

**Oral History Interview of
Max Evans**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
May 19, 2015
Albuquerque, New Mexico**

**Part of the:
*Crossroads of Music Archive***

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Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson, Dr. Bill Tydeman

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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 time in Hollywood, the culture of the West, living in Taos, and his experiences as an author.

Length of Interview: 03:29:09

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Keywords

The West, Hollywood, mining, writing, art, cinema, literature, business

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Yeah, I think so.

Max Evans (ME):

It's going to be about seventy-five, and—

Bill Tydeman (BT):

Okay, well I'll catch up with you later.

AW:

Won't be too hot, won't be too cool.

ME:

I guess we better do a few more little incidents in Hollywood before you start on—

AW:

On the mine?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Okay, yeah, let's do.

ME:

I don't think I told you about what happened when we—Pat—I did tell you about Pat coming back and getting stuck in Grants.

AW:

Yeah, on bald tires, and—

ME:

But I don't think I told you what happened to me when I stayed out there.

AW:

No.

ME:

Well, I had about twelve, fourteen dollars in my pocket, and so this big agency, MCA¹, it was

¹ Music Corporation of America, an American media company, originally a talent agency.

was built like a White House building, huge. It was the biggest agency in the world. And they handled me from the New York agency out there. So he took me over there, and there was a little ol' bitty hotel that somebody was just saving to build—tear down and build later, some investor. But they still had it running. And ol' Fess Parker took me and dropped me off there. I had an old ratty suitcase, and—

AW:

Oh, so you were evicted from the guest house?

ME:

Yeah, I guess. (laughs) Yes, he brought me all the way in his Lincoln Continental and dropped me off at this little old place, there. And he knew about it, he said, "Well, it's not much money—twenty-five dollars a week, and you can bill your agency." He just wanted to get rid of me. And so he stuck a bill in my pocket, and I thought "Well, you know, he's richer than hell, and he knows I'm damn near broke." I think I had twelve or fourteen dollars. And I thought it'd surely be a hundred, so I went in there to rent the room for a week—this little ratty hotel. And it wasn't—it had been a hotel, it was just an old folks' home now, really, except I'd be just two or three young people. I was young—there were two or three others there. And so it was twenty-five dollars a week. Well, I'm sure I had a hundred, and it was a twenty, and I thought, "Oh my God, I've got enough to pay this week, but it's nothing" —you can imagine sitting there. And so I went ahead and took it for a week, and I thought, "Well, let's see. I've got about five dollars left to eat on for a week." So I won't tell you how I survived all this—I was there five or six weeks. It's in the tapes. Those tapes that you can't listen to for ten years—everything's in there.

AW:

That we got from UTEP?

ME:

Yeah, all this, details of my methods of survival are in there. But anyway, it—I survived—and I don't remember, five or six weeks. And there I was, you know, all I could do was just write letters to people. And I just thought I was not going to ask anybody for anything, I'm going to somehow work out of this. Finally, I ran out—he told me up front, I'll give him credit. The guy and his wife ran it, they lived right there behind the desk, little room. And he told me, said "If you don't have your payment on Monday morning—your twenty-five dollars—you go to the sidewalk. I want you to know this in front." Again, I gave him credit; he was straight with me there. So I had to fight that and hustle that every—I can't—I just can't bring myself to tell you how I managed it, but I did. So I finally run out—couldn't make the payment. So I just packed my old bag—it was this old, worn-out suitcase—and when I'd been at a party, old Fess had shown—had a party during the time, the month we stayed at his house—in his guest house. And I met a guy—an actor—who was a friend of his, Morgan Woodward there. Morgan gave me his

phone number. We visited and had drinks and had a great time, really liked him, he liked me, so I had that damn phone number. So I thought—and he told me, said “Hey, if you’re in town—ever in town”—he didn’t know I was flat-ass broke, he thought I was a rich writer. I didn’t know people who thought all writers were rich, you know, but they did, some of them. And I was getting lots of notice and no money—no hamburgers coming with my awards. And so, by gollies, I thought “I’ll just take a wild chance, and call this ol’ boy, and maybe he’ll have some idea of what I can do. Maybe.” Well, I called him, and miracle of miracles, I got him—because you just hardly ever get an actor. I don’t know why they’re—but—on the phone, the first time you call. But he said, “Well, I’ll be over there.” I said, “I’m out here on the sidewalk.” I’m losing my story. They wouldn’t let me make a call, and I didn’t have a dime. There I was, suitcase out there. Finally, I just walked back in and I said, “Look, you’re going to have to put me in jail, because I’m going to make a phone call. That’s all there is to it. You can let me use that thing on the desk for nothing; it’s costing nobody anything,” and I just bluffed him into it. I really had nothing to lose, and I would have—wouldn’t have minded going to jail—I’d have something to eat. (laughs)

AW:

[And a] place to sleep. (laughs)

ME:

Yeah. So I called ol’ Morgan and got him, and he said “It’ll take me about thirty minutes to get there.” He lived way up—this is way out in Beverly Hills, and he lived way up in the Hollywood Hills—Hollywood Boulevard. Well, I waited and waited, I sat down out there on my suitcase and waited, and it seemed like several years before he got there. Anyway, he shows up in this great big old—all those old guys drove, in those days—later they went to these scoot-ass cars, but in the early days, they all drove these big black Lincolns. I don’t know what the hell that was. So here he drives up in front of this ratty little hotel, and great big ol’ black Lincoln car, and gets out and looks at my suitcase. And he told this story for years, that I had—it was tied together with baling wire. But I don’t think it was, I don’t know. It might’ve been tied together with some kind of string or something, but not—I didn’t have any baling twine available. But anyway, we put the—made a ceremony, sort of—I think he started catching on real quick—in the trunk. So when I went around to get in the front of this big ol’ Lincoln, there were those two women—that ol’ boy and his wife standing there, staring at me, “That guy couldn’t pay his rent—he couldn’t even make a phone call—here he’s getting in this huge Lincoln car.” Well, you know it was years later before I realized—I didn’t even realize—people’s impression of that kind of crap. You know, I just turned around and smiled and waved at them, and away we went. So that was how I departed—I stayed up there with ol’ Morgan, and he—Morgan Woodward was that wonderful guy from Texas University, was Fess’s best friend—Fess Parker’s best friend. He’s a wonderful guy. And he had this wonderful house, but there was no furniture in it. The living room, you had to sit in the floor, or just stand there—great view, but he didn’t have any furniture. And there was

an old cot in one room, and he had a bed—he did have a bedroom and a kitchen, but all the rest of it, there was nothing in it. He'd bought the house, and he didn't have enough money, yet, to—then he became a multi-millionaire by buying houses after he really got to making money acting, he'd buy these houses just like this—vacant and empty and he had a couple of old-time carpenters that were retired. They liked to do little piddling work, and he'd fix up all these houses, and became a multi-millionaire—ol' Morgan Woodward, he pulled that off. Well, but now, there was nothing, but I was thrilled to death, my God. So he fed me and bought cheap whiskey—we'd drink that—I forget what was the name of it, we used to joke about it—until I finally sold an option on a short story to old David Dortort, which I think he just bought for sympathy. He loved my work, and he was trying to get *The Hi-Lo Country* made into a television series. David Dortort was the producer of the two most successful Westerns ever in history, with the exception of *Gunsmoke*—*Bonanza* and *High Chaparral*. Highly respected guy, and one of the few gentlemen I ever met in Hollywood—just straight and—

AW:

Boy, *The Hi-Lo Country* would have made a great TV series, too.

ME:

Yeah. Well, we had it made, with Morgan costarring, and I forget who the other guy was, and all this happened right—all of the sudden, while I'm right there—first trip. And I can't think of that actor's name, but we had him and Morgan, and NBC had okayed that, and then the—that guy became a star later, which always amazed me. He's a sort of a Hungarian guy, played Westerns and everything—can't think of his name. Anyway, his agency pulled him out for a lead in another series, and we lost it. But in meeting David Dortort—I went around to studios with him. You know, here I am, an absolute pauper, couldn't buy lunch, couldn't do anything, but he liked me, he took me out there, and he finally took an option on one of my short stories, I forget which one it was. And I know it was—later, as I thought about it—it was just out of pure sympathy, because he wasn't interested in making a series out of that short story. But it got me a little bit of money, and I got home, back to Taos. So anyway, that's just an incident, when I left. But another one I thought you might ought to have here on this particular tape is—we decided we'd move to—things were going pretty good, and we decided that we had enough money to hold us together for a year, and we'd try Hollywood. Pat and I decided that—we'd take our girls. So we went out, and—

AW:

How long after your escape from—?

ME:

Oh, I don't—just a year or so.

AW:

Not long, though, really.

ME:

No, no, a year—maybe a year, eighteen months. All this is down on other tapes, but I just wanted to get this incident in, because it was of enormous importance, actually. I'm ticked at old John Randall, when he made the appraisal that just these three letters I'm fixing to tell you about were worth more than the whole damn appraisal. I don't know how in the hell he didn't understand that. But we picked a house in the Valley—what they call "the Valley,"—it's over the hill from Hollywood. Studios are all over there—Warner Brothers and several of them—Universal and Paramount—no, Paramount's in Hollywood. But anyway, the studios, and a lot of people live over there. And it's not Hollywood, it's people—they're there, but there's people, the main prominence of people are just like us, working for a living one way or another. So we liked it, we rented a good house—a little—wasn't big, but it was really good. We went out there and took our Taos dog, the kids, some Navajo rugs and some paintings, so we'd feel at home—and moved into this furnished house. And I got—the story I'm getting to, is it was very handy to everything. The studios this way, go over the hill, and you're in the middle of the studios and Hollywood, and agencies—and the first thing we did, there was a guy came to see us, and he'd heard about me, and I hadn't heard about him, which is very strange, at that time in my life. His name was William R. Cox—Bill Cox. Well, he was the epitome of what we used to call "hack writers." Now, that was used in a derogatory sense, but it should not have been, because a hack writer was a person that could write any damn thing, and they could make a living. And that's what he did. He wrote children's books, he wrote shoot-'em-ups, he wrote sports stories, he wrote—he could write anything, this ol' boy. And he was one of those loveable guys. He had a—he didn't have a big house or anything, he lived about five, six blocks from us, and he had his studio out in a nice backyard garden, and in his studio he had a bar and he had [a] big old lounge—comfortable old lounges and chairs—out there, you just feel comfortable. And that's where he'd work, and that's where he'd play. And so first thing, he had to have us over for drinks. And I never will forget this, that night I had just gotten—I'd just given him a copy of a little book I did, *Mountain of Gold*. And he was president—I didn't know anything about all this—he was president of Western Writers of America. This is the winter of '64 and '65; he was president of Western Writers of America. And he got drunk and he called everybody up and said, "Y'all got to make this the Spur Award," and of course, they were telling him, "We've already picked the Spur Award winner." But I told him—after I heard him fight like hell for that, and cuss them all out, and he was turned down, he said, "Ah, the dumb son-of-a-bitches"—he really loved them, and they loved him. But I thought "Well, there's a really good guy. And not only that, he has vast wisdom. He realized my *Mountain of Gold* was a classic." (laughs) So we became really close friends, our families—he had a redheaded wife—I found out he'd had four wives, finally, all of them redheaded. (laughs) But she was a dandy, so we'd go down there and visit and take our daughters, and his little studio, and just we could walk down there, and it was just grand people,

it was a great adventure. Now, this guy had a knack of some kind or other, beyond anybody I ever knew in the whole of my life—he attracted the biggest damn names, not just in the movie world—in the world of names. Aldous Huxley was a good friend.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. Well, I'd already met Aldous Huxley, which was another story—just met him; talked to him. But I got to talk to him there, and his closest friend was Buster Keaton, who's a—either one or two—it's undecided after all these—way over half a century, whether Charles Chaplin was the world's greatest comedian, or Buster Keaton. The last ten, twenty years, they're leaning towards Buster Keaton being the greatest of all time. Well, here's ol' Buster Keaton over there, and his wife, and they just loved my little daughters. Both of them, they just loved them. And they didn't have any kids of their own, evidently, because if they did, I never heard about it. And we just sat around there and had a wonderful time with ol' Buster Keaton. Well, he was called "Bus" by the people who was close to him, and this is his best friend, ol' Bill Cox. That's—hack writer was his very best friend in all the world. So anyway, he gave—if Pat'd show it to you—when he was a young man, he was around theaters and as he got to working in theaters, and doing this—you know, he wrote his own damn comedy, he invented all that—those motion pictures and things he did, he wrote them, he invented them, he acted, directed them. They just had somebody to bring cameras and stuff. And he actually knitted—he took up knitting.

AW:

Buster Keaton a knitter?

ME:

Yeah. That's what he'd do, instead of going crazy. Like Henry Fonda used to paint watercolors. Well, he knitted. And Pat's got it somewhere here, if you want to see it someday, I'll have her look it up, show it to you. He gave her, I believe it's a pillowcase that he had knitted—last time we ever saw him. And now, in that bunch of letters that you've got—the last time you picked up those letters, I pointed that out to ol' John Randall, I said, "There's three letters in there from Bill Cox—William R. Cox. They concern something as private and precious as any letters you'll ever read in your life." And what had happened—ol' Bus got sick, bad sick. And he had already made a deal with Bill Cox, and his wife, and Bill Cox's wife—arrangements for getting to the hospital and everything, and the press would not know. He did not want the press knowing that he was ill; he didn't want anything. Well, there's three letters, after we'd—we'd moved back to Taos when this happened, when Bus got really sick—and there's three letters, typed out by ol' Bill Cox, from two to three pages long, talking about all kinds of things, and then about Bus. It said, "We're doing everything we can to keep it from the press. We've been successful so far, so I just

wanted you to know” —and he trusted us totally, he had to. He said, “You guys, don’t say a word to anybody. I’m just letting you know because Bus loved you guys.” Well, what he loved was our kids, goddamn, and so did his wife. They just adored—well, there’s three letters in that group of letters there about the greatest comedian in the world and his death—he died—and how it was kept from the press and all that. And I told ol’ John Randall, I said, “Look, there’s letters in here that you’ve got to really pay attention to—what they really mean in the history of America, whether you like it or not, that’s what they are—the world, in fact.” And he paid no attention to—he just—in his—when he made his appraisal, he just—they’re just appraised like the letter from some old cowboy, you know. You could take those to Sotheby’s and talk to the right person, and man, they’d have an auction with those damn letters about Buster Keaton that you couldn’t imagine what the Asians or Germans or something would pay for that damn—letters. Anyway, that’s a hell of a part of a story that I thought ought to be on this tape right here.

AW:

Do you mind going back and talking about how you met Aldous Huxley the first time?

ME:

Yeah, not at all. There was a guy—in fact, Fess Parker indirectly was responsible for this. He took me to a guy named John Meston. John Meston was one of the initial writers on *Gunsmoke*. Now this is really where—he was rich, he lived on top of a hill there in Tarzana—a big house, gate around it, you had to speak into it to open the damn gate, and all that stuff. So ol’ Fess takes me over there because he’s trying to use me to get a bunch of writers involved in *The Rounders*. You know, there’s so much of it that happened there in a month. So one of the guys he had picked out for me to go visit was John Meston. Well, I didn’t know what a hero John Meston was. He was rich, the—*Gunsmoke* depended on him a whole lot—Sam Peckinpah, too, in the beginning of *Gunsmoke*. But he took me over there, and I wish I could think of the other—Borden Chase also, the guy that wrote *Red River*.

