

An Interview with  
Robert Edward Wilson

An Oral History conducted and edited by  
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project  
Nye County, Nevada  
Tonopah 1990

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Bob Wilson at work on a bulldozer in Round Mountain, Nevada  
c. 1965



Bob Wilson in the open pit at the Round Mountain Gold Corporation operation, Round Mountain, Nevada  
1990

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## PREFACE

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

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

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

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often sprinkled;
- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;
- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context;
- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered but have been added to render the text intelligible; and
- e. make every effort to correctly spell the names of all individuals and places, recognizing that an occasional word may be misspelled because no authoritative source on its correct spelling was found.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

Appreciation goes to Chairman Joe S. Garcia, Jr., Robert N. "Bobby" Revert, and Patricia S. Mankins, the Nye County commissioners who initiated this project. Mr. Garcia and Mr. Revert, in particular, showed deep interest and unyielding support for the project from its inception. Thanks also go to current commissioners Richard L. Carver and Barbara J. Raper, who have since joined Mr. Revert on the board and who have continued the project with enthusiastic support. Stephen T. Bradhurst, Jr., planning consultant for Nye County, gave unwavering support and advocacy of the project within Nye County and before the State of Nevada Nuclear Waste Project Office and the United States Department of Energy; both entities provided funds for this project. Thanks are also extended to Mr. Bradhurst for his advice and input regarding the conduct of the research and for constantly serving as a sounding board when methodological problems were worked out. This project would never have become a reality without the enthusiastic support of the Nye County commissioners and Mr. Bradhurst.

Jean Charney served as administrative assistant, editor, indexer, and typist throughout the project; her services have been indispensable. Louise Terrell provided considerable assistance in transcribing many of the oral histories; Barbara Douglass also transcribed a number of interviews. Transcribing, typing, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Jodie Hanson, Alice Levine, Mike Green, Cynthia Tremblay, and Jean Stoess. Jared Charney contributed essential word processing skills. Maire Hayes, Michelle Starika, Anita Coryell, Jodie Hanson, Michelle Welsh, Lindsay Schumacher, and Shena Salzmann shouldered the herculean task of proofreading the oral histories. Gretchen Loeffler and Bambi McCracken assisted in numerous secretarial and clerical duties. Phillip Earl of the Nevada Historical Society contributed valuable support and criticism throughout the project, and Tam King at the Oral History Program of the University of Nevada at Reno served as a consulting oral historian. Much deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

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--Robert D. McCracken  
Tonopah, Nevada  
1990

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

A survey of written sources on southcentral Nevada's history reveals some material from the boomtown period from 1900 to about 1915, but very little on the area after around 1920. The volume of available sources varies from town to town: A fair amount of literature, for instance, can be found covering Tonopah's first two decades of existence, and the town has had a newspaper continuously since its first year. In contrast, relatively little is known about the early days of Gabbs, Round Mountain, Manhattan, Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and Pahrump. Gabbs's only newspaper was published intermittently between 1974 and 1976. Round Mountain's only newspaper, the Round Mountain Nugget, was published between 1906 and 1910. Manhattan had newspaper coverage for most of the years between 1906 and 1922. Amargosa Valley has never had a newspaper; Beatty's independent paper folded in 1912. Pahrump's first newspaper did not appear until 1971. All six communities received only spotty coverage in the newspapers of other communities after their own papers folded, although Beatty was served by the Beatty Bulletin, which was published as a supplement to the Goldfield News between 1947 and 1956. Consequently, most information on the history of southcentral Nevada after 1920 is stored in the memories of individuals who are still living.

Aware of Nye County's close ties to our nation's frontier past, and recognizing that few written sources on local history are available, especially after about 1920, the Nye County Commissioners initiated the Nye County TOWn History Project (NCTHP). The NCTHP represents an effort to systematically collect and preserve information on the history of Nye County. The centerpiece of the NCTHP is a large set of interviews conducted with individuals who had knowledge of local history. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then edited lightly to preserve the language and speech patterns of those interviewed. All oral history interviews have been printed on acid-free paper and bound and archived in Nye County libraries, Special Collections in the James R. Dickinson Library at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and at



other archival sites located throughout Nevada. The interviews vary in length and detail, but together they form a never-before-available composite picture of each community's life and development. The collection of interviews for each community can be compared to a bouquet: Each flower in the bouquet is unique--some are large, others are small--yet each adds to the total image. In sum, the interviews provide a composite view of community and county history, revealing the flow of life and events for a part of Nevada that has heretofore been largely neglected by historians.

Collection of the oral histories has been accompanied by the assembling of a set of photographs depicting each community's history. These pictures have been obtained from participants in the oral history interviews and other present and past Nye County residents. In all, more than 1,000 photos have been collected and carefully identified. Complete sets of the photographs have been archived along with the oral histories.

On the basis of the oral interviews as well as existing written sources, histories have been prepared for the major communities in Nye County. These histories also have been archived.

The town history project is one component of a Nye County program to determine the socioeconomic impacts of a federal proposal to build and operate a nuclear waste repository in southcentral Nye County. The repository, which would be located inside a mountain (Yucca Mountain), would be the nation's first, and possibly only, permanent disposal site for high-level radioactive waste. The Nye County Board of County Commissioners initiated the NCTHP in 1987 in order to collect information on the origin, history, traditions, and quality of life of Nye County communities that may be impacted by a repository. If the repository is constructed, it will remain a source of interest for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years to come, and future generations will likely want to know more about the people who once resided near the site. In the event that government policy changes and a high-level nuclear waste repository is not constructed in Nye County, material compiled by the NCTHP will remain for the use and enjoyment of all.

--R.D.M.

Robert McCracken talking to Bob Wilson at his home in Round Mountain, Nevada, January 4, 1990.

## CHAPTER ONE

RM: Bob, could you tell me your name as it reads on your birth certificate?

RW: Robert Edward Wilson.

RM: And where were you born, and when?

RW: Rockford, Washington, November 11, 1914.

RM: What was your father's name?

RW: Gustavus Edward Wilson.

RM: Do you remember when he was born?

RW: December 12, 1887, in Rockford, Spokane, Washington.

RM: And what was your mother's name and her date of birth?

RW: Ruth Mabel Gates; born the 18th of March, 1892, in Rosemead Township, Ranson, North Dakota, U.S.A.

RM: And you have their dates of death, don't you? Your father died on the 27th of July, 1973, and your mother passed away February the 20th, 1968. What was your father's occupation?

RW: He was a logger.

RM: In Washington?

RW: Yes. They moved down from Washington in about 1917 to Los Molinas, California.

RM: Then they moved down to Los Molinas when you were just a little kid?

RW: Yes, I was two-and-a-half years old.

RM: Is that in the Ojai area?

RW: No, that's the Red Bluff area; it's in northern California.

RM: What did your father do there, Bob?

RW: Well, he always farmed. He had a prune orchard and alfalfa land. Then he went to work for the Tehama Land Company as foreman for about 40 men and 200 horses that they had on that ranch. They used 200 head at a time to farm 3000 acres.

RM: What were they doing - grading?

RW: No, [raising] alfalfa - 3000 acres of alfalfa.

RM: And that was in the Red Bluff area?

RW: It was in the Tehama-Gerber area, next to the Sacramento River, which flowed down by it. They leveled up all the river bottom land with those horses. The checks were 30 feet apart, and they used a 4-foot Fresno. They would load the dirt in and dump it in 2-foot-high by 3-foot-wide piles, pull up and lay it down for 3000 acres, leveling it. The checks were in between for the water to run down to the end of the field. [It took a] fantastic amount of perseverance, of hanging in there and . . . hell, now they take a grader and run all those checks up to grade, traveling every 30 feet up and down the field instead of crossways.

RM: Did you grow up in that area, then?

RW: Yes. We lived out on the ranch in the Los Molinas area when I was 4 or 5 years old, and I got my first experience of driving a go-devil with old Jack, the horse, hooked on it. After I loaded all the straw on, I stood on the front of the sled and said, "Git up," and drove out to where I was going to put the straw on the stumps. When I said, "Whoa," I just fell off against his feet, but he never moved; he was a kid's horse. He might fight the others, but he was really a good horse for the kids. So I learned to stand on the back of the go-devil.

RM: Now what is a go-devil? I'm not familiar with that term.

RW: A go-devil is a sled. It has 2 runners and a floor built on the runners. The farmers would haul anything out and around their [property]. It didn't have to have wheels on it, just a flatbed sled.

Then when I was helping my dad on the grain binder, he shoved the sickle in and it stopped before it was all the way to the other end. I was right there, 5 years old, and mechanical [minded], and when the sickle stopped, for some reason, I thought, "Well, I'll find out where it's stuck," and I put my finger on the sickle, and about then he pulled it back, and off went my finger.

