

**Oral History Interview of
Max Evans**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
March 18, 2015
Albuquerque, New Mexico**

**Part of the:
*Southwest Collection***

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library**

15th and Detroit | 806.742.3749 | <http://swco.ttu.edu>

Copyright and Usage Information:

An oral history release form was signed by Max Evans on March 18, 2015. This transfers all rights of this interview to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.

This oral history transcript is protected by U.S. copyright law. By viewing this document, the researcher agrees to abide by the fair use standards of U.S. Copyright Law (1976) and its amendments. This interview may be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes only. Any reproduction or transmission of this protected item beyond fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the Southwest Collection. Please contact Southwest Collection Reference staff for further information.

Preferred Citation for this Document:

Evans, Max Oral History Interview, March 18, 2015. Interview by Andy Wilkinson, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses almost 6000 oral history interviews dating back to the late 1940s. The historians who conduct these interviews seek to uncover the personal narratives of individuals living on the South Plains and beyond. These interviews should be considered a primary source document that does not implicate the final verified narrative of any event. These are recollections dependent upon an individual's memory and experiences. The views expressed in these interviews are those only of the people speaking and do not reflect the views of the Southwest Collection or Texas Tech University.

Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

Consult the Southwest Collection website for more information.

<http://swco.ttu.edu/Reference/policies.php>

Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: interview recorded in multiple parts; combined for transcript

Recording Notes: Noises not directly related to the interview have been omitted from this transcript.

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews:

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: Elissa Stroman

Transcription: Elissa Stroman

Editor(s): Jason Rhode

Final Editor: Andy Wilkinson

Interview Series Background:

The Crossroads Artists Project encompasses interviews conducted by the Crossroads of Music Archive Staff members. They hope to document the creative process of artists and songwriters from all across the Southwestern United States.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Max Evans, who discusses his early life, the culture of the West, and his experiences in World War II.

Length of Interview: 04:10:46

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Recollections of family history prior to Max's birth	5	00:00:00
Max's childhood in West Texas and New Mexico	8	00:13:59
Horse Drive with Cowboy Boggs	15	00:33:18
Moving to the Hi Lo Country	22	00:51:20
San Cristobal, Glorieta Mesa, and Mother Young	25	01:00:39
Influence of J. Lee Smith, principal of Andrews High School	29	01:11:43
High School and First Marriage	32	01:20:33
Experiences with coyotes	35	01:27:43
Joining the Army in World War II	39	01:37:48
Involvement in the Invasion of Normandy and beyond	41	01:41:55
Injury and avoiding the Battle of the Bulge	52	02:10:23
Interest in art prior to the war, parental support	55	02:17:50
Grandmother Swafford and her/Max's gift	57	02:23:00
Grandfather Swafford, Max's father	64	02:44:00
Max's recollections of Lubbock	68	02:57:45
Lubbock and the region's acceptance/support of its residents	70	03:02:58
On writing his latest book, <i>King of Taos</i>	73	03:13:55
Walt Sheldon, influential writer/friend	77	03:22:47
Creating art in the rural west, Luz Martinez	79	03:27:58
Reading habits, cowboys, and creativity	81	03:33:07
Curiosity, creativity, and space	82	03:37:57
Meeting Dal Holcomb and later Woody Crumbo	91	04:00:05

Keywords

The West, ranching, writing, art, cowboys, World War II

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Okay. This is March 18, 2015. Andy Wilkinson here with Max Evans at his beautiful home on Ridgecrest. I'm going to put it right here so it will get us both. Go ahead and talk just a little bit.

Max Evans (ME):

Okay. Can you hear me good, Andy?

AW:

Yeah. I can see that the lights are working on it, and it's recording perfectly well. We, of course, had-- I heard a great Hugh Cabot III story before I got the recorder turned on. But maybe Hugh Cabot will appear again. Or Dolona Roberts that we were talking about. There are a whole lot of ways that we could approach this, Max. One of the great things is that you've written a lot of your own story into the various things that you've written over the years. And so, we don't necessarily have to re-cover all that. but I would like for you to talk a little bit about your growing up around Ropes and Andrews. We had talked about that just casually, you and I, for some time. And I think there's more that could maybe said about that—I think it's very interesting.

ME:

Well, yeah. And I appreciate, Andy, you bringing up because I thought of it this morning myself that I can refer, for instance, I did a story for a collection of mine called "For the Love of a Horse." Most of my adventures at Humble City in Lee County are in that story. And that story is called "Cricket," the name of my first horse. And my mother bought it for me when we had moved to Humble City, a little town. So I'll do that all through this, if you don't mind. I'll refer to those places [if] anyone ever might accidentally want to find out a timeline of my dumb life. (laughs) They can do it through the books themselves already.

AW:

(laughs) Right.

ME:

Now I might as well start out with what I remember about my family before I was here. They had a ranch, my grandfather, J.R. Evans, had a little ranch out of Irving, Texas. And my father, W.B. Evans, was born there in 1900. That's when he was born there. And Lloyd, the other brother, and Roland, and they grew up there on the ranch, and he somehow or other decided to drift on in his own way to West Texas.

AW:

J.R. did?

ME:

Yes. J.R. So he moved the cattle and the family over to Archer City, and they had a home there and a little ranch as the boys grew up. And a daughter was born—their only daughter of that family, “Aunt Pearl” I called her. And then the next thing I recall them talking about was, on their way—they came in a wagon and team with the cattle, and the boys and J.R. and my grandfather herded the cattle. And the daughter, Pearl, and my grandmother drove the wagon. And she was pregnant with my Uncle Slim, Robert Ion Evans, I-o-n. And he became later a noted bronc rider, rancher, rough-rider all the way from Mexico to Montana. But he was born on the way out here in a dugout on what’s now the Matador Ranch. I do not know if the Matador had been formed, but I know it’s one of the most famous ranches to cowboys in the world. And that’s where he was born, old “Slim” Evans he became known as. He was “Tex” and “Slim” and “Ion,” but it’s just according to what part of the West he was in. So anyway, they moved on to Lynn County Texas, and my grandfather acquired a ranch there, and they were getting established -- I assumed that would be about—somewhere between 1915 and 1916. But they had established their ranch. They had, like everybody did, you’re running 150 head of cattle, you got a big family and everything. But they had mules, they farmed a little for feed, they had chickens, pigs, they butchered, they did everything that people did in those days—and even in my early days—to survive. And they were building up a good ranch, and it seemed that everybody was happy and that was permanent. He was preparing to try to spread out, and the elder son, Elbert, went into the army, went to France in 1918, and that same year they had the great blizzard. That year changed the direction of the Evans family and, coincidentally, me—forever. That blizzard wiped out everything they had. I think they had the two mules; they didn’t even have the hog. My uncle Lloyd, who spent most of his life around Levelland, Morton, and that area—he told me one time, he said, “The strongest memory of my life is when we were trying to figure what was left of that blizzard, and I see the back of this hog, frozen solid. This huge hog, our meat for the winter, frozen solid in a snow bank.” And the youngest boy, Bernard, his memory to me was this: he said, “This is why I became a merchant, this scene. All we had left that we could get any money out of was to skin the cattle.”

AW:

And sell the hides?

ME:

Yeah. And [he] said, “I’ll never forget seeing those hides on the fence, drying, just as far as I could see.”

AW:

Wow. So the whole herd.

ME:

The whole herd. Everything. It wiped them completely out. And then their boy, their eldest son, which in those days, and for twenty years after that, the eldest son was looked up to just like the parents, because when the parents started getting old, which was early in those days, the eldest son took over and ran everything until he got a place of his own. And then the next eldest son—that was the rhythm of life they had to perform to survive. But then Elbert was killed in France in World War I. Right at the time they had had this—he did miss the blizzard. He missed the wipeout of the family, but he got wiped out. So, they gathered whatever it was they had left and one thing and another, and he probably had some money in the bank, because they moved from Lynn County to Ropes, Texas. And Ropes in those days was one of the great—as you know Andy, you lived there, you lived there all of your life, you know it—Ropes was one of the great cattle shipping points, at the end of the railway. And they came from all over eastern parts, far Southeastern New Mexico and West Texas to ship cattle there. And that's how Ropes, the little town, was established. Well, my grandfather decided that he would establish a town, and he drilled the first water well they ever had there—city well. Got the tower built. He—

AW:

In Ropes?

ME:

In Ropes. He eventually had the first brick building, which only fell down about ten years ago.

They tried every way in the world to preserve it. It was known as the Evans building. And he established a mercantile. And the boys—they had decided, the boys, that they wanted to be under the influence of their father, that they wanted to be merchants or traders or something like that.

They had suffered enough in the cattle business. Well it didn't quite work. Old Slim, all he ever wanted to do was ride broncs his whole life—he loved it. He cowboyed his entire life. And then Roland, one of the other boys—a middle boy, his son did the same thing. And I almost did it. So the cowboy never did leave the family, but the merchant—then Lloyd became a grocer and a merchant, a very successful one in the little town of Morton. In Ropes, he was a grocer there, at that old hotel. One side of it on the bottom was his grocery store. And Roland had—they still had attached [themselves] to cattle—they kept cattle to butcher themselves. So Roland butchered the cattle for them; he became a really hell of a butcher. So they had everything going in the merchant world. They were very successful. People respected them. I remember this. At one time they said the whole baseball team—in those days, a baseball team was about all they could afford in local sports. A bat and a ball and gloves. You didn't have to spend lots of money. The whole team was Evans boys. The Ropes team. So it's true. Five of them were; four of them were brothers, and their nephew was the pitcher. So five out of the nine were Evans boys. (coughs). Excuse me please. But anyway, my dad, I guess, was just born to be a trader and an adventurer and a developer, because he tried to do a housing development at Ropes. But before that, he had decided that Hockley County had to be organized. And they loved that part of the world—

Lubbock and all that part of the world there. And so he and my mother organized Hockley County in a wagon and team.

AW:

Now, he did he meet your mother?

ME:

They had moved there; her family had moved there from Oklahoma, and her father was—they were Swaffords.

AW:

Oh, so that's how you are kin to Jim Bob [Swafford].

ME:

Yeah. We're cousins. And I don't how much—all kinds of Indian. He ran it down here a while back, and one thing we know, both of us are a sixteenth Choctaw on that side of the family. But unbeknownst to me, my dad met my mother there in school. She was going to school, and married her there. In the history of Ropes, what little history there, you'll read where a young entrepreneur W.B. Evans started a housing development in Ropes (laughs). You go there now and you wouldn't believe it, but he did that all over the country—everywhere he went, he'd develop something. And so they had a house there he had built, part of his development over on Roundup and Timmons Street, which you've been to, and we've been to together, I believe. And that's where I was born. And they had lost a kid before me; they had a boy born. So I assume that they did—since I was born 1924, they probably built that home, I'd say, in 1921. Because they had their first child there, and it died right after birth. My dad buried, in fact, out in the backyard.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. It's still there. And then I was born there. And at that time, they had cattle there. They had chickens and hogs. Everything. Everybody did that. It was all tied—they had the mercantile, they had their—one of the boys was developing the grocery store, and my dad was developing all kinds of things. Anyway, they formed that county, and my granddad was the first elected judge ever in Hockley County. And then he was also, he was elected again, and then I think that's the limit he could run, so he ran for county commissioner, and he was elected county commissioner. But they voted whether Ropes or Levelland would be the county seat. And my family, of course, scoured everywhere—all the little farms and ranches were so few in those days, in that part of the country—for votes. And they lost by nine votes.

AW:

By nine votes.

ME:

Otherwise the county seat would be at Ropesville. Change the whole makeup of the area and era as far as that goes. I do remember that I thought that Lubbock, Texas was the biggest town in all the world. (laughs) I thought New York City or London or Paris weren't even in it. (laughs) But the first cognizant—really obviously imprint in my mind was in Roswell, New Mexico. And this morning I was thinking about it because I wanted to be sure I told you this. The first thing I really remember with total clarity is a box kite flying. My dad had moved to Roswell for a purpose—he was going to build houses there and get a piece of land between Hobbs and Lovington and build a town, because in his visionary mind, Hobbs and Lovington would eventually grow together. And all of his town would be part of one town, and he'd be right smack in the middle of it. So he had found this ranch land there; it ran there between Hobbs and Lovington. Anyway, the timing or the money or whatever it was hadn't quite worked out. So he built houses in Roswell and profited from it, to buy that land between Hobbs and Lovington. But I remember, my first clear memory of the world, we lived out on the edge of that town is all I know—was seeing a box kite flying above. And it was a wondrous thing to me, I thought. I obviously had knew what kites were, because I thought, "Oh my god, the string broke." And I took off, trying to follow that kite. It was a big beautiful kite; it was like you see, you've never seen a 727. All of a sudden you look up—

AW:

There it is.

ME:

—in the sky. It's even more important to me than that, it was just a magic thing. And I remember, my mother had to run me down. (laughs) My dad was off building houses. But I remember that quite well. And then I remember her telling about me; they found me one time—and I can sort of remember that too—that I would go around the neighborhood and gather up papers where they'd throw them out. And I'd stand on the corner and peddle papers. (laughs) And I was yelling "*Denver Post!*" or whatever the hell the paper was.

AW:

So you had a little of the merchant in you, too? (laughs)

ME:

Yeah. (laughs) Anyway, my dad got that land there, and the drought and all that was going on. And the cattle—he borrowed [in] 1928, he closed on the land—let's see, it'd be the east end of that land, it crossed the highway on both places there. The sign's still there. Humble City. It's—

on the highway. But it crossed there, and the east end of it, he saved back for his sister, my Aunt Pearl, who had five little stair-step girls by then. Her husband had been killed working on the windmills—sucker rod fell some way and brained him. So there she was, a widow. So that's what started me cowboying. She had this little place there, and it had grass, but hardly anybody had grass. The government had come in there and bought all the rancher's cattle for ten dollars a head, dug holes, and pushed them in it. I don't know how all this happened, nobody else does, but she had some grass. There was a good well; I do remember that. I can just see that water pumping out of that windmill—there was a windmill on it, he put a windmill on it. My Dad somehow got a windmill on it. She gardened, and she had these little bunch of cattle: milk cows and beef cattle. Well, the girls were just too young and too inexperienced to take care of them. And my mother had bought me a little horse and a saddle. And it was the sorriest saddle that ever was; I thought it was the greatest thing. Hell, I had an old rope for a reins, but that little old horse—I don't know where she got it, but it was a real little cow horse. And it became a turning point in my life, because she bought this for me—she was the postmistress there. What she made out of that post office at Humble City had to be just pennies, but she somehow got me this horse and saddle. And then my dad informed me that I was to take care of my aunt's cattle. So there I was, I was out there driving her cattle, and these things are really clear in my memory—driving her cattle around, looking for grass, weeds, or trying to take them anywhere they could find—

AW:

How old were you?

ME:

Hell, I was four years old when she got me the horse!

AW:

Yeah, that's what I was thinking. (laughs) I was counting up here and thinking, well you're just four.

ME:

(laughs) four years old!

AW:

So you were punching cows at four years old.

ME:

I know it sounds impossible, but by God, that's what happened. And in fact, there's a picture of me on that horse when I was about nine.

AW:

The one where it was when you took it to Lubbock?

ME:

Huh?

AW:

When you took it to Lubbock, that picture?

ME:

Yeah. Yeah. And then later, as I told in the "Cricket" story on Cricket that I wrote, you can find out in there, when my dad had to sell everything, '29 crash hit the America, and the drought was on, and of all the times—I believe his little town would have been fairly successful. He was—

AW:

Yeah, just the wrong time.

ME:

But he had everything in the world working against him. By the way, he pioneered a lot of things there. A lot of people claim it's different, but I was there as a little kid and watched it. He dug a well, and he was probably the first irrigation well ever dug in that part of the country.

AW:

In Humble?

ME:

Yes sir. And his first crop—he took me over to Hobbs on an old flatbed truck is all I remember. And we had watermelons and strawberries that I really remember, because he had me take those boxes of strawberries and I'd go up and knock on the door and a big box of strawberries for a nickel or a dime, whichever one I could get. And watermelon was a dime. And it sounds so silly that that was really money, but it just—pennies were money.

AW:

But a nickel in those years was worth a lot more than a nickel is today. (laughs)

ME:

Oh yeah. And I remember those things really clearly. I also remember something that deeply impressed me. They put in a motion picture house at Hobbs after they hit oil down south of there. A little money coming into the town there. And they had—by the way, it was there, still there twenty years ago. I don't know if it's gone or not. That same theater.

AW:

Do you remember the name of it?

ME:

I did, but I can't now.

AW:

Next time I'm through, I'll look for it. It's bound to be pretty identifiable.

ME:

That old Jim Harris might remember, because I showed it to him one time. He's done so many things, I don't know if he'd remember or not. But I remember as if it was right now- -getting a dime, a whole dime, to go to that movie. A movie. And I remember sitting in there, and the lights were on— and old lights, electric lights, whatever they were. And I looked up the ceiling and they painted the ceiling blue and they had stars up there. It took me a little while to figure that they made those stars out of tin foil, you know—

AW:

So they shine?

ME:

—taking gum wrappers and things. And I thought, "Oh man, what magic." And then here this thing comes on the screen there. I can't remember the movie, you'd think I could. But that that'd be something I'd never ever forget. But I was in such awe, that I could suddenly look and see all this, and then the lights go off and then all of a sudden I look over here, and there's people moving on the wall. All these magic things taking place. And that impressed me my whole life. I've been a movie lover ever since that moment. (coughs) Excuse me. But it was a wondrous time. When people were going hungry and struggling and everything, I just loved every second of it. I didn't know. You see, you don't know—you don't know what your folks are going through. All the people around you. To me, I'm just having great adventures.

AW:

Yeah. Do you remember anyone showing you how to ride a horse, or how to put the saddle on? I mean, you're four years old. How in the world do you—

ME:

Yeah, there's an old guy down there, there's a little old grocery store down there. And his two sons were still trying to keep their ranch. (laughs) My dad had talked him into putting in this little grocery store, which we actually had pretty good business until then. Finally everyone just got so broke. But his two sons were still cowboying, and one of them—I just remember this

faintly—over by the grocery store, he showed me how to throw a saddle and one thing or another. But they were out of business too; they didn't have any—their cattle were gone. I don't know how those people—and the only guy that I remember was a guy named—that was successful to hold things together near there—was a guy named Hobbs Simpson. And I'm amazed that I can remember his name.

AW:

Hobbs Simpson.

ME:

Hobb Simpson. And he was out—he had a little place out—now, let me get this right—southwest of Humble City. And I remember damn well two terrible things and two beautiful things. I remember that I could ride up there to their little old horse tank, just before noon, and make out like I was just there watering my horse and I'd just hang around until they invited me in for fried chicken (laughs). I'll never forget: the best damn fried chicken I've ever had in my life. I thought I was really getting away with something, you know. She knew exactly what I was doing, riding up there. And then I got friends with that kid, he was my best friend. I can't remember his name. Maybe it'll come to me.

AW:

He would've been Hobb's son?