AW:

Borden Chase?

ME:

Yeah. But those were two he had picked out. Well, they were big writer heroes—both of them richer than hell—and he’d done *Red River* with John Wayne, and two or three other big pictures. Anyway, we get to Meston. So he takes me over there, and he’d leave me and this guy to get acquainted. Well, this was a strange bunch of events, too. This guy was married to a beautiful woman who was a world-champion bullfighter.²

² Bette Ford, born Harriet Elizabeth Dingeldein.

AW:

(laughs) A woman bullfighter?

ME:

Yes sir, and she was the best in the world. She fought in Mexico and Spain, everywhere.

Beautiful sucker, looks like an actress, you know, like one of those starlets—except she's a little tougher.

AW:

Yeah, I guess.

ME:

She's pretty tough. But she left, they left me and him, and so he took me out on the patio, and we were going to have—now, Fess had already given him the book *The Rounders* and *The Hi-Lo Country*. But I can't remember how that I had—can't remember how Fess got me to give the manuscript, before it was published, of *Mountain of Gold* to Meston. So we sat out there on the patio, and I found out that he's a graduate of Harvard literature—here he's writing shoot-'em-up westerns. But it was a strange meeting for a little "just off the ranch" cowboy, really—sat there with this guy, and I am broke—so broke, I can't believe that I'll ever have another dime. And here's this son-of-a-bitch, he's actually jealous of me.

AW:

What?

ME:

Yeah, I wanted to go jump off of the bluff. I couldn't believe there could be a human beast like that. And so—and later, in another time, after the Fess thing had blown up, we'd become friends, he'd invited me for some reason—to show off his cowboy friend, I guess, or something—how gracious he was to have friends like me. But he invited me to two or three of these parties, and I went. So anyway, he said, "Well, I want to talk to you about something special," and we met at Musso & Franks, a meeting place—still there. One of the few, few places left in Hollywood, down on Hollywood Boulevard, where people really meet, and really for business. So I met, and there never was any business. He just brought up *Mountain of Gold* again. So I thought, "Well, hell, I'll just"—this is one of the periods when I was broke—"I'll just break all my rules of life, and I'll just borrow a miserable thousand dollars from this rich bastard." Well, I'm waiting, because he'd said, "I want to take you across here to Larry Edmond's book shop." It was the book shop of the stars and big writers and stuff. It was a wonderful damn book shop. So we walked in and there was Aldous Huxley holding a damn book. And he had it up right like this. I didn't know he was damn near blind.

AW:

So he really had his nose in it?

ME:

Yeah. So he took me up there and introduced me to him—he knew him. And then he politely left so we could visit. And he asked me all about peyote—

AW:

Huxley was asking you about peyote?

ME:

Yeah. And he—that book was something about herbs and stuff around the world. You know, he got fascinated with all that kind of dope.

AW:

Yeah—do I remember correctly that he was one of the first intellectuals that tried LSD later?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Yeah, I thought that.

ME:

So he was reading a book on it. (laughs) I'd—my mentor had—and then the old medicine man at Taos had both had me take a peyote, and it drove me—you know, I had this vision, and wrote that story about that vision. And then I never ever—it made me sicker than hell. It made me really sick. But I never took it ever again, but he didn't have the knowledge of the peyote, that's what he was trying to get knowledge of. And so I had quite a bit of knowledge for him. So we had a—I guess it was three quarters of an hour. Ol' John Meston came back and I saw out of the corner of my eye, he was around there just looking at books and stuff. So I thought, "Okay, well now, we've got to go, and I'm going to walk to the parking lot with him back there and I'm going to hit him up for a thousand-dollar loan," which to him was nothing, you know? Just reckless. I did it. I've done this very few times in my life—ever asked any individual for a loan. In fact, that may be the only time. And he said "Well, Max," —oh, I heard this when I was dealing in the mining business and things later. I heard this song-and-dance, but he was the first one. "Well, you know, I make quite a bit of money, but you just cannot conceive of how the taxes take it—the income taxes. I just can't afford to loan you a thousand dollars, but I will let you have a hundred." And he, after this, he had one of those—he had a low—one of those low-rider-type of Mercedes they had in those days. I'll never forget, he wrote out that check on top of

that Mercedes car—that hundred-dollar check. By God, I took it. I was broke. That's a—later, irony happened here and all, and I'll wind this little part of the world up—I found out at one of his dinners that he had told people that I owed him two thousand dollars. And that really ticked me off, because whoever told me—Morgan or somebody who I knew told me the truth. Now, get this one. Suddenly I get a call, after we'd moved from Taos down here, right to this house—he calls me and he says “Max, this is John Meston, your old buddy, you know?” and I'm thinking “Well hi John.” I knew it was something—couldn't imagine what the hell it was. He said “You know, they've got a hippie camp out north of Albuquerque.” And there was a big encampment of hippies out there in those days, in Positas, which is an elegant part of town, now. And he said, “I think my daughter might be out there—my only daughter,” —not by the bullfighter, but by his other wife—first wife. And he said, “I sure would appreciate it if you'd go out there and” —and you know what, I couldn't believe I was that chicken—well, chicken-shit. I told him, “Well, you just come to look for her yourself, John. I don't have any business out there with those damn people.” And I really didn't have any business out there with them, come to think of it. And that's the last I ever heard of John Meston.

AW:

How do you spell his last name?

ME:

M-E-S-T-O-N

AW:

O-N, okay.

ME:

John Meston. You can look him up on the credits of *Gunsmoke* and things—you can find him.

AW:

When you were out there in California those years, did you dress the same way you did back in Taos—boots, hat, and like you do?

ME:

I just dressed like a working cowboy.

AW:

Yeah, so that would have made you really stand out, out there.

ME:

Well, I didn't know it, but it did.

AW:

Yeah.

ME:

When I was in that little hotel, the only thing I could do there for just pleasure—didn't cost me nothing—is walk down that Beverly Hills Boulevard there. And all of the sudden, it finally dawned on me: people are stopping and turning around and staring at me. And then I realized there wasn't anybody wearing boots, Levis, and a damned old cowboy hat. Then I got so embarrassed, it made me uncomfortable just having the one pleasure I had left. But now everybody wears boots and Levis, you know. Nobody did, it just—I guess—I thought about that a lot later. In some ways that was to my advantage; in some ways it was a tremendous disadvantage, so I guess it about evened out.

AW:

How was it a disadvantage? Because I can see the advantage, that you are going to be this unique character, and you look like the things that you actually wrote about, which is quite different than most writers, and so what was the disadvantage?

ME:

Well, it seemed like some people would just—I'll give an example: a guy wanted to do a—the director—oh God, maybe I can think of his name in a minute for you—he did this wonderful picture with Charlton Heston about the last of the cowboys—it really—

AW:

Will Penny?

ME:

Huh? Will Penny—that director, he became a real good friend of mine. But let me see, what's his name—God-dang.

AW:

I should be able to remember it, too; I own that movie.

ME:

He's just a wonderful guy. He wanted to make *Bobby Jack Smith, You Dirty Coward!*—that satire comedy that I did on the West. It was a bestseller in the beginning, now it's completely lost. In fact, I hadn't thought about it in ten years.

AW:

Yeah, I haven't either.

ME:

It's really funny.

AW:

What's it called, again? *Bobby Jack Smith*—

ME:

Bobby Jack Smith, You Dirty Coward!

AW:

I'd like to read that, I haven't—

ME:

It's a whole satire on everything—movies and shoot-'em-up westerns, and boy, they loved it. Old Peckinpah read that and he said, "That's the funniest damn book I ever read in my whole life, but it's not for me. But I'm going to take and introduce you to a guy, a friend of mine that will love that and can get it made." Tommy Gries.

AW:

Tommy—?

ME:

Tommy Gries, the director's name.

AW:

G-R-A-S-S?

ME:

G-R-E-I-S.

AW:

G-R-E-I-S.

Me:

Or maybe it's I-E-S—yeah, it would be—G-R-I-E-S—Tommy Gries. He was a great director. He died—now, my *Bobby Jack Smith* was scheduled to be made with him and MGM when he finished a Muhammed Ali picture. Well, he didn't want to do it, but under contract, he had to do

it to get *Bobby Jack Smith* made. And he said, "I don't like this picture, I don't like the script, but I have to go do it." And he went to Florida, and made it in Florida, and I was anticipating the end of that picture there greatly, because in the first place, it meant a lot of loot to us, and I knew he would make this really funny as the book. He understood that this was a different kind of satire of the West—he really understood it. And by gollies, he finished the picture, his wife flew out there to meet him, they stayed and had dinner and drinks and everything, and the next day they went out—they were going to stay for two or three days—the next day they went out to play tennis—they both loved tennis—and he fell dead on the court—Tommy Gries—wasn't even fifty years old.

AW:

Wow.

ME:

Yeah, things like that happened at motion pictures and people. But, well, those are just little weird anecdotes I told you [that] you might want me to tell you about.

AW:

Oh, that is just great.

ME:

There's a zillion of them, but I can't remember them all now. So, we'll go to where you want to go, unless there's just a specific question you want to ask about that Hollywood thing so we can wrap it up.

AW:

Well, now there—as those pop into your head, we'll stop and get them, but you started yesterday, right after—and you're good at this, Max, when I shut off the recorder you start another good story. But you started telling us about exploring that gopher hole. Let's get that down on tape. It makes me—the hair stand up on my head, but I'd like to—you might just start by saying what's a gopher hole. I mean, most people think we're talking about a real gopher, but—

ME:

Yeah, we'll it's a—actually a prospect hole, but most prospect holes are just dug ten foot down and so wide, straight down on a vein to see whether it will last. We can take three or four cuts so it will average out. But this guy—whoever the hell he was, poor devil—he had found an outcropping of this peacock ore—I told him the name of it last night.

AW:

“Peacock ore” because it shines in the sunlight.

ME:

Okay, he'd found a little vein of that outcropped way over on the east side of Bull-of-the-Woods Mountain,, which went all the way down to a little boomtown over by Eagle Nest, so it's a huge area, from twelve thousand feet up, and just a vast, vast area—forest, mostly forest, but little outcroppings here. Well, I just couldn't resist it. I was up there, and we'd found some good ore on top up there—both oxide ore, copper, and the metallic peacock ore. My God, I can't think of the name of that stuff; it'll come to me—so I just thought I'd go prospecting down there. I thought, “This can't be all” —I just wandered off by myself, never even thought what I was doing. And I found this little outcropping, and underneath was this little hole that had been dug out there—what we called a “gopher hole,” because it didn't go straight down, and what he'd done—this guy, or it may have been two or three of them—they had just started digging and following this vein underground. So wherever it went—it just curved, and—

AW:

So it wasn't a straight hole, it meandered around.

ME:

Yeah, it just went under the ground. And some of it was about that wide, then narrowed down.

AW:

So it'd be three or four feet wide, and narrowed down to just a couple feet.

ME:

Yeah, or less.

AW:

And how did you get through a couple of—that's—

ME:

Well, I got—it's hard to explain the passion that comes to a prospector when he sees that beautiful, shiny ore. You know, it's no—it is rainbow ore, and I wasn't using a carbide lamp or anything that I should have been using, I just had a flashlight—a regular old flashlight. So, I just crawled in there, you could—I could follow that vein. I kept thinking, you know—all of the sudden, I thought, “This'll widen out, and boy, it's going to be a big discovery.” What happened is, of course, it didn't widen out, and I got down in there and I got hung. I couldn't turn around, I couldn't—I'd got hung in a narrow part of the gopher hole. And there I am, way underground, eight or ten feet, and I know the flashlight's going to only last so long, and I tried and I tried,

until I nearly broke my back, I just twisted and turned. And then I cut the flashlight off to save it and rest up to try again, because there I was, I'd buried myself. I was a dead duck, wasn't any question. So I had to face things there in the dark. Okay, I was stupid—I just knew I was telling myself—I was stupid enough to do this, so just accept it. Here's where you are. But also, a haunting thing hit me: my wife and my kids or nobody is ever going to know what happened to me, they're going to be—that started to worry me, because—

AW:

Because nobody's going to find you there.

ME:

There's just no way they're—

AW:

You're just not going to—you're just going to disappear and—

ME:

Yeah, and they'd have the people looking for me, and everybody going crazy, the law out—and all of these things hit my head all of the sudden. So I just laid there in the dark, and I don't know what guided me; I have no idea. I might have made prayers, I don't know. I can't remember. But whatever happened, I just twisted a little bit, and I thought, "Well I'll be darned." I held it right there, and I pushed on the rocks, and I got loose. And then I was still scared to death, because I was having to back out. But when I got out—I guarantee you fellows, I sat down and took a great wonderful deep breath of that ol' sunshiny air, and I could see a million miles, and I thought "What a wonderful thing life is."

AW:

You know, if it'd been me—well first of all, I wouldn't have gone down there—but if I had, if I'd got stuck and got out, I don't think I'd ever have gone back in one again, but you were still young. You did a lot of mining after that, did you not?

ME:

Oh yeah, yeah, sure.

AW:

So how do you gear up to go back down?

ME:

Well, I never went down a hole like a gopher hole like that again. I went in a lot of old tunnels—

seemed kind of tame to me, I mean, after that everything seemed easy. Yeah, but that one really sticks with me.

AW:

Yeah, I see how it would. That's just pretty amazing. Last night at dinner, we were talking with Luther about the interest that your—I guess it's not a life-long interest in mining, because you didn't start at that until you got up at Taos.

ME:

Oh, I guess I should tell you how this all started.

AW:

Yeah.

ME:

Well, I couldn't remember it yesterday because there's so damn much to tell. Me and my mentor—

AW:

Woody?

ME:

Woody. And an old cowboy named Marion Minor, just an old retired cowboy. He cowboy-ed until he got so crippled up he couldn't. But he's a good looking, handsome, clean-cut guy, and everybody really liked him in Taos. All the cowboys liked him, even though he couldn't participate, really.

AW:

Marion—

ME:

Miner—M-I-N-O-R

AW:

M-I-N-O-R

ME:

Yeah—and we were sitting down in Terry Monahan's motel and bar. He had a motel and a bar in there. Terry Monahan was a professional Irishman. And so we were drinking beer on credit—the three of us. We didn't have any damn money.

AW:

You and Woody and Marion Minor.

ME:

Marion Minor—drinking there, it was going on my bill—I was the only one that had any credit with—that had established credit with them. Pat knew his wife real good, and I guess that was in her kinfolks, and so I guess that was part of the reason I got credit there. And all of the sudden, he came in—that same little guy was tending bar, there, Shorty Kendricks, was later tending bar up at La Fonda de Taos, when we talked about the—One-Eyed Sky's inspiration, when that happened. He was in there, tending bar in there. And he—you know, short, little brassy guy—he didn't take any crap from anybody, but if he likes you, he'd do little things for you, but it wouldn't be obvious. He'd just do it. He was—I really loved him. But ol' Terry Monahan, he told us, he said, "Terry will be over here in a minute—he said—he just called, said he wanted to talk to you guys." So I couldn't believe this. He came up to us and he said, "You know there's a guy staying here, Max, and he's got a geologist with him. He's a rich sucker, and he's looking for a mine—mining properties—uranium properties." See, the uranium boom was on, and people were just as crazy as they were back in the gold rush—just as crazy. They came from everywhere; they just covered all these hills, all over the West. And he told us, he said "He manufactures Coca-Cola boxes for the Coca-Cola Company." You know those little picnic boxes? You don't see them anymore, but they—

AW:

That's because the antique people buy them all up.