RM: So you lost the tip of your left index finger, didn't you?

RW: Yes. It's tough, though. See, that's the fingernail root there.

Anyway, then we went over to Tehama and lived on that ranch, and he was foreman there. As a kid, I worked there during school vacation. I started with 4 mules, hauling a load of hay in wagons that were 20 feet long and 9 feet wide, and the Jacob's staff was 15 feet in the air. Do you know what the "Jacob's staff" is? [Mr. Wilson has sketched an isosceles triangle with a crossbar extending beyond the triangle about 1/4 of the way down from the apex.]

RM: I'm not sure . . .

RW: That's a cross in front, so that when you get the hay loaded you can climb up to the top of the Jacob's staff and get up on the loose hay and drive the 4 mules to the mill. A year or so later I started with 6 head of mules and rode the wheeler.

RM: Now, what's "the wheeler?"

RW: The wheeler is . . . actually, it's 2 horses or mules on the tongue. There are 2 on the swing, and 2 on the lead.

RM: Where's the swing? In front of the tongue?

RW: Right in front of the wheelers. That's with only 6 head. Eight head has the point, which is just behind the leaders. Well anyway, riding that wheeler I didn't have to climb anymore, and we hauled 2 loads, then, at a time; we'd tie the tongue of the second wagon to the rear axle of the first wagon.

RM: And how old were you when you were doing this?

RW: Twelve.

RM: Twelve. And you were handling 6 head?

RW: Yes. And I used to work some of the balky horses before I drove the mules. There was one [team] with 3 horses that could pull the wagon until the balky one decided to help. Then, for the rest of the day I had to hold a tight line on the balky one. I had the same problem the next morning. The 6 head . . . they were big mules - 1400 pounds each. But they were young, and you had to watch them all the time. The first time, when I took them out, I only took 4 head. In fact, I took them down to the field and it took about 3 of us to get them hooked to the wagon. When we got them hooked to the wagon, typical mules, they had to run away. But there was lots of elbow room down there. It took me 4 days of hauling before I could use a 6 head and get them calmed down. The last time they ran away, it was all 6 of them; they were going back down to leave an empty wagon in the field and they ran. I beat them on the tail to go faster, and I got them so they'd sweat behind the ears, and they cut that action out from then on. I worked them every day hauling hay to the alfalfa mill - a 7-mile round trip. Hay was ground up, making alfalfa meal.

That's the way mules are. A pair I used to work - old Hooligan and Turk . . . their names were just what they implied. They were older than I was, and were something. You'd start to hook them up, and they'd squirm around. One time I hooked them to a bull rake, which is a big rake. I had the neck yoke hooked up and they wouldn't stand still, and I whacked them on the tail and they took off. But I pointed them right at the side of the barn, so they stopped. They wouldn't hurt themselves.

But a horse will take your breath away, when they run off. They plunge. They accelerate so fast. And they don't care what direction they're going, they're just going. They'll run into a fence or whatever is in their way.

I operated a hay loader called a jayhawker - that's like a buck rake. A buck rake picks up the shock of hay and the forks are 10 feet long. You tip the tip end to the ground and drive forks into the shock of hay. The jayhawker has a drum on it, and a winch, and after you get the hay on forks you pick the shock of hay up and dump it on the wagon, 500 pounds at a time, one on each corner, and build the hay on up. There is the bull rack. The buck rake is used to carry hay just above the ground on long forks. The jayhawker picks the hay up the same way, only it has a winch drum with a cable. It winds the cable as the horses move and that hoists hay in the air to load the wagons. It was also used to put the hay in the haystacks 10 or 15 feet high. The buck rake brings the hay from the field to the stack. The sulky rake windrows the hay the mower cuts, and the bull rake puts the windrows into 500-pound bunches.

Anyway, I was just going down the lane - it was only a 60-foot wide lane - and that hay rake is pretty wide, too. The horse on the right stepped over his chain for some reason, and it spooked him and he started running away, in a circle. I'm sitting on the back and the horse on the left side is a-pivoting, and [the spooked one is] running in a circle like a merry-go-round. But he calmed down before we tore anything up. He could've run into power poles, or anything. You have those narrow escapes; if I'd fallen off, they'd have run over me around and around - because you sat on a triangle. The seat is above the wheel in the rear; it's a 3-wheeled tricycle with a horse one each side.

RM: Did you graduate from school down there?

RW: Yes, I went to grammar school at Los Molinas and high school at Red Bluff, and took auto shop. From the auto shop, I worked a year in a sheep camp. At first I was getting a dollar a day, and then they cut us to 75 cents because 2 sons came up from Oklahoma and worked for 75 cents a day. But working in the sheep camp, they furnished the food. I had to cook it, though.

RM: When did you herd sheep?

RW: In 1932, when I graduated from school. I graduated when I was 17, and went to work in the sheep camp. I saved up \$200, working from '32 to the summer of '33. In the summer '33, I went to Los Angeles to go to school at Frank Wiggins Trade School. It was endowed in 1927, and I went there in 1933. It had 10 stories. The tenth floor was a cafe, where girls learned to cook and wait tables. On the ninth floor the gals learned to fix hair. The sixth floor was for electricians, the third floor was automotive electric and the second floor was automotive

-repair of transmissions and rear ends and brakes. The main floor was motor repair, and the machine shop.

In July of 1933, when I wrote and asked about going down there, they said, "I'm sorry, it's filled up. You might write in 6 months." But I was determined to go to trade school, and I had a teacher from high school, Mr. Bulkeley, to clear the way, in a sense, because they knew him.

When I first got down there, I lived at 1866 North West 11th Street. It cost me \$2.50 a week for a room with cooking privileges. I then would go downtown with an old Irishman to Grand Terminal Markets, where you could buy T-bone steaks for 15 cents a pound. And your 12-inch high sack of vegetables would cost 10 cents. I was able to make that \$200 last for 6 months.

RW: Wow - \$200. Today, \$200 wouldn't even last .....

RM: It wouldn't last a week. [laughs]

RW: Then I moved over to my teacher's sister's place and helped her. And I used to work on automobiles [on the side]. I overhauled an Auburn 6 for \$20 and made about \$15 in one day, and the scale of wages was about \$3 a day down there. In those days you had babbitt rods, so you'd just file them and tighten them, and then you would lap the valves in and put new rings in. Rings cost about \$2. I got credit for 4 hours a day, in the school, and was allowed to go 8 hours a day to gather more experience.

The reason I went to L.A. was that my high school teacher in the auto shop in Red Bluff was a Mr. Bulkeley. He was from Los Angeles, and he knew the department heads and the teachers, like Mr. Essler. Essler was my teacher in machine and motor shop.

When I got down there to Frank Wiggins Trade School, the first day the line was about 2 blocks long. Well, I waited about 3 days, and no one was there. I went in and sure enough, no one was ahead of me. I asked the lady at the front desk if I could file an application. She said, "The department head takes the application."

So I went to the department head. When I put on [the application that I was] from Red Bluff, and [the name] William Bulkeley, they said, "Well, I'll go talk to Essler - the department head." He talked to Essler, and I got to start in the second-year class. (The other department head was named Gardner.)

RM: Was that because you were so advanced?

RW: Yes; I was advanced, from high school. I got to re-bore cylinders, and overhaul Essler's '29 Desoto - stuff like that. Anyway, I got credit for 4 hours a day, and I went to school 8 hours, to get more experience.

And these [teachers] were old-time machinists. I learned in high school, from Bulkeley, to use my head. He would tell me to go out and see what was wrong with the school bus (which was a 1924 Dodge). I would say, "What do you think it needs?"

He finally said, one day, "Damn it, can't you start using your an head, and figure out something?" And you know, I found there was nothing to it. I went out there and looked, and the spark plug wire had fallen off.

So when I got to Los Angeles, I used the same pattern; I didn't ask them anything. For instance, in the machine shop, they would tell me, "Take this boring bar and take it all apart, adjust it and put it all back together, so you'll know something about it." So I did. It would re-bore a cylinder to a rough size. It looked like a standard thread in it, then it had an eccentric grinder that drove a stone, and it would grind a cylinder smooth and round, ready for a piston.

The line reaming machine took me about 2 days of going over the measurements to not cut the bearing bores too big, because the mike was a direct reading. And to figure it out, and by doing it that way, when I got all done line-reaming a crankcase I had no problems remembering how to do the next one. But if he'd have told me, "Do this, do that," I wouldn't have remembered too much. When you have to do it all yourself, you remember better. It's just like someone telling you how to drive a car.

RM: Yes, right. [laughter]

RM: Bob, what was L.A. like then?