ME:

Yeah. Yeah. I remember one time he took both of us to Hobbs with him, you know. And he actually bought us a candy bar. We split it in half. And that was a grand trip. But another thing I remember: evidently, I was helping them do chores, and this old milk cow, he was milking and that old milk cow had a stub tail. And she kept swatting him with that tail. And later he had tied a rock or something on her tail, thinking she wouldn't be able to swing it. She swirled that rock and hit him in the side of the head, and he got up and got an axe and killed that milk cow, right in front of me. Just chopped—split her head, just wide open. That was the first time I realized there was things in the world besides brawn. (laughs)

AW:

In that poorer time, that was a pretty big gesture—to kill your milk cow.

ME:

Well, and I think back on it as a terrible gesture, because that milk cow was absolutely a part of their survival.

AW:

Right.

ME:

But I remember them holding on when other people just couldn't hardly hold on. Just somehow or other, he had a little patch of feed and things and their milk cows and they raised chickens, and they held together. I thought they were—I went out there one time, and I don't know how in the world this happened, it just [was] another adventure you remember. I don't remember what time this was, but I just decided to stay all night with them. And I was always out roaming pastures and hunting for rabbits and stuff to feed the family—help feed them. And I knew how to run rabbits in the hole, how to twist them out. And I learned every trick to survive, just about, that there was—which came in real handy later on in Hollywood. (laughs). I used all those tricks—

AW:

Well, I bet you had to chase a lot of rabbits in Hollywood. (laughs)

ME:

You bet. They're hard to twist out of their hole, I'll tell you. (laughs). Anyway, I remember my dad riding a mule, out there to get me, bring me home. I guess I'd stayed two or three days or something. Dad brought me home, made me come back home. But it was grand adventures, and I was really proud of the story I did called "Cricket." The history of all that, and the things that we did to survive, is in that story. Now, what's tied to the town your soul's in—Lubbock -- that's where my dad went when he finally went broke in Humble City and sell the horse. And everything he had.

AW:

Sell your horse?

ME:

Yes. And it's in the story in "Cricket"—how I felt about it. And this is unforgettable, because this was a regular sale, once a week, they had there in Lubbock. And people would sell cows, horses, and all kinds of things. It was a big thing for people in the Plains country. They would come from all over the place. I don't know where it was located; I was just a kid. But I remember only too well, all the people around and the cattle and horses, and I dern well remember my feeling. Because my dad, he said—he gives me a little talk, that's all. He said, "You got to make that horse look good 'cause they're going to want to know—it's the only way we're going to get any money out of it, is if you show what a real little horse it is." So I demonstrated—that little sucker was really fast, you had a hell of a rein on it, and it broke my heart, but I went out there and made him work like a jewel. And my dad got a chunk of money

out of that little old horse. And somebody that really got us started again. But it broke my dern heart.

AW:

I imagine.

ME:

It just broke my heart. But I thought, "Well, this is what you've got to do in the world." And it was good for me to have to lose something.

AW:

And you were about nine at that time?

ME:

Let's see. I'd be—I guess I was nine or ten—I guess I was nine, because the next year is when he set up that horse drive that I wrote about in my novel *My Pardner*. And there is an old cowboy and he was—I'm going to go back later in this, and tell you a thing I saw him do at Ropes. But in the story, I didn't know this cowboy. He's one-eyed, and in the story, I didn't tell about, he was also one-eared. But I didn't tell how he lost the ear, because I witnessed it. It threw my story off, it became too much, so I fixed—I cut that out in my story *My Pardner*. A little book that a lot of people have loved—especially in Hollywood, they went crazy over it for years. They never did get it made, but they spent a lot of time and money and love on it. Well anyway, he took me down outta Jal [New Mexico] there, way down in southern Lee County. And he had bought some old starving horses down there. And he and his uncle Pitt Emery, he was from Lubbock Texas, he had already moved to Lubbock. He was an auctioneer. And Uncle Pitt's what we all called him—he'd be my great uncle, on my Evans' grandmother's side. He was an Emery. And he lived in Lubbock, Texas. So what they had done, they had gone up to Guymon, Oklahoma, around in that area there somewhere. And they had some good rain, and they were out of horses, and they were going to need—in my dad's mind and his uncle's mind—that they set an auction. And they were going to have all kinds of stuff up there to sell. Well, he introduced me to old Boggs (laughs), he was already a sort of strange hero of mine. I didn't know him—I watched him do something there at Ropes. We'll go back to that really—just here in a few minutes. And he gave me three dollars and I thought—he said, "This cowboy here—" He told me, you know, I obviously don't remember or anybody else, the exact words. But the whole thing was, he gave us both instructions that we were to drive those horses and get feed for them someway and make them look better than they did—to Guymon, Oklahoma.

AW:

From Jal?

ME:

Yeah. On a certain date.

AW:

That's a long way.

ME:

That summer. Yeah, I mean especially if you zigzag all the way about—

AW:

Looking for grass.

ME:

—across the heart of Texas looking for grass and stuff. To feed for ourselves. And I thought, well, this is a strange thing. This guy is a cowboy, and I know he is one hell of a bronc rider because I had seen things happen. But I just played to the game, like I didn't know him. But I thought, "he doesn't have a saddle, he doesn't have nothing. He just got a bridle, and here I've got the only saddle." You know, I thought that was all strange, but kids were not supposed to say anything. You were just supposed to observe and do what the hell you were told. So I tried to do that, and he's riding bareback. And I thought, "Oh Lord." So anyway, I don't remember how many days, it wasn't very long, he got off and made me the saddest speech. He said, "Look at me," I remember that part. "How bowed my legs," he said, "that's what happens to you with saddles. Saddles make your legs like that. so you better let me have the saddle."—

AW:

So your legs won't get that way. (laughs)

ME:

And I gave him the saddle; I rode bareback all the way to Guymon, on one of them old skinny horses. (laughs) But anyway, we stopped in Ropes. We zigzag there. I never forget the hotel and the restaurant. He pulled the oldest trick ever known; it was brand new to me. But he ordered us a meal, and he ordered himself a cup of coffee. I didn't drink coffee; I don't know why I didn't, I just didn't; little old kid I guess, I don't know. But anyway, he complained—the oldest trick, I found out later, in the world—he found a fly in his coffee, and got out of paying for the—

AW:

For the meal? (laughs)

ME:

Yeah. And he went around there playing out like he's blind, getting money off of people. And didn't have any damn money. And I thought, "Lord God, what is happening to me?" And then we, over there somewhere close to Lubbock, there was a farm, and there's still lots of grass country there, but there was a farm there. And my dad knew this guy. And I remember him telling Boggs, says, "You be sure and stop there—this guy owes me some favors, and you can pick up some feed for the horses there. He's always got lots of grain." And I remember him talking like that. Well, we did, but old Boggs wouldn't get off the horse. He made me go to the door. This is unforgettable in my little mind. And I went up to the door and knock and knock and I'm really thrilled, you know, this is a really great friend of my dad's. Finally the door opened just a little, and the woman just looked out the crack of the door. And I told her who I was and what my dad had said, and she said, well, her husband wasn't there, so we could go out with the hired hands. Well, it was my first experience about racism things. They had a shack out there, and the colored—the black people lived there. A family, it was a family of them that worked for them. You know, it was probably the reason for the success of that farm. And they treated us, I never will ever forget this, if I live a thousand lives. We slept on the floor in that little old shack, but they treated us so beautifully.

AW:
—the hired hands?

ME:
They had three kids, or maybe four little kids, and they were just grand. I played with them; I don't know what the hell I played with them, I played a game with them. And she cooked us supper and we slept right there on the floor. So then, somehow—I wanted to stay there (laughs). I just remember that. I didn't want to go back on the road. But old Boggs got me up, and he had—I don't ever remember seeing the man of the house. I'm sure he went out and met with him, but I just a little kid—I was having fun with the other little kids. And anyway, we get off a ways, and he got two half sacks tied together, and half sacks hanging over one of them old horses. And I thought, asked him "What's that?" He said, "That's grain. I stoled it. That S.O.B. back there." (laughs) So we had a little grain for our horses at night. Anyway, it was one tremendous drive, zigzagging. We dern near got drowned over there at that Canadian River. It came a flash flood, and we lost one horse.

AW:
You were going into—where'd you cross the Canadian?

ME:
I don't know.

AW:

Yeah. I was just wondering what your path was.

ME:

I don't have any idea.

AW:

But you lost a horse?

ME:

Yeah. We lost an old mare. She never would have come out of that, I don't think, anyway. She just didn't—and he had somehow managed it, they actually had put on a little weight. I mean he stole enough—

AW:

(laughs) It was that grain.

ME:

Yeah. And to my great surprise, we got off up there in a little old town called Stratford, I believe. (Andy affirms) And how all this part happened, I don't know, but I remember he pitched baseball for that home team there, and really was a hell of a pitcher.

AW:

With his one eye? (laughs)

ME:

And his arm—he threw his—I didn't what you called it in those days. But they said he threw his arm out in the seventh inning. He couldn't finish the damn game. And I don't remember whether Stratford lost it or not, I forget what I put in the story. But well, then the next thing that comes into my mind, was a little slight hill we were going up, and by gollies, we got there in time. We were only about an hour before that—just like you'd do it in a movie.

AW:

Wow. Yeah.

ME:

Before the sale. And I remember all those people gathering around those Model T's and wagons and teams. And then the next memory that comes about that trip, which affected my whole life and a lot of other people indirectly because it was successful—they got some money. My uncle, and he had a bunch of kids there at Lubbock. One of them, finally, was the fire chief there. One of his sons, would be my cousin. I remember that we went back to Ropes. When we got to

Ropes, me and old Boggs were riding in the back of this flatbed truck or pickup or whatever you called them in those days. I just remember that. And he had promised me all that time that if I'd work and be good and everything, and using my saddle, that he'd buy me a really special present when we got through with this, because he'd get his salary. So what happened was, my uncle's grocery store—he took me over there to that old hotel there at Ropes, and he was going to buy me this special present. So I sat out on that porch they had at that hotel, and my uncle had the grocery store on the, it'd be the east side of it. On the bottom, and it had a drug store on the other side. And I sat out there, all anticipating my great present. I couldn't imagine, because he promised me so many times about this great present. So this little old pool hall down there, big vacant block and then there's a pool hall. And he just handed me this pecan bar—

AW:
Candy?

ME:
Candy pecan bar, and took off for the pool hall. And I thought, Oh well, if that's it, I love pecan bars, and the damn thing had worms in it. So I decided I'd kill him. And I meant it too. (laughs)

AW:
(laughs) So you were what, ten?

ME:
I was ten. Yeah. I decided I'd just kill him. And so—

AW:
Well, he'd earned it by then. (laughs)

ME:
Yeah. (laughs). So my uncle had an ice house right out there beside that hotel and in the back there was a—people would go out there and piss behind that out house. It got to stinking so bad, and muddying up everything. So he put a big old board out there. At least it wouldn't just run into the ground. And so I remember him saying he was going to hook up electricity to it. And I don't know whether that happened or not. But anyway, I don't know how—where my dad was—I have no idea. All I had on my mind was, I was going to get that sucker. And I waited one night for him—he was over there playing pool. And he came out of that pool hall. He was staying off down there somewhere like on towards Lubbock—about two or three doors down on that highway there. It wasn't a regular highway; well, it was a highway, but it wasn't paved and everything like it is now. And I picked—I thought, "I know what I'll do—I'll pick up that board, behind my uncle's ice house, and I'll just whack him in the back of the head with that board, and he won't see me." I guess he was drinking bootleg whiskey, because he was just stumbling

along. And I got that board up, and made a run at him—the board was so heavy, the urine had soaked in that board—I couldn't hold the board up. So instead of hitting in the back of the head like I intended and really doing away with him, I just hit him in the back of the shoulders. But it knocked him all to hell. And he disappeared.

AW:

Oh, he did?

ME:

Yeah. He didn't know who hit him. I figured it out later. He didn't know what—I guess he'd done so many damn things (laughs)—

AW:

He knew that whatever was catching up to him. (laughs)

ME:

He had it coming to him. He didn't know it was a little dumb kid had whacked him. I was sorry about it later, because I really loved him when I think back on it. He taught me a lot. He really tricked me into lots of dang things. But—well now I'll tell you, I'll run backwards here.

Somebody had a paint horse in that country there, had become a really famous bucking horse.

Nobody, you know, every country gets this—a horse that can't be rode. Ever part of the country did that. Well, that was that, there. So those stock pens that are now at the Ranching Heritage Institute, this word was spreading all over there, all the way to Lubbock, and all around. People coming, they're going—old Boggs—

AW:

Was going to ride that horse?

ME:

Yeah. But this was before our trip. This is why I knew about him, why I let him get away with things. But they eared that horse down, back in those days—had a blindfold on him, and a couple of cowboys eared him down. I got up on top of the corral there, quite a ways off, a big pen, just sitting there, to really anticipate this ride. Well, by golly, that old horse was what he said. I mean, he was a bucking sucker, but old Boggs was riding him. And that dang horse came right about three or four yards from me, right over the top of that cockeyed railroad fence.

AW:

That's a tall fence.

ME:

Big flank just flocked way off out there, and I thought they were both dead. A little old kid, I just thought, "Oh my god," I mean, I thought, and by golly—that old horse got up and old Boggs stumbled up and got back up on that sucker. And he started bucking down through the railroad track, and then for whatever reason on this earth, he just turned right down that railroad track towards Lubbock. And in a dead run, he quit bucking and he just run and he fell, like that. And I was the first one there, little old kid. I thought for absolute certain he was dead, but he had an ear torn off. It was quite off, he just pulled it off right in front of me.

AW:
Oh man.

ME:
So he taught me a bunch of things. (phone rings) I guess I better answer that.

AW:
I'll pause this.

Break in recording

ME:
But Andy, when I did this story, *My Pardner*, I thought: "I just can't tell—as wild as the story is, it's the truth." And I've had to subdue the truth; I've had to do that nearly my whole life.

AW:
Oh, I agree with you. Anytime, in writing songs or poems or plays, if you change the truth, it's to make it more believable.

ME:
Absolutely.

AW:
Because if you tell it like it really was, nobody will believe you.

ME:
That's the difference in people who write about—based on true experiences. Those of us who've had these experiences in their life, we do have to subdue our story. Where most other writers, I think, they're hampered by this. They haven't had these kinds of experiences; most of them really haven't. And they have to enhance their stories beyond what really happened. Where like guys like me and you, old Andy and old Max, we have to occasionally subdue them. And I really did have to subdue him. Because one-eyed, one-eared both. That just—

AW:

And a pitcher. (laughs) That may be the best part.

ME:

—was too much. But he was a great, great profound influence on my life, and he gave me that one story that I'm really proud of. Old Boggs. Never knew what happened to him.

AW:

I guess he never came back to Ropes. (laughs)

ME:

Nope. Not that I ever saw.

AW:

Well, sometime in this, you go up to the Hi Lo country, to your marrying aunt's piece of ground. Is that later?

ME:

Well, no. I went to the next—the next year.

AW:

The next year?

ME:

Yeah. I don't know how this happened, but I was over there with my—I spent so much time with my grandmother Swafford.

AW:

Now she was the one where the road turns, right there by the [cotton] gin?

ME:

Yes.

AW:

East of Ropes?

ME:

Yeah, east of Ropes. But my Evans grandparents lived—you and I tried to find a house. And I couldn't remember if it was still there. In and out—it would be north of Ropes. They had a really

fine house out there, little tank, and it had milk cows and things. My grandfather had a feed store down by the depot. And they had big corrals there where he and my uncle, his sons, kept cattle to butcher, to sell to the farmers and people around that area. So they had several businesses actually in the one. They had the mercantile, in the first brick building ever built there—the Evans building. And all those things are so much; it's all sort of a jumble. But one thing I remember, my, old Slim, my old cowboy uncle who never quit. He had gone off up here in New Mexico and all through this country up there—that's how I found out about Glorieta Mesa. He worked up there; he loved that sorry country up there, south of Santa Fe. And I was sitting there on the porch with he and my granddad—he somehow came down to visit with his daddy. And here was this great old big tall skinny cowboy, and I'm sitting there listening to him tell his dad about different parts of the country. And I'm sitting there on the porch and I got an old black dog. I always had a dog somewhere or other, I don't know where I'd gather these dogs. I started trying to brag on my dog, I could tell dogs were his thing. If I had had a horse over there, well that would have been a different thing. And anyway, I'll never forget it—hearing about that country up there, and I thought, by golly I want to go there. It got in my mind, listening to him tell his daddy.

AW:

Listening to Slim talk about it.

ME:

Yeah. And that just kept working on me. And I got to thinking about it—you know he talked about Indian ruins and stuff up there, and all of those kind of adventures I could imagine—well, they came true. But I finally told my dad, he was just fixing to move. It was done in Humble City. He was fixing to move to Andrews, actually. I couldn't remember that exactly for a long time. But, I told him, I said, "I got to go to the mountains." And he said, "Well I need you here. We're going to start a new thing down at Andrews, Texas." And I said, "Well, I just go to go to the mountain." So he saw I meant it. If he'd been a—always, it's known later, I knew what my dad was going through having to let me just take off like that. But then, I didn't realize what a gentleman he was being—what turmoil he was going through to turn me loose like that. But somehow he got me five dollars, and got me on a bus at Lubbock. I don't know how come I caught a bus out of Lubbock, but I did. And I had a little old suitcase, and I had one of those breakdown Model 62 Winchester .22's. And I really could shoot with that sucker. You could break them down in half and put them in a suitcase. So I thought, "Well, I don't know what I'm getting into. It doesn't matter; I can always make a living with this gun. There's no way I can't shoot a rabbit or a squirrel." And that really gave me confidence, because I was a dead shot. Just right on.

AW:

Now how old were you?

ME:

Well I was coming twelve—I was eleven. Let's see—it'd be the summer—June, July, August—it'd be late May. School was out, and just as soon as school was out, he took me over there somehow. I don't remember how he got me there. Whether it was that old flatbed truck or what the heck it was. But anyway, and I got a bus—and my suitcase and my little rifle, and I wound up in Lamy, a historical town now. I didn't know it at the time, of course. Years and years later I'd find out that's where Mable Dodge Luhan and all those—she'd go, she and old Long John Dunn that I did a book about—they'd go—she'd send him up there to Lamy to pick up her famous friends from back east.

AW:

Yeah, because that was the nearest railhead or rail stop to Santa Fe?

ME:

Yeah. And that was—I had no idea. I just got off the bus, and the roads would be real curvy, and I'd gotten kind of puny sick in my stomach. There wasn't any dirt highway then, down through there. Got off there in Lamy because he'd talked about friends he had there. Obviously, I had—

AW:

Who? Your dad?

ME:

My uncle.

AW:

Oh your uncle. Yeah. Slim.

