in New York there when your dad was working on the St. Lawrence bridge, what other bridges did he work on as you were growing up?

DM: The Mackinaw, Verrazzano, there's one over the St. Lawrence. That'd be one of the—I forgot. I should have asked Mom. She remembers all that stuff.

TM: Okay. The Verrazzano Bridge, is that New York City? I'm trying to think. I've heard—The name rings a bell, yeah. New York City?

DM: Yep.

TM: Did you get a chance to see your dad in operation on any of those jobs?

DM: I remember New York, like, we'd go pick him up and that. That was about it. Then when I got older, he worked some refineries around home here. And he did work a couple bridges in this area.

TM: Okay, so let's go to your first summer job as an ironworker. Where was that?

DM: Around this area, the Lake Charles, Louisiana area.

TM: Okay. Do you remember what you did?

DM: I think it was a Butler building, just a regular, old building. We called them Butler buildings.

TM: Okay.

DM: That's who produced them.

TM: How high were they?

DM: Oh, it wasn't very high. Fifteen foot, something like that.

TM: And what was your job?

DM: Whatever had to be done. We put up the framework and sheeted it. If they had another job, we'd move on to it.

TM: Okay. And then your second summer?

DM: I worked offshore one summer. It was the oil field business.

TM: So moving pipe?

DM: It was a production platform. When the oil came in and it separated all the sand from the water and whatever.

TM: Was that in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast as well?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Then you graduated from high school what year?

DM: In '78.

TM: And you would have been 18 or 19?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Had you thought about—You were going to get out of high school and become an ironworker? How did that work out?

DM: I don't rightly recall. I know I'd have to go to work or get out the house.

TM: I'm sorry. Say that again.

DM: Have to go to work or get out the house.

TM: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly. Did you go through an apprentice program?

DM: No, I didn't. My dad showed me a lot of stuff, you know, just growing up.

TM: Okay. Did he help you get your first iron job?

DM: Yeah, he talked to the business manager, told me one day to go down there and talk to the business agent. It started from there, I guess.

TM: Great. Do you remember the job?

DM: First job was, so I said, a Butler building. It was a couple miles away from here, out in the country.

TM: Is that the same sort of work that you've already done a couple summers before?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Okay. By the way, what was your father's first name?

DM: Harry.

TM: Howard?

DM: Harry.

TM: Alright. How long did you work for the building people?

DM: Oh, it was just that summer.

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

DM: Went back to school.

TM: Okay. I'm sorry. So when you graduated in '78, where did you—

DM: After I graduated, I worked right here around the Lake Charles area. The LNG plants were coming up back then across the river from Sulphur here. We'd put up these control rooms. I think we were about finishing, and me and a good friend of mine now, Morris Lanier, and Scott Smith went to the powerhouse. Well, we had a strike or something, and then the outfit that was

doing the powerhouse asked the friend of mine, Morris, to go to Florida on the job, and he got me to go with him, so we went to Crystal River, Florida.

TM: Okay. What was that job?

DM: It was a powerhouse's— Putting up the border.

TM: What were you doing on that work?

DM: I started out in the yard, loading iron up for, you know, to send to the unit to put up. Then I got in a raising gang and started hanging iron.

TM: Okay, and that was in '78?

DM: '78, yeah.

TM: In the fall or winter of '78, '79?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Was that a union job?

DM: Yes.

TM: So you were able to get in on and start working without going through the apprenticeship program.

DM: Well, when I got to Florida, I had several other guys that kind of took me under their wing. But one guy named Jesse Dean, he called around and— You had to go take a test, and I flew to North Carolina and took a test and bought a book.

TM: Okay. And did you pass?

DM: Yeah, sure did.

TM: Cool. So that got you a card, a union card then?

DM: Correct.

TM: Alright. Because you know I've been talking with Ronnie Mac, and you know Ronnie went through the two-year apprenticeship program.

DM: Yeah.

TM: And so that's all I know about how that can be done. That's neat. I mean, you had the skills, so you came in and just tested out.

DM: Yes.

TM: Nice. So tell me about that first job on the raising gang. How high did you go and what were you doing?

DM: It was a powerhouse, and I forget how high it was. We set all the iron in the boiler room and the turbine room, all that. That was a long time ago.

TM: Okay. Yeah, 1978. Let's see, '88, '98, 2008, '18. Something like 45 years ago.

DM: Yeah.

TM: Yeah, but I'm assuming that would have put you maybe 50 or 60 feet up in the air?

DM: Oh, it was higher than that. Most of those powerhouses are a couple hundred foot.

TM: And if I get this right, your job was to get the steel up, and then there would be a bolting crew coming in behind you?