RW: Is Angeles had smog then, but it was mostly on the industrial section, downtown - for instance, 20th. And Santa Fe was the packing house [district]. When you'd drive by there, your eyes would burn and the smoke would get you. And it would get you downtown, but there was no particular smog in the outlying part of the town. And we didn't have as many stop signals, then. Most of the cars had 2-wheel brakes, and boy, I'll tell you, you paid attention on stopping.

RM: [laughs]

RW: I worked delivering parts, and I had a '32 V-8 Ford. It was quite a zipper, compared to the other cars. Any time you'd pull up to an intersection and [were] going to make a right turn, you had to be against the curb, or pretty close to it, because usually, when you'd start to turn and a motorcycle would come in on that side, whenever you'd hear his brakes a-squealing, you'd just give him room by not turning onto the next block.

And there were no offsets, like they have now, for the traffic that's going to make a left turn. What you would do is this: When you made a left turn, you'd stick your left arm straight out. So you're turning, and the guy's coming towards you. If his front end doesn't dip down, or change pace, you let him go. If he's back far enough [and] he figures he has to give up, you go on. Then you have to take on the lane of cars next to the curb. That's the way you operated. It was a matter of who could pull the biggest bluff. You could sit there all day, probably.

RM: Was it a big adjustment for you, coming from the rural area down to the city like that?

RW: Not really. I'll tell you why. There were 40 men on that ranch, and I had big ears and listened, and they told me everything that could happen to a guy, or had happened to them,

and I listened to them for several years. So I wasn't as naive as a newborn robin. I even knew about the queers.

RM: How long were you in L.A., then?

RW: I stayed in L.A. from 1933 to 1946. After I got out of Frank Wiggins Trade School, I worked in a machine shop turning pistons. Then I went to Santa Barbara and worked in a machine shop, and then I came back and worked for Handy Parts Automotive Machinists, re-boring cylinders.

RM: In L.A.

RW: Yes - 1501 South Hope Street. I started at Handy Parts in '36. I only got \$90 a month, and I got a chance to go to Pasadena and work for \$125 a month, so I worked there a year or so. Then a friend of mine who worked in the [Handy Parts] machine shop got killed in an aircraft accident. He learned to fly, all right, but what happened was that he was landing at 91st and Western (a lot of small aircraft landed there) and a faster plane flew in the top of his plane, causing it to fall to the ground, killing him and his passenger. The other guy went on and landed. That was the second time for that guy to do that. I was then in Pasadena, working for Frank Burbeck Machine Shop for \$125. While I was over there, this boy got killed and Dean, the owner of Handy Parts, called me up and wanted me to come back. I went over and talked to him, and he wanted to give me \$125, but I held out for \$150. That was 1938, or so. Well anyway, I got \$150 a month, and I worked at Handy Parts till 1941.

The war was coming on, and being a machinist, I went to work for Byron Jackson, out on Santa Fe and Slawson, in the machine shop. I ground gauges at first, and then I worked in the tool room, making gauges. I ran a lathe and did machine work for a couple of years, there.

Then I got a little machine shop going on my own, on the side. I had 4 lathes and a milling machine and a power hacksaw and drill press and what have you, and I was making small parts for the war effort. Tire machinery is one example - they couldn't get any tire machinery around that time. There were mechanics and machinists they let out of the army wherever they were. A lot of them were 35, 40 years old, anyway. They needed help from than to repair all the automobiles - you could hardly get any parts, let alone new cars. So in my case, I started my machine shop. I guess I was classified 2-B, but . . .

RM: What does that mean - 2-B?

RW: [It's a type of] defense work. Two-A means you're married and have a child.

RM: Oh - you'd gotten married in between times.

RW: Yes, I got married in 1937.

RM: Did you marry an L.A. girl?



RW: A Ventura girl. I was working at Byron Jackson and the machine shop foreman was a real nice guy. I talked to him, and told him I had that little machine shop, and could I quit and go work in my machine shop.

He said, "We'll give you clearance on that, being as it's machine shop and automotive, too." So I went into machine shop [work] during the war, and then as the war ended, I just shifted over to automotive repair. I had a shop at 89th and Main in Los Angeles. I ran that till '46, and then I moved to Ojai, California. I had built up a machine-shop trailer. I could re-bore cylinders, grind pistons, fit pins, put in false seats in cylinder heads for valves, do all the machine work required on a motor –even babbit connecting rods.

RM: Why did you go to Ojai?

RW: Well, my wife was from there - actually from Ojai and Ventura. I had 3 places I could go, and the one I should've gone to, I didn't do. One of them was Woodland, California, and the other one was Red Bluff. I really should've gone back to Red Bluff. The valley is large and wide - there's lots of elbow room up there. But I didn't. Ojai got cluttered up with people . . . that Ojai Valley was really booming. Anyway, I bought property there and in my machine-shop trailer I went around reboring cylinders for several years before I built a building and did a repair business. In fact, my brother still runs that shop down there.

RM: Is that right - in Ojai?

RW: To be exact, Meiners Oaks. And George comes up here every year. He's been renting it since '57, so that's 30-some years. He could've bought it from my ex-wife after Dorothy and I got a divorce.

## CHAPTER TWO

RM: How long did you stay down in Ojai?

RW: Until 1954.

RM: Then what did you do?

RW: I came to Round Mountain.

RM: How was it that you came to Round Mountain?

RW: Well, 1953 I went up to see where I was born, at Rockford, Washington, and visit that country; I'd never been back there since I left when I was 2-1/2 years old. On the way back, I stopped at Woodland, California, and visited my uncle, who was a rice farmer.

RM: Where is Woodland, Bob?

RW: Woodland is about 27 miles or so from Sacramento. In talking to my uncle, he'd thought that he would go into the mining business, and he had a couple of guys building a mill at Grantsville (near Lone). It was a mill for working tungsten. The price of tungsten had increased to \$63 a unit, due to the fact that the [government] stockpile went into effect for stockpiling concentrates in about '52. He had a guy over there building a mill, and they just had no luck operating it. They had 38 percent tungsten and the rest was lead - concentrates. They were running the tailings at Grantsville.

He said that they had just moved over to Round Mountain, at Ophir Canyon, and were building a mill, but they didn't seem to be getting much done. Well, I lived next door to my shop in Ojai, and I always had to leave early in the morning on Sunday if I was to not work 7 days a week. So I told Unc, as I called him, "I'll go up to Round Mountain and see what that's like. Maybe I'll just go up there and shut my garage down and put that mill together."

Well, that's what I did. I came up and looked at it. I left my wife Dorothy and my brother - the one who worked for me for 8 years - and they ran the shop while I was gone. I came up here in August of 1954 and put the mill together, and have been running it whenever the price is up on tungsten, and put it on standby when the price drops. The price of tungsten raised in 1973, so I took early retirement from the operators. When I was 59 years old [I had a] gold mine and tungsten mine.

RM: Bob, what made you think you could build a mill? You hadn't had any experience with mills, had you?

RW: No. I didn't have any trouble, either. I found out the guy who was trying to do it didn't know anything either - they didn't even have an arc welder. I'll tell you what my key is: Whenever you want to know something, you go ask the guy who's been successful. It doesn't

do you much good to sit in the bar and listen to some guy who has never made a success tell you how to do something. The man [I went to was] Lee Early. Lee Early had milled a half a million dollars with a little old crusher type Mack mill. He used one table and ran one ton an hour. He produced \$300,000-and-some-thousand dollars for himself with that little mill; the rest was custom ore.

RM: The Black mill is the one made over in Bishop, wasn't it?

RW: Right. And the Black mill, really, is his idea. Mr. Black, the machinist, built it; Lee had a lease up here on Ophir. My uncle had the lease further up, on the Bobby claims. When I wanted to know anything, I went over and asked Lee. And I was helping his 2 guys who were mining over here - I was doing repair on some of their equipment. They took out about \$100,000 out of the Bobby 4 claim. Louis [Cirac] and Bob Marker and George Barra had leased Ophir to Lee Early, who hauled all his ore -1000 ton - clear to Bishop.

RM: Now, Early had a mine in Ophir?

RW: Lee Early leased the mine from Louis Cirac, Bob Marker and George Barra in Ophir; yes. He hauled his ore to Bishop and he was recovering almost 2 percent scheelite worth \$120 a ton.

RM: And he had a Black mill in Bishop?

RW: Yes, out at Buttermilk Flats, west of Bishop. I looked at his mill and saw how it operated: one table and jaw crusher, 3 tables and a ball mill. Before they put the ball mill plus crusher in, my uncle decided to try a goofy little mill, but it wouldn't do anything. It was one of those mills that [they would] swear would do 3 ton an hour. It had a screen about 18 inches long, and a cone, [but] it wouldn't do even a ton an hour. When the promoters tried to make the goofy little mill, it didn't work, so they left. I finished the mill by making the mill and crusher.