ME:

And I had the names written down, two of them. So I got off and I had that little old suitcase and there was two or three business buildings there across from Harvey House. That was Harvey House then. One of them was a bar. I didn't even know what a bar was. And I walked in that bar, and there was a little guy behind it, and there wasn't anybody in there but him behind the bar. And I remember he was bald-headed and [he said], "What are you doing here boy?" you know, like—how does this little old kid walk in here? In this little old tiny town? And I told him, "I come here looking for—my uncle used to live here. Did you know him?" And I told him about him. He said, "Yeah, old Slim." Well then, he started—everything started being better. He said, "Well, what are you doing—just what are you doing here? Your uncle has gone up—Wyoming or somewhere." I said, "Well I'm looking for a—I'm going to get me a job, working on a cow ranch." He kind of grinned. Anyway, he turned in to be a wondrous human being. He was from

back east, and I didn't know it—a lot of westerners made fun of Yankees in those days. I didn't know that kind of thing. He just was a wonderful man. And he took me in the back room there, and he said, "My bedroom's over there." He had two or three rooms—big old rooms—and he said, "Here's a cot, you can sleep there." So he took me for three days, he took me and fed me over at the Harvey House. Man, it was the greatest meals I'd ever had. One thing I'll never ever forget for sure, is that right out of Lamy, it'd be to the northwest, is those hills rise up there, right out of town. Well, I thought they were just little hills because I'd seen those big mountains over there. So I decided I'd climb my first hill. I like to never got to the top of that thing. (laughs) I think you'd get to the top and then there'd be another part. I got back down there about sundown, and he said, "I was just fixing to send the dogs out after you." I said, "I've been climbing that mountain." He really laughed—it's just a hill to people there. But boy, it was my first mountain climb. Well sure enough, just like he said, on Saturday, the cowboys came to town to have drinks. And they came in the bar, and he introduced me to a guy named Pete Coleman.

AW:
Coleman.

AW/ME (together):
C-o-l-e-m-a-n.

ME:
And he was a fat—had a great big belly, which I thought was grand. And a moustache, just like I had seen in the movies—outlaws were in the movies. And it was his ranch, and he had married a semi-wealthy woman from back east when working on a dude ranch somewhere. And they had leased the end of what—the ranch is still there: the San Cristobal. Seventy-five to eighty thousand acres. I got to where I thought all my life, I still think that ranch is mine. I loved it. It had wonderful terrain, and the San Cristobal creek, and Indian ruins all over it. White face ruins are there; pictographs—everything I dreamed of is on that. Well, the very first day, morning, they had already—their lease was out, and here's how I was introducing to cowboys up there in that country. They put me on a cockeyed horse—gave me a saddle and a half-bronc horse. And we started moving his cattle up on Glorieta Mesa. Up.

AW:
Up?

ME:
Three days it took us to move those cattle up there. And he had—he and his wife—and oddly enough I can remember her name—Nancy. The Yankee girl. And they had bought this place up there on the mesa, in those days, I don't know what they call it now. They called it Haney Springs.

AW:

Haney Springs?

ME:

Haney Springs. And those springs made that San Cristobal creek. They came out all over that part of the mesas up there, and it fed down into this canyon and made that San Cristobal creek. The ranch is named after that, and it watered that whole ranch. It ran completely through that ranch, but they were at the headwaters where it formed. One of the few people that had springs up there, and water. Very rare. So, anyway—

AW:

Especially up there on top of a mesa.

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

Especially on top of a mesa. Yeah.

ME:

Yeah. It's just an amazing thing. It's just wonderful, and I started working cattle with them, and finally he told me, old Pete, after I'd been there about two months, and I thought, "Well, I've got to go back home in the fall." And he said, "Well, Max," he said, "I'd sure like to keep you on as a hand. You can stay here." Obviously, I had already told him I had to go back to—Andrews, it turned out to be Andrews, "Then I'm going to come back; I'm going to work it somehow. I don't know how, I'm going to come back—I want to be up here." And he said, well, what he hated to tell me was that they'd bought a place in Wyoming and this was just an interim thing, and they were going to move. And he said, "But I know a guy over here—south of here—old Ed Young. He's got a good little ranch, and he's a hell of a cowboy." And he said, "I'll introduce you to him. And I'm going to tell you in front, no kid's ever been able to work for him. He is *really* tough." And I realized, way later in my life, he was telling me the truth, but he was also telling me so, if I was going to chicken out, I could do it right then. Well dern if he didn't take me over there horseback to meet old Ed Young. And he had this little old ranch, but he ran a bunch of cattle. He had forest service and little places leased here and there. And he'd steal grass from San Cristobal; I learned we called it borrowed grass.

AW:

Borrowed grass?

ME:

So he ran a lot more cattle than he had land for. So sometimes there'd be two or three hands there, and sometimes there'd just be me. But two great things happened to me right there, just like Boggs, really altered my life. One of them was his wife, and her name—I never did know her name until four or five years ago. Her name was Lucy, but everyone in that country—on that great old sparsely-settled mesa, called her Mother Young—they had such respect for her. That was just her name: Mother. It was her name. Well, I respected her so that every night that I was working there, I'd chop the wood, I carried the dern water. They had a cistern and it wasn't—the well would've worked except we couldn't drink the water. The cattle could, but we couldn't. We had to either take rainwater, or we had to haul the water.

AW:

Gypsy. Was it gypsy water?

ME:

Yeah. And it was four hundred feet deep, I remember pulling that damn well, O, Lord. I got to hating windmills more and more than I could—a rattlesnake was a pet compared to that windmill. (AW laughs) She fascinated me; she painted pictures. She never had a lesson in her life.

AW:

She painted?

ME:

Yeah. And they were all over the house. She made the rugs—rag rugs; they were beautiful. And I thought—and the lamps she made out of—I used to have one of them—cactus stems. Those old tree cactus. She made lamps out of them, and hung a little kerosene lamp down there and painted the shades with western scenes on them. And I just thought she was the damnedest human being on earth. So I dried dishes for her every night of my time I was ever there. And I was there a lot of years, later, I mean, when I got it all worked out. And I got to admiring what women did to ranches and farms and stuff. My God, the men couldn't operate them without it. Got these strong women. And it really made me appreciate that, and I always tried to show in my writing later my respect for what women did—what they contributed to the west. He was tough, old Ed Young was tough. But once I had earned his respect, I had it all the rest of my life. Yeah, he was a friend until he died. Over at the town of Loretta; he sold the ranch and moved to a little town. You know where it is, over between Santa Fe and Las Vegas [New Mexico]. Over by Rowe—little town right by Rowe. Part of that mesa, by the way, was called Rowe. What I didn't ever know.

AW:

Really? Spell Rowe.

ME:

R-o-w-e.

AW:

And I didn't know it was part of that—

ME:

Yeah, it was part of that Glorieta Mesa. We just called it "Glorieta." The Secretary of Agriculture's grandfather was my friend there, and he called it "Rowe Mesa." Secretary of Agriculture of the state now. All his folks were up there. But it was a grand adventure for me, and I had all kinds of rough cowboying and scheming to live. And I couldn't of had a better beginning. You know, I had people who respected me, and did them. So then I worked it out, I really worked it out. I loved Andrews; I was torn. I just loved it, and my dad—he had a store there, a mercantile again.

AW:

What did you love about Andrews?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

What did you love about Andrews?

ME:

You know, it's just the people. It's the best bunch of damned people, and they all believed in their town. I liked how they just loved Andrews. Their school, everything they had. They were appreciative. It was just a great place, and then it had adventures in the sense that the booms were fixing to start. The first oil boom. And there's always a little oil there, but they hadn't had these booms. They hadn't hit that deep pay and everything, and at Shafter Lake, you know how rare water is in that part of the world. And every now and then, there's water out there in Shafter lake, and that was a grand thing. And then right up on the hill to the southwest of there, I had heard they'd had a big Indian battle out there. And so what little time I had spent there to get off in years to come, I went out there. And they really had—I found these cavalry cartridges, whatever they were, all over that place. Buttons and—I had a collection of them once—I gave them to some guy down there at Andrews. But anyway, I found out that the one thing they love more than anything in the world is football. And I could run with that damn football, and I could kick it—what they had to call the "coffin corner"—it was a goal, and that was a prominent phrase back in those days.

AW:

Yeah, because that really set the other team right back in their own back yard.

ME:

Oh yeah. And so since we didn't have too many players—the big boom hadn't started yet—I found out, time I was a sophomore, that I could do kind of what I wanted to do. So I was—well, let me start backwards real quick.

AW:

Sure.

ME:

Two things happened up there on that ranch at Rafter EY, it was a ranch. Ms. Young had inherited some Balzacs and some other European classics, and they never read them. But her aunt had left them to her. Some aunt down there in north Texas, died and left her some stuff. Part of them was these books. I got to reading [Honoré de] Balzac, and I'm eleven, twelve, thirteen years old and I'm reading Balzac. So when I got to school there at Andrews, they had a pretty good library in the beginning; they had a great one later when the money started coming in from the oil fields. Well I started reading those classics, and there's a guy named J. Lee Smith who really influenced my life again.

AW:

Jay Lee?

ME:

J.

AW:

Just the initial, or—?

ME:

Yeah. Initial. L-e-e Smith. He was the principal of the school, and like everything there in West Texas in those days, he did all kinds of things. He was the assistant coach and he taught history and all kinds of things. He was principal of the school. (laughs) But he took a liking to me because I took him quail hunting once, and I had a little old .410 shotgun. He loved quail, and I really knew where, I could smell them out. And somehow or another I really impressed him on that quail hunt because I could really shoot. And he took a liking to me, and by golly, he worked it out. This is hard for people to believe in this day and time, but he worked it out for me—he knew something about me, nobody knew. J. Lee Smith. I didn't even know myself, but he saw

something in me. And he arranged for me to have time in that library when I was supposed to be in other classes, because he knew I was reading those classics. I don't know anyone in those school was doing it unless they were assigned. I remember being assigned Shakespeare. I know that (laughs)! And for a writer, I really didn't care much for Shakespeare. He was too much for me. But boy, old Balzac and Dostoevsky, a whole bunch of those old dang people, I just loved them. He arranged for, I could go up to the ranch, on Glorieta Mesa, after football season and spend the rest of the year and the summer and come back in the fall for the football season. And the first time he took me to the bus, he would go to the bus with me, and he would take a box of books, Andy, with him. He'd carry them down there for me, and he'd say, "You read these now, and I mean read them. So that you could even write a report on them. And when you come back to school, we'll work so we can get your grades." And that's how it happened. And it's an unbelievable thing. But football and J. Lee Smith allowed me to become a writer. It's just that simple. I don't know how in the hell else to put it, because (coughs) excuse me, unbeknownst to me, I was way, way ahead of most people who have designs of being writers, because I was reading the classics from the jump go. And I could really read. I had 20/10 eyesight. Believe it or not. That's why I could shoot, that's why—but that almost doomed me when I was a young man.

AW:
How?

ME:
Because I outshot everybody at the basic training.

AW:
Oh yeah. So that sent you to—

ME:
And the only way I didn't wind up as a sniper, dead in World War II, was simply because a regular army sergeant over there in Wales, when we went to test the carbine. I shot one point—you were assigned to somebody. You kept score on theirs, and they kept score on you, and it went into your records. And I shot one point from a perfect score, and I was doomed right then. I didn't realize it; I was doomed. I was going to be a sniper, and I wouldn't have lasted three days. And he changed the score.

AW:
Your partner?

ME:
The sergeant. He's a regular sergeant, so this is his career. It wasn't mine, I was just there because they had to be—to save the world, you know—how we all felt about that war. We really

did believe it. Honest to God, America believed it, young men of America and the young women—really believed—everybody believed it. My god, we could save the world, and he switched scores—cheated me, and kept me from being a sniper. (laughs) That's a strange irony, because he got shot right off.

AW:

Oh he wanted to be the sniper! (laughs) He wasn't doing it to help you.

ME:

No, he hadn't thought of that really. He just wanted to have it on his record—he was regular army. You couldn't blame him much. He knew how to—just a dumb little old kid from a cow ranch. All I wanted to do was get there and get back. I never did blame him much; I was proud of that score. I just really was. I shot the very highest that I think they'd ever had in that part—that division, second division (laughs). So J. Lee Smith, in his strange perception, for years and years I corresponded with him down there. He died and his wife—there's got to be a letter from her in that El Paso stuff, where she wrote me about J. Lee and how much he thought of me. How proud he was that—well, he's proud because he saw something that actually worked out to a degree. To him, I guess it was a big degree, it wasn't—to me it was just part of life. But anyway, that about wears me out for now. J. Lee was so important in my life. Mother Young, she gave me a whole other view point of humanity.

AW:

Before we stop it and get us a bite or whatever. Tell me about—watching her paint, was that part of what made you think about painting yourself?

ME:

You bet. And I was so amazed, because she just did it out of her heart and her soul. And they were pretty good. I wish—we had one, Pat and I did, that she'd given us after we got married there at the house. And I don't—I probably sold it, because I'd do anything to do up more painting and writing—sell anything. That's just part of life, too. And I have sort of one regret—I don't—regrets are the most wasted emotion on earth. But I'd love to have one of her paintings now, hanging on the wall here, to remind me of her. But she'd paint cowboys; it wouldn't be accurate, the horses wouldn't be accurate, but all their gear was, the feeling was, and you knew she was painting the truth. And that was a very important and influential on me as a painter—just paint what you feel. Sincerely, not talk about it, but just do it.

AW:

Well, you want to take a pause and go get a bite to eat?

ME:

Well, unless you've got a question you want to ask me.

AW:

Oh no. I thought you said you were tired, you were worn out.

ME:

No I'm just ready—

AW:

Oh, move on to another topic. Okay.

ME:

(laughs) Well, just what you want me to do here.

AW:

No. This is all just great stuff. I think it fleshes out some of the back part of the writings you've already done. But about—you graduated from high school then?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

You graduated from Andrews High School then?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

And did you go—that would have been about what year? Let's see, you were born in '24, so that would have been—that would have been during the war. Right?

ME:

Yeah. I came back. I never did stop to get my diploma, though. I can't think of his name, the superintendent of that school for years and years down in that country. J.D. Thomas. Not J.D. Thomas, but Mr. Thomas, I called him. J. [Lee] Smith was the principal. He had a son killed in the infantry in World War II; so even though he was kind of mad at me all the time because I was an outlaw, you know. (AW laughs) When I got back, he said, "You come over here and get your—you didn't come to the ceremony." I said, "You know I can't stand ceremonies." And instead of being mad, he laughed because he was missing his son. And I'd made it back. So we became real close. He bought two or three paintings from me for the school. They don't have

them anymore; one of the trustees for the school stole them, I found out—took them home with him. They're down there. Old Marvin Fisher. His father had a ranch out there, he struck oil, and he got real rich. So he became the boss in Andrews for a while. I guess he still is, until he died. But anyway, I found out he had my paintings. (laughs) I never did squeal on him.

AW:

Well, what I was getting at was that right out of high school, you enlisted in the army. Do you feel like talking about the army?

ME:

Yeah, I don't mind at all. Now, there's a—we have to run backwards here. There's so much happening in my young life. I had an aunt on my mother's side, Aunt Fay. And she was my marrying aunt. Okay, that's how my grandmother had that farm out there, paid for, right out of Ropes. One of her rich husbands bought that farm for her momma. She was also contributing to me because that was a grand time that I spent with my grandmother Swafford and all those Indian stories. And she made medicine for people all over Ropes and that country. They'd come to her. She was good; she really knew what she was doing. Well, anyway, I don't know whether it was second or third husband, but he had taken a little ranch up in Union County, New Mexico -- he'd never seen it; neither one of them had ever seen it—for a debt. They'd signed that ranch to him. So just before I'm ready to go to the army, she tells me—I didn't know then I was going, of course. I was still just a young man; that's why I didn't stop by to pick up my diploma -- she told me, "You know Max, you cowboyed up there in New Mexico. You like that kind of thing?" I said, "Oh, I dream of it." She said, "Harper," that was her husband—Dr. Harper—"Harper's got a ranch up there—a little ranch. We've never seen it. They say it's got springs on it. If you could dig up \$500, I'd sell you that ranch, and then you could just pay it out however you wanted to." I said, "My god." I told my dad about it—I said, "I got to get,"— so I went everywhere; I got \$500. I think my dad gave me \$100; I don't know where I got it, but I got the \$500. She would have given it to me; she just wanted to make me do this. You know, and it was hard to do, but I did. So I was up there on that little old ranch when I went to the army. I married my high school sweetheart. She was the daughter of—what do you call those guys?—pumpers—ride in the oil fields, they go check all the pumps all the time. Well she's the daughter of one of those oil field guys. And her name was Helen H-a—with an "e." Helene with an "e". Caterlin. Irish girl.

AW:

H-e-l-e-n-e?

ME:

Caterlin. C-a-t-e-r-l-i-n. She was Irish. Green eyed, red headed—bronze-headed. Anyway, I married her, and I was up there on that little ranch, and I just wrote her a letter and told her, to come on, "Let's get married." (laughs) Next thing we know, we've got a kid coming, and the war

is on and all that all at once, and here I go. I still got the ranch, though, I kept it. It started me in life.

AW:

Did she come back down to Andrews?

ME:

Huh?

AW:

Did she go back down to Andrews when you—

ME:

No, she stayed there in Lubbock with my folks, and part of the time over in Levelland with my uncle's family. And we had a little baby named Sharon.

AW:

S-h—

ME:

S-h-a-r-o-n, who di—she may still be alive. I doubt it, but she lived at Claude, Texas—up other side of—

AW:

Really?

ME:

Spent her life up there and married a guy named Byrd, who was a farmer, rancher, and had a cotton gin and—

AW:

Spell his last name.

ME:

Byrd. B-y-r-d. She had several children; I've got grandchildren and great-grandchildren, I'm sure, that I've never seen, all over West Texas.

AW:

I know a bunch of folks in Claude, and I know the Byrd name, but I don't remember if I met her or not.

ME:

We split up there at Des Moines. So I sold that other ranch.

AW:

After you got out of the service?

ME:

After the war. It just didn't work out. I'll tell you the truth, it was my fault. I was just too wild and crazy (laughs). It's simple as that. (coughs)

AW:

Well that happens to a lot of us.

ME:

And, not only did I love to drink and party, but I loved to run coyotes. Which wasn't much of a profession.

AW:

(laughs) No. Why did you love running coyotes?

ME:

Oh it's just the sight of those hounds stretched out there—the grace, there's a great beauty to it. Deadly, deadly, I know, but it's like all of life to me. It's like the war, like the whole world, there it is. It can be graceful and beautiful, and then boom—it's deadly. It kills you. It was just a grand adventure, watching those great graceful animals. And coyotes, I got to respecting coyotes more, and people still do—by the way. And I learned a lot about coyotes that most people didn't know in those days. And now a lot of people do—they've had a chance to study them. But it influenced—they influenced the rest of my life.

AW:

What about them caught your—

ME:

They are survivors beyond people.

AW:

Yeah, they are survivors.

ME:

That's what that painting is going to be about up there. The Navajo legend is the last living thing on earth that will ever be heard is the howl of a coyote. Everything else will be gone; that'll be the end of this world. That's their deepest legend. And I've always felt obligated to do it in some way. And I'm not going to have a coyote howling, but I've got to do this. It's moonlight. And that's why—

AW:

Well, you do so well with those night scenes, anyway—they're hard to paint.

ME:

I just—that came from way back there when I was running those coyotes and studying them. How they survived. I remember one night, me and my then-wife and little baby had gone to town, we shopped at Greenville then. We came back at night in this old pickup and it was a mile uphill from the country road into where our house was. And our barn and henhouse were all in the same old building. Out this side we were coming up that old rutted road at night, and there was a coyote that had gotten in that barn and had two chickens. Two of our precious chickens. He dropped one, and he just kept going with another one. He couldn't escape with two of them, but he had gotten two of them and he was trying to carry two of them. And I thought, my God in heaven, that sucker is feeding pups. You know. And just little things like that. I got to admiring their survivability, their cunning that they had. Just under any circumstances they adapt to—cunning—to a way of survive. Under any circumstances. And I know of no other animal that can actually do that. There's no other animal on this earth that I've ever been able to study that could adapt like a coyote. They're in Times Square—I mean in—

AW:

Central Park.