ME:

Yeah, but they were very prominent—he's the guy that put them out all over the world. So he had this geologist, and he brought him in there, and they sat down, and they bought us some drinks, you know, whatever we wanted. We're sitting there having a big time with him, he said "You boys know anywhere there's any claims?" And I had been up to the Harding Mine, which—up by—south of Taos in the mountains—southeast, there's a mine there during World War Two—that's the only reason we went up there—only reason I'd gone up there. But it had beryllium, and lithium, and rare earth columbite, and rare minerals in that mine that was critical to the war effort of America. In fact, they had people walking all over there in those days with—Spanish people that lived there—with buckets, picking up these little pieces of metallic stuff for the war efforts because it was critical. So I heard about that, and I'd gone up there and looked at that mine, and that's all, I just—I wondered, well—it's still there, the university owns it. UNM³ owns it now, and they take students and study it, because it produced the rarest minerals in America. So that's my experience. Because of World War II, I was interested in that mine. But

³ The University of New Mexico.

anyway, I was thinking, I said, "Yeah, I know where's some minerals," so here we go. (laughs) They loaded us up in this old van—well, it wasn't old, it was the flashy damn thing I ever saw—we went up there to Harding Mine. We're walking down below there about a half mile or so, and we just walking out to the south of—north of the road there, and I—still just acting like we know everything about it. And it was just me and Woody, and old Minor didn't even go with us, and the geologist and the manufacturer. And I looked down, and I know—people later—I told this story, and later I know they thought I planted this, but there's no way I could even know to plant it—I saw a black rock, and it'd been there for—the earth was just packed around it. And I just picked it up and handled it, I said, "Well that, that's pretty heavy, there." It was really heavy, and I handed it to that geologist—he had a Geiger counter with him, of course—and he put that rock on that—that Geiger counter thing on that tube on that rock and it burned the thing out—the needle just went over and stuck. Well, the greed hit them. And I thought—I honestly thought, "Well, we've discovered"—I'd heard enough conversations about uranium and stuff, didn't intrigue me that much, that this was the basic uranium, pitchblende, which is metallic. Then it oxidizes into the yellowcake that they mined at Grants and everywhere over there. It oxidizes and turns into yellowcake. But I thought that's what it was, and they did to. So the greed hit that guy—the blessing of all time—we have a few greedy people running around—and he couldn't wait to get us back to the cockeyed motel room. "Can you beat them?" He didn't even—he didn't say anything about hiring a lawyer or anything else. He got me and ol' Woody over there and wrote up a contract on a yellow pad—yellow sheet of paper—and had us sign it, and gave us a check for ten thousand dollars. (laughs) And the thing we had to do was go stake twenty claims—have them surveyed. So that was—you have to think about this a second for it to have any importance. But ten thousand dollars was like one hundred thousand dollars or more today. And you're sitting there flat broke, you can't buy beer, you can't do anything. And you—our pains are gone, it'd take up a year to—we really just don't have anywhere to go. And then this blessing comes by—this greedy blessing runs by—and within three or four hours, you've got a hundred-thousand-dollar check, and it was good. I took it to the bank and had them call up—call that bank. I wasn't even taking any risks. So now we are really rich. So we hired old Minor to go out and dig prospect holes. You got to dig the holes I was talking about, ten feet deep, and I forget how wide.

AW:

You have to do that before you can stake the claim?

ME:

Yeah, to make a claim legitimate, you can hold it for a year. So every year you have to—supposedly—you have to do a hundred dollars' worth of work to hold it—keep it for next year. Anyway, he knew all about that stuff, he just hadn't done it, but he was tickled to death. He didn't mind digging at all, and he hired a couple of guys himself—we paid him pretty good. We had—we were rich. Cripes, we were rich. And so I didn't—but all of the sudden the surveyor,

that was a different thing, he was going to charge so much—so I said, “Look, we’re going to form a company. We’ll give you part of the company if you survey that.” Okay, we did. We went to Santa Fe, and I’ll never forget that guy’s name. I don’t know why I can remember his name, but it was Hawk—and attorney named Hawk.

AW:

Hawk, like the bird?

ME:

Yeah, in Santa Fe. So here’s me and old dumbass, naïve Woody, we go up there and tell this guy, “We want to form a mining corporation, and we want to be able to do anything—mine everything, do anything, we want it to be” —so he did. He formed it and worked on it, and when we got through with that contract—that corporation—formed the corporation—the corporation papers—had them signed. We signed them and all that stuff. He notarized—everything was done perfect, we thought. And I asked him, I said, “Now we’re ready to go. We can sell the interest of this to anybody in the world. We can do anything with this, it’s all ready to go, right?” and he said, “Yes. Yes.” Well, we believed it. We didn’t know that you had to go register with the corporation commission to sell stock. We had no idea. But we went out and sold several millions dollars of stock. We sold eighty thousand dollars to the Assembly of God Church in Oklahoma. We didn’t steal the money, we fed it into mining. We developed the mines, but that’s too long a story.

AW:

Well, I think we covered that earlier, too, in one of the interviews.

ME:

Yeah. So that’s—anyway, now, that’s a little detail, though, that you’ve got to—how this came about. It was just a simple place that the great mystery in the sky made me look down and see that black rock. That black rock, we found out very soon after, was columbite. That was the official ore. And it came in these pegmatite dikes. These dikes run up in that country there, and they’re formed in the earth, and they have—they’re mainly formed of feldspar, but they have these little beryllium six-sided crystals in them, and they have that columbite, or columbium—they call it both—all through it. So that’s what they’re picking up—those things eroded over the thousands and thousands of years—during World War II. And that’s where they were picking up all these little rocks, was for the manufacturers to harden their cannons with. So anyway, I took a passion—I started studying the hell out of all this. I could name every mineral, all the symbols. I could literally see a spot of—a piece of ore, actual ore—instead of the host rock—better than any geologist we ever hired. And it just became a natural thing. I loved it. I enjoyed it. Ore is beautiful, different—all kinds of things you can do—the world’s made up of it, you—this is made and everything around us is made—your car out there is made out of it, and it’s just—it

became a wonderful thing. I still love it. You'll see tomorrow why I love this mine up here. Okay, I'm ready for whatever you're going to ask.

AW:

Well, you know, we—I've been thinking about this. One of the things you said in one of the early interviews, when we were talking about writing, is that we talked about how people from our part of the country, you know, not only do we have this language that we hear that affects the meter and rhythm of our own writing—but also the idea of growing up and working in a place that's pretty much unbounded—you have this entire horizon of complete sky, you know, where you grew up, in Ropes and eastern New Mexico, and cowboying in the Hi-Lo country. And we talked—you talked about how that opened your mind up—

ME:

Yeah, space.

AW:

Yeah, the space. Is it just too crazy on my part to be thinking of this other interest of yours, in going down in the ground in this earth, where everything is made from, is essentially the yin to that yang—the flipside to that same coin, that this fascination of yours with the complete opposite of the expansiveness.

ME:

Well, I think you're on to something. I never thought about it—consciously thought about it. But if you're adjusted to this—which, you are, yourself, you guys—to all this space that we had in the—where I was in the early days, and then all of the sudden you're up in mountains, you know; the Taos Mountain's a dominating mountain anywhere in the world. And you're up there, and you go inside it, where other people had been going in there before you—long before you—and you realize that when you look at a mountain, you're just not looking at a mountain. There's millions and millions of tons of all kinds of earths under that mountain, and that there's another side to that mountain. So I think that absolutely comes about from having this space in the beginning—being adjusted to space, because you're adjusted to that, but now here's another thing, you see, it confronts you. And what minerals are in there? After you have a little bit of going in those mountains, and following those minerals, the magic of what's in that huge space underneath that surface of the mountain—that blue surface we look at is fascinating as hell, always has been to me. I got to where I—not always, but later in life, after I got in the mining business—I couldn't look at a mountain anywhere—never did—without thinking. I don't just look and see a mountain—just a slope going up there, a blue slope. I look at it and think about “How's that fold on the other side? What's inside that mountain?” Because there is, all kinds of minerals—in any mountain, there's all kinds of minerals, and formations, or granite, or whatever, you know. It's just a—yeah. I can see where what you're suggesting is absolute truth. The space

created—helped create part of that. Because a lot of the guys that came up in those days and really got after it and climbed those mountains and really looked—prospected—they were from down in the flat country—space country, a lot of them had become fascinated.

AW:

And I think about my own relatives on my mother's side, for instance, who left the coal mines down around Gordon, and that area west of Fort Worth and Mineral Wells. They left the coal mines, and when they got up on top of the flatlands, they thought they'd come to heaven because it was so different than being down in the coal mine. So it seems like this connection is really interesting, and I just think—and I guess the other thing is, I've been thinking a lot about what you just told this morning, about you know, you're flat broke and then you're making money. And then you're flat broke, and then you're making money. It strikes me that you've—I mean, you've had to work for money—to do things for money, but it also strikes—I mean, it strikes me, the main, that nothing you've ever done really was something you did just to make money. It's something—painting, writing, mining; those are really passions more than they are occupations.

ME:

Yeah, well, just like that ten thousand dollars. I mean that was a whole separate thing in the world. I mean, that was like you discovered an actual unicorn, you know, a real one. All that mattered to us—and it was the same with Woody Crumbo and old Minor—all that mattered to us, hey, we could have a little fun, pay our bills, and buy beer. We didn't know it we was going to get hooked, and want to do this bigger and bigger and bigger.

AW:

Well, that's what success will do to you.

ME:

You know, right above the ski lodge—now, you can't see it now, the timbers grown up—we went right up above there, right when they were making the ski lodge, right when they first were constructing that ski lodge up there. We opened up a 1,340-foot tunnel right under that mountain, where you look right across from the ski lodge. And—

AW:

Wow, that's a big tunnel.

ME:

Yeah, that was a hell of an adventure. But it was very, very dangerous. About two hundred feet in, there was a fault in the mountain. And there's nothing we ever could do. We tried timber, we tried every—best timber in the world—that sucker, the pressure would still come down and stop up that tunnel. And so we couldn't mine it, and it asked that—you could cut copper samples—

legitimate samples—it'd run about two and a half percent. So that wasn't rich enough, except for open-pit mining.

AW:

Right, where they get big huge—

ME:

Just tear up—open it up and just tear the whole mountain down. So we didn't want that to happen. Oddly enough, we didn't want that to happen. And so we just caved in—let that mine cave in there. Yeah, we had that kind of strange dignity about it. But we found other veins and tunnels that were richer—that weren't—and this was oxide ore, green ore, oxide—and when we started finding that peacock ore, why, that's what drove us all crazy. It's just so darn beautiful, you know. That's what we were actually mining, and we got the Molybdenum Corporation of America at Questa, that's one of the biggest mining outfits in the world. It's been mining for—it just shut down this year, finally, finally. And they spent a fortune converting part of their mill there, for us to haul our ore there, so we could concentrate it and—because we were shipping it to El Paso, and we had to haul it in a truck to down about Santa Fe there, to load in a boxcar—

AW:

That's expensive transportation.

ME:

And it cut our profit by half. So we quit shipping, and started stacking the rich ore, there, waiting for the mill. And then what broke us was a very simple thing. We had this good geologist, and he'd been a big wheel, actually, in the Atomic Energy Commission from here—Dan Hurley—been dead now for fifteen, twenty years. He took me and ol' Woody in the office there one day and said "I've got to explain something to you guys. You're just getting this ready to go here, but"—and he stuck a piece of paper up on the wall, he said "Now, all these mining companies, Phelps Dodge and everything," he said, "here's how they survive." He took a graph, he drew it like this, and he said, "Okay, this is when copper is so much a pound up here, everything's going good. You can hold it all together. But," he said, "it always goes like this." —

AW:

Goes down and then back up.

ME:

Always in the history of copper, since they first discovered it. And he said, "While they're up here, they put away enough money to get through this period." And it was the simplest, beautiful explanation in the world; we paid not one bit of attention to it. (laughs) Oh boy, we were stupid.

So we had the mill ready, we had the stack of ore, and in ninety days, copper dropped from forty-six cents to twenty-four cents.

AW:

Right in half.

ME:

Absolutely flat in half, and it broke us. Just broke us. You know, it took us a while, because we were spending money trying to figure how to recover, but we had no resources to back it up. And that's how we went broke. So now, I told you about finding that little black rock, how we got rich, now I told you how we went broke. Both of them just stupidity, I guess.

AW:

One lucky stupidity, the other unlucky.

ME:

So that's a brief history of the mining world, there.

AW:

Well, let me ask you one other question that I've been thinking about since yesterday. You mentioned turquoise, and how you were really interested in finding—

ME:

Yeah, I don't know why. You know, I just—I never was like crazy over gold, like all the miners I've ever known.

AW:

I've never heard you even talk about gold. You talk about copper, you talk about—

ME:

Yeah, I just—it's the beauty of the damn minerals. And I was always fascinated in the beginning with beryllium—little hexagonal—they're all hexagonal when they're complete. You can find them that size up to big as this room—

AW:

You mean hexagonal from the size of your little finger to as big as this room?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

That's got to be an amazing thing, to see—it's one thing to see a crystal the size of your finger. It's a whole other one to see one that's really big.

ME:

Oh yeah. Well I dug one up over at another deposit that might still have—to this day, might have a—about seven miles south, back towards Taos, or maybe eight, as the crow flies from that big mine—Harding Mine. Now I don't think anybody knows about it today, but I dug up a—it was really hard to dig up, because I didn't want to blast, and in fact, I didn't want anybody to know I was—and I had a crystal of—a golden crystal about this big.

AW:

About a foot tall.

ME:

And about that big around. And I kept it on our desk there as we were being broke and broke and broke and more broke, and some son of a gun—I knew who did it, but I just kind of admired him, because he had figured out how to get in there, in our office—we had an extension out there, and there was a window out of there. So he had to—it was a two-story extension—he'd taken a big old board and laid it up there, and he just run up that board, went in there and went down to our office, came back, scooted down the board, and stole that thing. I knew there was only one guy who could do that, and I never did even pursue him. But that almost broke my heart; it was such a beautiful specimen. And I got to thinking how beautiful—I always thought turquoise was the most soothing color in the world. And I—just fascinated by it. So that was about the only thing left that I craved to do, and I still do. I'd still love to find a turquoise mine. Now I finally checked old records and found where there had been one way back there, down in the very bottom of Sierra County, below Hillsboro, and me and my old prospecting friend tried to figure how we'd get in there, and I was beginning to get old, and my lungs go, and we got to—we had an old map and we figured a direction, and finally I told him, "I'm never going to be able to climb in there. If it's going to be found, you're going to have to." And he just never did do it, I don't know why. But that was sort of the end of my real—I had this mine up here, and so that was enough. But I always wanted to—still, I still would like to find a turquoise mine, it's just a beautiful thing—beautiful rock.

AW:

Yeah, I don't know anything at all about turquoise mining.

ME:

It comes from limestone, mostly. I found—I went up and looked along at a mined-out mine up at Manassa, Colorado. Yeah, just out this side, you can go up there now.

AW:

Yeah, right up the valley.

ME:

Yeah. That's where Jack Dempsey's—

AW:

Right, "The Manassa Mauler."