RM: Now, this is not the claim Early was on, but another one?

RW: Yes - the Bobby amber 1. They were still working their mine. RM: What was the name of your mine?

RW: It'd be some more of Cirac and Marker and George Barres' claims that my uncle leased. They had more, all in the same canyon; just further up the canyon. Early was working Bobby amber 4, and I was working Bobby Number 1. The Number 1 Bobby ore was 1-1/2 percent, worth \$90 a ton in 1954. The tunnel was driven into ore all the way.

RM Was it scheelite on a granite-lime [stone] contact?

RW: Yes, with a little moly [molybdenum] in it. The tungsten in the tunnel driven by Newmont had some ore in there and they drove that 300-foot tunnel and core drilled, but it wasn't big

enough. Actually, they followed a vein about a foot and a half wide, all the way in. And where it intersected, it went 200 feet to the surface.

RM: Where it intersected with what?

RW: Two veins.

RM: Oh, 2 veins; they followed one of the veins in.

RW: It looked like this, you see.

RM: Oh, it was a perpendicular thing.

RW: Pretty much; yes. The tunnel was straight in, for 300 feet. At 300 feet, they drifted to the left and the right and sampled around, and they found where the 2 came together, and they raised on it a little bit. But it wasn't big enough for Newmont. Do you know who Newmont is?

RM: Newmont Mining; sure.

RW: Well, that's a Hoover company. They're up in Carlin, right now. RM: President Hoover owned them?

RW: Yes - that was his company originally.

RM: Oh, I didn't know he owned it.

RW: So the ore that I took out of there . . . I had 3 tables, and I had a guy named Tammy Thompson who was helping me, because he was a millman from over in Gabbs. When Tommy ran 9 tons that was good ore, he only got about 60 or 70 pounds of concentrate, but he had 300 pounds of mids [middlings]. He didn't know what the hell to do with them, I went over to Bishop and asked Lee what to do. "Oh," he said, "that's simple. Just put your cone in there up at the front of the table, in the trough, and take and dump a little at a time in there. It'll table and you'll [catch it]."

I got about 150 pounds of concentrate out .of 300 pounds of mids. Then I said to myself, "Hell, I might as well do this myself. These guys don't know anything more than I do." (I don't mean that he didn't know anything about the operation of mills.)

RM: I see. So you didn't have your own mill at that time.

RW: No, actually it was my uncle's. I ended up with it, but . . .

RM: How did he happen to get involved there, Bob?

RW: He had had that rice farm in Sutter Basin since 1920, and this crop duster flew him over to Lone and they went over and looked at this mine. And he had a promoter, a used car salesman, who was promoting him to get the mine. It cost him about \$150,000 right there, and he didn't get anything. After it didn't produce at Grantsville, this promoter found out about the property up there in Ophir and leased it.

RM: Was Grantsville tungsten too?

RW: Yes, Grantsville was a lead-silver mine with tungsten in it. There was a million ton, and there was probably a million dollars in it, but it'd cost you \$2 million to get it out. The crop duster guy (as I talked to him later) said, "Yeah, I tried to tell old Unc that mine was nothing to fool with. I could see that it wouldn't do nothing." The old Dutchman wouldn't tip a waitress more than 5 cents, but he'd give a promoter \$20,000, just on the idea that he was going to make a million dollars. That's just the way he operated.

But anyway, on this tungsten deal, Lee Early . . . one of his nephews had to go to school to take his G.I., for learning to be an attorney. And they thought they had pretty well worked that mine out -Bobby Number 4. So I got a lease from Lee Early on Bobby Number 4 - I paid him 5 percent, which cost me 15 percent royalty - and we took out \$38,000 in 3 months. That was the one they had worked, and they took out the \$100,000. He told me, when he gave me [the lease], "I'm going to come out and look at it [and] see. I think those boys left a lot of ore there." When he came out with his brother-in-law, Stokes, they set up their little tigger in an incline down there, and took out 15 ton of ore in about 3 or 4 days, chugging around this and that. And they had me mill it for them. It was no problem, to those guys, to make a few bucks. I got about 100 pounds of concentrate out of that, or more, for them, which would've been about \$500.

RM: What was the price of tungsten then?

RW: Sixty-three dollars, but we were getting \$60 from C. W. Jones in Bishop. He was an ore buyer for the stockpile, and he shipped his.

RM: They figured that price by unit, didn't they?

RW: Yes.

RM: How much was a unit?

RW: A unit of scheelite is 20 pounds. And with that 20 pounds, it takes 13-1/3 of waste to make 60 percent. Another, simpler explanation is [to think of] 3 units in 100 pounds. Sixty percent of it is scheelite and 40 percent is waste. I tried to explain that to Bob Marker and George Barra, but they couldn't understand that. So I discovered a simple explanation: 100 pounds would make you 60 percent. That'd be \$180 for every 100 pounds.

RM: Is there such a thing as pure scheelite?

RW: No. That was the 60 percent, and scheelite can only make almost 80 percent; the other 20 percent is calcium. Scheelite is calcium trioxide. A lot of times, they take that tungsten and remove the calcium and up the grade from, say, 60 percent to 80, and you get more money for it.

Anyway, what I did in that tungsten . . . I was recovering 2 ton an hour on those 3 tables, and it was running \$125 a ton - that was \$250 an hour. And I always said, "Man, the garage business never could do this." And I never forgot that. I had 2 leasers who went in there, and they went down and raised about 6 feet into a pod of ore that they took out that was pure. My grade went up to 71-1/2 percent (or something over 70), and he paid me \$61.40 or so - a bonus - because he would mix it with his that was low grade and bring their grade up, and he would make more money. I'd take a ton of concentrate to him at one time, and that was really something.

That was in 1955, and the stockpile was filled April the 15th, 1956. Well, I asked Lee Early what to do. He said, "You just quit." So I just cleaned out everything and quit. I had some friends who thought it might come back, which it did - at \$55. They came down and spent \$15,000 building a house - 2 carpenters and all (they moved down from Lynch Creek) - and they decided to run the tungsten. But they had to fix the house, even with inside plumbing, before they could get started, and when they got started, the stockpile only lasted about 3 months - the big boys all shot theirs. It was \$21 million, and they shoved it all in there. That was the end - they quit.

RM: So they spent all their time working on the house and didn't get any mining done!

RW: And, hell, they had a millman - a guy who could run a gold mill -and they fiddled around with their little ball mill.

I'd removed some equipment and taken it to my uncle, who was up at Wells. He had a project going that cost him \$150,000, to make zinc sulfate. He could've spent \$100 and found out that he couldn't do that, but no, he didn't do that. There was a mine out there that had the zinc in it, but it had 4 percent magnesium in it, so what he ended up with was 29 percent magnesium in his concentrate. It was quite a system. He tried to get some flue dust out of a smelter in Salt Lake, and they finally got some zinc sulfate, all right. That's a fallout using sulfuric acid and refrigeration. When you run it through this particular action, it turns to crystals, just like that. The crystals of magnesium and zinc both fall out at the same temperature. But you have to have zinc oxide at least 98 or 99 percent pure, because that zinc is used in paint. Well, he wasted enough . . . I'd taken him the ball mill and a few things; I should've kept the ball mill, though. I had to replace it with another ball mill, which I did.

RM: So you let the mill be disassembled?

RW: Yes. I put it all back together, in time, to get it ready for the next go-around. But anyway, when I had to quit the tungsten, then I went over and worked the placer gold in Round Mountain in 1960.

But first, in '57, I went to a sawmill in Bridgeport, California, and worked there, with friends that I'd worked with years before, as [their] millwright. I had 7 motors to look after.

They'd run all their equipment and then . . . I sharpened the saw lots of times, but usually the sawyer would do that.

RM: Bob, were you getting dissatisfied with the life in Ojai? It seems that you made a big jump from running a machine shop to sawmills and ore mills and . . .

RW: Yes. You see, the garage business is fine, but it just works you . . . My brother George and I had 250 regular customers. Well, I shut it down while it was going full blast, and it was about 3 years before George took it over, and he's been running it ever since. I had decided that I would be a heavy-duty mechanic instead of a automotive mechanic, because at least you get paid for taking it apart. Flat rate work was terrible. In those years, the flat rate was only about \$3 an hour. You'd get \$9 to put a clutch in a Model-A Ford. Now they'd charge you \$150 and wouldn't know how to do it. [chuckles] Believe it or not, a guy nobody knew, getting 50 percent, could do it, at \$3 . . .