ME:

Yeah. Central Park now, you know, everywhere. And everybody's been trying to kill them; they've been trying to kill them all off in this state. So, by the way, with all that hunting and all that they taught me, I was on a hunt with an old hunting partner when I got to where I never would—never could ever kill another one. The rest of my life.

AW:

And why? What happened on that hunt?

ME:

Well, I wrote about it in that story, called "Old Bum."

AW:

“Old Bum?”

ME:

“Old Bum.”

AW:

I don't think I've read that story.

ME:

Well, it's based on the truth. An old hound dog that me and my old hunting partner found coming down the railroad track, and that's why we called him Old Bum. And he became an alcoholic (AW laughs) in this little old town. I found a picture the other day, which I'll show you someday when I look at it again, taken in that bar with one cowboy and three railroad men, squatted down there with Old Bum with a bottle of whiskey. He became kind of famous there in that little old tiny place. And anyway, we were off with Old Bum and two sets of our running dogs. So you could jump two, you have a chance of getting two coyotes. Me and that old man—he's lot—he's like a kid to me now, but then he was an old man. And we were whizzing out after that—all thrilled about this coyote hunt, and Old Bum was in there and these other two sets of dogs. And we jumped—we were chasing this mother and three pups—mother coyote and three pups. And we turned the dogs loose and they caught her. And they caught one of the pups. One set got a pup, another set got the mother. And we got to where we had to stop to pick up—had to run—he [Bum] couldn't run very much—his breath would go. So I'd just sort of slow down, and we were going to the kill. And one of those pups, I don't know what happened to the others—all of this was happening like lightning. You tell it, it seems like it was forever, but it just happened, boom-boom. Against all the laws of nature that has ever been heard of, that pup is supposed to escape no matter what. That's what they've been taught, and ran into them forever. Eternity, ever since the world was here. That pup stopped on the top of the hill and looked back. And then it came charging down and charged those hounds on top of their mother, just head on that pup, in a dead-on run. And one of those hounds turned loose, and caught it and killed it. And I saw that, and I could never go coyote hunting again. And all my cowboy and rancher friends would get pissed at me. They'd see a coyote; they'd try to grab a gun. I said, “No, goddamn it. Let him go! Let him go!” The rest of my life; I wrote about them—I could never kill another one, and I can't stand the thought of it.

AW:

Did you ever take one as a pet?

ME:

No. My neighbor did over there. He kept one for a year, right after—his son had also been killed. He was a friend of mine. And we made the last ride I ever made in that country, was with him.

We went supposedly coyote hunting. But we just wanted to be together. Because we were both going away. He didn't come back. He lived about six months in a huge cast and then died. So anyway, old Warny Rankin was his name. He was my neighbor—

AW:

Say that name again.

ME:

Warny W-a-r-n-y Rankin. He had found a pup in a den someway or other, and he had kept it there, and kept it tethered, and fed it, and petted it. And it just worked out—and I went by there one day—well, that's where I got my mail. It didn't come—I was isolated even from mail. But that was closest place for mail that they delivered. So I had gone over there to get the mail, and he said, "Boy, you came over just at the right time. Today's the day. Old—," what's it's called—I forget what they called him. He was petting that coyote. I'd see him lot of times, just gentle, and wag his tail like a damn dog. And he said, "We're going to take the tether off of him today. You're here; we'll just do it. We'll celebrate for you and old Daz." That was his boy that was gone. I never ever forget this. How could you forget a thing like this? Way out there in that old isolated prairie country—in rolling hill mesa country, he turned that coyote loose, untied that knot, and that coyote just took one glance at him, and took off in a dead run. Never ever looked back.

AW:

I was just wondering, you know I've never heard of anybody actually taming one and keeping it. But I saw a photograph of the fiddler Jess Morris, up there at Channing, you know, east of there—over in the Panhandle. But he always had a picture of himself made with whatever dog he had. He had a Boston terrier, he had—but there's one picture of him holding his fiddle and his dog sitting there on a table beside him in the studio, and I look at that dog and I look at it and I say, "That is a coyote. That's not a dog." It's at least half a coyote. And I just—I always—of course Jess Morris has been dead a long time, you can't ask him. But I always wondered if anybody ever—

ME:

I've never known it.

AW:

Yeah. Me neither.

ME:

Half-coyotes—you can train them for a while. And even just half, they'll still—they'll attack you or they'll—

AW:

Or they'll take off.

ME:

Desert you. But that sucker—it was a beautiful, magnificent thing to see really. Because he just took one glance only, and never, ever even looked back.

AW:

Wow.

ME:

Just ran over right over that hill and vanished.

AW:

Knew what his job was.

ME:

Yeah. (laughs)

AW:

Well, so, were you drafted into the service or did you join up?

ME:

No I joined up. They were going to draft me anyway, so I just joined up.

AW:

And where did you report?

ME:

At Santa Fe.

AW:

Santa Fe.

ME:

Yeah. I never will forget that because, Andy, when we moved here, the guy that drafted me was retired—an old colonel, Lloyd—just lived, oh, three or four blocks over here.

AW:

Oh really? From this house? (laughs)

ME:

Yeah. He knew this house. He used to come up to the house; he was a salesman after he retired from the army. He loved it because he'd get away; he'd go up to Taos. I forget what he sold, it didn't matter. But I met him, had drinks with him, got to liking him—old Colonel Lloyd. Well, I told him where I was moving, we'd bought this house and we were going to move. He said, "My God, that's just a few blocks from me." He's first guy, he came in here, we had another couch then, I don't know where that old couch over there. He came in with a bottle of whiskey, said, "Here's to the new house." (AW laughs) He was a grand old guy. Well here's what he did, though. I told him, I said, "I'll kill you, instead of taking a drink we ought to just kill you right now. You lied to me like a goddamn dog." I don't think he really remembered it. He made out like he did. But I said, "I asked you if I could get into the cavalry [inaudible]. If I just went ahead. And you told me that I could." and he started laughing, he said, "Well I had to lie to you because they were disbanding the cavalry while I was talking to you. The cavalry was down in El Paso and some place back east."

AW:

Didn't they still have a place in Fort Robinson, Nebraska? Because I know they cavalry there for a long time.

ME:

I don't know; he said they were disbanding the horses and turning it into mechanized cavalry. And he knew all that. And I said, "And then I get on the train over at Clayton, thinking I'm going to be in the cavalry, and they haul me off, and the next day I'm in the walking infantry." (laughs)

AW:

You're not even in the motorized cavalry. (laughs)

ME:

No. He just laughed. He said, "Hey, that was my job—get you guys that could walk in that army." I said, "You sure as hell did it."

AW:

Where did they send you to basic [training]?

ME:

Down by Fort Worth, there at Weatherford, Texas. I forget the name of it. Nearly everybody remembers everything about the army, but I don't. I had other things, I just doing it because

that's what I was supposed to do. But I had other things—painting and horses, always on my mind. Not killing Germans, but I did kill them.

AW:

Now at basic, did they send you straight over to Germany?

ME:

Yeah. I didn't have no idea—just a dumb old ranch kid. And they sent us right over. They were planning the invasion; they put us right into really terrible training there in South Wales. Hell, I [was] just there and the next day we were climbing goddamn mountains almost straight up. Those old Welsh mountains, they just go up like this. Man, it was really tough. But it made you tough. They tried to kill you off to make you tough enough to do that. And it sure worked, all right. But anyway, it's just fast as you could be. I'm at the ranch and the next thing I know I'm over there climbing straight up and down mountains, and shooting and firing mortars and everything else. And before that ever hardly got started, you're over there looking at a beach head.

AW:

So you were part of the invasion force.

ME:

We were the supporting division on Omaha Beach.

AW:

Oh, man.

ME:

And we lost two hundred men of our—my group didn't go in until the next morning. When the really heavy fighting was over. But what happened to us, which is just as bad a tragedy, turns out, we had lost—we had sent in—the division commander had sent in our engineers because they were having so much hell with all those iron spikes and things. So when we got there, and I'll never forget, you know, you could hear the artillery coming still, a little way off when the first shell hit, about a mile around this little canyon, around that, went up through that beach there. And then we found out the next day that we didn't have any of our heavy weapons. We had been assigned to take a town four miles and the crossroad that we had to take, they just told us, "We got to take it." It's a crossroads, and they got it, and we had no heavy weapons. Our engineers had all been killed. So we fought that artillery with rifles for four days.

AW:

My, that puts you at a disadvantage.

ME:

Yeah, it was really a tough go. You get to where you're so numb, you don't know what's happening. You just hear that, and that's all. We didn't hear our artillery; later, my God, I got as afraid of that as I was of the Germans. But we didn't hear it. We didn't have any. And somehow, we finally got artillery, I don't know how. And we got mortars, and I liked to fire mortars. But—anyways, it was really a go; we lost a lot of men. Bloody old go. But I thought, well, this is what we're here for. But every day, I can tell you this without any question, when I think back on it now, I didn't ever figure [I] would make it to sundown ever.

AW:

Any day?

ME:

Not one single day do I remember thinking I'd make it to sundown. So anyway, that's—we won. (laughs)

AW:

How long were you at Normandy, at the beach? How many days or months? What happened with your—

ME:

What happened was, we moved our men, and we hit those hedgerows. It's hard for you to understand about hedgerows. What they were, for a thousand years, there'd been farms there at Normandy.

AW:

And that was a fence essentially, wasn't it?

ME:

Yeah. What they did was they gathered all the rocks so they could farm, and then made huge fences around their farm out of it. just one after the other. And they were six, eight, ten, twelve feet, some of them, thick at the bottom. And they'd piled up like this. And over the centuries, the brush had just grown all in that, and made it just like a fort. Every damn farm was a fort.

AW:

Yeah, impenetrable, wouldn't it be—with the rocks and the brush.

ME:

And our bulldozers, our tanks couldn't knock them down, and our bulldozers couldn't even knock them down.

AW:

Would you have to use explosives? Or—

ME:

Well, what our tanks could crawl over, the infantry in those days, we had to have tanks every now and then—we just couldn't advance without them. They've got forts on all four sides of you. Everything is a fort. And the Germans had learned to dig holes in a corner, and they'd stick little ten, not ten—twelve-to-fourteen-year-old kids in there with a machine gun, where they could drape fire all over. And they'd fight to the death. They were there to die. They'd kill you. It was a hell of a place to be.

AW:

Oh yeah.

ME:

So they finally stopped us. And what the history books, for what reason—I never read it—I haven't read them in years. But I never read a history book that told the truth. They really had us about twenty miles in. And without—one thing Americans—only thing they had on the Germans was—they were more inventive. The Germans were regimented better; they were actually better soldiers per se.

AW:

Because they did like they were told.

ME:

Yeah. But they couldn't invent like the American mind. So there we were, and they're trying to figure, God on heaven! You know, their tanks just knock ours out. Our tanks couldn't fight them hardly at all, unless they happen to catch one from the side. So it was a hell of a mess, it looked like we were going to lose the war right there. But while we were stalled, we're just having artillery duels was what we were doing. I remember now firing mortars all day and half of the damn night. And they're coming at us the same way, and we just couldn't go. They're trying to figure how to solve this because at Saint-Lô, that city there was just like the beachhead. We had to take that city, we had to break through there, or this war was doomed. We're going to lose that damn war. Somehow we all sensed that. But there was just a buck sergeant, who was a mechanic in the tank corps. And he came up with this idea, well, let's get our engineers to go back and bring those spikes up here, and we'll cut those spikes, and make a triangle, weld them on here into a triangle in front of our bulldozers, and he said, "I think we can knock those—it'll break

through those rocks. Jar them far enough we can go through those hedgerows. If we can, well, then our tanks can go in without their soft underbellies being exposed.”

AW:

Yeah, because as soon as they went up like this, well, they were asking for it.

ME:

Oh yeah, you could almost knock one out with a rifle because of the soft underbelly. And by God, it worked.

AW:

I'll be derved.

ME:

Just an old sergeant. Why he isn't one of the great American heroes, I'll never know.

AW:

Do you happen to remember his name?

ME:

Oh no. I wish to God, I think about it. I don't ever think about that war except him. I think, good God, how did it—what the world owes to that one little old mechanical engineer—sergeant—plain old buck sergeant. Then our tanks would just go through it, and the infantry could follow without being totally exposed. And we started taking those hedgerows then, and we broke through at Saint-Lô, and we were next to the Ninth Division at Saint-Lô.

AW:

You were the Second Division?

ME:

Yeah. And we were right next to them. And they had the worst part. They had—there was a hill 192 [Hill 192] that the Germans had right out of Saint-Lô. And they had artillery spotters up there, and they had heavy artillery. And they're just knocking the shit out of us. And we only had to take the foothills of that thing, but that was bad enough. But poor Ninth Infantry, they had to go right to the top, and then knock that out there in order to break through at Saint-Lô. And we just had to—I didn't know any of this until later, but we really had it good. (laughs) We were just breaking through the hedgerows at the edge of town; they had to go through town. Where it had lots of snipers and everything else. But it was another terrible battle; God o-mighty. It was a horrible—just like D-Day all over again—more artillery. Another thing that there was that was unforgettable in your life, we knew what was going to happen that night, I don't know how

everybody knew. You just know things. It just goes somehow. You may not talk about it, but it goes. We knew the next morning was it. Well, I can almost guarantee you that every one of us never thought we'd make it to see lunch. And we're in that damn foxhole. But before that, I stood up there and I looked and I knew we were going to attack. We all knew it. And here's this line of planes from horizon to horizon, moving in the sky. Bombers. Just as far as you could see. And the whole earth just had a little tiny vibration.

AW:

From the aircraft.

ME:

Yeah. Just the sound of the motors, actually, literally. And we knew they were going to bomb. And we had been—

AW:

Now these were our aircraft?

ME:

Yes. And British.

AW:

And British. Yeah. But the Allies?

ME:

Allies. Canadian. They had, oh my God. I don't know how many there was, but just as far as you could see both ways, it just went out of sight. And they started bombing and what happened was, the fighters had come over and dropped smoke bombs, supposedly out in—they did—in front. And that was to confuse the Germans with this smoke when we attacked—they couldn't see us as well. Well, like all great things in history, nature changes that. So nature flipped the wind. And the cockeyed smoke's coming over us.

AW:

So now you're confused. Instead of the Germans.

ME:

And we have to attack in that. But while this is happening, they're right there, and I think all the men who did this, look up at the sky out of that foxhole. And the earth—they started dropping those bombs and the earth did like this. It actually moved and closed. I thought I was going to be buried alive. And a hundred thousand other men thinking the same thing, down in their foxhole.

AW:

Yeah, watching the foxhole sides come in and out.

ME:

That's how heavy that bombardment was—it was the biggest bombardment in the history of the whole world except for the atomic bomb. So that's how we got up, but we went and we took it, and we lost a lot of men. And then we had to fight all the way—where I really got hit was at Saint Vire, France. V-i-r-e. I guess you call it veer, some people call it veer. But we were just breaking out of the hedgerows finally. We'd had months—I forget how many, it seemed like eternities. You know, every day's an eternity when you're—

AW:

Yeah. When you don't think you're going to make it through.

ME:

Because it doesn't stop. There's not stopping to go back to town or—you just went on day and night. On and on and on. And so, but we finally broke out of the hedgerows somewhere over in France. And I remember this part, that there was an old colonel out there, waving us across a canyon. There was shooting all around that sucker. And that's the first real, in my mind, just a hero—that I knew was a damn well hero. He was just standing there like, “Come on boys. Get across that goddamn canyon.” And he just never stopped. Bullets everywhere, he just kept going. I used to remember his name. I think it was [Chester] Hirschfelder. I'm not sure. But we got across that, and then there wasn't any more hedgerows. And so we thought, “Oh, boy.” And we fought on down there, and we came to a point of sort of like a mesa, a little mesa, a hilly thing. And there was trenches—it was late in the day. And instead of foxholes, it was like trenches. The Germans had dug them. And they had held up. So we had three divisions on the point, and we all get word, you know, that we were closing the gap. That in two or three days—that was to make us forget how tired and worn we were. And it was true though. We were supposed to close that gap, and some genius general pulled the Second Division and the Ninth Division and I believe it was the Eighth, which I hadn't seen yet. Ninth, you keep running into adjoining division guys, you just do that when you're in battle, everything just—They took three divisions, two of them right off of the point, when we were really good divisions. And we could—I swear to god, we could close that gap and save seven or eight months of this war. And they pulled us off and sent us to Brest, France, way over on Brittany, on the coast.

AW:

Yeah. Why?

ME:

Some general did this; I don't know what general. But some general did this to go on his record, because Hitler had his favorite battalion and his submarines at Brest. And his favorite SS battalion was there. So somebody wanted to get Hitler's—some general—

AW:

Just to show him you could, huh?

ME:

Yeah. Well, it'd go on his record. He'd get him another star. And so he took two of those bloodied division that had fought all the way there to get to that—I forget what we called that gap—Falaise Gap—f-a-l-a-i-s-e. That's what we were closing. The Brits and the Canadians were on the other side, and we were closing that gap. And they finally did close it, but, you see, it took them—

AW:

A lot longer than it would have.

ME:

Oh, a lot longer. And instead of getting the whole German army, they only got 80,000 of them. Whereas we had the main part of the Army trapped.

AW:

Yeah. Because that was the idea of closing the gap was that they couldn't retreat.

ME:

Yeah. We had them. And it [would have] shortened the war enormously. So now we got a six week battle taking place that's completely isolated and they can't do anything to us.

AW:

Except not protect you.

ME:

Yeah, and eight thousand casualties, taking that cockeyed Brest. It was almost impregnable. They had built on it, because Hitler, he had built huge bunkers of concrete.

AW:

Yeah. Well, especially if he had his submarines based there, they would do their best to make it impregnable, wouldn't they?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

Because he had his submarines based there, they'd have to protect that very—

ME:

Yeah. And he had his personal battalion of SS men stationed there to protect the submarines. Well, of course we didn't know it, the Navy came and knocked out the submarines, but they couldn't knock out those—and we had to take it. And it was just (laughs) just another terrible battle. It took six weeks! It took six weeks to take that goddamn isolated place that was already isolated where he couldn't—they couldn't do anything. Our Navy had destroyed the submarines and here we had to go—so then, I think, oh my God what's next? That's the first day-and-a-half we'd ever had off since the invasion there in France. I don't know what it was; that Indian boy from Oklahoma, I can remember his name, though. Daniel Bird, I wrote about him.

AW:

B-i-r-d?

ME:

B-y-r-d, I believe. I guess it was B-i-r-d. It was one or the other. Daniel Bird. He was an Osage. We got along real good. And we went back to our little village there that had been spared, it wasn't shot up at all. A little French village, and it was unforgettable. Some people, a couple, invited us in and fed us a meal. I don't know where they got a little bit—a tiny bit of meat, potatoes fixed. Oh God, it was good. And they had a bottle of wine for us. Me and that Indian. I though, My God, is this like—is the world really this way? It's got some keen people here. (laughs) It was just a beautiful time, and then boom. The next thing we know, they load us on trucks, take us to Paris. I think, Oh God, I'm going to get to see Paris. Well now, that's really nice. They'd already, of course, taken Paris. Well here's how I got to see it. They drove us up and dumped us off at the railroad out—it seems to me it was west of Paris. But it was up—I remember looking out of this boxcar they loaded us on. That big old box car door, looking down on Paris. And it was clouds—and I could only see a little something—

AW:

Sticking up?