DM: They're called the bolt-up gang. The connectors would put the iron up there, you know, do all the framework, fill it in, and then the bolt-up gang comes right behind that, stick in all the bolts, and the putting up gang, they'd plumb the building and they'd started tightening all the bolts up.

TM: Okay. So as the raising gang, you didn't have to do the plumbing to get the building square.

DM: No, but it had to be plumb to continue every tier though.

TM: Okay, so every tier would have to be plumbed before you put the iron on above that.

DM: Right. And it had to be plumb to finish bolting up. I mean, we could probably set the iron, but they couldn't bolt it up, you know, tighten it up. It had to be plumb so you could continue every tier.

TM: Okay, alright. I apologize for being so stupid about this.

DM: No, it's quite alright.

TM: But I appreciate you're getting me straight on this. And there's— You know, talking to Ronnie, it sounded like there's three different types of iron work. There's towers and buildings and bridges.

DM: Yeah.

TM: So this was your first building, this powerhouse. Once it was up, what did you do?

DM: On to the next job.

TM: Where'd you go from there?

DM: I was in Crystal River, and the outfit I was working for had a job in Apollo Beach, right below Tampa, so I went down there with them.

TM: What was that one?

DM: That was another powerhouse.

TM: Okay. So are these coal-fired power plants?

DM: Yes.

TM: Alright. And did you ever get a chance to work one of these jobs with your father?

DM: The one here at home, I did. He ran the yard, and I worked in the yard for just a little bit. Then I went to the unit to hang iron.

TM: Was it pretty easy— Did it come easy to you working on these powerhouses?

DM: After I got, you know, knowing all the moves and that, yeah.

TM: In '78, '79, 1980, were you wearing a harness clipped in? Was there some safety for that or were you all just— I hear a laugh there.

DM: No, back then we just had a lanyard on a belt. There were no harnesses back then.

TM: And was that lanyard hooked into something?

DM: It'd be tied off to the iron, you know.

TM: Okay. Well, that's good news. I mean, that way at least if you slip, you would be kind of like a pendulum on your lanyard to your belt.

DM: Yep.

TM: Clearly that was not recommended.

DM: You know, back then, that's the way it was. They didn't have harnesses back then. I think the tower guys had harnesses, but that was mainly for them to go up and down.

TM: So when did you move from structures to bridges?

DM: I went out to Utah, and when I left there, I came back home. That's when I— I should have dug my résumé out. I think I went down to New Orleans on the Greater New Orleans #2 Bridge.

TM: Okay. The Greater New Orleans #2 Bridge. Well, let's back up for a minute. You mentioned working in Utah. What were you doing there?

DM: Another powerhouse.

TM: Okay. Was that your first time out West?

DM: Yes.

TM: Do you remember roughly the year? Was that in the early '80s, or when was that?

DM: That was the end of '82, '83— It was '83.

TM: And then the Greater New Orleans #2 Bridge, what kind of bridge is that?

DM: It's a cantilever.

TM: Were there big differences that you found between buildings and bridges?

DM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TM: Like what?

DM: Well, on a bridge, you got maybe a handful of laborers, operators, and ironworkers. On a powerhouse, you got all kind of crafts, you know, pipefitters, uh, laborers. All kinds.

TM: Okay, so just to make sure that I clearly get that, there's a smaller crew building the bridge?

DM: I guess you could say that. You got quite a few ironworkers, but you don't have as many crafts working on it. At one time, anyway.

TM: Right. Electricians and plumbers and carpenters—

DM: They come, kind of, after all the iron work was done. You'd have a handful of journeymen, but not very many.

TM: Okay. Did you enjoy that first bridge?

DM: Oh, yeah. Sure did.

TM: How long were you on it, on the job?

DM: Uh, I don't remember that part.

TM: Do you remember the company that you were working for on that job?

DM: Beasley.

TM: Okay.

DM: John F. Beasley.

TM: John F. Beasley Construction out of Oklahoma. Is that right?

DM: There was an office in Oklahoma and there was—I don't know if it was still open back then, but Wickliffe, Kentucky was one they based the bridge division out of. They had a yard set up right there on the Mississippi River.

TM: Okay. And Ronnie Mac was working for Beasley.

DM: Yeah, I think he worked out of the Ohio office up there. I think he was working for them but I'm not quite sure. You know, just another division of Beasley.

TM: And it sounded like they were a big company.

DM: They were at one time, yeah.

TM: Yeah, okay.

DM: I know they had— Someone did these water cranes [unclear] than the bridge company ever had.