RM: Is that the way they worked it? The mechanic got 50 percent of what they . . . ?

RW: Usually it was 40 percent, in those days.

RM: Bob, can we back up a little bit to about 1954 or '55, when you came over and visited us at my dad's operation at Reveille?

RW: All right. After I closed the mine down, and the equipment was available, your dad came by and wanted some equipment to set up over at Reveille, because Les Emigh had messed everything up and had left.

RM: He was the promoter.

RW: He was the promoter, and old Ted Kite was the new promoter. Anyway, I got your dad 2 tables and a hammermill and conveyor and stuff . . .

RM: Oh, he got that from you.

RW: Yes. He got all that from me.

RM: I see. Did that come out of your mill?

RW: Yes. I hadn't used the hammermill there, but it would work all right on [his ore]. He set it all up, but he had the usual problems - the concentrates weren't much better than the heads.

RM: [laughs]

RW: [laughs] And so that kind of faded down. Then your dad went to work at Mercury, and all my equipment was there, and some scoundrels removed the rear end out of that one dump

truck and took it over and put it up in the building at Hot Creek, where he was. I got the rear end back, because the sheriff told me where it was. I went and got it, and I got the truck and all.

RM: This was a dump truck my dad had at Reveille?

RW: Yes, it was a Studebaker rear end. I think there was a Ford, too, but I'm not sure. The big generator and my equipment were there, and I went and got my equipment all back after it folded. And old - what was the old Irishman's name, who worked out there with your dad?

RM: Not Jack MacMahone?

RW: Yes, Jack. Old Jack decided they ought to sue old Les Emigh and get some money out of that deal. I didn't really want to, but I finally conceded, and we got the suit filed, and we won the judgment, but we didn't really get anything more than the junk.

RM: Is that right. You sued him in Tonopah?

RW: Well, the suit was filed in Fallon. The big mistake I made on that was, I had a Bohunk lawyer named Jack Dealh, a Bohunk judge named Gregory, and Bill Beko was the attorney for Kite, even though he was district attorney. He was also supposed to help the miners' labor - he was labor commissioner. That's when I learned about what I'm doing now; you have to get all the footwork done for them.

I found out that if the corporation doesn't pay their normal fees every year - the corporation ceases doing business as a corporation - then the officials are responsible for the corporation's acts. I found that out myself, and told Jack and he said, "Well, we'll put old Kite on as an adverse witness."

So we got old Kite up there, and right away, he led him into the question that [he had to answer by saying], "My bank account was tied up, and I couldn't pay my fees for the corporation." All right, that put him on the spot - it looked like they were going to have to pay me. And the outfit in North Dakota that had that hardware store would've had to put up the money. But they recessed and scratched each others' backs - the three Bohunks - and let Kite off the hook on that.

Although, when they finally came back with the final decision . . . I had witnesses. I had your dad, and I had Fred Steen, who was their bookkeeper. I had all the evidence that I wasn't a part of the deal; I was only furnishing equipment and I was getting paid for whatever I did, which was true. Well, Kite and Beko lost right there, on that. So they were all in my favor, and I got the junk.

But to carry that one step further, all that equipment: was under the jurisdiction of the sheriff's office, really. Someone came in and took that big generator - loaded it up on a low-boy. I had collected all the other stuff, so there was nothing [else] to be stolen. No one thought that anyone would take that 10- to 15-ton rig out of there, but it disappeared. I told Jack, "You've got to do something."



Well, he didn't do anything but make the statement, "Well, you could only get a couple of thousand," because that's all their bond was. But because I didn't really have the time or the money to fuss with them, I kind of let that go down the drain.

### CHAPTER THREE

RW: So after the lawsuit . . .

RM: Was that generator yours, Bob? Were my dad and his partners buying the equipment from you or renting it or what?

RW: They were renting some equipment from me. It was one of those mining/helping deals; donation deals.

RM: [chuckles] Yes, right - where you never get your money.

RW: That 100-kw mill generator came from back east, and we don't know where it went, but it went somewhere.

RM: It disappeared for good?

RW: Yes. It was tied up in the attachment; that's how I knew.

RM: What was that generator worth?

RW: It was worth a couple of thousand dollars or more. It was a Cummings 6-cylinder boat motor, originally. The generator drove off the front end, like a boat would - air start. I would say it probably was worth \$4000 or \$5000, to be right about it. Wilson always buys everything at a low figure, so I just figure low.

RM: [laughs] What did you think of my father's operation over there - the mine and all that?

RW: Well, the idea was good, but he didn't have the expertise to be able to handle it.

RM: You mean, the milling expertise.

RW: Yes. He was about in the same boat . . . all the guys who own a property and try to get a promoter to do something . . . always, the promoter seems to spend all the money, like Les did, doing things that didn't have anything to do with the mine. They spend other people's money, and . . . If he would've applied it properly - not so much getting junky equipment or anything, but just going ahead and taking some ore out . . . The ore was there to be taken out, the hoist was there to run - get a couple of good miners, and go ahead and take the ore out. It doesn't cost so much to get 1000 ton of ore out, with proper guys who would do something. And the lead . . . I ran a little bit of lead carbonates for a guy over here one time, and it tables just like tungsten.

But there are more angles to this milling . . . One thing Lee Early told me that was really good: He said, "You put a V-trough to the table, from the ball mill." The reason for that is, by

the time the concentrate gets to table, the scheelite's settled to the bottom of the V and it just drops out in the table trough and comes out on the table by itself, separate from the gang. It really does. When you use a 2-inch pipe the round pipe keeps the scheelite in. An outfit - Superior Company - built their mill on my millsite and spent a quarter of a million dollars building a mill and putting a pipe in to carry water and ore to the tables. And then they would check their tables and the scheelite was running off the tables or side into the waste trough. They came down and checked my little mill, running with a V-trough, and checked it there along the side - nothing there; it was all separated and coming off the end where concentrates should. I learned that from Lee Early.

RM: So you've got to have the V-trough.

RW: The V-trough settles ore out; yes. It's simple, too - just 2 1-by-12s nailed together. It works like a top, Bob - it really separates. Because when it gets into the table from the V-trough the table is shaking, it comes out and drops down and walks right out where you have buckets to catch the cons. And even the slime . . . I used a V-trough on the slime; my third table was for slime. And I had a cone - made it myself. That would run scheelite out about a foot wide, like skim milk - just super fine.

RM: No kidding. Just white?

RW: It would probably take you a day or so to get a bucketful, but man, it was just like white lead, then - really good stuff.

RM: Bob, how does the cone work?

RW: It's a tapered cone - inverted. I used a 10-gallon milk can, upside down. It was one of those old milk cans that had the tapes in the tip where the lid pressed into the can. I just turned it upside down. I asked Lee Early about this kind of thing. All right: You put a cone on the bottom. You put water in the bottom - a jet of water about the size of your finger that keeps pushing up, and the overflow is what you get. When you dump the material in the top, it starts down and the slime just rises to the top and flows over and comes out in your trough.

RM: Oh, I see. And the heavy comes down, then?

RW: The heavys drop to the bottom of the cone and go back onto the other tables. So it makes a good deal.

RM: And you were working 3 tables at your mill?

RW: Yes. Two for the heavys, and one for slime.

RM: OK. And when did you shut your mill down?

RW: In 1956.

RM: And what did you do?

RW: After the lawsuit, I went to Bridgeport, California, in 1957 and worked in the sawmill for one year. In October, just before they shut down, the sawmill burnt down, and it burned up my machine-shop trailer too.

RM: Oh. The one you'd brought up from Ojai?

RW: Yes, complete with all my equipment. [I could do] all types of automotive machine work. It had its own generator, and I could machine anything I wanted in the lathe, build mill equipment.

When we were in the fire, all Old Stan and I did was run around and wring our hands. Damn, all we'd've had to do was hook one of the diesels onto that trailer and pull the whole thing out; we had long chokers lying in the mill yard.

RM: If you'd have done that, you'd have saved it?

RW: Absolutely. I did save some of the stuff, but we had plenty of time to do that. When we arrived there at 6:00 in the morning, while the fire was getting bigger, the side of the machine shop, where I had the trailer parked, was not [involved in the] fire yet, or anything. We just ran around in circles, and didn't do anything.

I'll tell you what happened right up here at Kingston, to show you the same thing happens. Some of the tools that I resurrected out of that fire got burned up again, up at Kingston. I had just put the big D-8, 75-kw generator back together, overhauled the motor, and had it all ready, and I was going to start it up the next morning. A gas-driven [generator] was sitting in the other part of the building, and it set the roof on fire. They had about \$40,000 worth of plumbing equipment and a new Ford motor for a pickup sitting in there, and also a pickup [truck]. If it hadn't been for a 15-year-old kid getting smart enough to get in the pickup and drive it out, they would've lost it, too. They ran around wringing their hands, and there was no water and I know how they felt.