ME:

Sticking up. (laughs)

AW:

And that was Paris. (laughs)

ME:

And that was my trip to Paris. And about a hundred thousand other poor bastards. And then they hauled us way up there somewhere, and dumped us out, and we had to climb these mountains. But at Saint-Véran, I never finished that—you'd think I'd finish that, because it affected my life.

AW:

Well, now was Saint-Véran before this? Or after?

ME:

No, no. This is before. This is when they took us from there to Brest. Well, two days before they took us to Brest, France, I volunteered—I never did this. I hated to go back and get food and water and stuff, I don't know why I hated that. But anyway, I did. And my sergeant was a guy from—Milton Rudio—a great son-of-a-bitch from Montana. We got along really good because he was from the West and I was from the West. And we were really friends. And so he said, "I'm going to go back and get some damn water and whatever kind of rations it was. Come on, go with me. We'll go back and get that before it gets dark." So, because he wanted to, I just—okay, let's go. Anyway, when we first got in those trenches, overlooking this valley towards that gap, I'd heard my first railroad gun that I was aware of. You know, they tell you, you don't hear them—

AW:

Because they're really big guns, aren't they? Long range guns?

ME:

Yeah. Huge five-hundred pound shells or more—I don't know. But I'd heard one. You know, you don't hear artillery go off, only after—

AW:

After the shells drop over you.

ME:

Yeah. But I could hear this damn shell in the air. It sounded like a cockeyed whole house being fired (makes rumbling noise)—

AW:

Wow.

ME:

And it went way over, it got silent for a minute, and then boom!—actually shook the ground. It hit a mile back. And I thought, My God. It fired again. And this happened just before we went back for the grub. And pretty soon, it must have hit something back there—some of our guys in the supply line. Because pretty soon, here comes a P-51, boy they come (makes noise), and pretty we hear the bombs.

AW:

Bombing the cannon.

ME:

They got it, we thought.

AW:

You thought. And that P-51, if I remember hearing one, they're pretty loud.

ME:

Pretty damn loud is right. So it's hard to recall this, but I got to do it right now. Let's see, he—okay—now—after the bombers, we were all so tickled. You know, we're just thrilled to death, our bombers got that son of a S.O.B. So anyway, he said, "Let's go back, Max. Come go with me. We'll get a can of water each. Bring your pack, empty your pack. We'll bring—" whatever kind of rations. They changed the rations; they called K[-rations] or C[-rations] or whatever. And we'd bring a pack, both of us. Hell, everybody is hungry and thirsty. So I went with him, we went back there and got a can of water each. And got a pack full of damn rations. And you know, we're dead, dead exhausted. You forget it because you're so hyped up to stay alive. But all of a sudden, both of us got just so damn tired that we could hardly walk. So this whole town, Saint-Véran had been bombed out. And we stopped by a bombed out—I can see that sucker in my mind right now, a bombed out basement; the house was plumb gone. It was a cement basement, but it was rubble all around. But it had really—a big shell or something—or we had probably done it ourselves—the Allies probably. So we just, he said, "Let's stop and rest for a minute. And I'm going to have a smoke." He climbed down the cement stairs down in that basement, and he was sitting down there having a smoke. And I just sat down on the water can. And there was people coming back and forth, scattered along there, doing the same thing. Going back to get food to take up to the front line. And water. And all of a sudden, I heard this railroad shell. And you know, you're trained to say, if you hear it, you're already passed you. Well the only thing they didn't tell you about was a railroad shell. It arcs so up—

AW:

Oh. So you hear it before.

ME:

Well it turned out, just before.

AW:

Just before.

ME:

And I don't remember what happened, because I woke up, and he was pouring water on me and yelling at me—my sergeant.

AW:

Oh, Daniel Bird?

ME:

The sergeant—Milton Rudio.

AW:

Oh Rudio.

ME:

Yeah. Sergeant Milton Rudio. He was a true genuine hero, that guy. I just remember him talking to me; I recognized his voice. It's all kind of hazy. And he said, "I'm going to take you back to the medics. Get up, see if you can stand." And I got up, and of course my helmet is gone. And he got me a—I don't know where in the hell he got it; he got me another helmet. He got me up there, and I got up out of the damn thing, and I said, "I don't know what in the hell made me do this. I said, I'm all right." I was bleeding from the ear, the nose, the mouth. I said, "It's just a scratch." That's what he told me I said; I didn't even remember saying it. But for some reason, we went back up, and took the damn water. (laughs)

AW:

You finished your job.

ME:

Delivered it. And then he said, he told the staff sergeant, who was the only war-lover I ever knew. He loved war. I wrote about him in *Bluefeather Fellini*. In the war part of that. I wrote about him because he just loved it.

AW:

What's his character name in *Bluefeather Fellini*?

ME:

I think I either called him Peck or Pick. Sergeant Peck or Pick.

AW:

Peck or Pick.

ME:

But let's just call him Peck. Sergeant Peck, he just said, "He ain't got nothing but a bloody nose. We need him up here. We're going to take this—we're closing on these Germans. We're going to take them—we're going to close them." So I disagreed. I'd been knocked out of it, see. And I went right on. I was sick all the time. I was throwing up, and I was dizzy. But I just went on—a lot of people were, you know. I thought, "Well, hell. It's one little old piece of shrapnel in my skull is all that got through, out of that whole huge bomb." And I thought, "I'm the luckiest bastard that ever was." I just went on. But I was really sick. I didn't know it had busted my inner ear. I didn't know it. I just—you know, you're firing those mortars, so much noise, you just think, Oh okay I got a little deafness. (laughs) So we went on, got up—way up in the Ardennes, and we had a bunch of battles up there.

AW:

And you hadn't seen a medic yet?

ME:

No. No. And we lost our lieutenant, you lose ever two weeks at least, in long battles. And we had a new lieutenant come up there, named Evans. And that's the only reason I remember this name. so he took it—first thing he did is try to show—you know naturally, they'd come and try to be combat guys, just as quick as they can. And that's why they get killed all the time. So he had to take us on patrol, and hell, the Germans were all over. That's where the Battle of the Bulge started four days after I left. He shipped me out. But thank God, or I wouldn't be here talking to you. No way I'd made it through that, after all the other battles. And he took us on patrol; we didn't see any damn Germans. We didn't even see them, hear them. We'd listen, trying—but he just wanted to be sure he had a combat patrol under his belt. Later he had plenty, all right, that I heard from—heard about from Sergeant Rudio. He lived; he made it. All of a sudden, I just—that diddy hit me, and I just slammed into a goddamn tree. Just knocked me goofy. And so we got on up there to our headquarters where we were dug in and we'd built some little old log fortresses and sort of shelters. And it had been snowing, about that much snow on the ground. And he said, "Evans you're going to get ever damn one of us killed, falling around like that. I'm sending you back." This time I didn't argue. And Rudio didn't either. Before he'd argued for him, and wanted me to go back, but he took care of me. And thank god, because I'd have never made it through the first day of the—four or five days later, Germans hit with their tanks. They didn't break the Second Division, I found out later. But they bent them way back, and they did—our tank corps came up and really, really did a magnificent job in the Battle of the Bulge. They

knocked out a lot of tanks. But our infantry—they'd already knocked the shit out of us. I'd have been dead right there. And anyway, I missed that by four or five days. I didn't know it; hell, I was back in the damn hospital because I really—really was having a hell of a time getting over it. Anyway, it's enough of that war except Sergeant Rudio made it all the way through to Czechoslovakia, and I found later that he saved Lieutenant Evans' life.

AW:

That same Lieutenant Evans?

ME:

Yup. Same Lieutenant Evans. He went out and he got a big medal—a Distinguished Cross or something like that. he went out there, and he's wounded, got him and brought him back, and saved his damn life.

AW:

I'll be derved.

ME:

Got a medal for it. Found that out. His brother told me—Rudio's brother. He never did—he was a modest, wonderful human being, God.

AW:

Did he make it through the war?

ME:

Yeah. He made it through.

AW:

How do you spell his last name? -i-o. or -e-o?

ME:

R-u-d-i-o. Rudio. Milton Rudio from Helena, Montana. So I got to getting, having real problems with my inner ear. I really didn't know exactly what it was. Doctors would just tell me different things. Everyone would tell me a different thing. I didn't know the inner ear thing controls your whole body. And none of them ever told me such a thing. And so, I went out here to the VA [Veterans Affairs], from down here on the ranch, and they said—the only time I ever went, I never—I just wanted them to treat me, I didn't want anything. And they said, "Well if you said"—I don't know what they told me; it was just a bunch of gobbledygook, said, "you ought to—" One guy gave me a big lecture how foolish I was that I didn't go back over there when the shell hit.

AW:

You mean, go back at the very first time you had a chance—

ME:

Yeah. (laughs) He ought to give me a lecture how stupid I was. That's what the VA did for me in those days. They saved my life later, but— He said, "Well is that sergeant still alive?" and I said, "Yeah. He's living up there in Helena, Montana." He said, "Well write him and have him tell what happened there. Then we can take care of you maybe someday." They couldn't—they still can't. They just can't do anything about it. They give you medicine, and some of that works, some of it doesn't. And it healed up to a degree. I got to where I could operate for years, but I had to watch what I was doing—riding in cars, certain things around curves. And as I started getting older, it started getting worse. It finally got to where I just can't hardly travel or do anything. Sergeant Rudio wrote me an affidavit, had it notarized, and had it sent to me. I mailed it in to that guy over here at that very VA right here. Never heard anything from him, and years later, I got to where I couldn't do anything because I could hardly hear. Right here at this house, and it's just right here. So I went over there, and they had—they were kind of specialists. They got one guy who finally figured out—there wasn't a damn thing they could do about it. Just give me a certain medicine—and helping—and it did. It does. I still take it.

AW:

Could they have done anything about it if you had gone for treatment right after—

ME:

I don't think so.

AW:

Probably not.

ME:

No. I don't think so. I think I just—hey, I'm glad I stayed hooked, since I didn't get hit again. Because then I had that information to write about in my *Bluefeather Fellini*. And I wouldn't have had all that.

AW:

Well, so after you get sent back, before the Battle of the Bulge, how much more time did you spend in the army?

ME:

I don't know. They sent me to hospitals in England, Belgium, and England.

AW:

So they never sent you back to the combat?

ME:

No. no. Well hell, I was puking all the time—falling down. (both laughs)

AW:

You weren't much use. (both laughs)

ME:

I wasn't good for anything. I finally, gradually got better. They sent me back, of all places, to El Paso, where this all started—where I had that old bastard double crossed me. Where I was supposed to be in the cavalry. And then I wound up in San Antonio. Then I was discharged there and went back to the ranch.

AW:

Yeah. You said, you know, you were thinking about other things. You were thinking about cattle and horses and painting. Had you started painting before you went into the army?

ME:

Yeah, just once in a while. I always did when I was a little kid. I just drew, and every now and then I'd paint something. You know, I wasn't obsessed, but I couldn't keep from doing it either. I remember there at Lubbock, one time, it was uptown in Lubbock. Some lady had a little gallery there. I wish to God I'd got her name. I can't remember while we were at Andrews or somewhere. There's just so much in this life—I was involved in so damn much so early, and it just never stops. But she had a little display in her window, and somehow I knew she had done that up around Santa Fe or somewhere up in there. I recognized it somehow. So I went in there and talked to her. And she said, "Well I'll give you lessons if your folks can—I have to make a living. If your folks can dig up a little bit of money." I took two or three lessons from her. And they had to drive me up there. I had to go—I don't know how—on the weekends, I guess. And anyway, in just those three lessons I learned one hell of a lot. I didn't know I was going to use it later, and I know my folks had to make a hell of a sacrifice to drive me up there from Andrews for those lessons when I was just going to be there through football season and a couple of weeks after. Everybody had to sacrifice for me to get those three lessons, but I never forgot what I learned in those three lessons. She really was good. I thought of her a thousands of times since—wondering what her name was, what happened to her. But you know, the war and the ranch and everything, you forget some of those things that you want to remember.

AW:

Well and, you know, the older you get, the more stuff you got in there that the harder it is to get it out too. It's still there, but it's just fishing it out.

One of the things that I've always wondered about, I mean since I've gotten to know you, is how you were able to keep cow punching after your injury in the war. I mean, most people that have no trouble being dizzy can damn sure get dizzy when they get up on the deck of a horse.

ME:

Yeah. I just did. It's just will. I just willed myself to do it.

AW:

You just pushed yourself through it. It wasn't like you felt any better.

ME:

No, you know, I—indirectly—I can realize that I thought. “I have to do these things so I can go on and have a life.” If I give into it, it's got me. So I just did. I broke horses. But it hit me once in a while. And the thing is, I didn't know—I guess when I was eighty years old I realized—that, I was one of those fortunate or unfortunate guys that could drink and handle it. But I realized when I got about eighty, that alcohol had numbed that in there, and it was actually helping. I had no idea.

AW:

So it actually helped you.

ME:

Yeah. And the fact that I can handle it was a tremendous blessing in disguise. Because I didn't drink when I worked, ever, not once. When I painted or wrote—not one time in my life, didn't even have a single drink. I had that much regimentation about me. But then I'd get start—get to where I'd get a little dizzy. And I didn't know it, but I'd want to go party. And I guess that physical thing was part of it, and I didn't know it. I didn't know it until I got to be an old man—and realized the truth of it. But I sure had a great time. I'm glad it happened, hell. I had so much fun, they couldn't hardly take it. (laughs)

AW:

That's pretty interesting. Well, did you want to grab a bite to eat today?

ME:

Yeah, let's do that.

AW:

I've been making you sit here and talk. Let me go ahead and bring the recorder with me, just in case. Because you're apt to say something smart at any given moment. (laughs)

ME:

That ain't going to happen unless you stay a month or two.

AW:

I don't know. All right.

Break in recording, interview resumes at restaurant, with substantial ambient noise.

ME:

—[speaking of his grandmother Swafford] Enormously creative and spiritual in every other way. She just didn't paint it right. She painted words, though. She could paint words. She could tell you something that was so beautiful and profound, and you'd understand it.

My father and my mother were, I'm sure that, like all kids, they wanted them to be business people or whatever they'd [parents had] done. Ranchers become ranchers, but they never did anything but encourage me when I decided to be an artist or whatever I tried to do. They were always encouraging.

AW:

I'm going to say, I tend to see a little more of that in our part of the world, because the friends I have who are artists—of course I'm not talking the ones who aren't artists, but the ones who are and are writers, pretty much say the same thing—that their parents would've maybe preferred something else, but when it came down to it, they were encouraging to whatever it was you were able to do.

ME:

My mother, without me ever saying a word, one time Pat and I were really having it rough there at the house. I hadn't been able to make any money writing, and I'd used up all my painting. And so I just—us out in the streets to various ways to make a living, till I could get a story down. and all of a sudden my mother, without me ever saying a word on earth, she started sending me \$15. She'd write me a letter and there'd be a ten and a five in there. Or three fives. How she knew that, I'll never know.

AW:

Yeah. That's really interesting.

ME:

But it was just a wondrous point of faith for me when I was scratching so dang hard. And that was just huge money. It was more money—way more money—it's just how she knew that, or understood it, is another thing that we don't under—that we never acknowledge, our really fine parents have this intangible connection to us.

AW:

Yeah, I think you're right. Well, and we didn't talk this much this morning about your grandmother Swafford. I know in the past you've told me lots of very interesting things about her—that she was—she had a sense of the spirit, and you were just saying she was very creative. But I almost get the sense that she was like a medicine woman. Is that—

ME:

Yeah. She was.

AW:

She was? That's not taking it too far then.

ME:

No, not at all. In fact, the people came from Ropes—they would—you know I don't have to tell you, you were raised the same way, but sometimes the churches get real strict.

AW:

Yeah. Especially in that part of the world.

ME:

Yeah. In our part of the world, it sure does. And a lot of those church people would come in her backdoor.

AW:

Yeah. So they wouldn't be seen?

ME:

Yeah. And have her talk to them, and do medicine for them. And she never charged for anything. She—it just was a wonderful revelation to me to be a kid there and know that this part of the world existed. As a kid, to have a realization, I didn't have to wait for some great event to happen to me or some educational form. I saw her heal these people, and I'd see them later and they'd be healed. I'd never say anything to anybody, but she did it. And I knew that power and that force was there. And she knew that I had some of that, and it grew for a long time. For a long time—

Waitress:

Hi gentlemen, are we ready?

AW and ME food order omitted here.

ME:

We might as well do that and then we'll rest. But she, Jim Bob [Swafford], had her later. But he talked to me one time and he said that she was a huge influence on him too.

AW:

Yeah. That's what I mean. He said the same thing to me, and so, you know when you were talking about—that you'd always done some drawing, and always when you could, painted. It's interesting to look back and see—well, how did you know about other people doing that, and—

ME:

She had a gift of her own that she never—I never saw her use it for herself, ever.

AW:

Really?

ME:

She gave it to other people. She had a thing about her that just soothes people. Even people who are all mixed up in the world, and confused, and maybe being mean or something. They'd get around her, and they'd change into a better person.

AW:

Really?

ME:

I mean literally. I'd just watch them change. It was almost like a motion picture slow motion thing—where they can film and you can see people changing. You know ten years of their life, you can see it change in a minute. Which that minute may be eternity.

She had that influence on me deeply. Right after Pat and I got married, we went down to see my folks—they were living in Morton at that time. And my dad, as I've told you before, he just loved to build things. It didn't matter where it was, he just loved it. He loved to create and build things. And I guess that's part of, I guess, my life in creating too—from my dad, in an indirect way, but a powerful way. And he put in the gas company there at the little town of Morton. Even the little place called Whiteface, and Plains. He put in a gas company at Plains, that little oil

town, cattle town over there on the New Mexico, West Texas border. My grandmother Walker had come there to live with them, unbeknownst to me, 'til she died. She was going to die.

AW:

So she had left Ropes and was living in Morton with your—

ME:

Yeah. And so that's where—I found out she was there, and I wanted Pat to meet her. And of course Pat was an artist, and she understood all these things. And she understood about the spiritual world. So I wanted her to just meet my grandmother. So we were sitting there at night, and my sister was there, my Dad, my mother, my grandmother. And we just visiting in the living room with them, just like you do. We had supper, and we just visiting in the living room. And all of a sudden she said to my mother—most people would hesitate to tell this. And I sure hesitate to tell this to most people, but I will tell it to you because I know you understand it. She said to my mother, "Hazel, look over there; put your hand on that little table right there." And I thought, What in the world? But I knew my grandmother didn't kid lightly or anything. I knew—and so I just sat—and Pat got to witness this. Then she said, "Now raise your hand." That table just tilted up on its edge.

AW:

Stuck to her hands.

ME:

Yeah. Went back down, and that's all she did. We went right on visiting; nobody said a thing about it. They'd just witnessed a so-called miracle.

AW:

Well, of course, I guess your mother had been witnessing that her whole life, right?

ME:

Yeah. She just took orders. She just—

AW:

What did Pat say?