TM: Okay. So after the Greater New Orleans, do you remember some of the other bridges that you worked on?

DM: I worked on the [unclear] Louisiana [unclear]. That was for Beasley, too. [Unclear] Natchez. I did a couple of them down there in Fort Lauderdale on the New River. Did a bunch of overpasses up in New Jersey, that area, New York. Did the one over Cattaraugus Creek. That's on the western side of New York.

TM: Okay.

DM: South Carolina, Cooper River. Did a couple of rehabs down there, too, in South Carolina.

TM: So all over the East Coast then, all over the eastern part of the states.

DM: Yep.

TM: OK. How did you meet Ed Kent?

DM: From that Greater New Orleans job. He was the superintendent when I got there. And I forget how long he stayed, but they moved him up to West Virginia or somewhere up there. John L. Sullivan took over Greater New Orleans.

TM: So Ed was working for Beasley, and they moved him up—

DM: Yeah, sent him to another job. I think it was in West Virginia. Not quite sure.

TM: OK. And do you remember your first recollections of Ed?

DM: He was a long, tall drink of water. He was the only man that could stand flat-footed and put his right leg in the back of that pickup truck and stand there and carry on a conversation.

TM: Wow. So he would put his foot up on the bed of the truck. He was that tall.

DM: Oh, yeah.

TM: And he would have been— Well, was he your father's age or was he younger than your dad?

DM: He was younger.

TM: Okay, but he was older than you.

DM: Yeah, I think he was—oh, shoot—I want to say, if I remember right, 11 or 12 years older. But he'd get out there and work right along beside you, I know that.

TM: Oh, yeah. Yep. So you met him there at the New Orleans bridge, and then he headed out. When did you run into him again? Do you remember?

DM: In South Carolina on that Cooper River Bridge.

TM: Okay. Was he the foreman there?

DM: He was the superintendent.

TM: Superintendent. Thank you. Okay, on the Cooper River. Alright. Do you roughly remember what year that was?

DM: I want to say '90, '91. Sometime around there.

TM: Alright. So this is just three years or so before the Navajo Bridge there at Marble Canyon.

DM: Sounds right.

TM: And was that fun working for Ed there in South Carolina?

DM: Yeah. Sure.

TM: Do you remember about how long you were on that job, Cooper River?

DM: Not quite sure.

TM: Alright. Then when that bridge was done, where did you go from there?

DM: I'll have to get back to you on that one.

TM: Okay. Because you're gonna end up at Marble Canyon, maybe we should just jump over there. Did Ed ask you to come out with him to the Marble Canyon job? How did you find out about that job?

DM: I think I got a call from Jay Rollins about going out there.

TM: And who was Jerry?

DM: Jay. Jay Rollins. He's the one that we all worked for with Beasley. I guess he's the one that got the jobs. He ran the yard up there in Wickliffe.

TM: So he was looking for people to go out and work this job?

DM: Yep.

TM: Okay. I get confused because the company name Traylor, they get credit for that build, but it sounds like—

DM: Well, they did build it. They had just— Beasley had just sold to them, I think.

TM: Oh, okay. Alright. That makes a lot of sense because I was, like, Ronnie worked for Beasley, and Ed work for Beasley, and you worked for Beasley, and suddenly there's Traylor. And I was, like, how did that happen? Okay.

DM: Yeah, Jay got the job. He did all the bidding with Beasley, so he knew what was involved in it, so—

TM: And did you know that Ed was going to be out there?

DM: I guess Jay told me he was out there. That's all.

TM: And by this time—by '93, early '94—had you worked with Ronnie Mac already?

DM: No.

DM: Navajo was the first time with Ronnie Mac.

TM: OK, so Marble Canyon was going to be the first time you were going to work with Ronnie.

DM: Right.

TM: OK, but you knew Ed.

DM: Yeah.

TM: What was your title on the job? Were you working as an ironworker or were you doing something else?

DM: I was a foreman.

TM: Alright, so as a foreman, I'm assuming you report to the superintendent.

DM: Ed Kent.

TM: That would have been Ed Kent. Alright. And then the ironworkers would report to you?

DM: Yeah. My guys, anyway. We had another foreman there, Ed Cross. He was from Georgia, too. The same town Ed was brought up in.

TM: And who was Ed working for?

DM: Traylor.

TM: He was working for Traylor too?

DM: Ed worked for Beasley, too. All them guys worked for Beasley for years.

TM: Alright, so that's what's getting me confused there because I keep hearing Beasley and I keep seeing Traylor and I'm, like, what? Okay. Alright. Do you remember your first view of the job out there at Marble Canyon? Do you remember what month you might have gotten out there to start?