ME:

Well, about—let's see, about four miles, or five miles east, right off the highway on the right, going east from Manassa, they had a—there was a—you can look out there, and you'll see where they mined turquoise.

AW:

I'll be darned.

ME:

Yeah. And you can—even today, you could go out there if you was careful, you'd find little tiny pieces of it. I guarantee, even today, rain and water come—they mined a lot of turquoise there. That's the closest I ever came—I had to go look at one that was mined out. I used to go up there and really enjoy moving around there and looking for little pieces of turquoise. But that was my last dream in the mining business—I still got it, sort of. I was going to see if I got—I don't have any pure crystal left, but I'll show you the part—somewhere here, I've got a partial—yeah—here's a partial crystal. See how it—that's beryllium. See the blue and beautiful colors in it? But it hasn't completely formed.

AW:

It only has two of the six sides.

ME:

Yeah, just two of the six sides.

AW:

It's not as heavy as I thought.

ME:

But that's what the—that's what they made—they had to have that to make the hydrogen bomb, by the way.

BT:

Oh, is that right?

ME:

Yeah. You can't make it without that. But then metal always—I wasn't intrigued with it for that reason, but—

BT:

Max, wasn't the—I mean the so-called "Turquoise Trail" back, way back om Santa Fe—weren't there turquoise mines up there?

ME:

Yeah, there's mines still there, and you can—they still want to mine it a little bit. Some guy owned it and just does it himself, and it's a good mine.

BT:

Still producing, huh?

ME:

Yeah. Yeah, it sure is. That stuff—that mineral comes in just about every color there is.

AW:

Really? So how do you recognize it if it comes in so many—?

ME:

I don't know. You know, an old uncle of mine, he and another uncle of mine had a cow ranch up there, out west of Taos. And he got fascinated with studying minerals, and just studied them.

And—

AW:

Was this Slim?

ME:

Oh, yeah, Slim had the ranch, but it was Lloyd that—

AW:

Lloyd.

ME:

Yeah, his son just—

AW:

Lloyd Evans.

ME:

His grandson, rather. He—the only argument we ever had in our life—he was one of my favorite people that ever lived—was over a rock. And he said, “That’s beryl.” And I said “No, Lloyd, I’m sorry, that’s chert.” And he said—he just kept going on, and he was so sold that he knew that—so I’ll never forget it. He had a kit, a testing kit that he studied how to do that. So we went out to that old ranch house, and I just loved this guy, and I hate to just—but I damn well know it’s chert. And he sat down and got his chemicals, and he was going to show me what an idiot I was, and it was chert. We had a laugh, then, about it, but he was just getting plumb mad.

BT:

Going to show you, huh?

ME:

We’d never had a cross word in our lives.

BT:

Max, how did you make—given all the characters, and all the range of human personality in the mining business, how did you make decisions about partners, and who to work with, and who to hire, I mean, did you just follow your instinct, and—

ME:

Yeah

BT:

—you just kind of trusted that it’s going to be—

ME:

Yeah. There’s an old guy—I wrote about him in *Bluefeather Fellini*—called him “Grinder”—that he’s an old toothless guy, and chewed tobacco, and he’d chew tobacco and drink beer at the same time, (laughs) and he’d repulse everybody but me. I just loved him. And he’s the best damn miner I ever had in my life. That was just a feeling. You know, that’s kind of amazing; he could chew tobacco and drink beer at the same time, and still stand up, you know. He got me in a terrible fistfight. Oh, it was a bad one.

AW:

Where?

ME:

I part-near killed a guy. He—we were sitting up at the front of the Taos Inn, me and that old other guy, drinking and just having a good time by ourselves—drinking a little beer, and we weren't drunk, we weren't anything. We [were] just visiting—we had lots to visit about, always. And there's a great, huge guy came in there with this beautiful woman. And what he was—of course, I found all this out later—he was one of those guys—they had a period where they had all these people who would go down to Venice, California and lift weights, and be all body guys. Well, he was one of them. He weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle—just pure, you know, huge, bulging—and he's sitting back here with this beautiful woman, and me and that old guy's talking, and he said—he had a glass jar every now and then he'd spit in, and—but he's still drinking beer, still chewing his tobacco. And that woman evidently got nauseated or something, because this guy came up there and told me that we had to, I had to take that old man out of there, because he was disgrace; bunch of bad things he said about him. And I said, "Well, I ain't going to do that." I was scared to death of him, I might as well tell you the truth. I just—I knew he could slap my head plumb off, just like that. But I told him, "I'm not going to do it," and he said—I said, "I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll just get up and move. We'll move to that table right over there," and he said, "No, I think you guys shouldn't be in here doing this. You're making everybody ill in here." So I said, "We're going out." And they had a great big glass ashtray. So I just planted that in his head. Well, it broke. I hit him so hard that it broke. So then I tried to cut his throat—I literally did. I hate to admit it, but I did. And I got him out of there, and I said, "Let's go down to the Fonda de Taos, have a drink because they're going to put me in the pen forever."

AW:

You were telling your friend?

ME:

My old buddy—old Grinder. And he said, "Oh, hell, we'll figure a way out of it, don't worry." Well, he wasn't the one that—he sure didn't have any worries. Anyway, that guy that owned the place—Harold Street—he really wanted me to go away, but you know that guy refused to file charges on me.

AW:

The big guy?

ME:

They took him to the hospital, sewed him up—took, I don't know, forty stitches in his head and

his neck—and he said, “No sir, I” —and he told them—all those people raging there, that owner of that place said he wanted to put me in jail, he said, “No, I’d asked for that. I didn’t have any business insulting those people like that.” And he refused to file charges. And after he got out of the hospital, he was still there at the hotel. I didn’t know who he was. I went down to see if he was there and I was going to apologize to him. And by gollies, he got up and shook hands with me and said, “You know something? I’m a different human being.” And I thought, “Well, you sure are. Your head’s wrapped up, and your throat’s wrapped up.” But it all came about by that old—you’re talking about instincts. I like that old crazy man that chewed tobacco and drank beer enough that I risked my life over him. That’s what I thought of him. I started my greatest novel of my life off with him. You’ll see it in *Bluefeather Fellini*—this kid sitting there talking to this old miner named “Grinder.” That was him.

AW:

That’s the same one. Well, it seems to me that you have as good a talent for picking good enemies as you do for picking friends.

ME:

I don’t know. It was all—it’s too damn much, I guess, I don’t know. Still here. But it sure has been—now that I think back on it, it’s been a pretty wild life.

AW:

Was it that same instinct that drew you to the Madam Millie story?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

Was it the same kind of instinct that drew you to the Madam Millie story?

ME:

Yeah. You now, I kept hearing about her, and there was this strange kind of conversation about—they called her “Silver City Millie,” they didn’t call her—in fact that’s what she liked to be called, but I knew it wouldn’t—you need just something on the title, and that was too long.

AW:

Silver City Millie.

ME:

Yeah. And I hear about her, and there was always just a—no matter what, there wouldn’t be jokes about a whorehouse or anything; it would be some kind of something good they’d say

about her—people would talk about her. And I just got—I thought about it a long time, and finally, old Charlie Crowder, that land guy we talked about, he knew Millie, and he sent a cowboy, Jimmy Bason, who became one of my best friends right here in this house, right in there. He called me, old Charlie did, and said, “You know, I’m sending a cowboy over there.” This cowboy happened to be his protégé in land trading and everything, but I didn’t know any of that. He said—he knew I’d say “Okay,” when he said he was going to send a cowboy, see, old Charlie’s that sharp—he said, “I’m going to send him over to talk to you about a book.” And I said, “Okay, have him come over.” So here comes this cowboy, and I knew—I could just watch him, and I knew he was a real cowboy. And so he said, “Well, Charlie would like for you to write a book on Madam Millie. I’ll take you down and introduce you to her.” And I thought—you know what I thought? I thought Charlie had to have her for some kind of a land deal, and—that she’d help him pull off, because she had connections with judges and governors and all these powerful political connections. In fact, she had affairs with two of the governors, and she wore diamonds to the last of her life that the chief of police had given her. They buried her with diamonds—or somebody might have stolen it off her finger, but—so I thought Charlie was in some kind of trouble, and I didn’t want to ask, and so I said, “Okay.” So anyway, the meeting was set in Las Cruces, and they had Madam Millie Room—a Silver City Millie room in the new Holiday Inn down there. So that’s where we met.

AW:

In the Holiday Inn?

ME:

Yeah, in her room—it was named after her.

AW:

In the family-based Holiday Inn hotel chain.

ME:

Yeah. So he—Charlie had a table just full of food and drinks and everything else, and he got me and her husband, old Wendell, together and left. He didn’t stay, he didn’t get—and Pat was there, so they just went off and visited, and I sat down there, and within an hour, we were just the best friends in the world. I just loved both of them—her husband was just great fun, and a good guy, and it was a great joy. From then on, I just—I learned to respect the fact that she had been an orphan from the time she was nine years old, and there wasn’t any relatives, no known relatives in the world. And for her to come out here—the nuns sent her, you know, and it rained for—

AW:

And didn’t she have a sister that needed—

ME:
Huh?

AW:
She had a sister that was ill.

ME:
Very ill, and an invalid—became an invalid. Older sister—only relative she had in the world. She loved her—is all—well, that was all she had to love. And they sent her to out here because of Harvey Houses. She was way above her age in experience, and they thought she could get on at a Harvey House. So she did in Deming, New Mexico—was a Harvey House where she went to work. And there's where she learned that men would pay more money for frolicking around than they would for tips, you know, and she had her sister in a sanatorium in El Paso, which was damned expensive. So that's what turned her into a hooker. She had no other way on Earth to provide the money to keep her sister. So then she got to El Paso—she decided that—she got hooked up with a taxi driver—she could sing like hell. Well he got her a job singing across in Juarez, and he'd take her over there, and then he got to talking about her and introduced her to some hookers and madams and things, so she just studied. She studied what was happening, and then she decided this being a hooker isn't it. That's not going to be it, she's got to be the boss—running. So that's—she found out that there was a madam in Roswell, New Mexico—who's pretty famous down there, now—I can't think of her name. I've got a picture of her old house.

AW:
Uh-huh. I think you talked about her in one of our earlier interviews, because that's kind of where she learned how to be the boss.

ME:
Not only that, she was different from any madam that you could ever dream of in those days. She made her girls read classic novels, and she kept a classical pianist to entertain the guys that were there, and a lot of them would just come and just carried on with Millie. There's people would go there that didn't have any interest in the girls—they had wives or girlfriends that they didn't care about her girls. People from all over several states would come in just to visit with Millie. You know, she kept a big pot of spaghetti going all the time, and if she liked them, and they had some kind of position in the world, they got drinks. And she was really something; she was a great business woman. And she handled her girls beautifully. She got a little ranch out of town, there, so when the girls got burned out or got sick or something, she'd take them out to the ranch and keep them there and all kinds of animals. And those girls all loved animals. I noticed, when I first started interviewing her, looking at the photographs, every one of those girls would have a cat or a dog or something. They loved animals. I guess the human beast wasn't too nice to them,

you know. So she'd take them out—and she even kept wild deer there, and things, that they could pet—horses, all kinds, cows. So she was something special in this world.

BT:

Max, did you ever have any qualms about that project? I mean, did it ever think about—"Well, maybe this is not going to go over too well," or "Maybe this might damage my reputation," or "Should I be writing about Millie and prostitution?"

ME:

No, none. After all I'd seen in Hollywood and various other places in the world, that was pretty tame to me.

AW:

But you know, on another level, though, it was a different kind of book.

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

It wasn't fiction.

ME:

No, it was just dead-on truth. Now, the only cheating I did on this was I left a few things out that would hurt Millie or friends of hers.

AW:

Yeah, well that's not exactly—cheating is when you make things up, not when you—

ME:

Most of the writers I know in the West world—nine out of ten of them have had to make all this excitement up. I have spent my whole life subduing the truth. And I did the same for Millie. I told—everything in there is just the cold-blooded truth. But, there's some other truths that I just simply didn't tell—didn't distort a thing. One really rank one, in El Paso, in fact I—she looked me up, got it on the tape, and I went to a guy and had him cut it out of the tape. I lost the tape. Southwest Collectables might have it in that El Paso stuff, I don't know.

AW:

Yeah, I don't know what the exact listing of the things that we have. Well that's still a book that—we were just talking to Luther this morning, and he was talking to us about how well it sells, even today.

ME:

Yeah, it's been selling and it never stops. And the amazing thing to me, guys, is the main customers are housewives.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah, yeah, two out of three customers. Women just love it—and all walks of life—church women, it doesn't matter, they love the book. There's something about it—her and that sister, and the strange loyalty she had, and how she really did try to take care of her girls in a terrible position. Somehow, people—there's something it touched, that I had no knowledge that I was doing this, but it touched the average woman deeply because of that sister, I think, and the fact that she treated her girls, who were all—they're just lost souls, they didn't want to do this kind of thing. They certainly didn't enjoy all that. And she tried to take care of them the best she could. Also, she had no prejudice—she's the only human being I've ever met in my life that didn't have some kind of prejudice. I never could find a prejudice in Madam Millie about anything. You know, her—the lady that took care of her racehorses was a big old fat black lady. She gave her—she had this whole string of racehorses, and she—hey, she took care of her, she paid her—had total trust in her. And the lady that handled her money, you know, she'd go to the bank every day with a sack of five dollar bills, and was a Hispanic lady—handled all her money. I mean your money and your racehorses—what are you going to—if you're going to trust anybody, that's the greatest trust you're going to have. So there's just something rather wonderful about her. Nobody ran over her, I'll tell you that.

BT:

Does she—

ME:

She—one thing I add—I may tell this someday, now, she's so long gone. But in El Paso, she—you know, she fell in love with that classical pianist in Roswell, and he came to join her in El Paso when she finally got a bar there, and she was running hookers and then she tried to go straight, was running a bar. She intended to marry him, she really did. He had a big home, and was known around the world, really. She didn't know that in those days. She went to California with him, and they had a grand year out there because he had all this money and stuff she didn't even know about. But he got a girlfriend there on the side, in El Paso—she—in the book I told that she just knocked her off of a stool, but she really did something else to her. It was really pretty terrible. Me and old Jimmy Bason used to—long ago, we'd think about going to El Paso, because he knew exactly where that place was, and look up and see if we could find what

remains. But we never did do it. But he went by there, and found it. He didn't—he wanted me to go look for the wreck. But she was something special in this world.

BT:

Was she—I don't even remember—the racehorse connection—did she race all thoroughbreds all over, like, New Mexico and—

ME:

And Tucson—Tucson was the main track in the Southwest in those days.

BT:

Was it?