ME:

Nothing. When we went to bed that night, she said, "Well, I see why you brought me here."

AW:

(laughs) I see why you brought me here—that's crazy.

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

ME:

So the next day, my grandmother called me and Pat in the kitchen. And Pat heard all this. She called me Maxie.

AW:

Maxie?

ME:

Yeah. She said, "Maxie, I'm going to leave in about a month—I'm going to leave this world. I'm going to pass something on to you. I have got nothing to give you. I've got that rocking chair in there of mine, you can have it. That's all I've got to give you. But I'm fixing to give you something else." So she said, "You've seen me do all this and everything." So she just showed me a technical thing, because she didn't want Pat to freak out. But she showed me what you do at a ritual to read tea leaves. Well of course, the ritual is to get the participant concentrated so she can get their spirit going. And I didn't know that later, but she showed me how you'd take and turn, dip it in your saucer and turn it two or three times, after getting it out. And then you'd look and there it is—there's a story come to you. So she showed me; Pat witnessed all this, see. So now we're going to go home. Oh and when she read my tea leaves—she did read my tea leaves—she said, "Oh, you kids be really careful when you go back to Taos. I see that you're not going for a day or two. You're going to stop." She knew just exactly where we were going to stop—at the ranch on the New Mexico-Texas border. My old Uncle Slim was working there; we were going to stop. He worked off and on for the Fields there all his whole life. And they loved him. He raised their kids. They were very wealthy people, but they really loved my old uncle. He could do things with horses—they couldn't find anybody that could. Hell, he'd be working in Montana or somewhere, and they'd get ahold of him, have him down there, and pay him extra to come—quit his job or whatever to come down there and take care of horses. Anyway, we stopped by at the daughter of the Fields—it was three of them—two boys and a daughter. And the old man had died, old Grady Fields, had established that big huge old ranch over there, and when he died, he left it—two of them in Texas, and one of them was over there in New Mexico. One of the boys, Bobby Fields, got to ranching, I guess it was sixty thousand, seventy thousand acres in each one of them, in New Mexico, and Ty Fields got this ranch in Texas, and the one on the south end. Another big ranch; they got oil now. They got a billion dollars, I guess. They didn't then, but they had money from leases. But they found deep oil there later, and oh god—but anyway, old Slim was there working for the daughter—working out a little string of horses for her. She was a real mean—she was different from the rest of the family. She was pretty mean, but old Slim knew how to handle those kind of people. So that night at supper, we ate there, it was just Slim, and what was her name—whatever her name was—and Pat just—we were at supper, and she said, "Max, why don't you read her tea leaves?" Well it really got to me; I never thought about—

AW:

Doing it.

ME:

And I didn't want to do it; I was embarrassed. But I said, "Well we don't have any tea; we're drinking coffee. Well, maybe it's the same thing." I knew damn well it was; it was just—so I read a couple of their so-called tea leaves. Did just exactly what my grandmother told me to do. And I saw two things I remember. I said, "Well first, Nita, when you were out looking at that windmill on that certain pasture, you opened a gate and saw a coyote out there." She—

AW:

She looked (laughs)

ME:

She just stiffened up, eyes got big, and looked at me—what is he pulling on me? She was just about—one of the most unbelieving. There wasn't any way she's going to believe any of it. And then I said, "Oh." I'll always remember this; I can't remember much that happened this morning. But I remember this. I said, "You're fixing to buy this bar here at Bronco." That's the name of the little old spot there; they came all of West Texas out there to get whiskey and drink at that bar when all of West Texas was dry. She jumped up and started cussing her lawyer. She said, "Nobody knows but that son-of-a-bitch. How did you get him to tell you about that?" She just threw a damn fit, and I just sat there looking at her. I didn't know whether she was going to knock me on the head, shoot me, or what the hell she was going to do. But anyway, we knew—there it was. When Woody Crumbo found out I could do that, he almost put us both out of business. He was driving out there in the three to four miles over that rutted road out of Taos, every damn day, for me to read his tea leaves. But anyway, Pat and I go home and we hit that blizzard before you get to the horseshoe at Taos. Up on at that hill and then you hit a big horseshoe point. We hit that blizzard, and we couldn't even see the damn road. And my grandmother said, "You'll think you're in danger; just go ahead. You're fine." So I just drove like she said, and we made it right over that damn—but Pat witnessed all that, and then she didn't have to know anything else or hear anything else from anybody. She knew what it was. My whole family is that way; my daughter is. And Pat, they have enormous spiritual experiences all their live. It's so common to us that we don't ever even talk about it. There's so many people don't think of anything that exists but themselves. It's amazing how many people that are supposed to know better and do better don't realize how full of dimensions the world is. It's a wondrous, massive, unlimited, dimensions. Dimensional entity.

AW:

Well, that's right. That's a good way of putting it, too.

ME:

I used to, when I was painting, wear-out, I'd go sit in old grandmother's rocking chair. I don't know whatever happened to it.

AW:

I was just going to ask if you still had it, but—

ME:

No. I can't believe that I somehow or another let it go. Somehow it got lost when we moved into town. I just don't know. I thought about it a lot. But she was gone in a month, just like she said.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. So you know, with Pat, there's never ever any more questions about the other dimensions of the world ever, ever. Now grandmother, well I know that she imparted some of that to Jim Bob. I don't think it was much, because he was there—he was younger, and he wasn't near as experienced as I was. But he had some wondrous experiences with her, too. She influenced our family and the other people, my God, if you think about the people who came to her to be healed, no telling what her influence was. It was probably worldwide. She was a rare jewel of a gift the great mystery gave us.

Waitress brings food; interaction omitted pertaining to food.

ME:

Go ahead and ask me whatever you'd like, Andy.

AW:

I was just wondering, where did Grandmother Swafford come from. What part of the world had she grown up in?

ME:

She came in Indian country in Oklahoma?

AW:

Oklahoma?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Now did you tell me once that she was part Indian?

ME:

Yeah. She was at least one-eighth Choctaw. Because old Jim Bob ran it down, and we're one-sixteenth, me and Jim Bob. So she's at least one-eighth. But she had other—she made—when I first realized she was making medicine, I found out later in life, she was making what you'd call now Cherokee medicine. I don't know—so she must have been— had two or three different kinds of Indian blood in her. I think she had some Osage. But she never dwelled on stuff like that—it was just natural, whatever it was. My grandfather Swafford, I don't have much memory of him, except that one time—they used to drop me off there, with her, not just the year when I got expelled from school—for stabbing that kid's hand that had rocked my dog. They expelled me from school; so I lived with her—the greatest thing that had ever happened to me in my life.

AW:

Yeah. Well you ought to tell that story too. We didn't get that down. Sound like a kid that deserved it (both laughs)

ME:

I can't remember where in the hell I was now.

AW:

About—how much you didn't get to know your grandfather Swafford very much.

ME:

Oh yeah. Well he was a hound dog man.

AW:

Oh really?

ME:

Yeah. And he drank a lot.

AW:

So he probably came from the south somewhere.

ME:

Yeah. I forget where—Tennessee I think. Tennessee or Rome, Georgia. That's where he came from. Rome, Georgia. And he had a little old station there on the corner of that highway. And one time they dropped me off there to stay there, and they were off trading—my dad was doing something, in Humble City, and my one memory (laughs)—it sure was a lot of fun. He had an icebox that had chocolate soda pop in it, and God I loved that soda pop. And he'd already given me one; I wanted another one so bad I couldn't hardly stand it. But I was trained not to do that—ask him—he had to just say it. A kid came by with a sack of groceries, and I didn't know he was under some shit in the world. But he told me, he says—here's how he figured it out, see—

Waitress brings more food; interaction omitted

ME:

He said, "If you'll go out there and take those groceries away from that boy, I'll give you another chocolate soda." So I went out there and just jumped right on him. (laughs) He spilled those groceries; he just beat the sh—crap out of me. I remember I got up and I was crawling along there and it seemed like a mile, but it was probably two or three feeble steps, and got up and ran back in the station there, in the little old store he had there or whatever it was. He was laughing so hard; he couldn't talk. I was really getting mad at him, and then he went over and got a sodie pop, handed it to me, and everything was all right. He'd had a great laugh; his old dog didn't even pay attention to me. He just laid there through the whole damn thing. (both laugh). Just the laziest bunch of old hounds.

AW:

So was the Coke box in that place one of those with the little—there used to be one at Tokio [Texas], we had a little farm there for a while and they had this little rock service station, and the icebox had the metal rim. And you could see the chocolate soda way back there, and you had to move every one of those around until you got to that one. You remember those?

ME:

(both laughs) Oh yeah.

AW:

They'd drive you crazy.

ME:

Oh yeah. Well he traded land, and my mother was always a little bit ticked at him. He had a section of land over there at Sundown, a whole section. That was the first big boom right next to Lubbock, of oil. That whole section was drilled. He lost it. And my mother, she quit talking about it in the years later, but at first she was still mad at him when I was a kid because he'd lost

that—he hadn't made the payments on the land. But you see, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if he'd made the payments on his land. I'd of been something else.

AW:

Yeah. That's exactly right. As the poet Rilke says, "In any case, life is right."

ME:

It isn't going to matter if it's right or wrong, you're going to go do it. But he went to Oregon, and that's where he died. So I never got to really know him. And then I remember his laugh. I do remember that. He really had a great, deep hearty laugh. He really enjoyed laughing.

My mother said he had a dream always that she could remember since she was a little bitty kid. He wanted to go to Brazil, pioneer in Brazil. And again, I wouldn't even be here (laughs) if he'd gone to Brazil.

AW:

But I'm really impressed in listening to you talk about your dad's motivation to start these new things.

ME:

Yeah, he built the gas company at Andrews, and it was getting ready—it was really making money, and he sold it out to a guy that had helped finance it. But he did all the work, planned it, plotted it, got all the permits, got the pipes, got everything. Got all the ditches dug, got it installed, but the guy that financed half of it was a grocer named Guy McGill. So he just sold it to him and moved over to Morton to do more over there. He'd done that. He was a big success, and that's all he—

AW:

That's all he wanted to do.

ME:

Everybody was happy there. And he didn't care—he just— it was just the way he was. He went down to Throckmorton. He heard they needed a gas company down there. So he went down to Throckmorton and put it in. It wasn't in three months until he sold it, and started another one somewhere.

AW:

Did that drive your mother crazy?

ME:

I imagine. (laughs) I know she was really glad when he finally decided that Lubbock was where he'd settle down. Got an old place out there on West 17th. I know she was—

AW:

I know we've talked about this, but I'll bet ten-to-one he knew my grandfather's brother—my Uncle Bob, who had rental property all along east Lubbock. But mainly he ran grocery stores, you know, the credit grocery stores in poor part of town, where people didn't have any money except, you know, once a week.

ME:

Yeah. Well, he's a lot like my dad. He did things like that too.

Brief pause, eating

I know when I got back from the war, a guy named Markham, my dad had bought some little oil royalties for him, and he ran a hamburger joint. He and his wife ran it together, and they just worked like dogs—get extra money for my dad to buy them a little oil royalties. He'd go out and visit with farmers and everybody and just sit there and tell them what he wanted—what money he had. He'd buy a acre—two acres, three acres, whatever. But I remember when I first got back there, they were talking about my dad—he had knocked his shoulder down, stayed down the rest of his life, but he had a baseball game going during the war there—at Morton, I don't know who he was playing. And they needed a batter. And my dad, he's forty-something years old, which in those days was old. Now, you're just getting started. But he got up, knocked a three-bagger, and he ran so hard—

AW:

With one arm?

ME:

No. that's where he hurt his shoulder.

AW:

Oh okay.

ME:

He ran so hard from third base that he fell and hit his shoulder—hit on his shoulder, he was out the rest of his life. But they were all talking about him just walking up there and volunteering—just knocking that three-batter.

AW:

My wife fell the other day, a couple weeks ago, and knocked her shoulder out. And I'll tell you, she's a woman that never shows pain, but she was hurting that night.

ME:

Boy that damn shoulder, you forget they control your whole system. (brief pause, eating)

I remember that year I was over there at Ropes, that kids would go out all over and look at where people dumped their garbage—for vinegar bottles. A vinegar bottle would bring a whole dime.

AW:

Really?

ME:

It was the adventure of finding it in the little bit of trash, and then getting a whole dime. If you could find two or three of them, you could go to Lubbock, have a hamburger and go to the picture show. And I remember doing that two or three times—how great that was.

AW:

What did they do with the bottles?

ME:

I don't know. But they were valuable. People—I just remember that. and also aluminum and copper, they'd buy it. My granddad, down at his feed store, bought aluminum and copper. He didn't buy the bottles, I forget who bought the bottles. But boy, it was just like you'd find a nugget of gold if you find one of those vinegar bottles. There was a place there, just off of the square at Lubbock, a little place about this wide between two buildings. And the guy cooked hamburgers in there. (laughs) You know, people will do—it's wonderful what they'll do. And you'd get three for a dime. He just had a bunch of stuff he'd stir up and just slap on those little old things, little old buns.

AW:

Three hamburgers for a dime.

ME:

Yeah. And my God, if I found three vinegar bottles, if I had a way to get to Lubbock, sometimes I'd take a kid with me, I can't remember who it was—take somebody with me, treat them. Boy, we'd have those hamburgers and go over to the movie. It was the greatest thing in the world.

AW:

Well, when you did go to Lubbock, did you generally go—did you ride, or did you take a car?

ME:

No. I'd bum rides. I didn't mind—I'd just go down the highway until somebody picked me up. Or go ask somebody if they were going to Lubbock. After Humble City, why nothing like that bothered me. My mother told me a story over and over. She said—my Dad moved or just were moving to Roswell. I was pretty near [a] little old baby. And my grandmother had a little old house uptown, there's a picture of it in my Ropesville stuff that I've gathered for you that you'll get later. That's the first little house that I remember. She said all of a sudden I disappeared. And they got panicked, and had everybody looking for me, and she said finally she and some guy found me walking down the railroad.

AW:

Whoa, that's scary.

ME: Yeah, and they asked me, "What do you think you're doing?" And I told them, "I'm going to Yubbock." [Lubbock, mispronounced by a young child] (AW laughs) She never forgot that; she told that story her whole life—about me going to Yubbock. I just barely could walk and I was going to Yubbock. (laughs)

AW:

Max, I suspect, and you correct me if I'm wrong, but I suspect you've not had many times in your life where you lacked a decision.

ME:

No, not a bunch (laughs). In fact, I never do think of one. There must be one.

I remember one of the times, you'll really get this—since you're from that same kind of country that farms and things. And I told you this before, I think. but I'll tell you again; I hope I did. One time, when I was dropped off at my grandmother's, you know I told you about that the end of the Spade Ranch was still there—out west of Ropes. And there was two double—a big tank in between two double windmills.

AW:

Yeah, the Twin Sisters, I think they call them.

ME:

Yeah. That was a big big thing for us little old kids there at Ropes. There was pasture—

AW:

And isn't that where that attorney that had found that little strip of land, isn't that where he was ambushed?

ME:

Yeah. So they had plowed up a field there between Ropes and that Spade Ranch land and that windmill. And it was just obviously was in the great drought, or it couldn't have happened. So I don't know how old I was—I don't remember. But I know that two kids were with me, and we were walking across—this field had blown—the rows were just level—it was just solid. It just looked like a field of sand. We were walking across that, and one of them said something about, "Never will grow anything here again." Or something. I said, I remember telling him this. I said, "Don't ever worry about this. All of this is going to come back, like this ranch out here. It's all going to be grass." (laughs) I never did know if they believed me or not, but I really was laying it down the best I could.

Waitress stops by, interaction omitted

ME:

You know if, Andy, you're lucky in your life, and I know you've had this happen to you—you couldn't be a writer like you are if you hadn't. But the faith of those people in West Texas there—the faith you'd have in you—people who didn't have the slightest idea about a painting or writing or even what they were sometimes, they'd have faith in you. And I never have been in any other part of the world where that many people had faith in their local boys and girls.

AW:

I think that's right, and—

ME:

I don't know that came about. Do you have any idea?

AW:

Well, I think some of it is—well, here is my theory, but I'd sure like to hear some contrary views or some agreement or modification, but there's always this question: why so much creativity from where you and I are from? And the easy answer—people say, "Well, there's nothing else to do." And I say, "Well, that's exactly wrong." First, that makes it sound like art and writing and music are not important—you only do them when you're bored. And the plain fact is people like you and all the successful painters and singers and writers that I know from there—they're successful because they did it instead of the other things they could do. You know? So I think that's important. And the other thing is, that I think's real important, is that we're still down there, it's still the frontier, you know. And on the frontier, there's a sort of a practical democracy, or a practical way of looking at the world. You've got to depend on the person next to you.

ME:

That's the word.

AW:

Whether you like them or not, they're your neighbor.

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

And I think it's pretty interesting that in the history of America, women got the vote first in Wyoming. They didn't get it in Connecticut or New York or New Hampshire or Maine or you know, Massachusetts. All the civilized back-east places. They got it in Wyoming, you know. And so I think that's part of it. I know I hadn't really thought much about it until I quit—if I've told you this story, stop me. But I was working at a day job there in Lubbock, well actually I was travelling for a firm out of New York. I got to know a lot of business people in Lubbock and these people in New York. And I had clients in Dallas and in New York and in Denver and associates out on the West Coast. So I knew a lot of business people around the nation. And I was convinced that when they found out I was quitting to do music that those people in Dallas and New York and Denver and L.A. would not think I was nuts—that they would be appreciative and glad that I had seen my true case and everything, and that back home they'd think I was loony as a tune, and maybe hold an intervention trying to stop me from doing it. But it was the opposite. The people in Lubbock, to a person, would get me, take me off to the side, if there was something going on, say, "I heard you're quitting and you're going to do music full-time. That's the best thing you could ever do. You know, if you could play music, that's what you ought to be doing. That's a great deal. I wish I could do something like that." And I never heard a word of that in New York or L.A. or Denver or Dallas. I mean, *those* people thought I was crazy. Now that says something about that place we're from. And it's like, if they're of the opinion that if you can do it, more power to you.

ME:

Yeah, you've got a good understanding of it. Because it's certainly true what you just said.

AW:

You know, we're politically right-wing, religious[ly] fundamental. All the things that in other parts of the country make people mean and tight-fisted and opposed to people of various racial mixtures and anything and everything else. I have a friend in Lubbock. Well you know Byron Price. This is Byron's nephew—Ryon. And Ryon, at his young age, is pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Lubbock. And when Ryon was getting his PhD at Duke, he met a young

woman, they fell in love and they married. She's black. And they have three little kids, cutest things you want to know. Ryon told me, a month or two ago, that the only place in the world where they've never had anybody ever take a second look, make a remark, ask a question, do anything—is in Lubbock. Everywhere else, people stare—they want to know, you know, what's the deal. You've got to explain this to us. And he said in Lubbock, it was just—you know, no one even—they didn't even. You kind of feel like you might have to point it out to them. (laughs) And you know, I think about that kind of thing a lot. You know, we'd vote for—I think if Adolf Hitler ran on the Republican ticket in Lubbock, he'd get elected.

ME:

(laughs) He'd get my vote.

AW:

But I'll tell you. The people there are as willing to stop and give somebody assistance, irrespective of where they come from or who they are or what they look like, as any place I've ever been. And I—you know, there's more to it than my idea of that frontier thing. There's something else, and I don't know what it is. But it's really pretty unique to that part of the world.