DM: I forget what month it was.

TM: Had any steel been set before you got there?

DM: No.

TM: The foundation people, had they gotten in and done the skewbacks in with the bolts out of the concrete there and the—

DM: They were still blasting.

TM: They were still blasting? Okay. Were they still blasting on the lodge side or the Fredonia side and the—

DM: No, not the lodge side from what I can remember, because they'd blow that horn, you know, and we'd all have to stop. I remember they put a big, ol' rubber mat down there. And they had this big wire, they had a cable [unclear] cut out of the canyon and stop, you know, all the rocks and all that from going down.

TM: Right. Which was—

DM: That big, old rubber mat, when they'd blow that dynamite, it'd jump up and damn near go in the canyon.

TM: They were trying to keep the rock from going into the Colorado River below—

DM: Correct.

TM: —and pull the rock up out of the canyon up above.

DM: They'd drop the [unclear] down there and load up the rocks and run it to the top and use it for roadbed or whatever.

TM: Okay, so on the Flagstaff side, when you showed up, was that all done?

DM: The cut out was.

TM: Had the concrete been laid yet for the skewback, for the first plate there, the first the bolts down there?

DM: No, I don't—I think they were working on anchor bolts because— Yeah. No, we had to put in the tiebacks in there.

TM: Right. So that the tie backs help to hold the— It's like building a big diving board is kind of the way I think about it. And the tie backs help to keep the diving board from nosing down, just kind of hold it back.

DM: It held the, you know, it tied into the bridge, so it bolted to the chords. You know, it held it in place. It had the jack-in-the-box built in it so you could adjust the bridge.

TM: Okay, so you called that a jack-in-the-box

DM: Jack in the box.

TM: And that would move the whole bridge up and down a little bit?

DM: Yeah, in and out, up and down.

TM: Yeah, Ronnie had talked about that and that just blew me away. You can actually point the thing upstream a little bit or downstream a little bit.

DM: Yeah.

TM: And up and down. So it was really— You could really direct that thing.

DM: Yep. It takes a little time, but it can be done.

TM: Okay. The lodging out there was— There wasn't a whole lot of places to stay.

DM: No. [Chuckles]

TM: Where did you stay?

DM: I stayed out there at the lodge for a little bit. Then me and the bolt-up foreman, and it might have been the operator, we moved into Page, kind of, in a place over there. Eventually the kids and them wanted to come out, so I found a trailer house to rent.

TM: Oh, wow. So you brought out your wife and family?

DM: Well, they just came for the summer, you know.

TM: Okay. That's pretty neat. They must have had a good time over at the lake there swimming.

DM: Oh, yeah. Every day.

TM: Nice. And Ronnie Mac talked about getting a place to stay out there in Page. Who was your bolt-up foreman?

DM: Ed Cross.

TM: Okay. Alright. And who was the operator? Do you remember?

DM: Andy. He's a guy Ed worked with in Tennessee.

TM: Okay, so Andy from Tennessee.

DM: I think he was originally from Texas, but I worked with him in Tennessee.

TM: Okay. Well, if you remember his last name, let me know. OK, so Andy's running the crane. Ed Cross is bolt up. Were you, like, the overall job foreman?

DM: I was the raising-gang foreman.

TM: Alright, so there's a raising-gang foreman, and that's you. And a bolt-up foreman. Were there other crews as well?

DM: No, just the two gangs there.

TM: Just the two gangs, okay. Do you remember who was working for you on your gang?

DM: They were all union except Ronnie Mac, I know that. Well, I had another boy from Baton Rouge I worked with in Tennessee. He was there for a bit, then he broke his ankle or something. Fell off the float.

TM: Did he break his ankle there on the job or somewhere else?

DM: Yeah, on the job.

TM: Oh, no. How did that happen?

DM: He was almost on that skewback down there. I'm not quite sure, or I don't really remember

TM: Okay.

DM: He didn't go that far, but he did break his foot or ankle.

TM: Well, that's too bad. I'm trying to put together the names of the people who were doing this, and Ronnie helped me with Mike Charley. He was a Navajo.

DM: I know there was some Begays.

TM: Yep, Louie, Louis Begay. Do you remember anybody else?

DM: I can see them, but I can't remember their names.

TM: Okay. And when you first got out there, kind of looked at the setting and looked at the river down there 400-feet down, almost 500-feet down, looked at the—it's, like, 900-foot across, was that going to be just another job for you, or did it kind of strike you right away as something kind of different?

DM: The first thing I said was I bet when that first cowboy come up to that edge, he was dying of thirst. How in the hell is he going to get down there and get a drink water?

