

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: John Weisheit (JW)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: John Weisheit recounts the beginning of his career in the outdoors.

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TM: Today is Tuesday, November 19th, 2019. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview with John Weisheit. My name is Tom Martin. This oral history's being conducted over the telephone. Good evening, John. How are you?

JW: Tom, I'm fine. Thank you.

TM: Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this oral history work that we're doing. May we have your permission to record this interview over the phone?

JW: Yes.

TM: Thank you very much. I'd like to go back in the wayback machine, here. John, do you remember family stories about how your mom met your dad?

JW: It was a blind date.

TM: Nice, where? Where were they?

JW: Well, let's see. My mom lived in Lawndale, near Redondo Beach. And my dad lived in South Gate. And I forgot who—I think it was girlfriend of my mother's—who encouraged her to do a blind date and my father, Donald, and my mother, Donna McWilliams, met and fell in love and they got married. I bet it was in six months. And I think they got engaged within three months.

TM: Nice. Can you bring us out for us, South Gate and Redondo Beach are near what major city?

JW: Oh, we're in Los Angeles County, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

TM: Okay. So is this, kind of eastern LA, or southern, or northern?

JW: So my mother was west, 'cause she lived close to the ocean. You know, maybe a five-minute drive to the ocean. And, in fact, it's where Interstate 5 is, if I recall. And my dad is—South Gate is south of LA. Oh my, the Harbor Freeway was close by. So anyway, my grandfather was a journeyman pipefitter and he built refineries and he built the Hanford Plant on the Columbia River. And my grandmother—these are

maternal grandparents—she worked for Hughes Aircraft, making helicopters. And on my father's side, my grandfather, Henry, he was a machinist. And so anyway, they were talking—people who moved to Los Angeles for jobs during the Depression. You know, my mother and father were not born in LA, but they grew up in LA in the 30s and the 40s. My father did enlist in navy, right about the time World War II was ending, so he served for three years. He never actually saw any action. But he was a World War II vet.

TM: What did he do in the navy?

JW: He was a fireman on a destroyer. He mostly worked in the Mediterranean and the East Atlantic.

TM: Do you remember the name of the boat?

JW: No, but I have records I could actually give you that in a minute or two, or maybe afterwards.

TM: Yeah, yeah. No, no. I just—if you knew that. And then did your dad meet your mom—that's Donna—was that after his service, then?

JW: Yes, it was. He had two very close friends. John Small and—no, no. John Pattie and Stewart Small. And that's why my name is John Stewart Weisheit.

TM: Oh, that's neat.

JW: Yeah, and John Pattie rose through the ranks in the air force. He was actually a colonel. He was a fighter pilot in Vietnam. And Stewart Small was a salesman. He lived right next to Disneyland in Anaheim and my mom and dad told me on opening day at Disneyland, I was there. I was one year old.

TM: Wow, that was 1955-ish?

JW: Yes. I was born in '54 on July 3rd.

TM: Okay. Well, that's kind of neat that your mom and dad agreed to name you after your father's two friends. Did you have older brothers, or younger brothers, or older sisters, younger sisters?

JW: I have a younger brother, two years later. He was born in '56. His name is Joel Wayne Weisheit. And in 1960, I got my younger sister. Her name is Lauren Janice Weisheit. It was just the three of us.

TM: Okay. So you were the oldest, then?

JW: I was.

TM: Alright. And did you grow up there in Los Angeles?

JW: I did. We lived in Whittier, California on the west side, very close to Pico Rivera, and on Telegraph Road and Painter, in that area. Near Santa Fe Springs, there's some oil wells out there.

TM: What was your dad doing when you were growing up?

JW: Well, he worked in a hardware store. You know, they used to have roller skates going up and down the aisles looking for parts, but he got a job at General Electric in the mailroom. And he would work for General Electric for the rest of his life.

TM: When did he start working for GE?

JW: That's a good question. Probably before I was born... 1953? And he retired in 1989 or '90?

TM: And he work his way up through GE?

JW: He did. He was in utility sales, so his customers were the power utilities, like Pacific Gas and Electric in California. He received a transfer to work in Phoenix. General Electric opened up a new office there and that was 1966, and, you know, that was when APS was developing their nuclear power plant program. You know, so Salt River Project was another customer. Whenever we went on vacation, if there was a hydroelectric facility or a coal plant on the way, my dad would call up his friends and we would do tours in all the dams and all the power plants. So, you know, this is like Navajo Generating Station when it was brand spanking new.