ME:

Yeah, she raced here and Arizona and down—and then she got lots of match races. She raced a little bit in California, but Tucson was a big track in those days. Yeah. That's where she met her husband—the last one that she stayed with the rest of her life. He was working in the racehorse business, there. They got acquainted, and—best thing she ever did. They were just great for one another. Yeah, she's—they were really contented together. He—in the end—I couldn't tell this in the book, but I might as well tell you guys on this tape, because it's a hell of an adventure within itself. I went—he had—I'd heard that he had a rich aunt—really rich aunt back east somewhere, ol' Wendell, and—but I just didn't much believe it. People are always saying things like that. And they had a trailer house—she had a bunch of little houses down there. She had to sell everything, finally, you know, but she had a trailer house, and had built onto it, and they were building a whole new room up on the hill, there, south of Silver City in one of those little mining towns, there, that's part of Silver City. And I went down there to see them and did some interviews there, and I just—one time, I go down there and here's a whole new room being built. And to show you how they trusted me, they—Millie told Wendell, said, "Wendell, show Max your inheritance," and I thought "What in the hell is happening here?" So he went in there and pulled one of those—some of those boards up over there by the fireplace they were building in this new room, and he pulled out a great big old container—I forget what—full of gold nuggets and stuff, and jewelry. There was—you didn't have to know anything about jewelry to know that this was old, ancient stuff worth a fortune—really, fortunes. He just showed me that damn stuff, and I said, "Well, I know a guy in Tucson that's buying that gold, there." Boy, they didn't want me, and they didn't let anybody—I don't know, they sold it, and they lived out the rest of their life just in luxury. Next thing I know, he's got a brand new pickup, and—biggest one he could find, and they come down here to see us and he brought me a big gold watch that he'd inherited. I've still got it somewhere. I can't get Pat to dig it up for me. She's hid it somewhere; she thinks I'll take it and sell it. But what a strange, wonderful ending—he inherited all that stuff, and—but can you imagine him just going in there and showing me that stuff.

AW:

Well, you're right—they had trust.

ME:

I mean people kill and destroy whole nations for a little gold. It was quite a compliment. I'm choking a little bit, I better put this—Pat told me to do this, and I forget it.

AW:

I'd think your lungs would remind you.

ME:

Well, it keeps me from choking so much. So anyway, I'm ready to go. If y'all got any other questions, just get after it.

BT:

Well, we've covered a lot of territory.

AW:

I've been kind of hogging this thing, Bill. One thing we haven't talked much about is the book trade, and I guess we're kind of keyed in on that, since we've had a couple meals with Luther. But it's an odd, interesting business. Luther was talking about going down to Silver City with you to do a book signing.

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

How many people had lined up—and he said there wasn't even a book store in town. They had all these books and all. And yesterday you mentioned a couple of times about how your new book would be a lot better if you could get out and promote it. Has that been a factor all through your career, in terms of your personal involvement, not only in writing the book, but then in helping to market it?

ME:

Yeah, you know, when I tell you this, and I'm fixing to tell you, you'll wonder—you won't wonder at all, you'll know that I'm the biggest idiot that ever lived, and I have no business writing at all, because I never had a single signing for *The Rounders* or *The Hi-Lo Country*, *The One-Eyed Sky*, *The Mountain of Gold*—not one.

AW:

Really?

ME:

No. And I just thought that was an embarrassment, to go out in front of people and have such ego that you sit there and put your name on books. I just thought that was—and I never—that's about all the thought I gave it. So I never, for a moment in my own damn works, ever—it's just—I did a little bit for *Bluefeather Fellini*. I went up to Denver; signed up there at that Tattered Cover, and signed here in the state, four or five book stores. And that's about all I ever did. There was one benefit I had that I didn't ask for, it just happened. I got two or three columnists that just loved my work enough that they kept writing me up all my life—all their lives. They're gone now. And one of them happened to be the entertainment editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, who was probably, without question, I think—in my mind, he's the best movie and book critic in America—Charles Champlin.

AW:

Charles Champlin?

ME:

Champlin. Yeah, Charles Champlin. He just died about a year ago, and God, what a writer he was. And he had television shows and entertainment—on Bravo channel, entertaining great directors and stars and stuff. But he was so highly respected—and we just became friends. We were just drinking buddies. And then I had to—in San Diego, I had a syndicated columnist, John Sinor—S-I-N-O-R—who came up to—when they were showing *The Wheel* up there—that little movie that was a total failure—he came up there and saw it and loved it, and we became friends, and within two or three hours' time. And at that time, he was syndicated to six million people around the world. I've got a stack of columns he did on me up there—that I'm going to give to you guys—over a period of six or seven years. I never said a word ever to him, but he wrote me up over and over and over. Well, that way I sold quite a few books, and I got a little movie attention that people were—

AW:

I was going to ask you if that helped in getting some attention from Hollywood folks.

ME:

Yeah, it really did. And it's just through a few friends. Then I had one guy that was editor here, at a paper—Albuquerque Tribune—really good paper, and he became editor, old Ralph Looney, then he went up to Denver and took over *Rocky Mountain News* as editor-in-chief, and it was the twentieth biggest paper in America at that time. It almost put the *Denver Post* out of business. But when he left—when he retired he came back here, then that paper went completely down.

But he just loved my work and he sent a lady down here, she did a three-page story on me. I had nothing whatsoever to do with it. She just called up and said, "Ralph wants me to come down and do a story on you," and I said, "Come on." And between a few people like that, it kept my books going. I didn't do anything. I'm trying to think of when I had my—what book I—I must have written ten books without ever having a signing.

BT:

Max, what about dealing with—I mean, Maxwell Perkins was considered the "great editor," right? And contributed so much to the work that would become the final form—the stable of people that he worked with. Were there editors that you encountered along the way that you really felt understood your work, and—

ME:

Yeah, there was, glad you asked that. There was a guy named Mark Chappy that—he was the first editor in the big-time publishing world that could pick up a phone and make a deal with an author for a half-million dollars. He was the first one that had that clout because he had picked so many bestsellers and things, and ever works of literature. And I—unfortunately, he wasn't the one that I ran into early on when *The Rounders*—I had that great agent and all that, but I didn't run on to him until some publication—he finally—he took over Bantam Books, and he published—he was the editor that took over *The Rounders*—the publication of *The Rounders* in paperback. And he loved my work; he published two or three of my stories and anthologies, and he was planning—he was aging, back when everybody had to be young in Hollywood and New York to matter. If you were forty-five years old, you didn't matter. And it was a strange period in America, but it existed, and it was hell to a truth there, that's just the way it was. But he was at Houghton Mifflin when I did *Bluefeather Fellini*. And so I sent an advanced copy—manuscript copy—to him and Robert Connelly, who I really wanted to know his opinion of the book, and I knew they'd all be straight with me. And then let's see, that guy down there at—they're going to put him in the Hall of Fame now, but I don't think he's going to make it Lubbock—Dale Walker. He was editor for Elmer Kelton. He edited twenty-six of Elmer's books. So I thought, "Well, if this is what I think it is, I'll find out with these three guys. They're so disparate, and yet they're all talented in their own way. They've all been editors as well as writers. And he wrote me back, and he said, "I'm here at Houghton Mifflin to find special books. This is"—I forget what he said. The letter's in your collection somewhere, it was at El Paso, it's in the El Paso thing, the first letter. I found one yesterday up there—the last one he ever wrote me, I'll go up and get it for you, show you. If I can find—like I said I found it—I was looking for something else yesterday morning. He wrote me back and he said "This is"—he compared it like to *Moby-Dick* or something. But he said, "If—I can crowd this through here. They're not going to take it, but I can crowd it through. But if I do, then they'll just—they won't do it, ignore it—throw it away." And so I got the letters from—they're also in the, you've got them in the archive, these letters—from

Robert Connelly. And he went a little overboard. He said you could just take a—oh, what's that greatest writer of all time—that crazy Greek that wrote all those—Iliad and all that stuff?

BT:

Homer.

ME:

Huh?

BT:

Homer.

ME:

Homer. He said, "You could just take his name and put it on here, and nobody would know the difference." And I thought, "Well, that's going a little too far, but I'll take it anyway." And Dale Walker just—he just went into detail. He was just—raved, these three guys. So I thought "Well, I don't want to go through the same thing I went through with *Rounders*, I knew that was special. Now I knew *this* was. So I just called old Luther. I said, "I want to get this thing published." He read it and man, he said—he was the director of University of Colorado then. Well, here's the problem Luther faced, which I've always loved him for it: they had never published a novel at that press, it was all just history, and much less, a huge novel like this thing.

AW:

Yeah, he said it was pretty big when you brought him the first manuscript—something about a wheelbarrow. (laughs)

ME:

So he said, "Well, I'll see what I—if I can get this through this board." He went to bat for me—I know it was hard for him to do, but he got it through and we made a beautiful publication, and we had a pretty darn good success.

AW:

After all those books and all those years of writing and publishing books, is some of the thrill gone for this brand new one?

ME:

No. I'm pretty excited about it. Yeah, I must say, I think a lot of the excitement is—I realize now that what I didn't realize then—that I was recording, in a novelistic manner, tragicomedy—which is what I do best—that little piece of history just missing—the transition of Taos, there. Now, it's—people there thought that little town—it was so incestuous in a way. They actually

thought that the whole world was staring at them, you know, that little place there—that little place, full of mountains up there. I'd catch a train to Hollywood, and I'll always go up in the upper car, you know, "beaut" car, or freight car.

AW:

Vista Cruiser, or whatever they—

ME:

I'd sit around there and visit with people. And they'd say, "Where're you from?" you know, it's common, everybody asks where you're from. I said "Taos," nobody knew where Taos was—"Well, I never heard of that. Where's that?" Tried to explain and explain—so when I'd get back to Taos, all of the sudden there they were again, thinking, "All the eyes of the world." Ain't nobody know you people! Well, now they do. But you see, that's the period that I wrote about, was when all—there was some great artists there, but nobody knew them—just in a little art world knew anything about them. And so that was a period that wouldn't have been told, except for that great guy that could drive that bulldozer. Oh, by the way, he wore a little gray hat with a little beard—I mean a brim only was about that big. And I don't remember him ever taking that off of his head. He'd drink in it, he'd eat in it—yeah, that little gray hat—he'd drive bulldozers in it. It was so worn out I kept thinking if he did take it off, it'd come apart, maybe that's the reason he doesn't take it off. It was a real joy in this old new book, because of the realization that you're getting about an eight or ten year history that's never—was really important in American arts—did become so, wasn't at that time, but it become so. But they come to Taos now like they do Santa Fe, from all over the world. They really come.

AW:

Oh yeah, yeah. You wouldn't get all the same questions on the train today.

ME:

No, they'd know instantly.

AW:

Well, what is something that I haven't asked or been interested in that I missed?

ME:

Oh, hell, I can't remember. Well, I, you know, Pat's out of it but I was addicted to the best of the foreign films for a long, long time in my life.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Like, give me an example.

ME:

Any of Truffaut, or my favorite director—I'd have to flip a coin, whether it's Truffaut or Federico Fellini, because his *8½* really influenced me.

AW:

Really? In what way, what was the influence from *8½*, because that's a later film for him, right?

ME:

Well, he made three or four. So that is later for him. He just made one every four or five years. Well Pat and I went to it the year we were out there, when we—all that Buster Keaton stuff. When we went down, it was showing down there in Beverly Hills, I believe. Art houses were art houses then, they showed these films—they were big houses; they weren't little hole-in-the-walls like they are now. People really were fascinated with this new thing in film. So we went to it—we'd heard about it, read about it, it'd been on—and we got really curious and we went down and we sat right in the back of the theater. There was only five or six more people in there, in the whole damn big theater. And I was just absolutely completely wiped out by that—the adventure of that guy's mind. It's a shared adventure of his mind—how he saw things in this—from a different angle. You weren't looking straight at things, you were looking at things from different angles. And then I became a fan of all that stuff, and even had a little old place in Taos where they showed foreign—really good selection once a week. And boy, we—no matter what we scrounge up the money to get to that. So she was addicted to them until about two or three years ago as I was, and then she doesn't give a damn any more. She just wants entertainment. And so I go along with it, but she—I used to go here—I'd go down to these places, it was a wonder—I told her the other day, I told Pat, I said, "Wasn't it wonderful, when we could walk in—they had these big old stores here, and you just walk in and shop for those—the rare films that you—and some of them would be so magnificent?" And she said, "Yeah that was a great time." Well they don't exist anymore, you know? And you can't do that, but it was—and it was a great time; I loved that—the discovery of—hell, I'd go sometimes, get five at a time, you know—

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. Oh yeah. But in the end, I can't remember names at all, hardly, but I do remember after

Renoir, and all those different guys every now and then I can remember their names. But I do know these two names, that they wound up my favorite directors in the world—Truffaut and Fellini. In fact, we run—just about once a year, we run that one movie of old Fellini's—have been for a zillion—seems like zillion years—when he was a kid, the one about his—I can't remember the name of it, but it's about when he was a kid. Wonderful human—Pat remembers it, I'll ask her in a little while. We've got it here. But that was one part of my life that was really, really important because there's just so much adventure and pleasure—you just sit down there, and you didn't have to do anything. Somebody had already done it.

BT:

Max, you've also built a pretty remarkable personal library here of books and authors, and you look back on that, are there any that to this day stand out to you that you thought may have had some influence on your work?

ME:

I don't know whether anybody ever had any influence on me, actually, directly, but I can tell you some of the guys I admired, and like they're sort of unknown now. I've got a bunch of them right up there—Joyce Cary.

BT:

Yes. *The Horse's Mouth*.

ME:

The Horse's Mouth, I really—I think that was a selfish viewpoint, to tell you the truth, Bill, because in a small way, we wrote alike. We saw things alike, so naturally, you—people who—that's who you like, is the people who think like you do.

AW:

That are as smart as you are, yeah.

ME:

I really did like him, and in fact I went around jumping all over people for several years because they hadn't read Joyce Cary. I'd get the literary types talking, and then I'd just jump all over them. I never found one person who was a fan. And that was the night I got the—and here I go back to Hollywood, and another Peckinpah story, but Sam was writing down there, something, and he was all by himself. He couldn't stand to be by himself, but he was, at Malibu. And he knew where I was, up in Hollywood, so he called me and I got acquainted with the guys in the Beverly Hills Hotel, and the mob was running hookers out of it, the most elegant hotel, entertainment hotel in the world. They were right there running hookers, and I got acquainted with the—they were Italians, but they had a guy named Anderson running—the boss—their main

guy. And they had these thousand-dollar-a-night girls—beautiful damn women. Some of them were actually going to college or teaching, things like that. It was a strange world to me; I just couldn't believe they were getting away with this. But anyway, I became friends with that Anderson, because he wanted—he had—like anybody else, he wanted his daughter to be a big actress, so he sort of used me to introduce—and I did. And they—didn't work, but I got her introduced to a big director. But anyway, he offered me those girls, free and everything, I said “No, no, no, no, I'm not in that business. I enjoy coming in here and meeting people on my business. They give you good drinks; it's a beautiful place.” So he accepted all that, we became pretty good friends. And the mob guys really liked me because I took old Doug Blankenship from Lubbock, had all those theaters? He came back—every year, he spent ten days in that hotel—

AW:
Really?

ME:
—running hookers, and drinking and just having the greatest time on Earth. And I never did like old Doug much. I liked his ancestors, and admired them—

AW:
Yeah, his kids were good kids. I knew them.