ME:

It sure is. I have an example, it hit me with you telling that theory. That Mr. Markham, by the way his son went on to become a real big oil man—never did go to his head—they were really good people. Pat and I coming up there, going to Morton and around there, and I just had some pictures and I wanted to sell one, goddamn. So my dad said, or my mother—I forget which one of them, “Well why don't you go over there and visit Mr. and Mrs. Markham. Show them your pictures.” I kind of hesitated, and I thought about him and the relationship between he and my dad, and how the hamburger joint—he'd become a wealthy man just by working day and night. And so I went over there, and he said, “Well, hi.” He was really glad to see me. [He said,] “What are you kids doing up here?” [I said,] “We're visiting the folks.” He said, “What are you doing now?” Just visiting. [I said,] “Well I'm painting pictures. I'm going to try to sell some.” And he said, “Really? If you've got any scenery painting, let me have a look.” (laughs) So I went out and got a scenery painting and he looked at it and looked at it. And said, “Well let's see. Momma—” He called his wife momma. “Momma, move this stuff here and see if we can—how it'd look right here.” So she moved some stuff and we hung it up there at that little old fake fireplace. I remember it was a good painting, and I guess the son's got it now, or maybe somebody built a fire with it. But he just loved it. And he said, “How much are you going to charge me for that?” Boy, I was tickled to death. I'd almost given it to him for making me feel so good. He paid me \$200. It just came to my mind—well, I don't want to be acting like I'm a greedy son of a bitch, so I'll just say \$200. He just got me a check; he got to paint two or three more times. He really enjoyed it. He kept that painting to look at, that scenery painting, until he died. That's an experience that fulfills exactly what you were talking about, Andy. I can't explain that.

AW:

Well, and the other thing is that—you know, some people would make fun of it him calling it a scenery painting. But you and I know that that doesn't have anything to do with it. That that's what he knew to call it, but he saw in that painting the same things you and I see in it.

ME:

You bet. Sure.

AW:

He just didn't have any language for it.

ME:

No.

AW:

I tell my musician friends, you know you can't learn how to be a musician in Austin. Because anything you do, they like. And that ain't true in Lubbock, you know now they'll be polite, but you can tell when they're paying attention and when they're not. And if they're not paying attention, that's the song you've got to work on. (both laughs) You know, you've got to do some fixing. You know, it's a better audience. If you can get them to pay attention, if you can get them to buy that painting in Lubbock, that's a good painting.

ME:

You bet. He really looked at it too. He was looking at all kinds of things in there—that art critic wouldn't be looking at. Especially an art critic.

AW:

Well you know an art critic has to prove a theory. That's the other thing Rilke said was "never read the critics."

ME:

I was looking through some books the other day—some from the Taos days. Oh by the way, before I forget. Five more days and I'm going to have another novel—a first draft done.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. Just five days away.

AW:

Wow.

ME:

Started it as just as sort of a kid, and published around her [the] *Hi Lo Country*, about four books or five. And we moved into town there, it was a grand place we moved to. It was an old two story Spanish home at—walls about that thick—it was concrete. It wasn't painted or nothing. It was on an acre, block and a half, in the plaza at Taos. Let's see, it would be to the south of us, southeast of us, was sort of a little creek, and a little meadow there, and it's all houses now. And hotels over there—from my kids who [were] raised with nature, and Pat watched after them. Rode by the house and rode by the house the things that happened on that road that I observed from my little perch up here on the hill. I knew it was a book long, long ago, and I'd forgotten all these years that I had started that day. So it hit me, oh God, that's never been done—never will be—can't be. Nobody else is ever going to know it, and I've got to find that manuscript. Then I remembered I had taken it to Luther [Wilson] long time ago. And he had—I had been correcting on it when I quit it, for whatever reason. Never did go back to it or anything. And he had had somebody type up my corrections—one of his secretaries. So he had it—I called him, and he had it up there in Denver with him. He had taken it when he had moved out. And I said, "Oh God, I appreciate it, would you mail that to me?" And then I lost it—he did. I couldn't find it; I didn't know what the hell I did. Pat looked for it, and she knew I was going crazy. I had an enormous obsession to do this—finish this book, and actually just redo it. So we were sitting downstairs there, and I said, "Well, there's absolutely not another place to look." And she sat there a little while and said, "Did you look in that stuff you put together for Andy, that box of mining stuff?" And I said, "I don't think I did." And I went up there, and it wasn't in there. In that whole box of mining stuff, lines and maps and all that—wasn't up there. And right there on a chair under my drawing table, a chair, stuck under there, a few little old letters. I don't know what made me do it, I just picked one of them up, and there it was. And I thought, "Now I've got to reread this and see if I'm really nuts." Why would I obsess over it? and I reread it and I realized it was a wondrous piece of—like you said about your new book—factual history.

AW:

Oh, cool. (laughs)

ME:

Factual fiction or whatever you want—

AW:

Historical fiction or fictional history.

ME:

That's exactly the same thing, only it's written in a totally different style, of course. But now I'm just really, I go to—

AW:

About things going on on the road below you?

ME:

Yup.

AW:

What a great idea.

ME:

And there was—boy, Taos was really something then. That was a great part of the history of Taos—all that four hundred, thousand years, and hundreds of years there in that little town—all the artists coming, and all the few writers, one thing or another. The cowboys and things that had been there, and the mountain men. And all that. I went there at exactly the right time; it was just in that next transition. It was still that small place where you were close to the Hispanics, close to the Indians, close to whoever you wanted to be, and you had time and space to observe, and that's what I did. And I'd taken advantage of that without knowing it. And I thought, it can never be again. I've got to do it. I'm ninety-and-a-half years old as we're doing this tape right here.

AW:

I know it.

ME:

And I've got to do that book, and I've just about got it done.

AW:

Oh, that's great.

ME:

And it really makes me feel great.

AW:

Has it got a title?

ME:

Yeah. *King of Taos*.

AW:

King of Taos. What a great title. (both laughs) Oh I love it. Now I know the neighborhood's not there, but is the house still there?

ME:

Yeah. Some guy bought it last year and turned it into a damn cash lease building.

AW:

That's right—that's what you were telling me.

ME:

Million-and-a-half on that old wonderful house.

AW:

Oh man.

ME:

Right there, just turned it into a huge—made everybody—

AW:

McMansions, as they call them in Texas.

ME:

Oh yeah. Yeah. Now that window that I looked out to see my daughter when I wrote *The Rounders*, and *The Hi Lo Country*, and *The One-Eyed Sky*, I'd look out across that meadow there and on up to the mountain. It was just a few houses, great sagebrush desert, and you know it really relaxed me. And I'd go on in just a minute, look out there, ease my eyes. That's where I wrote that book, at that time in history, before the town was just another big art colony. Still a little town but a big art colony. When everybody had to be—like you said—everybody had to depend on one another, one way or the other. And so it was a time to observe and absorb. And I sure as hell did. It's some wonderful stuff there. I don't mean to say that like in a bragging manner; it's a simple fact. It's just there, and it was going to be wasted. I've got it now where it could be published like it is. It could be—a good copyeditor could make it publishable. But I've got five days' work to make it what I want it to be. That's getting pretty close.

AW:

Man. I'll really be anxious to see it. What a great title. (laughs)

ME:

It really fits too. I think the reader will be surprised who the king of Taos is—or was. Still is in my mind.

AW:

Yeah. Well, we about ready to head back?

ME:

Yeah. We'll go back and do a little bit more—something special.

AW:

Yeah, and you know—you get tired, just let me know and we'll stop.

Discussion of food omitted

AW:

I'll stop this recording here. I think I forgot to say at the start of this, it was still the 18th of March, 2015. Max Evans and myself, Andy Wilkinson. We're at the Copper Canyon Restaurant, and we're having breakfast but its midafternoon. (laughs) And I'm going to stop the tape.

Break in recording, interview resumes at Max's home

ME:

There was a writer in Taos, Walt Sheldon. And look at the inscription in there and the date on it.

AW:

Wow. 1953.

ME:

And he was a big hero because he was a good guy to us old struggling guys, you know. And I was still painting then, just barely writing. And he really encouraged me—

AW:

Boy what a handsome guy too, it looked like.

ME:

Yeah. He was. He was really—encouraged me and—

AW:

I'll write his name—Walt Sheldon. I don't think I've ever read anything he's—

ME:

No his work disappeared; he did too. He went to Korea and married a Korean woman.

AW:

Well is it work that shouldn't have disappeared?

ME:

Yeah. Nobody knows who he is. He's just—he was a successful writer in Taos. This book here put all of us old goofy beginning writers like me—we were in awe of this book because it was a book of the month club or something. and he got more money than we ever dreamed was in the whole world. (laughs) I couldn't believe it. I think he got eight thousand dollars or something. And eight dollars was a huge sum. But he got that much money. We just thought he was—but he got me an agent. And it was the first agent I had, but I wasn't writing enough to keep him. But he did that, and hardly anybody'll do that. It's the strangest thing. They think you're competition, and you're not. You all write differently. It's just a—but he didn't have that selfish thing that so many people had. He was really a generous-hearted guy. And we'd have lots of drinks together in Taos then. He told me, "Well, I'm going to leave my wife and my kids. Got two kids, I love them. I even love my wife. But I was in Korea and the war," that war—whatever war it was, I don't know what war it could be, 1953. But he was in some kind of war, maybe he meant emotional war. I don't know what.

AW:

Well there have been some people—wasn't there activity in China during the Second World War that some, particularly airmen, went on?

ME:

It might have been. Yeah. I think so.

AW:

Yeah. I think there was.

ME:

And anyway, he said, "I met this woman long ago in Korea, and I can't help myself. I'll probably give up my career and you'll never hear of me or anybody else. I'm going." And he did. (laughs)

AW:

And he was right.

ME:

That's the last I ever heard of him. And all of that came back to my mind just less than a week ago when I was looking through there and ran onto this book and remembered all that—right there in Taos.

AW:

Well I'll be derved. I'm going to look for—he's a guy I've never heard of. I'd like to know something about him.

ME:

Well, I'd be tickled to death for him to look you up. Because he was sure good to me. He really encouraged me.

AW:

Well we, while we were talking at the restaurant, that was really fun to get to hear you talk about your Grandmother Swafford. And especially that connection to her spirituality and to yours and Pat's. It's always interesting to me—and now you know the people that I know and I know the people that you know—and we understand that there are a lot of spiritual people out there punching cows. But the average person does not think about that. And they think quite the opposite—that they're a bunch of yokels that can't get a job at the Dairy Queen, so they're punching cows. So while we're recording here, would you talk a little bit about what it was like to be working that Hi Lo Country after you'd gotten back out of the war, and you're writing, you're painting some—or you've always been painting some. How did your life of the mind integrate with the physical life of punching cows and working that ranch country?

ME:

I don't have any idea, but I'll try to figure it out while we're sitting here talking. (laughs)

AW:

Well, I mean because you've worked with other people, and not every cowboy is a spiritualist, but there are a lot of cowpunchers that are very much in tune to the bigger world around them. How does that all play out, just as a matter of course?

ME:

Well, it's like you were talking about the music—writing music down in West Texas. And how the people down there accept it, and the people in places that are supposed to be sophisticated and elitist in literature and arts a lot of times don't accept those things. I don't know, I didn't find anybody in that country, that little lonely country that didn't somehow believe, in things. And I never had anybody put me down for any belief or for something that had happened to me, and I would casually tell them. I never did. And then another thing, Luz Martinez, the only artist in that country at that time, when I was back there from the war. And I was fixing to go home from

Navarro one night there in that little old town. It had two bars, just like I wrote in *The Hi Lo Country* book—across the highway from one another.

AW:

And you're talking about—

ME:

Des Moines.

AW:

Des Moines. Right.

ME:

Yeah. I took Des Moines [New Mexico], Springer, and Cimarron, and made them Hi Lo—put them all together, little towns there, little cow towns. But they were more than little cow towns—there's always people that are so neglected in those areas. Lost areas like that. And I started home one night, out of that little old town, and I closed the bar, and there was only one light in the town. And it was in a grocery store there. A combination—I guess you'd call it a mercantile—a kind of hardware and grocery store. And there was a light on in there, and I was driving right by there, and I looked. And there was a poker game going on in there, four guys sitting there. There was just one light, and that whole—you could see the whole world. And I just wheeled—turned around, went back there, went up there, and got in that poker game. (AW laughs) And there's an old boy sitting there—a Hispanic guy—about ten years older than me, he's young at the time though, because I was just a kid. And there was something about him—he had a snap brown hat, and he was playing poker. And he was all within himself in some way, and I said after the poker game started breaking up, "I never did know you before the war. I'm going to go get old Bill Malone up." The guy that owned the bar. "I'm going to go wake him up; he may not even be asleep. Make him open the bar, we're going to have a drink together." (laughs) And I went over there and got old Bill Malone, and he said, "Oh hell yeah, that's old Luz Martinez. And he's the section foreman out here on the railway." He'd been over there in Italy or somewhere. And so he came back and opened the bar for us, and we got acquainted. And I shared with him that I really was getting a drive to paint, and he said, "I'm taking a correspondence course in art."

AW:

Oh. Really?

ME:

I couldn't believe it—that there's somebody else, you know, in that lonely old country. So we just became instant friends. And he quit his damn job, moved into town, and we rented an old

place there where he could paint for five dollars a month. I know that sounds like—but he'd damn near starve. We used to laugh like hell; I'd go over there by there to see him. We finally put a little gallery in there. And he'd be cooking, and I said, "I smell that food. That's real artist food." He said, "That's real artist food." That's what we called old fried potatoes. Sometimes that's all there was to eat. So there was that guy there.

AW:

That's L-u-i-s Martinez?

ME:

L-u-z.

AW:

L-u-z. Oh Luz, really Luz. Yeah. Light Martinez.

ME:

So when we moved to Taos we started painting. I had two little houses; I sold that little ranch and moved into town there. And I bought 120 acres of land right out of town so I'd have a place to keep my horse and one cow. And there's two places on that place, about an eighth of a mile apart. So I told him, "Well hell, just move down there in that little house there. I don't have a use for it. It's a good little house and there's a water well right there—a windmill, a little windmill with a shallow well there. You've got water, you got everything. I'll come over and we'll paint—we'll set up and paint there." And so we did. And then he said, "Well I'm never going to do any good with this. I'm going to start studying cartooning." And he did. But here's the weird thing about the story I'm telling you—to show you what'll come out of a country like this. Just so few people, cattlemen, a few little farmers, and obviously the rock masons and carpenters that hold all of it together, and all the ranches and things they hold together. A few cowboys and some of the big ranches and some small—and then of course the big ranches, they're all nearly big ranches, they've bought them all up. We went down there in that little old house, and he'd draw, study cartoons, and I'd paint. And we just both felt at home. So when I moved to Taos, I finally told him, I said—I went to Big Boy Hitson, oddly enough to Taos; he was a cowboy I wrote about in *Hi Lo Country* in that movie. The two of us had planned a trip to Taos for a long time, and we went over there—over the mountains in his old pickup—he had a boss that loved him. He gave him three days off, and we got drunk and we did—we looked at all of the art, and we did everything. And I told him, "You know, old partner, I'm going to have to move here. I saw this place when I was first twelve years old. My ranch boss brought me up here. And I fell in love with it then, and now I'm going to have to move up here." And he sure did hate to lose me, but he made a strange statement. He said, "Well I know Luz would have loved to have been here with us." And I said, "Well he would have been; we didn't have enough money to get here." We had a piece of luck, and I knew everything was right. They had wide open gambling up there—

old Long John Dunn—the guy I wrote the biography of. He was running the gambling wide open.

AW:
In Taos?

ME:
Yeah. Eagle Nest, all over there. So I knew that he had the clout. Nowhere else then, except Las Vegas was really doing that, and I knew Long John Dunn. And I said, “I’m going to come over here and get acquainted with Long John Dunn.” And he said, “Well, don’t forget your old partner Luz, and bring him over. He’ll fit in here.” And sure enough, I did.

AW:
And Big Boy said that to you?

ME:
Yeah. Now here’s the weird thing about this. He’d studied all that cartooning and other art—the only way he could in that part of the country. There wasn’t any artists to study with. So he became a wood carver. That’s the first one he ever did, that saint right there, I bought it out of a gallery. And he became a truly great wood carver.

AW:
I remember you giving a talk about him at Western Writers, one time here in Albuquerque.

ME:
Yeah. And the only thing that kept him from being world famous was, he lived right across an empty lot—field—it was bigger than a lot, a big field there in Taos, from Patrociño Barela.¹ And they were great friends, and he became the patron saint of all the woodcarvers in the southwest. He’s the greatest and most famous. Well he and Luz were contemporaries, and Luz was always—so they were great friends, they were drinking friends. Luz had to quit drinking; Patrociño drank until the day he died. He didn’t bother a bit—he could carve masterpieces drunk or sober, it didn’t matter. Old Luz couldn’t—Luz Martinez couldn’t do it. But that’s the very fact of his friendship there, when the Museum of Modern Art collected a piece of Patrociño’s bronze, and they wrote two or three little books on him. He didn’t know or care. By the way, he’s big in my book here—my new book. I didn’t know. That’s one of the reason I got—

AW:
Really? Patrociño is?

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patroci%C3%B1o_Barela

ME:

Yeah. Got so excited because I really tell about him. I already told my observations of him in this little new—*King of Taos*. But Luz was from that lonely country—he's a section hand on that railroad there. And he came over to Taos about six months after I did, and became an artist that's collected all over the world now. So you had it exactly right, Andy. The people just—it's there, it doesn't matter where you are. If it's in you, it's in you. And that's why they forget about—I don't know why they don't think people from our part of the country or that lonely part of the country could feel or see these things. But I think we have more room to do it, really.

AW:

Yeah. Is there—you know, the other thing I think about, too, is that even in a town as big as Lubbock, you're still close to the land—in the sense—you're living in town, just like you are here. But here in Albuquerque, you can't escape the weather. You can't escape the mountains around you; you can't escape the extremes—the highs and lows. You know in the West, places like this, places like Lubbock—Mother Nature is a formidable presence. I've often thought that, you know like, we go to cowboy poetry gatherings, but we don't go to farmer poetry gatherings. Do we?

ME:

No.

AW:

I've never heard of one. And I think maybe a major difference is that the cowpuncher or rancher knows they have to survive on what's dealt them. And the farmer has a very stubborn believe that they can control what's dealt them. They can irrigate if there's not any water. They can put a pesticide on if there's boll weevils. They can put a fertilizer on if there's not enough nitrogen. But how many ranchers do you hear talk about—it just seems to me like, when you're punching cows, you're part of—and when you're a farmer, especially a mechanized farmer, you think—I'm sitting in this seat and I'm in control of things. And is there some of that that goes on, especially in the Hi Lo country?