But there was a loader sitting out there. If I'd have been there, I would've taken that loader and knocked those fuel tanks right off their stands and away from the fire. The loader would've taken the one corner out the building, and there would've been no problems. The wall was stacked up like a railroad tie building and it wasn't really fancy; you would've saved the whole damn thing. As it was, when I got there at 9:00, it was all burnt down, and they didn't even shut the diesel off. The 1000-gallon tank to the Cat engine was sitting there, and there was a half-inch pipe of diesel oil burning under it when I got there. It just cremated that engine. It melted the aluminum pistons out of it without any trouble, and melted everything else it could melt - the radiator and everything. I went over and shut the fuel off, then. Hell, that diesel fuel wasn't going to blow up. In fact, no tanks blew up. There were gas tanks on the other [generator] and no tanks blew up. One of them looked kind of like it had really got out of shape a little from the heat in it, but it didn't blow. But that loader was there, and they could've just

pushed the wall down. It wouldn't have taken 2 minutes to get that fire under control, because it was just a hole in the roof that was burning. RM: They were too shook up to think straight; yes.

RW: Absolutely.

RM: And what did you do after the sawmill fire?

RW: Well, I stayed there, but I went to work for the county that winter, plowing snow. It was beautiful to watch that snow being blown 175 feet, and see rainbows. That's in the spring, cleaning the snow off the roads. I even went up to Saddle Bag Lake - hauled a D-7 dozer up on a low-bed on Tioga Pass road. In those days, you had to have an advance guard in front; there was one-way traffic on that narrow road.

RM: Oh! That was the scariest road I have ever been on. [laughs]

RW: I hauled that 7 up there. When I went up that road, I made several of the switchbacks. They were such a hairpin that the trailer backed up on them. When I came to one switchback, I lacked 12 feet of making it. I finally backed the trailer in a little stream on the edge and got it so I could make the turn. I went on up, and the snow was 12 to 15 feet deep up there, in May. It was 13 miles in there, and I plowed that snow off all the way in. It took a zillion passes; it was packed snow, too.

I took a couple of days off while I was doing that, for some reason, and my boss, who was a stonemason by trade, wanted to run the Cat. He took it and walked it on that snow 10 miles, which was all right, but he fell through and then he had to bring a D-8 in, to pull the D-7 out.

RM: He fell through the 12 feet of snow? Good lord.

RW: Yes. Well, a soft spot, you know. The houses at this resort there were all covered. So he brought a D-8 in and got out of the snow and took the D-8 back out. On the way out he broke the cable on the D-7, for no reason, only that he didn't really know what he was doing, running the Cat. I had to walk in with a cable and put it on. But I carried a long chain with me. When I was coming out, all at once it sank in a soft spot and sat there, and the tracks just spun. I got off and hooked the chain to the track pads on each side, eased it back, in gear, and it brought the chain in underneath and cut that snow, and I was out.

RM: OK, you put the chain across the tracks.

RW: In the back - yes. It followed down underneath, and cut the snow out. Now, a chain will stand doing that, but if you get stuck with a Cat in a bog hole (as I did later), you've got to tie a timber on there, with cables on it. You put the timber on the back and fasten it to tracks, and you bring it clear around to the front. You're out, then, or else you've got to take it loose and do some more.

RM: Now, was this Tioga Pass?

RW: Not the highway. As you go up the highway, before you get to the top, there's a checkpoint where you go into the park.

RM: Yes?

RW: Well, the road I cleared is back this way about 5 or 10 miles. It takes off to a summer resort, with all these houses.

RM: What did you do after that?

RW: I got a call from Smoky Bowman, when I was still working for the county, that I could go to work for M-K (Morrison Knudsen) here in Round Mountain, in '57.

RM: What were they doing here, then?

RW: They were stripping and hauling placer material for Fresnillo. Fresnillo restored the old placer mill here in Round Mountain for about \$1 million, to run the placer.

RM: So Morrison Knudsen was just doing the hauling?

RW: Yes, they had the contract to haul it to the conveyor and dump it in the ore bin. They were also doing the loading and repair of hauling equipment and shovels and Cats.

RM: How long had M-K been here?

RW: Only about a month. I came over and went to work for them, and had to help put the equipment together, so operation would get going. They ran their first operation in '52, and they didn't have any haulage trucks. All they used were conveyors - a big drag on the front of a Bucyrus 54 drag line, with 110-boom stick.

RM: A hundred and ten foot?

RW: Stick, with a 5-ton drag that they used to rake the bank. The big shovel - Bucyrus 170 electric shovel - had worked its way down to about a 300-foot bank, with what they call a stacker on the end of the track. It had a big ore bin on it that the 170 dumped into. And as the 170 moved ahead, the bin had rails that followed the 170 shovel along, and the conveyor. It went out of the pit, made a turn and went up to the stacker that put it in the big stockpiles. It was all conveyed out.

RM: Who was the outfit that was doing the milling? That wasn't South African Gold, was it?

RW: They were a subsidiary of it, but they were over in California. It was Yuba Dredge. [I remember their name because] they made the jigs.

RM: And they had it leased from Nevada Porphyry?

RW: Yes, they had a lease from Nevada Porphyry - that is, Lou Gordon and Al Silvers. And in about '49, they built that whole mill. They call it a dredge - a dryland dredge. It would mill 1000 tons an hour; about 500 tons of it was rock. They crushed the rock to 9 inches. And the reason for that is this ore was pretty muddy and sticky, and it beat the ore up to free the fine material [before] it went through the trommel. I'll tell you how sticky it was: They dumped in the ore bin one night in '58 and it took 3-1/2 hours for them to get the material unstuck off the sides of the ore bin, because it was just like it was frozen.

RM: Why was it wet? Was it wet caning out of the pit?

RW: Well, there's water in that pit. The south pit formation contained water all the time - seepage water, really. The north pit was the dry pit. They were running the south pit because it was high-grade there - it really was good.

[To handle the moisture, at] first they put 27 pipes in the walls of the ore bin to blow the sticky stuff off the sidewall, but all it did was blow holes in the ore. So then some smart guy laid belling on top of those blow pipes, and played it like a piano, wrinkled that buildup, and they kept it off of the walls of the ore bin. Then they improved it a little bit by going over and getting some dry, north pit ore. But that's how sticky it was. Their trammel was 50 feet long and 10 feet in diameter. From the stacker conveyor it went underground to the mill. RM: What did the ore run, Bob?

RW: I don't know what it really ran. The ore that I ran when Nick and I ran placer in the south pit was \$2. They no doubt ran \$1 . . .

RM: That was at \$35 gold?

RW: Yes - \$35 gold. They had one stretch there that they had to strip off, to get the high-grade out of it, where in one week they ran \$300,000 out of that one spot - just high-grade - \$14 ore. When Nick and his partner got into that one little spot (before Nick and I were working) they got out \$14. Half an ounce, in other words, per ton.

RM: Was that ore hard to break, or was it pretty soft?

RW: Well, this was a placer operation. The ore was free, in the overburden. You see, placer ore is free gold that's lying with other material. The unique thing about this ore body is that when those big veins started eroding, they were soft veins - very soft. They eroded, and as Nick said, they weren't in the bedrock, they were in the false bedrock. What happened over there, in the geology of it, was that it started eroding millions of years ago. It eroded about 3 feet off, the

mountains and down that slope before the gold started eroding. It just eroded the overburden off the soft veins of gold. Some of them were big, high outcrops, though.

So before they ever really got down to be placer gold, there were about 3 feet of overburden that went down the slope first. Then on top of that was about 3 feet of good ore. In order to get that, they had to strip a certain amount off the top. In some places, they had about 20 or 30 feet of overburden. But when they got to the gold, they never quit till they got to bedrock, which in some places was 300 feet down. And when they got to bedrock, they left what is called an island that was left after they mined, out of the south pit, and quit mining and gave the property back to Lou Gordon. Old Eddie Critchfield and 3 other guys ran a tunnel into that island, and they used to bet who could get an ounce of gold in the pan when the ore was close (about 6 inches) from the stratum of granite. They operated till they got back in there near the surface and they decided there was only enough for one guy, and old Eddie was going to run it himself. Well, he did all right - he did good.

RM: And this is after M-K had gone? When did they leave?

RW: In '60.

RM: And why did they leave?

RW: Well, Fresnillo had done all they wanted to do, and they got their money back, I guess. And Yuba sold out. Apparently Yuba let Fresnillo have . . .