ME:
You bet. Everybody but—he run off and I really got to know him. So he decided he wanted to buy an option on *The Mountain of Gold*, and he is friends of Roberto Gavaldon, Mexico's greatest director. He directed Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. He was a great director. He directed a lot of mediocre stuff, too, but he was rich and powerful in Mexico, and he liked the acquaintanceship, and so he flew him in there to meet me. He'd sent him *The Mountain of Gold*, and we meet. We have dinner, and that's the only time I ever saw him break loose and really buy things—he was really cheap. But he spent a lot of money, but it was just on himself. He didn't share much. And the mob guys, they just despised him; he was just so damn cheap. They couldn't stand him. I mean, they just—he'd come in there and sit down with me, and they just look at me like, “What's the matter with you?” He was richer than hell, you know, he had more money than every guy, and they were just working for somebody out of Chicago. Old Doug—that shopping center in Lubbock and theaters everywhere. Well, anyway, old Sam Peckinpah knew I had this friend in there. So he called me, and he said, “I've been down here by myself, slaving away on this script, and I want you to talk to your friend and get me one of those really, really the best looking woman you got—come down, and I'll pay her real good—come down and take care of me and accompany me here, and take this loneliness away,” you know, just gave me a spiel, and I said “Okay, I'll do it.” So I told him, I said, “I want the most educated, classy woman you've

got to meet me in the Holiday Inn at a certain time tomorrow, and Sam Peckinpah,” I told him who, I said, “He’s—he’ll pay you, you know, he’s good,” he said, “Sure, Sam, you bet. You still want [my] daughter to” —I go down there, okay the Holiday House is still there—I think they rebuilt it—but you could sit there at the bar, and you could just have a Coke or you could have a drink, it didn’t matter. And there was the whole Pacific Ocean right out the door, just had little gardens out there, and it was just great. I used to go with ol’ Lee Marvin just to look out the darn window, when he was sober, you know. You couldn’t hardly catch him sober, but when he was, he really was sober. So anyway, I kind of felt at home, I was waiting there and Sam shows up and the girl still isn’t there. They had two parking lots, one out front and then one come around—it came around this side, and there’s a little pathway through that beautiful garden. So there she came, and he said, “Is that here?” and I said, “It has to be.” Boy, that’s a dandy. So we sat down, the three of us, and she said that the Anderson guy, I can’t think of his first name, said, “He told me that you were a writer,” and we started talking. Sam, I thought he’d enjoy that—he’s making a living right then writing—getting paid a bunch of money. And somehow it wound around, and she was a fan of Joyce Cary. It can’t be, but it happened. And I just—I was just elated. I forgot all about Sam, I forgot everything, and I just started talking on Joyce Cary and all the things—how great he was, and Sam, all of the sudden, got up to go to the bathroom—picked up his car keys—he came back and just threw his car keys down and said “I can’t even come down here and spend one drink, and you steal my woman.” And we both just stared at him, you know, what’s going on with this idiot? How do you steal a hooker? I mean I never figured out that. One of the best looking women in the world, and just because she liked literature, I got carried away. She liked Joyce Cary. Well, Joyce Cary—bless his heart—I had—hey, it was over a thousand dollars, do you hear, and I walked her out to the car—she was really nice. And I walked her out to the car, and I said, “I don’t know how to apologize to you. I’ll just give you all I’ve got. I think I had thirty-two or –three dollars. She slapped it, “That won’t work, I’ll just forget it. I’ll let them worry about it.” And it was just forgotten. So that was—I wonder—I thought “Well, maybe going around talking Joyce Cary—maybe I can keep my damn mouth shut about him.”

AW:

Well, anyone other than Joyce Cary have that big of an impact on you?

ME:

Well, he’s one of the—you asked me—there it is. He’s the one that did it.

AW:

I’ve got to tell you, I’ve never read *The Horse’s Mouth*, but I’m going to.

ME:

Oh, it is great.

AW:

Is that the one you'd recommend?

ME:

Oh, you bet. And I can't think of the name of the other one—there's two or three others—

AW:

I can look it up.

ME:

Now, don't bother to read his Irish trilogy, because he forgot that he had a sense of humor. I couldn't believe it, because I was going to read—I was just thrilled to death, Bill, when I got those three big volumes of his Irish history. I thought "Man, I can just sit here and laugh for [the] weeks and weeks it'll take me to read these things." Nothing—just history—and I'm sure it's a good history, but I was so disappointed, I just didn't read them.

BT:

Yeah, haven't read them.

ME:

Don't bother, please. You'd be bored to death—after you've read his other stuff. There's one that was better than—they made a movie, pretty good movie out of that—what was that we was just talking about—

AW:

The Horse's Mouth

ME:

Huh?

BT:

Horse's Mouth

ME:

The Horse's Mouth, yeah, with that English actor—oh lord, we all know him, I can't think of his name. But it's a good movie, but it has—

AW:

It's called *The Horse's Mouth*—the movie, also?

ME:

Yeah. And it's a good movie. It's a good three-star movie. It's a top three-star movie, is what it is. But nothing could be as funny to me as that old painter in that wonderful book.

AW:

Doug Blankenship—back to him for just a minute. I know you and I talked a little bit about this some time back. I don't remember if we got it on tape, but I heard from one of Doug's sons that their grandfather—I guess it was a grandfather, Doug's father—

ME:

Their grandfather.

AW:

Yeah, Doug's father—that got them started in the movie business with—

ME:

Wallace.

AW:

—yeah, with a screen you'd carry off in the countryside, and had a gas-powered thing that would run a movie, and they would actually run a movie just out in the prairie, and people would pay to come see it.

ME:

I don't know that, but I don't doubt anything, because he was—I'll tell you what, that Wallace was a courageous man. He'd bring movies to all the little towns between Lubbock and Odessa, and once a week he'd manage to get a movie there.

AW:

Yeah, and when he'd show them in houses—sometimes—he'd say—sometimes they would show them against a wall—

ME:

Yeah. Absolutely.

AW:

—or out on the prairie.

ME:

In Ropes, they showed—he just showed it up against a wall. He'd come once a week, and then after I was down there, I was going—playing football at Andrews—he'd put in a theater down there. He built one, actually, a whole theater. But he was a really a courageous, adventurous sucker. He was really something. Well, you know, if you're going to be a black sheep, you might as well really get after it like ol' Doug did. Oh, I didn't finish that story. He brought Roberto Gavaldon to meet me, and he agreed to do the thing—to do the screenplay and direct it, he—

AW:

For *Mountain of Gold*.

ME:

Yeah. And so, you know, I was thrilled to death. And I said “Well we don't have any contracts. Now is the time we—we got all this put together, let's get some money up.” And so he said “Well, come on up to the room. I'll write you out a check.” So we got up there, he—I said “Well” —he asked me, he said, “What's this going to be?” And I don't know why I said this, I just said “Give me ten thousand dollars—just write me out a check for ten thousand. I guess we'll have to go to an agent,” —which we did later. He did do that; he did keep that part of his word. But he gave me a check for ten thousand dollars. Well, that's the most expensive place in Beverly Hills, and I went back down there and sat down there and I just was looking at that check, and one of those old mob guys came over there and said “Did you get that off of that SOB?” and I said “Yeah.” And man, they all came and beat me on the back, and I never bought another drink, ever, in that place. I never—in my life—I never found such an easy paradise—just walk in that door and everything in the world. And there's just nobody was going to mess with me. I had the—all the directors and producers knew I was a buddy, you know, and they—nobody smarted off. It was a wonderful time. And then it all ended, as all good things do. They raided the place and got them all—shut the—it made headlines around the damn world that this Beverly Hills, where all the movie deals were made. They just shut it down for a couple of days; it was too important, but they got rid of the mob, boy, no more girls out of there.

AW:

That's amazing. You'd think that they probably had enough high-powered customers to preclude that.

ME:

Pat and I were gone to Taos or somewhere. And we get back, and we were reading the paper, and you guys know about the little hometown paper, they put little old things in there. And there—let's see, how was it worded—it was a little thing in the paper, only about a half an inch—it was the initials Mr. Anderson is in Taos this week looking for his friends Max and Pat Evans. We'd missed him; he'd come through Taos. Oh boy.

AW:

And I guess his daughter never made it into the movies, huh?

ME:

They had not the slightest desire—nothing—you couldn't have talked them into it any way in the world. They—you know, hey, they've been around world-champion cowboys, and mining people of every kind—movie people were just another bunch of people. Now that's one beautiful thing about them, no way you could—you still can't—can't impress them unless you can do something, you know? If you're a good painter, a good writer, or you can build a good fence, well they admire the hell out of that. But no, they sure never spoiled that way. They were wonderful girls.

AW:

I need a little bit of a break, is that all right, if we put a pause on things here?

AW:

I need a little bit of a break, is that all right, if we put a pause on things here?

ME:

Yeah.

BT:

Yeah.

AW:

Before I stop this, I'm going to remind myself. Did I say at the beginning of this it was the nineteenth? I don't think I did.

BT:

No.

AW:

May 19, 2015, Bill Tydeman and myself, Andy Wilkinson, again in the never-dull company of Max Evans.

Pause in recording

ME:

Trying to get my book—*Peckinpah—War and Music* published in France, and he said “I've got

to have a bio,” and I said “We haven’t drawn up a bio in years and years—twenty years, I guess.” So I know I’ve some things, like some movie awards and things I couldn’t remember them, but that’s what she’s doing. It’s a very long bio; it’s in real detail. So it’s very hard to type, and I told her I’d take it to that lady that’s typing up that book, and she said “No, I want to do this, it’s too personal.” So that’s what she’s trying to do—get it right, because I darn sure don’t ever intend to make another one.

AW:

Well you said you had another story to go into when we took our break.

ME:

Oh, gosh, let’s see—

AW:

[I’m] trying to think of what we were talking about.

BT:

I can’t remember, I don’t—

AW:

Well, I think you were in the restroom. We were talking about—

ME:

I can’t remember it.

AW:

Yeah, I’m trying to remember what we were talking about. That—if I could remember what we were talking about, that would—

ME:

I can’t remember what we were talking about. It’s—well just go ahead and ask me questions about anything. I’ll do my best.

AW:

Well, you know, I like what you said about the people of Taos, and how they weren’t spoiled. And I think about the people in Ropes and Andrews and Lubbock in much the same way, you know, people ask me what’s it like—“Why don’t you go do music someplace like Austin?” And one of the things I tell them, it doesn’t matter what you do in Austin, the people are—they’re trained to like you. In Lubbock, they’re not trained that way. If they don’t like you, you’ll know it. I mean they’re not rude or anything, but you don’t have their attention. You know you’ve got

a good song if people in Lubbock will sit and listen. So I hear some of that—what you're saying about Taos. Is that an asset for an artist—to be in a community where they can be a person, and not have to be a celebrity—artist and a writer, I mean someone like yourself?

ME:

I think there's a great advantage in your creativity, because old Woody Crumbo worked all his life, ever since he was a kid, you know, ever since he first got in school, and produced and produced around the world. And he finally, for that period there, before we got in the mining business, well that's why he was broke like me. He'd made all that money in those silkscreen prints; he'd invented that. And celebrity—just write-ups and write-ups and write-ups, and he got to where he couldn't think. He never really did very much after that, just a little. And so I think sometimes that you're lucky, like me, that I didn't get more of that, because it's really—I've witnessed it, and you guys have, too—that people get known, and they're known for a certain thing, and then they're known so well that they quit doing it.

AW:

Yeah. In fact, it's kind of a truism. You'll hear people talk about in—particularly in American letters or music that there's no—there're very few great second novels. There're very few great second recordings. Your work has, to my way of thinking, has stayed very consistent. When we were talking yesterday about had your voice changed, I was curious, because when I read the later things or the earlier things, I hear the same Max Evans. Is some of that due—I know some of it is because of you, but is some of that due, also, to the fact that you've been able to maintain that life, like you said, that's—you're around celebrities, but you're not, how should we said, "tainted" by them?

ME:

Yeah, well I think, you know, you bet. I have to think back on it just this instant. I have to give ol' Fess Parker credit. He revealed the fragility of celebrity right off the bat, you know. I damn well observed it, and I thought "Well, how silly." You've got to go take a crap when you need to, just like I do, or you're going to go in your pants. That's a favor that just now dawned on me. I'm glad you asked that question. He taught me—he didn't mean to teach me that, he just—he did, you know. And also, you see, introduced me to those top names there, when he was trying to get the film made, just leaving me with them. Pretty soon, you know, they're just some other people to me.

AW:

You know, you talk about—the other thing, over the hours that we've gotten to spend together, much to my great benefit—you talk a lot about people teaching you things, you learning from other people. You use the word "mentor" very often when you talk about Woody and about Holcomb. In your mind, first of all, what is a mentor? What is that, because we, you know,

there's this idea of apprenticeship, or there's the idea of being a student, but I get a sense that you're thinking mentor in a broader sense.

ME:

Well, for instance, Woody Crumbo, when he graduated from that little college—the only Indian college in the country, and I'm ashamed I can't think of the name of it—

AW:

Not Carlisle⁴, but—

ME:

Yeah. When he graduated as a student, the next day they made him art director. He was that good. And so he taught—all these artists that he taught, nearly all of them, the Indian artists there—went on to become really well-known. And he showed them new ways, and approach, and got him in a lot of trouble, in fact, personally got him in trouble because he broke down the tradition in the old Indian art world of watercolors only. He painted in oils, and they quit showing him. You know, we think of the American Indian being just totally all—they're just like the rest of us—chicken-shits and good people. So when he took—he took an interest in what I was doing, and that became an individual thing to him—he didn't have any other students at that time. Maybe that was because we just enjoyed the same things, and outdoors, and all that together, but he gave me special attention, and he figured out that—and this is how perceptive a mentor can be—he knew I was going to develop into a good painter, or he would never have taken the trouble. But he figured out that palette knife is what I really needed. So he tested me to see if I could use a palette knife, and then he gave me a real piece of advice, because in those days all the teachers said if you use a palette knife, you can't use a brush. And he showed me how silly that was. He said, "Let me show you, here, you use a brush on your sky and a palette knife right down here on the ground, and then a palette knife in between to a certain degree. It's all in a rhythm, it jumps forward." And he was giving me these marvelous art lessons; I don't think he'd ever given to anybody else. And so I could do it, and he knew it. And he gave me all that individual attention. So he wasn't just a teacher, as a mentor he would say things about the art world, and just casually tell me little incidences, you know. Some of them I know he was doing on purpose, and sometimes he'd just be wanting to talk. But gradually, I picked up that the thing to do is not wait for somebody to come by, you know. I don't know—sometimes I thought I was his mentor, too. Pat said, one time, said, "I don't know who's the mentor here," because in the spiritual world, well, I could do things that he couldn't do, but he had this far broader interests already developed in his heart and his soul and his head. So he was both a mentor—teaches, and at the same time, reveals that world that you're entering to you, whereas a teacher in a class just simply can't do that because everybody is so different. If you start mentoring a whole class, it would affect some people well, and some people badly. And so that's the best

⁴ The Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, closed in 1918.

explanation I can give you. He was a true mentor, because we had great spiritual—and artistic and spiritual experiences together, and in fact, he got to where he damn near ruined both of us. He got to where he'd drive four miles out of Taos to our place so I'd read his tea leaves, yeah, he just got to where—there were some grand experiences we had, but we weren't painting. I couldn't have had a better guy. Of course, I was lucky I had Dal Holcomb and then I had that lady in Amarillo, over there for just a while, but she really influenced me—Ida Strawn Baker, she was famous at that time—

AW:

Talk about her some, I don't think we've done much—

ME:

Well, I painted a few pictures over there, just didn't know what I was doing, and to show you how goofy I am, I just went to Amarillo, Texas with that old hotel—old Amarillo hotel—I didn't know it once was a whore house.

AW:

Yeah, the Herring Hotel. The big one.