TM: [Laughs]

DM: It was gonna be different, for sure.

TM: Nice. Do you remember where the steel came?

DM: Um, I think it was Vincennes. Pretty sure.

TM: And did they just send it out by semi, piece by piece?

DM: Yep, trucked it all out there.

TM: Were they coming out on a schedule? Would you get in touch with them, or would Ed get in touch with them and say, "Okay, send me more steel"? How would that work out?

DM: Yeah, Ed would. He did that. He'd order the steel, you know, tell them what he needed, when we needed it.

TM: Okay. So let's go back to the tiebacks. What did you set for anchors for the tiebacks?

DM: I just remember the—some 300 36's, like a beam with an anchor bolt set up on the end of it. They have the anchor bolts in the—you know, built into the rock. Set that in there, concreted everything down.

TM: Okay.

DM: We bolted a jack-in-the-box on the end of that, onto the first chord.

TM: Was setting— Let's see. Now you had to have a crane out there. You had to have, you know, the operator—

DM: It started off with a cherry picker. He'd offload trucks and put the— We had a little traveler. Oh, I think it was 100-ton crane. They built a frame for and set it up on some rollers that would have tracks on the chords, so we'd roll it out there.

TM: OK, so hang on a second. Let me see if I can understand this. When I think of a crane, especially 100-ton crane that's got a tower on it that, I don't know, is 100-feet high. They got a long tower, maybe not 100—

DM: I think they only had 90 foot of boom.

TM: Ninety foot of boom.

DM: There's no tracks on it.

TM: Right.

DM: It's just another frame, and it was just as wide as the bridge was. We had these heavy-duty channels we bolted to the top chord that anchored around them. So we had Hillman rollers under that frame as guide rollers, and it set on that, on those chords.

TM: Could the operator move the crane toward the river and away from the river on those rollers then?

DM: It would travel on the rollers, but we'd have to put a cable out there— I forget how far we would put it—and a snatch block, like, one of the farther pieces out. And then we had one going back, too, in case we have to go backwards.

TM: Okay.

DM: The traveler would pull its own self out there.

TM: Got it. So you'd put a pulley out—a snatch block—put a pulley out front and one in the back, one down by the tie back. And then that crane could pull itself forward out toward the river or backwards back toward the tieback.

DM: Correct.

TM: That's clever. Could the crane operator see what the raising gang was doing?

DM: Yeah, I mean, some of the low stuff he couldn't, because on that traveler, it had a big deck, you know. It was nice. It sat up pretty high. But it was like a big dance floor up there, really.

TM: Okay.

DM: There was a big deck and, you know, we were up on the top chord. But we had to set, you know, on down on the bottom chord also. As long as it was out in front of him, he could see pretty good.

TM: But I imagine when you were first setting it up down on that first section, he wouldn't have been necessarily able to see what was going on down there. Did you have a radio to communicate with him? How did that work?

DM: Yeah. Radios. Walkie talkies.

TM: Okay. And it's easy because the distance is not too far.

DM: Yeah.

TM: Did you keep a journal at all?

DM: I don't know if I kept one back then or not.

TM: I just wonder how long it took you to get the first section up off the skewback and then up, tied into the tiebacks, and then start moving out into the air.

DM: I might have, but as many times that I've moved, I'm sure it got lost somewhere.

TM: Okay.

DM: You ever get to that, uh, he was the engineer for that job for the state?

TM: Jerry Cannon?

DM: Yeah.

TM: Yep. He lives in Tucson.

DM: Does he?

TM: Yeah.

DM: That was a good guy.

TM: What do you remember about him?

DM: That he said it took him 10 years to get that bridge started.

TM: Yeah, it did. What else do you remember about him?

DM: That's about it right there.

TM: Okay. Yeah, that's right. It was 1984 they started working on that, getting approvals and all kinds of stuff. And there you were in 1994, ten years later, starting to put things down. Yeah. David, we've been yik yakking here for almost an hour.

DM: Alright.

TM: I wonder if this is a good place to put a comma in this oral history.

DM: Okay.

TM: And we could pick it up again some days from now.

DM: Alright, sounds good. Maybe I can find my records.

TM: Oh, okay. Yeah, that would be neat. If there's some other bridges that you worked on before Navajo that you want to talk about a little bit, I'd sure like to listen. Is there anything else you want to add to what we've talked about before we wrap this one up?

DM: I'm sure when you call me back I will.

TM: Okay, good. Well, with that, we'll conclude Part 1 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with David Meche. Today is Monday, July 18, 2022. My name is Tom Martin. And David, thank you so very much.

DM: Alright. Thank you, Tom.