TM: So this would've been in early 60s, then?

JW: Late 60s. 70s, too.

TM: Okay, and so you grew up in the city?

JW: I did.

TM: And did you, you know, did you go camping on weekends? Did your parents like to do that, or was that only for summer vacation kind of things?

JW: Oh, no no. They were weekend warriors. Absolutely.

TM: How do you mean?

JW: Pardon?

TM: Tell me more.

JW: Oh, well we—if Dad had a week or two of vacation—we usually went to the Sierras. But on weekends, we would—as soon as we got out of school and Mom and Dad got off work—we, the whole family, we would go to the Colorado River and we'd spend a weekend there and then zoom back on Sunday night. And, you know, that was before Interstate 10 was built, so it was all on highways.

TM: So this would Route 66?

JW: No, oh my. What's that highway?

TM: Up through Bakersfield?

JW: No. So we would go through Indio. And Desert—Desert Center. We would—actually we went to Parker area. We went to Lake Havasu at first. On the Chemehuevi Indian Reservation, there's a place called Havasu Landing. Across the reservoir is what is now called Havasu City? Wait—

TM: Yeah, Lake Havasu City.

JW: Lake Havasu City. At the time, that place was called Site Six. It was a rehabilitation for people—for vets—who had either malaria or tuberculosis. It was a very common sight to see military planes landing there for, you know, for soldiers that needed rest and recuperation and dry, hot air.

TM: Okay. And so you were five, six, seven, eight, when this was happening?

JW: Yes, five. My parents decided I needed to learn how to waterski when I was five years old.

TM: So I'm assuming you grew up as a good swimmer?

JW: Oh, yeah. Yes, one of our neighbors was in charge of all the swimming pools in Los Angeles and—oh yeah we... Yeah, Arthur Towahead. Green hair. Freckles. Sun-burned, all the time. Yeah, that was me.

TM: Did you get into surfing at all?

JW: No, I didn't. We would occasionally go to the beach. But my parents, you know, when they were growing up, it was the beach. But when we were growing up, it was the Colorado River.

TM: Why do you think that was?

JW: I don't think my mom and dad wanted the crowds. And, you know, if you go to the Colorado River today, you have crowds. Back then, it was a quiet place.

TM: Did you guys own a boat?

JW: We didn't at first. We had friends who had boats. And usually, we would get up in the morning and go fishing for catfish. And then in the afternoon, we'd go waterskiing. And, yeah, I learned how to—I caught more green sunfish than I would ever care to eat. If we caught it, we had to eat it.

TM: So did you like waterskiing, was that something you—?

JW: Oh yeah, I did. Yeah. Chuck Stearns was my idol. And in woodshop, I made a ski. A slalom ski.

TM: Really?

JW: Yeah, I was way into it. I was really good at it too. When we had dinner, capture...

TM: I was gonna say it would be hard to, you know, in high school, join the skiing class because there probably wasn't one.

JW: No, there wasn't.

TM: But still, most weekends, as you were in grade school, junior high, high school, you all were still tramping out to the Colorado?

JW: Yeah, yeah. When, you know, we got invited all the time, 'cause we got up on the first pull. You know, you didn't have to train us. We were already trained.

TM: Okay. You and your brother and sister?

JW: Yeah. So, you know, teaching somebody how to ski is kind of painful. Very time consuming. It's boring, actually. 15, 16 tries. But, you know, people who like it, we got up and we stayed up. And, you know, so yeah. My mom skied, my dad skied, we all skied.

TM: Nice. Did you do tandem skiing where there's two people being towed behind the boat?

JW: Yeah. We used to cross, you know, you'd have to have a shorter rope. We would go under the ropes. And... wouldn't try to jump. We thought that was kind of dangerous.

TM: But were you jumping wakes of other boats and that kind of stuff?

JW: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yeah. We were hot. We were good at it.

TM: Did you do any of that competitively at all?

JW: No. Well, with friends.

TM: Okay. And what kind of boat did you guys have eventually?