ME:

Yeah. No, the old Amarillo Hotel. It was four-story brick—old—the first one ever built in Amarillo. I went there and told them I wanted to have an art show. They didn't even know what the hell an art show was. I talked them into it. I hung some of my things in there—I had never had a lesson or nothing, and this old woman came by—I sold one painting—just somebody, I guess, took sympathy on me, some old rancher. But this old woman came by and she got fascinated with some cartoons in oil I was doing, and she said her name was Ida Strawn Baker—

AW:

Ida? I-D-A?

ME:

Ida, I-D-A, Strawn, S-T-R-A-W-N, Baker. And come to find out, she was known in Chicago—she had an annual show in Marshall Field's, which was the biggest store in America at the time, every year and sold out, and she was famous for that. She was from Indianapolis, Indiana, she was the head of the art department for the state of Indiana. But she painted, and she was adventurous. And her husband had died, and he'd invented a paint—just recently died—and they had—I don't know how they had this home in Amarillo, but anyway, he had invented this paint that you could use watercolor, oil, or anything—it was a powder. So—

AW:

Like an acrylic kind of thing?

ME:

You could make any kind of paint you want to. You just use this watercolor—and it would work.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah. Pat and I had a big jar of it for years, but I don't know why you—the trouble of mixing it all up, and getting it exactly right just stopped us from doing it. But anyway, she took me out to her house and she told me how to get press down there, she said, "Go down there to the—just go walk in to the Amarillo News. Just walk in there and ask where the entertainment editor is, and tell him you want a write-up." So I had my first write-up I ever got was—I didn't know that it was an ex-whorehouse, that old Amarillo hotel. But she took me out to her house, and she was giving me lessons. And she showed me, the first thing I always did—it's indelible, but she gave me, she said, "Okay, let's take a—draw a guitar, just a rough sketch of a guitar," it was butcher paper, I drew this guitar, and she said "I'm going to show you how to break this down into what true abstract painting is." So she'd take a piece of the guitar—she took out another sheet of paper, she'd draw a piece here, then she took another piece of guitar and put it there, and there was a design. So she said. "I'm tearing this up, now you do that." It was a hard, tough first lesson. And by gollies, I did a pretty good job. So she decided that she'd take me on as her—become my mentor. And I went back and forth—it was hard—I'd have to go back to the ranch and try to figure how to get the money to get to Amarillo, and all that kind of stuff.

AW:

About what year would this have been?

ME:

Let's see, about '46.

AW:

Oh, right after the war. I'd like to try to find that write-up.

ME:

Yeah. Well, it was in the paper, Amarillo paper. And I think they had a picture of one of my cartoons—what you'd like, because a cartoon was a little bit abstract in a way. So then she finally—I made as many trips as I could possibly do, I don't know how many, but she was—I was getting pretty good with the abstracts, and I told her, "This isn't what I want to do," she said

“It doesn’t matter. This will help you with whatever you finally develop. You’re just a kid.” To her I was just a baby, you know, she was way up in years. And she didn’t know what all I’d done; I didn’t tell her what I’d been messed up in. So after I decided to move to Taos, and I met Pat and everything, she moved to Mexico permanently, and painted down there, and she wrote us and I have—I don’t know what we did with those letters. Pat and I looked and looked. She wrote me beautiful letters of encouragement for the first year we were married, then I guess she died or something. But she also tried to—conned me into going on the road with this paint. She said, “I want to get you up where you can demonstrate enough for college classes and things like she. If you like racehorses or whatever” —I never will forget this one, because she was pretty slick about this—“if you like racehorses, you can have a whole stable of them. We’ll get this paint going, and we’ll get a manufacturer and you can have so much income from it,” and made it sound so beautiful, and I said, “Yeah, that sounds awful good, ma’am, but that just ain’t for me.” (laughs) But she was something. Yeah, you’ll find a record. You can go back and find it, that she was an amazing creature for a while, there; I mean, to have the biggest show, in the biggest store, and sell out every year, for several years, is really something. That was really something.

AW:

The mentors you’ve mentioned have all been painting. Did you have a mentor for writing?

ME:

I didn’t have any, that I can recall. But I can tell you the guy that had the most influence on me. He didn’t write at all, but a guy named J. D. Smith—I think I’ve told you this before—

AW:

Yeah, your—at Andrews High School, yeah.

ME:

Andrews, he was the principal his whole life there. He didn’t go up or down. He was the principal, and sometimes he worked as assistant coach, or whatever. He just read something I’d done on a history thing, and somehow or other, when I’d go back to that damn ranch after football season, he’d go to the bus with me and hand me a box of classic books, and he’d tell me, you know, just the simplest thing in the world: “If you read all these and be able to make a good report on them, you’ll get your year’s grade.” So you couldn’t—a teacher couldn’t get away with that now, they’d—what would they do to them?

AW:

Fire them.

ME:

Huh?

AW:

They'd fire them.

ME:

Oh yeah, they would, wouldn't they? Just flat fire them.

BT:

We have a nine year old at home, and he lost his teacher at midyear—Ms. Minion—because she wasn't following the state curriculum for preparation for the STAAR test⁵. She had kids journaling, she had kids writing, she had them doing all these wonderful classroom activities that they were involved with, enjoyed, but nope, that wasn't the curriculum. So I mean, there's no way you could do something like that today.

ME:

Yeah. Another reason he got to like me—I think I told you one time before—is because I just always had a knack, because of hunting down there during the Great Depression and drought and all that there, over there around Humble City and things. I just had an instinct for finding quail, and I could—he loved to hunt quail—he loved to eat them. I'll tell you, quail, I knew where they were. That solidified out friendship—it really did solidify our friendship. We're just out there together, and we loved what we're doing and—but he didn't read. I never heard him talk about reading or anything, he just sensed something, and—

AW:

He just knew that you needed to.

ME:

Well that's my one influence in literature, was him, but boy, it was profound. I loved to read, and he saw to it that I could actually go to school by reading over on that damn cow ranch, so I was getting—he understood that I was getting all kinds of things at once, you see, real early in my life, and that was—when I look back right now, I like to look back on him. That was a wonderful, wonderful influence of all kinds he was giving me. In the first place his faith, you know, just his faith in you, and you know it's solid. Also, as we talk here, I realize what you said, Bill, he was taking quite a risk doing this. There could've been somebody on the school board that didn't like me or my dad or him or his wife or something and decided to get him in trouble. Yeah.

⁵ The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, series of state-mandated standardized tests taken in public primary and secondary schools.

AW:

Have you had an opportunity to be a mentor?

ME:

Yeah, lots of times. Yeah, that's natural for me, because it happened to me so beautifully, it's really natural. I hate to say it, it sounds like bragging, but please don't take it that way—

AW:

No, not at all.

ME:

—and really helped a lot of young writers. I am still, right now—several that I'm helping. And I enjoy it.

AW:

Have they sought you out for that, in that, with that specific language, a mentorship?

ME:

I don't think I ever had that happen but two times, and I turned them down. No, it's just people I'd read, and see, you know, that they had the potential. Old Slim Randles was one, and Luther helped me with him enormously, but he had a possibility of writing a real, sure enough, a fine modern Western, and he just never could bring it all back. I spent fifteen years of my life with old Slim Randles, trying to get that one book. But during this period, he developed into writing five hundred words as good as anybody I've ever read. That's his forte, but I knew he wanted this novel, I knew he had the knowledge, and Luther helped me, I told him, "I can't—maybe you can get him to do this certain thing, here, I can't," and Luther couldn't, either. He went ahead and published the book. It was good enough to publish, but it wasn't outstanding. But that's just an example. That little old book they put a bunch of people in there. That black lady [that] teaches law down here at this university, she had enormous potential, and she tried to do what I'd suggest to her, but somehow she just—I don't know what it is—her—she had more potential for tragic comedy than anyone I've run on to, you know, that I was interested in helping, but she'd get involved with another law book, or something at the school, and she just never did really get after it. And she did a thing on—a piece of non-fiction—on her nephew, a little black kid in the barrio that come to stay with his rich, educated aunt here, and all the trouble she'd have with that kid out of the barrios, and she's a tenured teacher here, of law, and has written international law books that were published all over the world—toured the world making talks about them—and how this kid, this little outlaw kid just completely disrupted her whole world. And she wrote that, and it's a—I could see the wondrous possibilities of tragic comedy in her. And I told her, "Will you go sell that to Luther?" And he could see it, but he didn't want to go to the trouble to develop her. So she never has made it.

AW:

Is she in that small book?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

Is she in that small book, the one that just came out last—?

ME:

Yeah. Sherri Burr.

AW:

Burr, yeah.

ME:

Two “R”s—B-U-R-R. She—

AW:

There’s also a young fellow in that book that wrote that letter to you that’s in the book. He’s from—

ME:

Grem Lee?

AW:

Yeah. He strikes me as being someone that considers you a mentor. Am I right?

ME:

Yeah, I’ve been guiding him for a long time, and it worked pretty good on him. You know, he’s got—he’s a total invalid.

AW:

No, I didn’t know that.

ME:

Yeah, he’s got—yeah, he’s in a wheelchair, and he’s from a cowboy family—one of the most prominent ranching families in history. They’re history, and they got a state park named after his grandfather. His grandfather was supposed to have killed—you know, they had the great trial,

Fountain and Lee's, and in Hillsboro and made international noise, and it's in all the New Mexico history. That's his grandfather—he's from that family. His dad's got sixty thousand acres—really good ranch right down here drove around. He lives there, but he's got this—it hit him—he was growing into a great tall young man, just perfect for a great cowboy and a good, sharp mind, and boom, this hit him and down he went. I admired him so deeply for—you know he did what he could. He's a pretty darn good cartoonist, and—he's not great, he's just pretty good—and his sense of humor is just a little—I don't know how to say it. You read it in there. It just doesn't quite make it, you know.

AW:

It's a bubble off.

ME:

Yeah. Just that much off, you're right.

AW:

But he has a real clear voice.

ME:

You bet.

AW:

You know, that's the thing I—I think I may have—I think, well I'm pretty sure I enjoyed that as much as I did anything in the book.

ME:

Yeah. Most people enjoyed it the most. He's really something. I'm down at this bull sale that my doctor—ol' doctor that helped me—we got the—that joined me to actually—I already told you about that yesterday—to get that new museum down there. He's having this—he raises these Santa Cruz cattle. That's what he really loves more than that—but he's got a very profitable clinic. One of his sons—two of them went to Tech, by the way, Texas Tech—but he's got one that's a doctor now, and so he still goes to the office and treats people, but his main love is raising these high-powered bulls. So every year, if I can't make it anywhere else, I make it down there to meet Grem Lee. His daddy brings him and wheels him up and we sit together and listen to the bull sale. And this year we didn't get to visit as much as I wanted to, because his obsession, now, is arrowheads, and he's made a huge study of them.

AW:

Grem has?

ME:

Grem. Yeah. The writer, Grem Lee. He made a—that's his life, now besides writing—he probably knows more about arrowheads, he'll tell you—and he had—his daddy would always just push him up to the table down there—this bull sale is under a huge tent, and they feed you and everything. He always pushes him—they all wait, and he pushes him up beside me so we can visit. This year, he was so excited; he had an eight-thousand-year-old arrowhead. It was like no other arrowhead I ever saw. It was longer and leaner. And he studied that, just—he corresponds on e-mail deal with everybody in the country that's interested in arrowheads. So his goal is to have a—his daddy or his brother, they drive him out, and just one of those old jeeps where you can see down—let him look for arrowheads all the time. And he's quite something, when you think about being cut off right in the middle of a great career—physical career—he could have been a champion calf roper, anything he wanted to be, and the fact that he could control himself enough, and have enough creative drive to do all these things—he's kind of a remarkable guy.

AW:

Yeah. He reminds me a lot of the story of my friend, Buck Ramsey, you know, who was paralyzed in that horse wreck, you know, as a young man, and had to reinvent himself, too. Yeah, Grem and I traded a few e-mails, and he's invited me to come down and see him when I can get a chance. I'd sure like to meet him in person. I really admired his piece in that—and I've enjoyed the e-mails. He has the same voice when he corresponds with me.

ME:

He's got the same voice when he calls over the phone, too. I don't know why he's got a knack for calling when we're not here, but last time he called, he said "Hey, you old—how's Pat's—how're your tomatoes coming?" He loves tomatoes. He tries to raise them himself, but he can't. Pat can really raise them. So he's impressed with that. It's the first thing he brings up—not about stories or paintings—just her tomato crop.

AW:

Well, at least his priorities are in the right place.

ME:

Well, you know, he's made trading these things—and then he just quit trading them. He just wants to collect the biggest collection in the world of arrowheads, artifacts. But he was making good money trading them all over—it was awful. You know it's a circuit—every single thing you can name in the world is a circuit—there's a circuit of them. I guarantee you there's a circuit of champion and amateur pinochle players.

AW:

Yeah, and they've probably got a hall of fame, and it's very likely in Oklahoma City. They've got—you know, they've got the Firefighters' Hall of Fame—there's actually a sign up, a long time ago, across the street—you may remember this sign, across from the Cowboy Hall of Fame, there's this old, weathered, beat-up sign on this big vacant lot that said "Future home of the Clown Hall of Fame." I always loved going by there. Well, when you talk to Grem next time about arrowheads, ask him his opinion on this, because I'm interested in yours. I attended this interesting talk at the university a little over a year ago. A philosopher from England—I mean, that's what he taught and studied, and he was interested in the philosophy of art, or the aesthetic of art—and he made the most interesting presentation about how the spear points and handheld tools that we find, mainly, around the world—flint knapped pieces are art pieces.

ME:

They're what?

AW:

They're art pieces. And he went through this—what I thought was pretty logical, especially for a philosopher—he said "You think about the size of the hands of the people who made this. None of them could have held this hand ax. None of them could have held—the spear point was way too heavy for anything, you know, the kind of shaft you'd put it on, and if you look, the symmetry of these pieces goes beyond just the flakes and the action. It continues into the colors in the flint. There're enough of these out there that my theory is that this was, much like a cave painting, someone would do this piece of art and say 'Look at how good I am.'" You know, when he started explaining that, I thought, well, you know in this songwriting class I teach, I guarantee every boy in there writing songs is writing them for one reason: to impress some girl somewhere. And I just thought about that, and I've since thought about all the beautiful arrowheads that I've seen, you know, you look at it and you think "Well, how is this in such good shape, and how is it still so attractive if it was actually used to shoot something?" I don't know. I'd like to know Grem's—I'll have to ask him that.

ME:

Well, you know, I told him about one that I found, a little bird point, and he's been hunting one like—trying to find one like it for years and years; he can't. But the White Bluff Ruins on the San Christobal ranch—I told you about that ranch, dad used to loan me out down there, it's south of Santa Fe, and still intact. It's seventy-five thousand acres, and got a wonderful stream to it, and I love it—had Indian ruins all over it. I used to just love getting loaned out down there. They had good food, and I liked to work cattle out there in that place. But there's great ruins there—there's a white bluff—big white bluffs off about five miles from the road. There's a certain way, if you're driving, there's just one spot you can see them from Cline's Corners to Santa Fe. If you look off to the left at just exactly the right time, you see those white bluffs sitting there.

AW:

How far past Clines Corners should you start looking?

ME:

Well, you know when you drop down?

AW:

Yeah.

ME:

Okay, then somewhere—two or three miles in there—right up on top of—that's where I first went to work when I was a kid.

AW:

Off to the left, or the west of that highway.