RM: Oh - Yuba sold out to Fresnillo, and Fresnillo [was a subsidiary] of South African Gold?

RW: Yes. I don't know how much they got, but we figured maybe \$4 or \$5 million in those days; they made some money. But they got as far as they figured they could get, and make money. When they let the leasers in, old Nick Andreason and Eddie went in, Nick and his partner Frank Jakowatz. Jakowatz married one of Karl Berg's sisters.

RM: When South African Gold pulled out of there, did they then turn it back to Nevada Porphyry?

RW: Well, indirectly. They gave up their lease, but they sold the mill to Machinery Center, in Salt Lake City, for \$240,000.

RM: And what was Machinery Center going to do with the mill?

RW: They tore the mill down and sold the pieces. They must've made \$1 million or more out of it. I helped tear the 170 down to ship to Peabody Coal. That was something. It took about 15 to 20 loads to get it back to Peabody Coal in Chicago country or somewhere near there. They had a shovel back there called the Mountaineer that they used for stripping the overburden off a coal body, and they then used a shovel like this, with about a 10- or 15- yard bucket on it for the coal, because coal's light. The Mountaineer - to give you an illustration that was in



Mechanic's Illustrated - could pick up a 125-ton boxcar and set it on a 10-story building 300 feet away. It had a 60-yard bucket on it.

RM: A 60-yard bucket!

RW: Yes. You went up the center pin in an elevator, to operate it, and it had 16 sets of tracks on it. It was really something. The guys said, well, it wasn't too hard to operate. They had 2 doors on the bucket. They would trip one door first, and then the other one; that broke the rhythm of empty and full. When it was full, it was depressed a little; [after all], 60 yards with all that weight on it. If you'd let it out without braking, the impact would swing you back over backward.

RM: Then after Fresnillo pulled out of there Gordon apparently opened it up to leasers?

RW: Yes, they opened it to leasers like me and Eddie and the others. PM: On what basis did you lease? Did you lease a little block of the Fat, or what?

RW: Well, actually, we had everything for 15 percent royalty.

RM: Which one - the north or the south?

RW: The whole place, at first. Then as leasers like Curly came in for a little bit, the agreement was that, "Hey, if he wants this section, all right . . ."

"Yeah, that's all right - we got more than we can work."

## CHAPTER FOUR

RW: When Nick and I were leasing . . . Well, Jakowatz left. He and Nick didn't get along. He was a hotheaded Bohunk and Nick was a passive, stubborn, calm Dane. If Nick was so mad that an Irishman would be pulling his hair and jumping up and down, Nick would say [low, slow, calm voice], "Well, I got purrty mad today about this whole operation." [laughter]

Then I became Nick's partner. I talked to Lou Gordon on the phone and he said, "Well, being that you're Scandahoovian, I'm kind of partial to Swedes . . ." He was a big, tall Englishman, that Lou Gordon. He said, "Go ahead. I'll be out and look you over." Gordon came out from Reno. He and Al Silvers owned the mine. Gordon was 80 years old and Silvers was 77, and they were ready to lease it to do something else.

Anyway, Nick and I started. I had a little trommel, so we set it up and we flushed the ore out of the bin with water pressure. We could only run about 30 yards a day, and most of the time we didn't get very much gold.

RM: Was your trommel down in the pit?

RW: We had it set on the outside. It was in the vicinity of where Curly Coombs finally had his little trammel set up: as you come up the road from the highway, over to the right. We hauled ore out of the pit with my Studebaker dump truck; I loaded it with my backhoe. I'd reach down over the bank and pick it up, swing it around and load the truck. I had a grizzly on the truck so the big rocks would fall off the truck.

I used to sample by taking a 5-gallon bucket of water and a little frying pan. I'd go along and find gold in the bank that they'd left where I'd get a few colors, and that's the stuff I'd load. One time I remember well was at a cross-over, where they'd really left some material under the bank on the right side.

RM: What do you mean by a cross-over, Bob?

RW: When the shovel digs into the bank, as far as it's going to go on, that level - above - is the other level that they'd taken down before it, as they came down the hill. They stair-stepped it. With this stair-step, they had a top level, and then they had dug in past the end of it. So to get to the ore, they had just cut in a road with a Cat across the top of the other level to the lower level till they were down to where they could haul ore out. Well, down over that bank, it looked like there would be some good material I could get. Nick said it didn't seem to have very much gold, but I said, "Well, it's easy to get; I'm going to get it," and we got 15 ounces of gold that day. That's the only time we ever did, too. But it was sticky and muddy, and man, when I looked at that black rubber mat, with those little pockets in it that we had at the top end of the sluice, it was all colored yellow and full of gold.

Another time that turned out all right was when I was on another level, a step further on up. I was raking the bank down, and putting the rock all in the dump truck. The cable backhoe had a pretty long boom on it, and I could reach up and load the bucket and swing it around and dump it in the dump truck. [This material] didn't have much fines in it at all, but I

hauled ore down and ran it and we got 40-some nuggets that day; it was broken-vein gold. So we went up looking for the vein, and the only decision we came to was that the shovel had dug into a vein, [and] when it swung around it lost a chunk of rock with gold in it and dropped to the ground and broke up, and we were able to get part of the gold. As far as that area [in general is concerned], they dug into bedrock, sometimes 15, 20 feet deep on the slope. It was a soft bedrock, on the side of the hill. They'd just take that much slope to be sure and get all the gold.

RM: Well, what kind of an operation did you have, then? You were . . . you were taking it with a backhoe, and putting it in your truck, which had a grizzly on it. And then what did you do?

RW: We dumped it in the ore bin we had where the trommel was. It went through the trammel, and the undersized material went in the sluice box. RM: How long was your sluice?

RW: About 60 feet long and a foot to 18 inches wide. Some sections were a little wider.

RM: How did you feed it from the ore bin into the sluice?

RW: We washed it in there with a water hose - pressure.

RM: Where were you getting your water?

RW: From across the valley. It flowed from Jett Canyon in a 15-inch pipe; the pipe was put in there in 1918. The pressure from over there, at the height that it started from, would bring the pressure in to 180 pounds, if you didn't regulate the weights to 110.

RM: Good God!

RW: In fact . . . do you remember where the old Sunnyside mill was, up on the side of the mountain?

RM: Well, not really, but I've heard about it.

RW: Well, it'd be almost to the top of Round Mountain. When you stood at the mouth and took a level sight, that side was [as] high as this side was - almost the top of Round Mountain. Way up there, on the side. So we used that water. We only had about a 4-inch stream, but at that time we had plenty, because we weren't running a very big volume. I ran the placer from 1960 to '62, and then in '62, in January, I went to work at the Test Site.

RM: OK, why did you do that?

RW: Well, I needed more money. I had the idea (which I later did) to build up a big placer mill and come back and run placer. Nick stayed with it; he was by himself, then, for a while, till he got cancer and passed away.

RM: Were there any other leasers on the property then?

RW: Curly Coombs was, and John Babiar. John was a little guy, and he was with the Veterans Administration. He was a veteran, and he worked in there after....he was a banker by trade, but he came here and worked placer for several years. He just died a few months ago.

RM: He wasn't working with Curly, though, was he?

RW: No, he was independent; we were all independent.

RM: So you went to Mercury. Did you go as [a member of the Operator's Union]?

RW: A mechanic - a heavy-duty mechanic.

RM: How long were you there?

RW: I was there 10 years, actually, before I took early retirement. I was there from '62 to '73.

RM: Where were you based at Mercury?

RW: Camp 12. A lot of people think that radiation is a dangerous thing down there, but I have explained to them that there are things that are more dangerous than that. One of them is driving that 200 miles a day; another one was the food at Camp 12, and the amount of booze that they drank. But if radiation is so bad, why do they use it to kill cancer?

RM: [laughs] I imagine they lost more men from drinking than from the radiation, didn't they?

RW: Absolutely. They never lost anybody from radiation; radiation never hurt anybody, but they try to blame things on it. Those coyotes that run around there have Test Site tumors. You know what that is?

RM: No.

RW: Fat gut.

RM: [laughs]

RW: And they were.. They looked like spayed dogs. They'd look at you and walk out of the way. They'd eat all of that good food that Camp 12 had left after every meal.

RM: [laughs] Oh, that's funny.

RW: And the cattle - radiation never bothered them; or the trees. I've always said that they should've let people live down there, but of course there's always a group of people that would

blame everything on the radiation. If they give you radiation to kill cancer, how come radiation causes cancer? That's never been proven, to me. Anyway, the radiation they have down there is so minute - such a small amount . . . the radiation that has hurt people is in the laboratories, where they are testing something with high, high radiation. And even then, they have been amazed. I was reading about a radiation operation in a closed cabinet. You had to open the door to shut it off, and something was going wrong with it, and it was really making lots of noise. This guy just went in and shut it all off, and nothing ever happened to him. They couldn't believe that he was not harmed. The radiation that used to hurt the doctors was from X-rays. I know of a surgeon who lost most all the fingers on one hand from that radiation.