JW: Well, eventually my dad bought one. It was a very small boat, maybe only 16 feet long, powered by a 25- or 30-horsepower motor. It was a C Team, as I recall. One time, we flipped it. We let one of the neighbors drive it and he didn't... This big wake, he didn't approach it correctly and it flipped us over. That was my first boat flip.

TM: How old were you? What year was that?

JW: Oh, let's see. I bet I was ten.

TM: Okay. I'm assuming nobody was wearing life jackets?

JW: We weren't wearing life jackets.

TM: But everybody knew how to swim, so...

JW: Yeah, the skier was wearing a life jacket. That was, you know, you had to have safety equipment. You know, they had to have a life jacket. You had to... If they fell, you had to lift up an orange flag. But, you know, we did... The boaters didn't have to wear life jackets in those days. They had to be in the boat, but we didn't have to wear them.

TM: So small children, I think now, small children have to wear a jacket, but at that time, the small children didn't.

JW: Yeah. Well I mean, some did. But I don't remember ever... I don't remember wearing them, except when I was skiing.

TM: So, typically when a boat like that turns over, all kinds of things go unexpectedly down to the bottom of the river there.

JW: Well, that was actually Lake Havasu. Well, there's enough air in the bow compartment to keep it floating.

TM: Okay. That was handy.

JW: Yeah, we just towed it to shore. They sold it out. It could've sank. It was a fiberglass boat.

TM: Okay. So was that exciting for you as a kid? Did you like, "Hey, let's try that again," or was that like, "No, I never want to see that happen again"?

JW: No, no. I liked... My reaction was, "things happened." You know, it didn't—no. I went skiing an hour later. You know, didn't bother me a bit.

TM: Nice. So at this time when your dad working for GE, was your mom a homemaker, or was she working as well?

JW: She was a homemaker until, I think, I was five. And then she was a work mom and she hired babysitters in the neighborhood. And then we were in school, and so when we got out of school, I would hang out at the babysitters for three or four hours till Mom got home.

TM: And what did she do?

JW: Oh, she worked—she was a girl Friday. You know, kind of a secretarial pool head. She worked for companies like Clorox in California. In Arizona, she eventually worked for Valley Gin. They are the folks that gin cotton and then bale it and then stick in warehouses and wait for the price to go up. And, actually, I would work summers for the cotton farmers. Leyton Woolf was who I worked for. I worked for him for maybe two summers and then I graduated from high school and actually hung out on the farm with him for about six or seven months afterwards. I did tractors, I did... Well, I spent the morning irrigating. And then I would get on a tractor and go up and down fields doing cultivation, listing, plowing, discing. I don't know... Never did plow. That was for the big guys. You can break expensive equipment if you don't know what you're doing. You know, so I'm like 17.

TM: So before we get there... In high school, were you in sports at all?

JW: No, I didn't like the sports scene. I was on the swim team. I was on the tennis team. And I was on the golf team for a little while, but, you know, the bludgeoning of football just didn't... didn't like it.

TM: Okay. And were you thinking about college? In high school, was it expected by your parents that you were gonna go to college? You know, coming from a family of tradesmen, was that an expectation?

JW: Yes, it was for me. I wasn't pushed on... us. Our parents kind of wanted us... They were good about letting us live our own life and making our own decisions. So I did decide I wanted to be a medical doctor. But I also said I didn't want to live in the United States. I wanted to go someplace else, like Australia, or you know... which, I—you know, back then—I didn't really know why. I just... But now I do. I really don't like the United States.

TM: Okay. Let's back up for a minute here. You mentioned that at one point, the family moved to Phoenix, is that right?

JW: Yes.

TM: When did you do that?

JW: 1966. I finished sixth grade and we moved in the summer and I started seventh grade in Phoenix.

TM: So that's a kind of hot, dry landscape. Like, super dry, compared to LA with a lot of moisture from the ocean there. Was that an adventurous move or what was that like?

JW: Well, I wasn't happy about it. None of us. We did like... We lived in a baby boomer neighborhood. There were so many kids. It was off the charts. I mean, we were never lacking in friendship or companionship, you know. There was something always going on. So we really liked LA. And out there, playtime was a big deal, you know. That's the first thing I noticed when I went to Phoenix—you asked a good question—is kids don't play in Phoenix.