ME:

The right, up on the mesa, is where I was working, but they loaned me down off of the mesa to all this ranch that you'll drive right through going to Lamy and Santa Fe. And if—about—I don't know, I can't remember—but three or four miles along that highway, you look off to the left, and way back in there you see beautiful white bluffs.

AW:

Okay. Yeah.

ME:

And I thought those things just—I used to think I'd live there, you know. I really did. But I had one day off one time when I was just a little kid, and I asked ol'—my boss—ol' Ed Young, I said, "Could I just get up about day—before daylight, and take that old snip horse and go down on there to the white bluff ruins and spend all day? I won't be back until after dark." And he said, "Yeah, if you're crazy enough to do that, go ahead." So I did. I got up—God, I couldn't sleep, I was so thrilled. There was a—on top of an ant bed, I learned that the ants dig up little pieces of rock, it was fascinating—

AW:

Yeah, and pile them up on—

ME:

Yeah, but I know they couldn't pick this up, but I found a little perfect white—beautiful white

flint arrowhead about that long—what they call a bird point—and it had the tip was ruby-red. And I thought “My God, how could that guy ever have hands that could work it.” And I kept it for years and years, and somebody stole my arrowhead collection out of the basement here. They got them. And I told old—I wrote about it in some book, that arrowhead, it just impressed me so. I can’t remember what book I put it in—*Now and Forever*, it’s one of those big old books. But so I told Grem about that years ago—he’s been trying to find one ever since. He never has—he found one with a little bit of a hint of—a while back, but—

AW:

Well, does it look like the person who made the arrowhead had that red tip on purpose?

ME:

Oh yeah. It was just the way it looks. It’s just so perfectly, you know. And we sat down there one time, me and old Woody Crumbo, for a week, camped out down there. That was back, they won’t even let me on there now—that old gal that inherited it from her daddy, she won’t let me go in the white bluffs. I could pull games, I guess, and get her—but we stayed there a week, camped out—horseback, we put our horses down there in the old clearing. And we just found all kinds of things. So at night, he’d tell me to—he’d say—old Woody would say, “Well, Max, read the coffee grounds.” He was doing our cooking. We had nice—he’d build fires—good cook—good outdoor cook. And by the light of that fire, he’d tell me to read those, and so I’d do it, and one night, I don’t know what happened, I was telling him all this stuff that I was seeing, and so all—when I finished, he said, “Did you know that you just now told me the history of these Indians that hardly anybody knows in the world?” Hardly anybody knows. They do now, I’m sure, but he said, “Hardly anybody knows that they herded turkey like you herd sheep.” And I’d just told him about this guy herding turkeys. And then I’d told him a bunch of stuff about the arrowheads. And he explained to me—and I was just as puzzled as he was. I didn’t know what—how that came into my damn head, I was just pleasing him, doing this. But it was a grand adventure there—several days. It’s a big ruins—goes way around that—and there’s a whole section of it—of that white bluff—where they carved pictographs there, right in that white rock. They’re really unique. Now, to add to that, in that trip I made when I found this arrowhead, I carried it in my mind my whole damn life, that I had ridden right up by a rock, and in my mind, this rock was just like that out of the ground, about eight feet tall. Why that got mixed up, I do not know, into a single rock. And I had—there was an Aztec drawing on it. Well, I’d tell people about that, and they just wouldn’t believe any—you know, I was just another yarn teller. And I had told Woody before we went down there, I said, “We’ve got our horses, we can find that thing.” It was driving me crazy, because nobody ever knew about it, they—all these archeologists, they—things—and we couldn’t find it. We’d block off and ride in certain sections—never could find it. Well, there’s a book right in here that that lady that owns it now wrote about it, and there—that cockeyed Aztec drawing was on the bluff itself.

AW:

Ah, it wasn't on a stone by itself.

ME:

It's now known about. It's now part of history. But I had—I just—I was sitting on this horse, my favorite old horse—wasn't mine, belonged to the rancher, but in my heart, it was mine, and I was just looking right at this head—I knew it was Aztec. I don't know how, I guess I'd seen pictures of them in books or something. I didn't know how, but I knew it was—or Mayan or Aztec, I don't know which, one of the two. And by golly it's there, and it's recorded now.

AW:

Oh, that's interesting.

BT:

Well, I think we've got a pass—

AW:

I'm worn out. Max can wear me out.

ME:

Well I guess we better go eat, then, huh?

AW:

I think it's—we'll be back just in time for Luther.

ME:

Yeah, okay.

AW:

All right.

ME:

—down at the Copper Canyon, if you want.

AW:

Sure, I could—because I could use a salad. They have salads there, don't they?

ME:

Pardon?

AW:

I could use a salad. They have salads there.

ME:

Yeah, they have good—they've got good stuff—you've been there.

AW:

Yeah, oh yeah, you and I have been there several times.

ME:

Yeah, it's great.

AW:

They're really very good.

ME:

Yeah, it's good—really just good home restaurant.

AW:

Well I'm going to shut this off, then. Thank you, once again, plenty of stuff to think about.

Pause in recording

AW:

One thing that would be—we ought to talk about is novellas. You know, we didn't really cover that as a—you really, you've done a lot of them. Why do you choose to do a novella, as opposed to a short story, or a full novel? Why not just make it into a—

ME:

I think, you know, reading Steinbeck, and all the guys I've enjoyed reading throughout my life—the thing I enjoyed—even Balzac, who's known for long, long rambling books, he did some good novellas. And all these good writers that I read when I was young, it just seems to turn out that the works of theirs that I loved the most was their novellas. And maybe that influenced me or not, I don't know. But also, it seems like they're the most difficult thing to do, because you have to split the difference between a short story and a novel.

AW:

Yeah, so you have to factor in more time than a short story, I mean time in the story, but you can't develop it like you can a novel.

ME:

No, and you can't waste any damn words.

AW:

So it's more like a short story in that regard.

ME:

But it's a place—it's the only place there is that you can tell a big story in fewer words than a novel. But you can tell a big story. I mean, *The One-Eyed Sky* is a big story.

AW:

Yeah, it is, and I think of that as being, to me, a perfect novella.

ME:

I think I started this Taos book to be a novella when I started, way back—

AW:

Oh, *The King of Taos*?

ME:

Yeah, *King of Taos*. I think I started—

AW:

How much larger is it, even now, than a novella?

ME:

Well, it's huge for me, because it'll be two hundred and fifty pages—the manuscript.

AW:

That's a full-sized novel. Yeah.

ME:

That's big for me, but—you know, I guess the American writer that I've literally enjoyed the most is Steinbeck. And I didn't read him until late in my life, really. I'd read all these other classics and things before I read him, but—and I'd been a writer and a painter a long time before I read Steinbeck, and I can't remember who—how I got on to him, but his big novels are so famous, I just don't even like them.

AW:

Really?

ME:

Yeah, I don't like them. They preach. They preach and preach and preach and preach.

AW:

Yeah, *Grapes of Wrath* preaches.

ME:

Yeah, and they're political, preaching—and man, he can do a little old short novel, or what I call a little “whelp,” and just absolutely grab me up and really grab me. So—

AW:

What—do you recall the name of a particular Steinbeck novella that you liked better?

ME:

No, I can't remember any of the names—of anything hardly, but one book he did was—it had a couple of novellas in it, and it was a collection of short stories. I remember the name of it: *The Long Valley*.

AW:

The Long Valley.

ME:

Yes.

AW:

I know the name. I've not read the book.

ME:

It's wondrous writing in that book—just absolutely—I don't use that word, “wondrous,” lightly. It's political, too, but—

BT:

Can I interrupt a minute, I'm sorry, Max, excuse me.

ME:

Sure.

BT:

What's the name of the hotel we're staying in?

ME:

—it sure entertained the hell out of me.

AW:

We're at the Holiday Inn Express on Menaul.

BT:

Holiday Inn Express on Menaul.

AW:

Yeah, we're between Carlisle and University.

BT:

Between Carlisle and University. What time is it there? Three o'clock?

ME:

I suppose, now that we're sitting here thinking about it—I never thought about it this way—but I suppose it's the challenge.

AW:

The novella?

ME:

Yeah. You really have to regiment yourself.

AW:

Just in your—I know you can't nail this down like those acquisitions editors, [who] say "We want two hundred pages," but a novella, would you say, is what? Thirty pages? Twenty-five pages? Fifty pages?

ME:

Oh, you know, it's just according to how well you can write. If you can really lay a lot of stuff down in a short sentence, and thirty-five, forty pages is a novella for me. A lot of people, that's just a long short story—most people. But around eighty, ninety pages.

AW:

Yeah. You get much over a hundred, though, you're kind of in novel territory.

ME:

Yeah, it'd carry you away.

AW:

What do you think—I would assume that you probably like him, at least a little bit, is Hemingway, and the reason I ask that is because I think he's, like you, is a guy that can write a punchy sentence, you know, it gets to the point. Even his long sentences seem to get to the point, to me, in a way that other people's don't. Did you read him much?

ME:

Yeah, I did. And I must say that I liked his—

AW:

I'm talking about his short story—I guess I should have said— I think I like his short stories better than his novels.

ME:

Oh, I do, too. And I liked his—oddly enough, the thing I liked about Hemingway the very best was that book he did—nonfiction—when he was in Germany—over in Europe, when he first went to Europe. That's the best writing I think he ever did.

BT:

—drawing a blank on—

AW:

Yeah, when you said “nonfiction,” I was thinking *Death in the Afternoon*, but that was afterwards. That was the bullfighting book, and I think it's a horrendous book, but it's filled with some of the most interesting comments about writing ever. You know, that's the book where he says “Any man's life truly told is a novel.” Now you're not thinking of *A Moveable Feast*, which he did as a very young man?

ME:

No, I did like that book very much, but no, he was just making a living. That's when he met ol' Gertrude Stein, and she did influence the hell out of him.

AW:

Well, she influenced everybody, one way or the other.

ME:

She did, just like Mabel Dodge over at Taos—Mabel Dodge Luhan, same way—had the same

influence. But she—he was writing these stories for a living. You know how *artistes* say it—don't like to hear that, but he was writing these just as clear and concise as he possibly could for the newspapers back here, at home. And of all the things I've read of his—and some I couldn't read, and some I loved—those are the best. He regimented himself, he was open, he had a little sense of humor, which he very seldom ever does, and—

AW:

No, in his novels, the sense of humor is pretty cynical.

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Although his short book, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Steinbeck's short book, *The Pearl*—I both like those better, too.

ME:

Yeah, they're actually, really novellas—.

AW:

Yeah, no, they really are.

BT:

Did you ever read any of his outdoor stories—the Nick Adams stories?

AW:

Yeah.

BT:

I read those as a kid, and just loved them.

AW:

Yeah, me too.

ME:

I read those, too. I loved them. But anyway, when I think about him—if I ever do, I haven't thought of him in years, but when I actually think about him—somebody mentions him, or something—I think about that collection of nonfiction.

AW:

Yeah, I'm going to have to look that up.

ME:

I can't think of the name of it. It was all in a book, and it made him famous at that time, and that's what influenced ol' Gertrude Stein—I think she was influenced by that particular bunch of—

Food is delivered to the table

AW:

So Bill, did you get ahold of your Bill?

BT:

Yeah, he was running around. What he wants to do is—the kids are involved in various sporting activities. Alex is running a bike race, but Matthew is playing baseball, and everybody's going to the baseball game, so he wants to come by and pick us up at 4:45 and take us to the game. How's that sound?

AW:

That sounds like fun. Can we get a hotdog there? [You] can't have baseball without a hotdog.

BT:

—baseball—it's out at the Balloon Fiesta Park, where the baseball field is—

AW:

And he doesn't mind—

BT:

He apparently didn't mind coming by and getting us—

AW:

Yeah, well, that's his call.

ME:

People forget how—well, most people haven't lived that long—but how important baseball was in West Texas—extremely important—I guess it still is, right?

AW:

Yeah, probably not as much as it was. I think football—now that cities are bigger, you can put a

lot more football teams, and that was one of the great things about baseball, and for that matter, basketball, is you don't have to have that big of school to mount a pretty good team. You look at a lot of the basketball stars, especially the women—young women—you see they come from little small towns like Nazareth and Roswell and Portales, you know, and it's because they have such a great tradition of playing it, because it's you know, in a small school, you can mount a pretty good team that way. So I—this needs some—this is just my opinion, but I think one of the reasons football got to be so popular is because we—our towns got bigger, you know, and bigger schools.

ME:

Yeah. Something forever in my mind because wherever they were, the Evans boys—that family of them, five of those boys—they and their nephew—their only sister's nephew—they'd play baseball, whatever little town they were in. And one unforgettable thing to me—I can't tell you how it all worked; I can't tell you anything—but Ropes was going to play Lubbock—a team in Lubbock, back when I was a little ol' kid, and they had hired—they couldn't get a whole team up there. They were short a player. So they hired a guy, and gave him five dollars to go fill in, and I just couldn't believe—five dollars was so damn much money that I just couldn't conceive of it. And I kept trying to want to ask my daddy, how could anybody be worth five dollars? How could anybody be paid five dollars to go play baseball? I thought you paid—if you had to pay, you'd pay to play it. And that old guy made a catch—I never—it's just indelible in my head as anything that ever was. He had to—first base, and he had just barely his foot on there, and he reached out just as far as he could reach out and caught that line drive, you know, and then my daddy told me—I was telling him about this, "Boy, he's pretty good, all right," and he said, "Well, that's why he gets the money." And I don't know why that's all in my head all these years.

AW:

I met a wrangler from the J.A.'s named Fish Wilson—met him at Quitaque, where he was in a retirement home, but he was still driving. He was ninety-something. His name was Menard Wilson, and they started calling him "Minnow Fish Wilson," and it finally just got to be Fish Wilson. Sharp, man, he could—you know, after all those years, he could still tell you names of the horses and streams and how they'd jump when they were getting a little snuffy, and really interesting. I sure enjoyed visiting with him, and one day he said, "I've got some photographs over at room, if you'd like to see them. I'm real proud of them." So I said, "Sure." I followed him over there. I thought we were going to see, you know, bucking horse photos, and all this string of photos. Fish had played on the Gasoline, Texas semipro baseball team, and every picture he had was him—he was shortstop—was him playing baseball in these pastures that looked like you couldn't see—I mean, you could see where they'd hammered a base down in the ground, but you know, there was mesquite wood just out in the outfield. It was the damndest

thing. But that was what—you know, what he did for a living was break horses. What he did for fun was a shortstop. I better get my phone out here so if Luther calls us, I'll see it.

ME:

Yeah, that mine's right straight up there, Bill.

BT:

Really?

ME:

Yeah, you go down here and you go to the gate, into the military base, and Sandia Labs. And that's where he'll meet you and take you out there.

AW:

Well that little rental car we're in make it?

AW:

Well that little rent-a-car we're in make it up there?

ME:

That what?

AW:

Little rent car we're driving, will it make it up there?

ME:

Huh-uh, don't think so. They'll—you'll have to walk part of the way. It's not that bad of a climb.

AW:

No, I mean to the point where we walk. Will it be fine driving up that far?

ME:

Yeah.

AW:

Okay.

BT:

How far is the walk?

ME:

Oh, I don't know, now. I never have been in the way they're going now. I don't know. But they have lots of—he's had—the people who've been working on it for months, they're from the base, there, and they're every age group. They love it. They volunteer to—they just love that mine.

AW:

He promised us—promised me we could make it, Bill.

End of recording



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