

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: Bob McCormack was one of Tulsa, Oklahoma's premier photographers. A native of Pompey, New York (just a few miles east of Syracuse), Bob's family moved to Lathrop, Missouri, while Bob was still a child. Bob came to Tulsa during the great depression. He spent his first night in Tracy Park. The next morning he went to the Tulsa World, where Eugene Lorton hired him immediately and sent him to Claremore because Will Rogers' plane had crashed, killing Rogers and Wiley Post.

Celebrities, it so happened, were always McCormack's favorite subjects. When movie theaters were still showplaces, a number of movie stars came through Tulsa for premieres and promotional tours. McCormack met them at the train station and backstage.

He took a job at Douglas Aircraft as its chief photographer. Four years later, he opened a studio of his own. His work has appeared in national publications such as "Life," "Collier's," "Sports Afield," "National Geographic," and many others.

He covered the opening of Philbrook Museum in 1939 for the Associated Press.

Bob McCormack died April 4, 2003. Bob's son John became a very accomplished photographer and tells the story of his father on the oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 8:50
Dentist

John Erling (JE): Today's date is May 15th, 2019. So, John, would you state your full name, please?

John McCormack (JM): I'm John Bonham McCormack.

JE: I gotta ask you about Bonham. Where does that come from?

JM: That is my mother's maiden name.

JE: Okay. Your date of birth?

JM: November 4th, 1948. That is Will Rogers' birthdate, also.

JE: Oh, yes! And what is your age?

JM: I am 70 years old. And that is a biblically significant time in my life.

JE: Why? Should I ask you why?

JM: We should all ask 'why' every day.

JE: Okay (chuckling).

JM: And say "Thank you, God." (chuckling)

JE: Yes. And we are recording this interview in the facilities of VoicesOfOklahoma.com. Where were you born?

JM: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in St. John's Hospital and I was born at 9:40 in the morning.

JE: Brothers or sisters?

JM: I have a sister who's older, born in 1945, Nancy. And we all grew up in the business. We lived within the business. Bob and Betty McCormack's -- Bob McCormack Photography; until I was 11 years old, we lived within the business.

JE: "Within the business," meaning?

JM: The photography studio was in the front of our house on South Boston. The dark room where I went in to kiss my daddy goodnight was formerly a bedroom and then we lived behind and above everything else.

JE: Alright. Let's talk about your mother: your mother's name, her maiden name, where she was born and grew up.

JM: Elizabeth Bonham McCormack, born in her mother and father's home when they were 40 years old. She was the only child of Vernie and Harry Bonham who were born in 1878. And when they were 40 years of age, they were finally blessed with a little baby girl, Betty. She was born in the same house that her father was born in.

JE: And where was that?

JM: Lathrop, Missouri -- the mule capital of the world.

JE: Lathrop, Missouri. And describe her personality. What was she like?

JM: She's very smart, she was an only child so she was quite authoritative, but she did it with great love.

JE: And then your father's name.

JM: Robert Merwin McCormack. Robert Merwin McCormack was named -- middle name -- was because of his doctor, the doctor who delivered him in Pompey, New York was Dr. Merwin, which has a significance to it that I -- that's a whole other story -- but Pompey, New York was also the birthplace of the mother of Sir Winston Churchill.

JE: And then -- we're going to talk about your father more -- but what was his personality like?

JM: He was a generous, loving human being. I miss him every day. He and my mother were a perfect pair. He let her do all the accounting and he was the artist. And he never had a cross word; I never heard him curse. I did hear my mother curse on occasion.

JE: Right. About you. The first school you attended?

JM: I went to Robert E. Lee School at 21st and Cincinnati.

JE: Which is now Council Oaks. It changed.

JM: It will always be Robert E. Lee in my heart and in my mind.

JE: (Chuckling)

JM: By the way, did you know that even the great American Native olympian gold-medalist Jim Thorpe played football on that field at Lee Elementary School?

JE: I did not know that.

JM: That was Lee Stadium, which is where TU also had their football games at first.

JE: And junior high?

JM: I went to Edison Junior High and Senior High. Graduated in 1967.

JE: And then on to college?

JM: I went on to the University of Kansas. In between the senior year I did take a summer -- a short study course of 4 weeks -- at St. Andrew's University in Dundee, Scotland. And that was a terrific, terrific journey and a very good learning experience. It's the only time I've ever been to Scotland but because of my last name I felt like I was home.