TM: What did they do?

JW: I don't know. They're old enough. I mean, maybe in the wintertime, you know, when the sun set, we'd go out and play basketball, or tennis, but... You know, I got to go back to the pool, you know, I did end up working for Phoenix Parks and Recreation as a lifeguard for some summers. Yeah, so that started my first aid swimmers' rescue courses, which I had been taking my entire life, starting at 16.

TM: Is that what sort of tipped you toward thinking about being a doctor?

JW: That's a good question, yeah. I think so.

TM: Because you weren't from a family of doctors, then there can be a lot of pressure if your dad's a doctor to become a doctor.

JW: Yeah, and I liked biology.

TM: Okay. So were you good in biology and math in high school?

JW: No, I wasn't good in math. Actually, what I excelled in was history and geography.

TM: And what was it about Australia that sort of caught your eye?

JW: Well, National Geographic. So National Geographic was a profound influence on my life. My mother gave me a subscription for my birthday present. And this is like 1965-1966. And I could hardly wait for it to come. And I read it from cover to cover. And it really influenced me.

TM: How so?

JW: Well, I started developing opinions. One, you know, that was when the population bomb discussion was happening. You know, Lyndon Johnson was on T.V. But there was a timer—no, a digital timer—because the United States was about to have 200 million people in it. And that's when Robert—oh wait,

what's his name—Robert Ehrlich? The guy from Stanford who wrote *The Population Bomb*? I didn't read that, but the National Geographic covered it and I actually made... As a result of that, I made a decision I would never have children. And I'm ten, eleven years old. And I don't. Here I am. I'm 65 and I don't have children.

TM: What else did—besides making you aware of population and population concerns, which now, there's another 130 million people just in America alone... What else did that do to you and for you?

JW: Well, I think that is where the Grand Canyon experience came into my life because in 1966, we were on a family vacation. We were headed to Durango. We were gonna do the train ride. Grand Canyon was on the way, so my father and I—well, the whole family—started walking down the Bright Angel Trail.

TM: So I'm gonna jump in here and say was that the first time the family had gone to the Grand Canyon?

JW: Yes.

TM: Okay. And this was—did you guys have a station wagon? I mean, there's five of you. How did you...

JW: We did have a station wagon. It was a Chevrolet Impala. Powerglide, remember those?

TM: No, but I get the drift. Okay. And so you're... This is... You're gonna be 12 years old, then, in '66?

JW: Yeah, I'm 12. Living in Phoenix. First vacation in Arizona, I think.

TM: Alright. What do you remember about that?

JW: Well, a lot. Because I hiked all the way to the bottom to Garden Creek. And I had lunch there with my brother and my dad. My mother and sister stayed in Indian Gardens. I'll never forget that day. There was a German tourist there with us. We were on a sandy beach.

TM: So this would've been at the mouth of Pipe Creek?

JW: No, it's Garden Creek. And every time I pass Garden Creek, I think of that day. And I think about the sand that I had lunch on that I've never seen since. And I, you know, this is before I was a whitewater boater. I was a hiker. I had a backpack. I would go, as often as I could, and I would go to different places. And if I didn't have anybody to go with, I went by myself.

TM: This was when you were in high school?

JW: Just out of high school.

TM: Okay. Alright, before we get to there, let's go back to Grand Canyon. So the smarter ones of you, that being your mom and your sister, decided to stay at Indian Gardens, is that right?

JW: Yeah.

TM: And then you and your dad and your brother went down to the river. And this was what time of year?

JW: It was hot.

TM: So this was like summer vacation?

JW: Yeah. Came in shorts and long sleeve shirt, though. And a hat. A lot of water. And we hiked out that day. I was sore for a week. But I loved it. I thought... It was... I'll never forget that day.

TM: Nice. And then from there, did you do any more exploring at the rim, or was it from there to Durango?

JW: Well, yeah. We went to Grand Junction, like Dad was thinking that he would like to maybe live there, which is interesting, because now I live in Moab, which is an hour and a half away. This was before the Department of Energy, so the Bureau of Reclamation was in charge of electricity from hydro dams and there was a big office in Montrose. We went there and I went into the room with zillions of gauges and knobs and people with headphones. And it was pretty impressive. You know, it was when the estima unit was just brand-new.