RM: Yes, I've heard of that.

RW: But down there, it's almost the same as the amount we get out of the air. I had 2 little [devices] that looked like telescopes that measured the roentgens. Being as I'm a heavy-duty mechanic, I had to be around if equipment broke down when they were cleaning up after a shot. I drove by J-tunnel with [these devices] and looked in them. One of them measured lower amounts - like, for instance, millimeters versus meters. [The higher one] wouldn't register till this [lower] one got past its points. Well, I'd pick up 40 roentgens, and that's nothing. That's the low end of the totem pole. I'd pick up 40 just driving through there, with the windows all up and everything. But I would sit way up on a point of a mountain - if they needed me, I'd go down there. I never stayed to be in the middle of the area unless repair work was needed.

I've been on reentry - I worked in the Q-2 shaft. It was 2700 feet deep, but we cut through at 1800. [I had to work] in the lower cage. I welded on the two 4-inch pipes to each side of the casing every 10 feet, 1800 feet down. Two guys welded in twin cages in tandem. I was in the lower one welding, with one guy putting the spreader bar in to hold the pipes against the sides of the 4-foot pipe. It resembled a piece of channel iron, but the dimensions were different; it had higher sides than most channel iron. You would slip that in behind the 4-inch pipe, and then they'd push the pipe against the 4-foot casing and you'd weld it on to the pipe and casing - about 6 inches on each side.

That casing was grouted on the outside. It was 2700 feet down outside in the hole. Actually, the whole length of the casing was grouted on the outside with cement. At 1800 feet, where I cut through it, the steel was 2-3/4 thick, with a rib on it about 4 inches wide, every 9 inches, that was 1 inch thick. Imagine standing in that 4-foot casing, in the cage, cutting - how hot it would get. And they wouldn't get me a lance type torch - that's the government for you. You had to put your hand near the casing . . . if you're inside a cylinder, and you're trying to cut through that cylinder, using a right-angle tipped torch . . . If you had a straight tip, your hands holding the torch would go away from the heat. I had to put gloves and guards on my hands to protect them. When you got the chunk cut loose, you brought that cage up a little bit so the cut chunk could out to the bottom of the cage. It'd go down and hit the water at 2700 feet, and boy, I'll tell you, it'd make a racket.

RM: Where was the Q-2?

RW: Up above B-tunnel, on the mesa.

RM: What kind of a shop did they have down there, Bob?

RW: Well, I didn't work in a repair shop - I was a field mechanic. At times I worked in the shafts and tunnels for several years. At one time there were 69 of us field mechanics. We had our own pickup and radio, and we'd get a call . . . if a small repair was needed, we'd fix it on the road. If a Cat or crane would need big repairs, we'd call and let the shop come get it [and] fix it in the shop.

But here's how I came to be working in the Q-hole. For some reason, whether they ran out of just exactly enough money for us field mechanics or what it was, all of a sudden they said, "Look. We're going to lay you guys off for a week, and then we'll call you back." And then the superintendents and the foremen all had to our work.

So in a week or so, I got a call to come back, but I didn't pay any attention to what it exactly was. I went through the rigamarole, and [the secretary] said, "You've got to go to McGregor's office."

I said, "What is this? I'm supposed to go to Carl Brown."

"Oh, you're in the mining division now. Nate Hecker called in and said that you were a good guy to have in that hole down there." So then Carl Brown tried to get this superintendent who lived in Eureka, but worked down there. (He's still down there, or was.) The super said, "Well, Carl, if you want him, I think I'll keep him, 'cause you think he's all right." So I had to go down that hole and cut through that casing and do all that. Boy, it was hot down there.

RM: It didn't bother you, being down at the bottom of the hole like that?

RW: Oh, no; it doesn't bother me. I have no claustrophobia at all. In fact, after we got that room cut back in there, I used to lie down there, welding on the chutes. I'd look around and say, "Yeah, there is 1800 foot of rock and dirt above my head, here." [chuckles]

RM: Now, what was the diameter of that hole?

RW: Four feet, with a 3-foot cage.

RM: That's just barely wide enough for your shoulders, isn't it?

RW: Yes.

RM: And then how deep was it?

RW: Well, they drilled it to 2700 feet with a drill. They only put one room in there at 1800 feet, because there was water below that, and they cut off at that.

RM: How big was that room?

RW: It was about 30-some feet, and about 30 feet high. Then they put a track in the top. I don't know whether this part is classified anymore, or not.

RM: I doubt it; everybody talks about it. What kind of equipment did you work on out in the field?

RW: A lot of times I worked in the tunnels - on locomotives.

RM: Oh, really - those diesel locomotives?

RW: Yes, they had lots of them. And mucking machines and . . . the 630 mucker is a track layer, and it has air motors. In fact, that baby is so fast that it takes a good operator to operate it as fast as it'll go. Man. It was like the 12. The 12-B is an overshot mucker - on tracks. You've probably seen that?

RM: Sure.

RW: The 12 has wheels that run on tracks. The 630 runs on its own tracks, like a tractor, but it drags the hose. So it'll run in and come back and dump . . .

RM: It dumps overhead, though.

RW: Yes.

RM: Did you work on Jumbos and things like that?

RW: Yes. Most of the time the Jumbo was worked on in their shop, because it was more stationary, and had so many big things on it - hoses and such - that they had 3 or 4 mechanics in the shop work on them. But the locomotives and the Jumbos and all . . . I even overhauled Deutch diesels. In fact, I went to Denver with a couple of other boys - one other mechanic and Joe Mills, who was one of the foremen - to Denver, Colorado. They flew us to Denver to go to school at the Deutch diesel class.

RM: Oh, really? Well, that brings up the next question I was going to ask you: How did you know how to work on all this different kind of equipment?

RW: All my years of experience. You don't have to know any special thing. For instance, I have my own jackhammers, and all jackhammers are basically the same. And all tigger motors are the same - I had tigger motors. And what you don't know, you can ask or you can solve yourself, if you've had a lot of experience. In other words, an air motor [is] a very simple deal. You can pull cylinders off and pistons out, and it's so much simpler to work on than an automobile. There is a high cost for parts, though - \$63 just for one piston.

I did get over in a classified section - Area 51. That's classified, too.

RM: OK. So you can't talk about that, then? Did you work over there long?

RW: Two years - and I learned a lot.

RM: Did you like it over there?

RW: Oh, yes.

RM: Where is 51? I don't even know where it is.

RW: Out by Groom Lake - air force.

RM: And you were working on equipment out there, too?

RW: Oh, yes. We had boilers and generator sets to take care of. The food was good over there, too. You had to have a black badge, which I did. The equipment over there was all necessary to [running] a camp. They had big 1500-kw generators over there that turned only 360 revs. RM: It was a slow-turning one too?

RW: Yes, it was 360.

RM: When you were at the camp at Area 12, how many men do you think were living there? We had 700 trailers, with all the other rigs, so I would guess there might be 500 or more and there probably were 1000 people working in that area, or more.

RM: Were there a lot of guys from Tonopah and Nye County?

RW: There were quite a few from Tonopah - they lived at Camp 12, too. The ones who worked at Mercury [and =muted] came from Vegas, usually, and a lot of them from Vegas worked at Camp 12. Those buses would haul personnel from Vegas - there'd be a couple of hundred who would have to come up. Seemed like we had C-P and Camp 12, and 9, and then we had quite a few tunnels, too.

RM: Was it a good place to work, in your opinion?

RW: Oh, yes; I liked it.

RM: What did you like about it?

RW: Well, I liked the freedom of being in a pickup with a radio, driving around from one area to the other. We had about a 100-square-mile area to cover. For instance, if we were at Camp 12 and had to go out to 20, we moved out to about where . . . do you know where Slim Riggs' old place is? Inland, it'd be about that far over. In fact, you could, if you had the right to do it, go straight up to the other areas near Tonopah. There was a road through there, I figured.



RM: I see. I worked there with my dad in '58 and we were at Area 12, at the camp. Where would you have to be on Highway 95 to come in and hit that camp?

RW: Well, you'd be over at Lathrop Wells - between Beatty and Lathrop Wells. Because you'd go in that way lots of times. You could go in at Lathrop Wells.

RM: I never did go in that way.

RW: You could go in across that way, and clear on up over the mountain to . . . that's where they want to store that radiation - Yucca Mountain

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