JE: And why did you go there?

JM: It was a study course that was organized by a Tulsa teacher, Martha Cole. She took 20 students from Tulsa there for that trip. There were 250 Americans, all met in New York City; boarded a plane on July 3rd, arrived in Scotland on July 4th a little bit late, but that school had gone out of their way to prepare corn on the cob for all we yankees.

JE: For the 4th of July celebration. Isn't that great?

JM: It was.

JE: That's great. So she was with what school?

JM: She was -- taught honor's English at Edison High School.

JE: And so it was out of Edison that you took that ...

JM: Yes.

JE: What a wonderful experience and how grateful to her...

JM: It was a great, great experience and I shall never forget it.

JE: Now, when you went on to college, what was your intent?

JM: Well, I wanted to be a dentist. I actually wanted to, sooner or later, specialize in orthodonture. I was advised by my counselor at Edison High School -- Mr. Alexander who had also attended KU, the University of Kansas -- that I should go up there because there was no dental school in Oklahoma then. And there was one in Kansas City. As a matter of fact, most of the dentists in Tulsa had been graduates of that school. It still is up there and so I took all the pre-med courses: the 20 hours of chemistry and the biology. And then even actually changed in my senior year and spent an extra semester getting a degree in journalism, which I'm so glad that I did that. I actually did that because I was told they wanted a more well-rounded student and not someone who was majoring in the sciences.

So I thought “Well, that would be a good one.” And they also would accept the 10 hours of Latin that I’d already taken at KU in lieu of 16 hours of another foreign language. So I wound up in journalism and had a degree in public relations and journalism, and enjoyed that time and learned so much more about the English language.

JE: So... what about being a dentist?

JM: Well, I started applying. The year that I graduated, OU opened up their first dental school and it was really unbeknownst to me, but when I approached them, they had 5 places left and I definitely needed to be a woman. And it would have helped if I had been part Indian or Afro-American. But I was not going to get in there that year. I went to other schools down at Baylor and Dallas and Emory in Atlanta, and it’s the same thing: I needed to wait. So I came back home and when I came back home I started working along with my mom and dad and enjoyed it so much that I gave up the dentistry. I had never taken pictures professionally. I really didn’t know much about photography except that I watched all my life and was involved. But the mechanics of operating a camera, at that point in time, I really had very little knowledge.

JE: And it just never sunk in that you should be interested in it?

JM: Right.

JE: You weren’t naturally interested in it as a younger person.

JM: No, not really. I enjoyed it, but I really felt like I wanted to be a dentist -- and orthodontist.

JE: And, so, do you ever wonder?

JM: By the time I was 40, I realized that I would have been a nervous wreck as a dentist or as an orthodontist if someone had bleeding gums, I probably would have gone to their home and held their hand until it quit.

JE: (Laughing)

JM: The other thing is, I had so much fun with my mother and dad. And my mother died prematurely at the age of 60, so I was with her the last 7 years of her life, working alongside her and my dad and that was wonderful.

JE: Mhmm. (In agreement). Did you know she was dying?

JM: No, no. She became ill the last year she had breast cancer.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 03 – 11:40

Death of Bob McCormack

John Erling (JE): So let's begin to talk now about Mr. McCormack. Because we're going to look at many, many images here. And how was he introduced to photography?

John McCormack (JM): My father, Bob McCormack, and his -- there were 4 brother and 1 sister. They all grew up in Lathrop, Missouri. And there back fence neighbor was a man by the name of Gerald Cross. He was a federal judge, as was his father before him, and he was an amateur photographer. And this would have been back in the late teens/early 20s. And he taught all of my dad's siblings, and my father, photography. And my father -- I had lunch with him almost every day, and even in my father's 80s, he lived to be 89 almost; he was 2 months shy of 89 -- he still said that Gerald Cross was the finest, most competent photographer that he had ever known. And that he owned everything to his knowledge that he had passed onto my father.

JE: So that was in -- would have been in his high school years? Your father's high school years?

JM: Mhmm (in agreement)

JE: How did he get to New York from Lathrop, Missouri?