TM: So you mentioned as well that, because your dad worked for General Electric, you had a chance to take a lot of tours of different hydroelectric facilities and electrical generating facilities. What are some of your earliest recollections of those places?

JW: Well, you know, I was impressed. And, you know, my dad is obviously proud, and I'm proud of my dad. And, you know, I'm not supposed to be a wilderness river guide. I'm, you know, I didn't understand wilderness, really. I didn't understand what reservoirs do to rivers and ecosystems at the time. I thought it was kind of cool, you know? But there was a time when that changed. I—and nobody taught me this change, I figured out for myself, just like I did for the population problem—and, you know, I kind of like... There was a time when I went, "Oh, this stuff is not good."

TM: You know, let's explore that a little bit because you clearly liked hiking, you liked out of doors, you like to swim. And National Geographic is global exposure to all kinds of stuff on a global scale. Himalayas to jungles. Cultural differences. I'm just trying to tease out a little bit more about how you slowly started doing more backpacking. How did that happen?

JW: I had friends who, you know, it's like, "Hey, let's go backpacking." It was a big thing, you know. It was new. Equipment certainly was terrible back then. And I had friends who had mutual interest in that and, you know, we would go backpacking, but it was the Grand Canyon. That's when I, you know... Yosemite. You know, I did a lot of it. There was a lot of work.

TM: Did you get into climbing?

JW: Later on, I did. I think, you know, I kind of came to a decision like, "What am I gonna invest my money in?" You know, I didn't have a lot. I never did finish college. So I don't have a degree. And I do like to work outdoors, so, you know, what I'm saying is is, "Yeah, river-guiding is..." I mean, I didn't know it then, but you know, when the connection happened, I took it.

TM: So let's kind of tie this together. In Phoenix, there was an outdoor gear store. I'm blanking on the name right now.

JW: Oh, on Cave Creek Road?

TM: Do you remember the name?

JW: Yeah, the Hiking Shack.

TM: Yeah, yeah. That's it. And that's where a lot of hikers and climbers would congregate. And a lot of outdoor gear changed hands. Is that where you bought your first backpack?

JW: Yes it is, as a matter of fact.

TM: Okay. And is that where you got some ideas of places to hike, or who were you hiking with at the time?

JW: Well, mostly my friend Kevin Hammontree. We went to school together. We lived in the same neighborhood.

TM: And he was the same age with you?

JW: Yeah, we were...

TM: —in high school together?

JW: Yep, yep. Best buddies.

TM: Alright. And where did you go with Kevin?

JW: Well, Pine Mountain, in the Verde River area, the Mazatzal's. Cave Creek. We went up Cave Creek a lot. Later on, I would go by myself. I bought a beater Toyota for like \$100 and it was a great Toyota and I took it everywhere. I went birdwatching in southeast Tucson. I went to the Baboquivaris. I went to Chiricahuas, Sant Ritas, the Galeros, the Whetstones. I just started, actually. I didn't go to—I did more stuff there than I did any other place with southeastern Arizona.

TM: So at this time, if your dad still had a boat, he certainly wasn't boating with you.

JW: Yeah, I got disinterested. I just wasn't... I would periodically use it.

TM: Okay. And the places you've stated, these are all over the state. North, south, east, west, out of Phoenix. But after high school, you started into college. Was that at ASU, then, in Phoenix?

JW: No, Glendale Community College. I was—in my first semester—I was in my second week. I was in the middle of math class and I swear to God, I just swapped out. I just, "This is not what I want to do."

TM: Okay. Then what did you do?

JW: I went to work on the farm with Leyton Woolf.

TM: Okay. Where was that farm?

JW: West Phoenix. I mean, it's condos now. You know, it's interesting. Four years ago, I went to the orange grove that I planted. And I actually watched them being ripped out by a backhoe to make room for condos.

TM: Interesting.

JW: So that's the point is, you know, I, in my lifetime, I have seen dramatic changes and all these changes have profoundly affected me.

TM: Well let's take them slowly and steadily, bit by bit, as the years are rolling along. So college lasted all of two weeks? And then it was—

JW: I'm proud of that.

TM: Alright then. And it was off to work... How did you meet Mr. Woolf?