ME:

Oh yeah. Sure. You bet. In fact it's a dominant factor. We just don't make anything out of it, or you're not aware that that's what—like Big Boy that I wrote a whole book about. He—I have to reverse this back and forth, this part of this story. I was sitting up there in the Sagebrush Inn after I had moved to Taos and after Big Boy was dead. And I was sitting there with a guy taught something—I forget—I liked him—he was a Scotsman, but he taught at the university over here at Highland. And he taught back east in some exclusive school. But he liked it out here, and he loved Taos. And he bought two of my paintings—good ones, too. But we were sitting with him, and he still had an intellectual, elitist thing in his head that he couldn't get out, in spite of his love

for this land. And it was some lady there that he had who was another elitist. We were just sitting in there, having a drink in this big old lobby, and we was talking about books. And I told them, "Well, I've been reading a guy that everybody thinks is just a hokey mystery writer. He's a great writer." They both wanted to know, they thought, well what dumb writer—I know what they was thinking—by just the expressions, you didn't have to wait. I said James M. Cain. Oh my god, you're right. He's a mystery writer. I said, "Well you're right," I just led them along because I said that, my best friend who's dead now—he just got killed a while back—introduced me to him. And he's just an old cowboy—way off out there, thirty miles from town. So what the hell would he know? And the truth is, Big Boy brought that book into town on a Saturday, when he'd once in a while come in, like all of the cowboys, have drinks and get in out of the wind. He brought me that book and said, "Here's a guy who can really write, Max. Read this and get some more of it." Now where did that come from, you see? Now James M. Cain is all around the world.

AW:

You know who my favorite guy to bounce books off of in Lubbock was, until he moved out to the ranch his uncle owned—out by Jayton. His name is Jim Richards, and he ran Richard's Chicken—a chicken restaurant that his dad and mom had started. And it was the best chicken in town. And when he moved to the ranch and folded up the business, we were in shock. (both laughs) But I'd come in, he'd walk over and he'd get everybody's orders going in the fryer, and he'd say, "Hey I've been reading," and then he'd mention some outlandish intellectual book that I'd take me three tries to go through. But just the same kind of thing you're talking about. He was a reader, and he knew what was good.

ME:

You betcha. Well there—they just, I didn't tell them I'd been reading Balzac and all those. I let them go ahead and have their game. But I was having more fun than they were by far. They didn't know that I knew (laughs). But I knew that they didn't. That was the difference. And I told them that; then they really did almost break out laughing at some old cowboy way off out there in those prairies—that had decided that James M. Cain was a master writer. How could he know? How could the hell could he know? But, yeah—that old country—so few people, so they become precious.

AW:

Yeah. And you just mentioned something else that's important: so few people. There's something about when the air is thinner, it breathes a little better. You get too many people in one spot, I think it must squish some of that, willingness or ability to think. I know it speeds up the world so that you don't have time to think, you know.

ME:

Well, if you're out there just to, say a simple thing like, riding the fence, checking the fence in lonely old country, and your horse is taking four or five steps, and you're checking the post every time. And if you go six or seven miles there, you can automatically check the fence if anything's wrong. You have time to feel and think. And at the same time, you have whatever's out there in the air in that wonderful dimension of air that we so often try to deny. You pick it up without clutter around it. And that's what he was doing. Old Big Boy was picking up these wondrous things that are out there. He wasn't—all he—he was riding that fence, and if he's riding an old bronc, well he could feel whether he's going to hump up and buck with him or not. He could just feel it. So he could feel that. He could feel these things coming in there. And somehow, riding the fence or riding the bronc out there, as the old saying—thirty miles from nowhere—something came into his head about James M. Cain, and the first time he saw one of his books, he bought it, and read it, and recognized what was there. That this guy was an honest writer; he knew it—if he'd of been a phony writer, he would've never suggested to me to read him.

AW:

Probably never finished the book.

ME:

Brought me the book. He went to the trouble of bringing me the book, and it was one of the great—James M. Cain was a great pleasure of my life to read at that time, when I was trying to begin to paint and write. And I had admiration for him. Deep admiration.

AW:

Buck Ramsey said, "There's a good reason that all good cowboy songs are written to the same meter as a dog trot." That that's the most comfortable—that's where you can clear your head, and the lyrics come to you. And one of the things I've noticed in your writing is that there's a rhythm in your language that reminds me of being out in that country. No matter what you write, it seems to me like it's got that same meter and phrasing and—

ME:

Yeah, I couldn't do it any other way if I tried. And it wouldn't come out any other way.

AW:

Yeah. Well don't try. (both laughs)

ME:

But you never know what will come out of that country there. Old Joe Flores, I was over there when this lady, we did that picture book of the Hi Lo Country. She did the photographs—took her three years. And she went to high school there at Clayton, and she loved that country. We

were over there, we had our first signing. She'd never had a book signing; that was her first of two books that she published in her life. She's still going strong, just got over a hip operation, but she's not going to be a writer anymore, or maybe not even a photographer. She just lives down there and loves it where she lives. But we were over there to Clayton right there in that—to us there in that corner of New Mexico, that is a big town—it's three thousand people, for goodness' sake. Big city. Anyway, we were back there after all these years, and people were coming in—some of them that had known me or heard about me, and two or three that remembered her daddy. So we felt right at home. And I was up there, that was back, I'd already published *Bluefeather Fellini* and we published this book. And here were these people coming in there and buying those books, and this one guy came in and he'll be in Lubbock, sure as hell. I've forgotten the last time I talked to him on the phone, we don't talk much, but it's very special to him for some reason. And he's a rancher out there in the Hi Lo Country, and he had a six—seven thousand acre ranch there. And he came in and he was fixing to move to Texas, Stratford. Well he'd read my book, *My Pardner*, and he knew I'd mentioned Stratford. So he said, "Anybody that recognizes Stratford and likes it—I want everyone of your books." He bought every damn book I had. And he'd been writing me ever since. And these letters you're going to take back to—whole stack of letters.

AW:
And what's his—

ME:
His name is Joe Flores.

AW:
Oh I know Joe.

ME:
You know Joe?

AW:
Oh yeah.

ME:
Yeah, he's on the Ranching Heritage board.

AW:
Yeah. I know Joe well.

ME:

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

Well that's how we met.

AW:

That's how you met—in the Hi Lo Country, not in Stratford.

ME:

Yeah. Right there in Clayton. We've been friends ever since. It's been years and years and years back.

AW:

Yeah. He's a terrific guy.

ME:

He's a dynamite guy. So anyway, last time we talked on the phone, we probably just talk once a year—but he writes me all the time. He sends me stuff in magazines where I have write ups—I never see them, I don't even look for them. He sends them to me, and he's read every dang thing. In fact I introduced him to—at one time the most honorable thing that had ever happened to him. I introduced him to that artist Ryan and Elmer Kelton in the same day.

AW:

Oh really?

ME:

Yeah. He said that was the greatest—so many things have happened since, maybe he's forgotten that. but he told me one time, "That was the greatest day of my life. I couldn't believe."—

AW:

Tom Ryan and Elmer Kelton at the same time. That is a pretty good day, with Max Evans.

ME:

He got to sit and have lunch with us; we were having a benefit for the Ranching Heritage institute. And he got to sit with me and Elmer and Tom Ryan and Pat and some other guy. So right that minute, he fell in love with everything. And he just dedicated his whole life back to that place there.

AW:

Yeah, he's been a real great friend to the Ranching Heritage Center. He sure has. What a great guy. I enlisted his help to see if he could find a yearbook. My granddad taught math at Stratford. In fact, that's how he met my grandmother; she lived in Texhoma, and she would ride over and

go to school. But yeah, he's a terrific guy. But for some reason, I don't know why I had it in mind that y'all had met much earlier. But—

ME:

No. It was about seventeen years ago. About the time that the Ranching Institute was just beginning to take off. Yeah. But he's been a good friend, a loyal fan ever since. If I get to feeling good, I've got to have him come over here sometime. He's been wanting to come real bad here in the last year.

AW:

That'd be a fun event, it really would.

ME:

But he'll—I guarantee you when he'll be there in Lubbock—while we're having that thing. He's a great reader—he reads all kinds of things you'd never expect. Again, like we're talking about. He's one of those guys like, I mean, where does all that come from? Where does his appreciation, his comprehension, his wonderful understanding of what creativity is and what that means. He just knows it—he just feels it somehow.

AW:

Well, you know my friend, Terry Allen, who grew up in Lubbock. He lives in Santa Fe now, but a songwriter, a visual artist, a painter, and a sculptor, and a playwright. And his wife is all those things. And one of the things that Terry talks about as one of the key ingredients to anybody who's creative is that they have a really strong sense of curiosity. And I think about that—you know I listen to you talk. And I think about Big Boy, or my friend Buck Ramsey, or Joe Flores, and you know, they're certainly—those are curious people. They don't just look at something and take it as it is. They want to go a step beyond; they're open to looking at new things. Is that part of the equation of why the creative people come from these kinds of places?

ME:

Oh that's a big part of it. You nailed it. Yeah. You know, and again I try to express the fact of space. That's what I love about Albuquerque; you picked it up earlier. This is a city, 600,000 people, there's a million with the little old subsidiaries around it, you know. A million people here and yet in any direction, within thirty minutes, you can find enormous space. And space is where things come to you.

AW:

Space is where things come to you. That's right. And even in this—I don't guess there's a place in this town—this is about as densely populated place as there is in Albuquerque—where we are

now, and it's not overcrowded. I mean, none of this is like a New York or a—where there are people just bumping into everybody.

ME:

No. That restaurant down there was a very popular restaurant, and there were only four people in that big old restaurant. We just had a late breakfast then.

AW:

So space is where things come to you.

ME:

Yes. Yes. And that's why people are afraid of space. Have you noticed how many people back east are afraid of space?

AW:

Well you know all the stories of people coming out West, particularly the plains, and committing suicide because there was so much space.

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

So why are they afraid—they lack a sense of self-worth? They're afraid in the space they'll disappear or what? What do you think?

ME:

Yeah. There's things there they don't understand or don't want to. That they don't want to make an effort to open up and allow these things to come into them. It makes them uncomfortable to even think of it.

AW:

So in that regard, here's a question that I've had for a long time since we've been talking. Is your in this beautiful country—the Hi Lo country. You're writing, and you're painting. But you're still out on the ranch, you haven't moved into Taos yet. How does a person like you in that place, that open space where the things come to you, it's almost like, how do you decide when to cut yourself off from mother's milk (laughs) and go out into the world? How did it come to you to decide to move into Taos?

ME:

Well, it was that trip that I made with that cowboy.

AW:

Yeah. But I mean, seeing those—I mean, you still—you had to be thinking about what you were giving up as well.

ME:

Oh God, yes. Still do—I still think about that open space there, over there. Right now it's there, you know. I miss it. But I can't go over there and ride fence like that. I can't go over there and go down those little brushy draws and work cattle out of there. I can't do it physically. But I can mentally—spiritually—I can go back there. And then, having been there, you see, and opened up to that, then when I went to Taos, I wasn't cluttered with everything there. I was open to see, hey what fits me here? And what fit me was the desert, the mountains, and the damn paintings. They all fit me.

AW:

Yeah. And so what I hear you saying is that space is not a commodity, it's a preparation.

ME:

Yes, of course. And it's also a privilege. Space is a privilege because it's an honor to be able to open up to it and realize in your life that all you've got to do is open up and the space will give you all untold wondrous things. It's out there—everything that ever was is out there. If you open up, if you're open to it, it's going to enter you, and tell you, and enjoin you, and be with you. It's the easiest thing on earth.

AW:

So in a sense, once you had it, you weren't giving it up by moving in to Taos.

ME:

That's right. No. You got it. You nailed it. I had it with me anyway. Yeah. Old Doughbelly Price, little ex-cowboy—

AW:

Say his name again.

ME:

Doughbelly Price.²

AW:

Doughbelly.

² <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/doughbelly/>

ME:

He's famous there in Taos, still. He's been gone a long time. But he's a little ex-bronc rider, and like he said, a real two-bit thief and a rodeo hand. He decided that there were enough fools in the world that he could be a realtor. (laughs) So he didn't have to study. In those days, you'd get five dollars, you'd get a realtor's license. So he got rich at it. And he sold me that little old ranch and just as soon as he sold it to me, out of Taos there—he tried to sell me a potato farm in Idaho. (both laughs)

AW:

That was part of the two-bit crook.

ME:

I thought, well—I did come to the right place. Here's this crazy wonderful person stumbling around here. (laughs) Yeah, I thought that was about as much extreme as you could go to. He didn't give a damn if I painted or not. If I painted, he looked at me, and these little kids can't make a living out here, they'll starve to death. I'll sell them a potato farm. I'll get a commission; he'll get some food. He was thinking, that old Doughbelly was.

AW:

Yeah. How long had you been in Taos before you met Woody Crumbo?

ME:

Oh not very long. I had been there. I had studied there; I had run into this commercial artist named Dal Holcomb, and he was—I told you about him.

AW:

Yeah you have.

ME:

I've got pictures of him up there and everything. But he sensed that I could paint. He didn't have any idea that I was going to try to write too. But I would go out for the first year I was there, Andy—I'd go out. He lived out on the—it'd be the south side of Taos, that Talpa out there—it's part of Taos. And he had a little place out there. But he was a hero in Taos because he made forty thousand plus dollars a year out of New York, and that was an enormous wealth at that time. And here he was, the only artist known of in Taos as making any money. But he spent it all. You know, he just—

AW:

Spent it there locally?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

So he was popular.

ME:

Yeah. If he couldn't buy people drinks, well then he'd get in a crap game with them, and he never won—I put our bathroom—finally I tried to protect him for six months. He wouldn't listen to me. So I told Pat, "Well I'm just going to go rob that son of a bitch. He just got his check. So we can put a bathroom in our house." (both laughs) So I went to town, got in a crap game with him, and came home with over a thousand dollars. I beat three or four other guys too, but most of it came from him—two-thirds of it. I came home with a check for over a thousand dollars—he couldn't believe it. I cashed it in with the guy that owned the place where we were shooting, and he took all the money, and then took ten percent, and then whoever the winners were—so he'd given me a check for over a thousand dollars. I said, "Well, now you can put a bathroom in the house. You can shit indoors now." (both laughs) But he was priceless to me, because he believed in me. And you know, he doing—to us there, a huge thing. He's doing General Motors and all those kinds of advertisements. Covers of magazines, Collier's, and Liberty, and all those magazines of the day. But he was just a hero to all of old starving artists around there. And just a wonderful, generous man. But every time I'd get confused about a painting that I couldn't figure out what to do, I'd manage to get out there and show it to him. And he'd just—he wouldn't take it in his studio, he'd take it outside and look at it. And in less than a hummingbird's wing flap, he could tell you what was wrong with that picture. And in six months he taught me more about design than I could have learned in thirty years in Paris at the best school they had. Because every picture he sent in had to be perfectly designed. He just knew it. He could pick that out. And he got me a—I'm sure that's one of the reasons that Woody Crumbo was delighted to take me on because he was a flawless designer, and I could already do that. So he thought I was worthy of it.

AW:

Spell Dal's name for our—

ME:

D-a-l. Dal. Holcomb H-o-l-c-o-m-b.³

AW:

³ <http://www.americanartarchives.com/holcomb.html>

No e. Yeah, the stuff you've shown me of his is remarkable. Well you told me a wonderful story about how you met Woody, about going to the gallery, and—

ME:

Well yeah. That was the Sagebrush Inn is where my life and lots of lives were changed and influenced in that place. It seemed like to me it was four miles south of Taos on the highway there. But now it's just buildings all the way. It had this—this is where me and old Big Boy stayed. And where they had wide-open gambling. That's where we won all that money in there. Made us sure enough love Taos. It was right there in the Sagebrush Inn, and that little intimate bar. I met old Thornton Wilder and people like that in that little old bar, you know, and had drinks with them. Because there wasn't any place for me to go or them—there you were. It was a wondrous thing that was there. Well, I walked in there one day and there's a guy that was a bartender during those days—I can't think of his name right now, but I'll think of it later. His wife was a rich woman, and he wanted to be a writer so bad he just couldn't stand it. He was an elegant looking old guy, a great big old hawk nose, and he just looked like he ought to be some goddamn British writer or something. But he claimed he was in there making research, tending bar. He was in there to get a little spending money. (laughs) His wife wouldn't give him any money. So soon I figured that out, I made real good friends with him. And I walked in there one day and there was all these paintings in that big lobby had been taken down, and there were these great big oils. Big Indian dancers, the most brilliantly colored things I'd ever seen. And I didn't dream they were Indians because Indians didn't paint in oils in those days—it was against their religion in some way. Just watercolor. And here was this one. I walked in there to that bar and said, "Who in the hell painted those pictures? They're magnificent!" He said, "That's Woody Crumbo." I didn't know who Woody Crumbo was. I said, "God. All kinds of people been wanting to take me on as my tutor, make me a protégé. And I've turned all of them—masters, masters—down here." Pat used to get confused about that too because she knew how hard it was to get one of those guys to pay any attention to you. And I had several of them that offered to take me on as a protégé. And I wouldn't do it. I wanted the right guy. Dal Holcomb was all I needed to critique me at that time. But I was so fascinated with color. And I saw this guy knew all those magnificent colors, and the rhythm of those dances, and how the color was put—light and darks so it actually rippled to the light—the color. If you looked at it right, it would make light ripple. And I thought, Man that guy has really got something I've never seen in anybody. Oh, Clay Crawford was that's guy name. Clay Crawford.

AW:

Spell the first name again.

ME:

The bartender. Clay Crawford. His wife built the first country club there, and then he had to go out there and tend bar (laughs). He couldn't tend bar any longer at the Sagebrush Inn. She made

him come out to the country club and tend bar out there. It ruined his life. But anyway, he said, "He'll be in—he comes in everyday about five o'clock. Sees if anybody's around—hanging around here at the bar somewhere might want to buy a painting." And I said, "Well, thank you. I'll be back in a little while." I left; I went back to my place down there. I had a little rental place then, before I met Pat. And I got back out there. I was there—and I got a chair out of one of those tables in the bar, and I just sat it there by the door. Just sat down there, and I said, "I'm staying here until that son-of-a-bitch shows up." (laughs) So he just laughed. People coming in and out. And all of sudden, here comes this guy in moccasins. And I knew it was him. And I just got up to go over, and he said, "Hi Max." Shook hands with him, I liked to fell over. He knew my name, and he said, "Let's go have a beer." Like that. That was it. And then I showed him some of my work, and we both knew, he was my mentor. Just like that. It's just how it happened. That's a hard one to figure really, I guess. But there it was.

AW:
Well, it's space.

ME:
Yeah. Yeah. It's just a wonderful piece of fate, all right.

AW:
No I mean space. It's that same space that (laughs) that's acting—it's behaving.

ME:
Yeah, but heck, we had grand adventures together.

AW:
Well, let me ask real quick, how are we doing on energy? You want to start tomorrow with adventures with Woody?

ME:
Yeah. That'd just about wind us up in a day to tell the adventures of Woody.

AW:
Yeah. We can do that, and then the next time we get together, it'll be time for Hollywood.

ME:
Start somewhere else. Because it's really—he was really a rare jewel of a spirit in this world, old Woody Crumbo was. And it used to tickle the hell out of me because he didn't play at it as arty-fartsy stuff. He didn't play that game, the artsy-fartsy game. And people wouldn't never dream that he's the guy that did all those wondrous etchings and things. And that was good to be able—

I used to just enjoy the fact that we could be in the mining business and nobody knew he was a famous and great artist. It was really, really a lot of fun.

AW:

Alright. Well I'm going to say, we're going to stop this tape today while you've still got energy, and we'll get started tomorrow. Terrific day. Thanks.

Recording ends



© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library