JW: Well, he liked to hire young boys from the secretaries at Valley Gin, you know, and I only got a dollar-sixty an hour, Tom. I'm 16 years old. You know, I graduated from a newspaper boy to a farm boy. And I would meet him at 43rd Avenue and Dunlap at five o'clock in the morning and we would drive out together. And I learned a lot from him. He was a major in the army. Served in World War II. You know, I learned a lot about agriculture.

TM: Okay. Did you get interested in agriculture or were you interested in machinery and how things worked, or...?

JW: Yeah, I loved it. Because every day was different. You know, I started the morning setting pipe with a shovel. And then, you know, he would drive me to, you know, I would do weed control. When it came time to do harvesting, I would rebuild the cotton harvesters, with zillion pieces. Lots of moving parts. Bearings, stuff. And I rebuilt them. So I learned about things like, you know, to this day, I can take care of my own car problems.

TM: Which is a good skill to have. So laying pipe, I'm assuming this is like, "Okay, here's an irrigation ditch and we need to get..." Were you setting suction pipes down into row, after row, after row, pipe, after pipe, after pipe?

JW: Yeah. Gravity flow siphons. Yeah, you know, that siphon water through a black tube that's two inches in diameter.

TM: Were you ever wondering at the time where that water came from?

JW: Yes, I knew where it came from. So Phoenix farmers were pumping groundwater. And that bothered me, 'cause I can, you know, how do you stay cool in Phoenix in the summertime? We'd go to the well. And I mean it's pristine groundwater. It tastes delicious. And it just... those pumps never stop. That was part of the routine. I had to oil... I had to make sure the oil for the pump was flowing and there was maintenance that needed to be done and...

TM: These are large pumps. They're two feet, three feet in diameter? You stand five or six feet high?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

TM: Electric motors on... I believe the pump is there on the surface and there's a draw pipe that goes down to the water, is that correct?

JW: Yeah. Where the submersible pump at the bottom. Yeah, they're pumping enough to irrigate 40 acres. And then the next day, you do another 40 acres. And next day, you do another 40 acres.

TM: How many acres did Major Woolf have?

JW: A lot. A square mile. No, half a square mile.

TM: Okay. That's a lot of land. And so how... So you're thinking about, "Alright, I want to be a doctor. Well, that gave up." Did that... When you walked out of Glendale, did you walk out of the idea of wanting to be a doctor?

JW: Oh, yeah. I wanted to be outside. That was definite. Whatever it takes to be outside and...

TM: Okay. And you mentioned a trip to Lake Powell with your family. So you were 12 at Grand Canyon. When did you all first go onto Durango from the Grand Canyon? Did you stop at Lake Powell, then, on the way?

JW: Well, so the deal was you would get four or five families to pitch in and rent a houseboat for a week. And a lot of the families had ski boats, so we would tow them behind the houseboat. We were usually out for a week.

TM: And you guys had a boat. So would your boat be one of those boats being towed?

JW: Yeah. And the kids would go waterskiing and adults would usually play Bridge. And so I drove a lot of skiers and...

TM: What year was that? What was your first year out there on a houseboat on Powell?

JW: I think it was 1973. And the reservoir was 100 feet below the top of the spillways at Glen Canyon Dam.

TM: So is that a hundred feet below full pool, or... How was that...?

JW: Actually, wait a minute. It was 1972, I'm sorry. And then we went back in '73 and the reservoir rose significantly that year. 'Course, we could check the gauge records to see if I'm right about the year, but nevertheless, the rise was so significant that I would see green-leafed cottonwoods completely underwater.

TM: So these were cottonwoods that were on the shore or near shore in '72...

JW: They were up side canyons. I think I went up Gunsight.

TM: Okay. And then in '73, you were boating over those same trees.

JW: Yeah. Looking for Indian roads that I'd seen the year before that I couldn't find. And then I, of course, realized the reservoir had buried them and that's when the light went on, Tom. That's when I went, "Oh, I get it. This is bad."

TM: So you were 18 years old?

JW: Yes.

TM: Okay. Did you have any other support from that? Were you doing any reading or anything else that was helping you realize that something wasn't right here?

JW: Yeah, yeah. So '75 is when *The Monkey Wrench Gang* came. *Monkey Wrench Gang* came out so now I'm introduced to Ed Abbey.

TM: But this is '72-'73. So you're ahead of that curve. Was there anything else more formative, I mean, anything out of the Sierra Club, David Brower or anything else that you might've run across to help you think about this stuff?

JW: Not the Sierra Club or David Brower...

TM: Your dad? 'Cause he clearly liked the out of doors. And he, you know, would've been seeing a huge amount of change, you know, just in LA during your growing up years in the 20—18—years you grew up. You know, his time as a kid growing up in the LA area, he would've seen that change as well.

JW: Yeah. No, the changes that I made that day my father never made. And I did not know about the Sierra Club. I wasn't raised to know about the Sierra Club. But, I did have a library card. And the person had turned me on to Colorado River problems with Wallace Stegner.

TM: How so?

JW: I read *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*. And to this day, I think that's the most profound book I've ever read in my life. And, of course, I devoured more Stegner. He became my idol. And then I learned about David Brower when John McPhee's book came out. So yeah, you know, I'm buying—I'm going to bookstores and I'm buying this stuff. And, you know, there was a lot of it coming out in the early 80s. Philip Fradkin. Donald Worster, which is my next hero. *Cadillac Desert* by Marc Reisner. Yeah. Oh, and then I got turned onto Vaughn Short, *Raging River*, *Lonely Trail*.

TM: Okay, let's back up a bit. Sort of fold your head. Then we need back up and tie things on because you're working for Major Woolf on a half-square-mile farm. And you're probably 18, though you've been up to Lake Powell. What happened then?

JW: Let's see. I started... Well, I actually started hanging around Lake Mead, believe it or not. And instead of putting in—I didn't put in at Las Vegas Bay or... I went to Temple Bar. I had my parents' boat. And I went as far up the reservoir as I could.

TM: What year was this?

JW: '77, '78?

TM: Okay, so I think the road into South Cove had just been built by then. But, you know, if you were coming in—well, coming in from Phoenix—you would come up to Kingman and then go up to Temple Bar versus going into Meadview and onto South Cove.

JW: Yes, that's what I did. I went to Kingman, Temple Bar. Put the boat in and drove up—gosh, I didn't know where I was, but I went... The reservoir was pretty much full, so it must've been the late 70s.

TM: Okay. And it would be easy to get lost up there, God's Pocket, and the Virgin Arm, and, you know, just Peter's Bay alone is big enough to...

JW: Oh, I had maps. Yeah. I have that map to this day. It's the Park Service map. It's a nice map. Anyway, I went about 12—whatever the lake level was—I was on flowing current. And I spent the night.

TM: This would've been up to Separation, or...

JW: Beyond Separation. Maybe between Gneiss and Separation somewhere. And I spent the night and I woke up to my boat entirely out of water. I did not know about hydropower releases. So here I am, in my ski boat.

TM: So let's back up for a minute. The Colorado River through Grand Canyon enters into Lake Mead, but that water in the river was coming out of Glen Canyon Dam and in the second half of the 1970s, that swing of water would've been from 30 to 5 every day. So it'd be 30,000 or so—33,000—cubic feet a second, and then at night, it would drop down to five or six, is that right?

JW: Yep, that's exactly what happened.

TM: And so, you'd be unaware of that, you would be... You're coming on high water and you'd set up camp and you go to sleep and then water would drop like a rock overnight, depending on the distance you are, of course, downstream from the dam. And so you're in a fiberglass... I'm assuming this boat is 18, 20 feet long, something like that?

JW: Yeah, it's an inboard/outboard with a four cylinder motor.

TM: So it's not the sort of thing you can pick up and put back in the water.

JW: Well, I did get it back in the water.

TM: How did you do that?

JW: Well, it was tilted, of course, and I was—there was some sand. And so I just, you know, it took a long time, but I got it unstuck. While I'm doing that, there's a private river trip coming down the river and they're laughing and they're having fun and that was another one of those profound... In fact, that's when I went, "I want to do that."

TM: Did you go talk to them?

JW: No, they floated by. I'll never forget that. I said to myself, "I am going to do that." That's when I discovered more books, more... Harry Aleson and Georgie White. I started reading their stuff. You know, I found out that Harry Aleson had a hermitage at Quartermaster. I would hike all around looking for it.

TM: Did you ever find it?

JW: No. I didn't. Have you ever found it?

TM: I've never looked in there. I kind of know the area, I know where it is, but it's Hualapai area right now and so... Pretty heavily vegetated and it's hard to get in there. Where Waterfall is, where the spring is, for Quartermaster Canyon. It's right up there at the high water line. Then there's a photograph of it. And so with a photo, you could go figure it out, but that was long ago.

JW: Yes, it was.

TM: So this is 1977-1978, when you're there. What were you doing, job-wise, at the time?

JW: I was in construction in Phoenix. Which is great, because I could set my own schedule. I only usually—I would get three months a year with... Not in a row, you know. Spread over the year. I'd get a week or two here and I, you know... I would go back. I'd go back up Lake Mead, you know, and...

TM: Were you building houses? What were you doing construction-wise?

JW: Yeah, I was building houses. The Central Arizona Pro—I watched the Central Arizona Project being built. And starting with the pumpkin station right there in Lake Havasu, we had property. We had a family. Three bedroom, one bath house. Below Parker Dam, on the Arizona side, we started... The family bought it in '64 for a thousand dollars. My parents would end up selling it for \$300,000. Yeah, so I'm still kind of a reservoir boy until 1980, 'cause that's when I did my first whitewater trip.

TM: Okay. You know that... Let's use that first river trip as the start of our next interview because we're closing in on our first hour, here, of yik-yakking.

JW: Oh, wow. You mean we're gonna do this in sets of whatever it takes?

TM: Yeah, let's do it sets of whatever it takes.

JW: Oh, my god. But I have a 40-year career.

TM: Well... Look, we've just covered 18 years, okay? And you're only 65, right? So in four interviews, we ought to be able to get it all figured out if we do an interview every 20 years, alright?

JW: We were just talking about the years when I had pimples.

TM: Exactly! How did you get into construction from working on the farm?

JW: So President Carter... He had a major HUD program where the government was taking VA in HUD homes that were foreclosed. And he would—he gave... Well they... There was federal funding to get those homes back in shape. And they hired a lot of contractors to do that work. So I was in remodeling, which was cool because I did roofing; I did drywall; I did painting; I did cleaning; I did rake, shovel, and wheelbarrow; I did trash; I did... You know, I got to do it all.

TM: Plumbing, electrical... Roof-framing?

JW: Well, that had to be done by a licensed contractor. But I would put on the cover plates and, you know, stuff doorknobs. You know, I did... I was gofer for contractors and... yeah.

TM: Alright. And that would've paid a little more than a dollar-something an hour? A dollar-sixty an hour?

JW: Yeah, actually... Yeah, I kind of, like, bid on it. You know, I got like, "I'll do it for this much a day," you know. I actually got a generator and a floor machine and I would sand the concrete, get the paint and stucco off sidewalks and stuff like that. So I was a generalist. I could do... I mean, I worked with some of the best contractors. I mean, I... You know, I worked with guys that didn't even use a chalk line. They were that good. You know, they could lay out a frame in the time it takes me to drink a cup of coffee. I was just blown away.

TM: Fast. And working with crews of... I don't know, 10 to 15 people, or less?

JW: Usually just me and a contractor.

TM: Okay. So small crews. And so, were you thinking, "Gee, maybe I ought to get into this construction deal"?

JW: Yeah, I did. But at the same time—so I'm driving a lot—and I... You know, I'm almost making enough to buy houses and... And as Phoenix spread out, I would move closer to the work, but I'm still spending... I'm still driving 100 miles a day. And I know the Central Arizona Project's coming in and I'm going, "I got to—I need to leave."

TM: Okay. So Phoenix was getting too big?

JW: Yeah. And I was falling in love with rivers, and so... You know, I ended up in Moab. I could've had a Grand Canyon career, but I decided not to do that. And I'm glad I made that choice.

TM: You know, maybe this is a good location to wrap up part 1. Working construction in Phoenix, because there's gonna be story about how you got out of that and the choice you made to go to Grand Canyon or Moab. Does that sound like a plan?

JW: Sounds good to me.

TM: Okay. Well in that case, this will conclude part 1 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with John Weisheit. November 19th, 2019. My name is Tom Martin. And John, thank you so very, very much.

JW: You're welcome.