JM: He had horrible breathing problems with asthma. And the doctor said "You need to take him to the desert." And by the time they got to Missouri, which is where my grandfather and grandmother's families were from -- Warrensburg, Missouri -- he started doing just fine, so they wound up staying in Missouri, which is really back home for so many of them. There was a McCormack Farm in Warrensburg.

JE: How does he begin to look at this in high school? Did he go onto college, your father?

JM: One semester, but this was during The Great Depression and his family couldn't afford even that. But he did spend one semester. He was a great athlete. He was the quarterback on his conference-winning team. As a matter of fact, all 4 brothers at one time played together on the same team.

JE: And for what school?

JM: Lathrop Mules.

JE: The Lathrop Mules?

JM: You'll see a picture of 'em.

JE: (Chuckling) And it was out of college then?

JM: No.

JE: Oh, that was high school.

JM: No, he went to Warrensburg State Teacher's College for one semester.

JE: We're talking about the 30s.

JM: Yeah. He came to Tulsa about 1935 at the age of 21. His birthday's June 3rd. And he was 21 years of age when he came to Tulsa to seek employment, specifically with The Tulsa World.

JE: Alright, so he knew he had to come to Tulsa? He could have gone to Kansas City or some other big cities as well, but he chose Tulsa.

JM: I think he was a very brilliant man. And I think he saw the writing on the wall. This was the oil capital of the world. I think he left one power capital -- the mule capital of the world -- and came to the oil capital of the world. Both very powerful.

JE: So in 1935, he takes a train out here, I guess?

JM: Yes, the same train that I and my sister would take. We visited every summer at the same house that my mother was born in and my grandfather was born in. We spent our summers up there, my sister and I. It was wonderful. We were so blessed. And that train would leave Tulsa early in the morning from the old train station downtown and arrive in Kansas City at noon, and my grandparents would pick us up there. The same train would return to Tulsa about 6 o'clock and get into Tulsa around 11 o'clock at night. And he came into Tulsa about 11 o'clock on August 14th, 1935 -- had no money in his pocket. He did walk over to Tracy Park, which he'd heard was a good place to spend the night, and he said that there was 100s of people in that park. It was hot. There was not a green blade of grass nor green leaf on the trees. It was hot and dry and people were seeking air because there was no air conditioning. So they would get out into the open air. He felt comfortable there. The next morning, he went into see Eugene Lorton and told him the story. And he kind of knew about him anyway.

JE: "He knew about." You mean Eugene? No.

JM: That Mr. Lorton -- Bob, I think, he'd written a letter and informed him of what he knew about photography. On that morning, when he went into see him, he said "Well, Bob, you are accomplished and we need you right now. We want you to go to Claremore and Oologah, Oklahoma because Will Rogers and Wiley Post have just died in a plane crash." So that was my father's very first job the very first day he walked onto that career.

JE: You know what kind of camera he had with him?

JM: I do not know at all. I would say it would have been the largest format camera that The Tulsa World was probably working with. I've seen some negatives from different times back then, but those did not survive. As a matter of fact, a lot of the things that the paper's did not survive. They just kept discarding things as it piled up in their storage room. But, as I saw, my father enjoyed working with large-format. 4 x 5 inch would have been ideal to carry around for him. And that camera was invented -- that I started with -- was the Speed Graphic. Which is still, in my estimation, the best camera that I've ever worked with that offered so much utility in the way you could focus and straighten the lines within the actual camera itself.

JE: So where does he live then after he meets Mr. Lorton? And then where does he go to live?

JM: He wound up staying at the YMCA. And that was a building that I think is gone now. If it's still there, they've probably re-done something to it. It was, I want to say, near 1st Street, the original downtown YMCA. And the reason I say that is because that was his first night, really in Tulsa. His last night in Tulsa was at the downtown YMCA. He had low blood pressure and he always stayed an athlete, always kept exercising and at 89, almost, his routine of exercise was: the hot tub or the steam room at the downtown Y and then a massage.

That last night, which he did go on and live another day, he got into the hot tub by himself, but because of his low blood pressure, he just fainted and went under. He still survived for 24 hours, I think. About that. It was shocking at the time. I had just spent that Wednesday afternoon at 4:30 with the new general manager of the downtown Y, a nice young man. And when I finished taking his portrait, which was for the Kiwanis Club -- I took him in because my father belonged to the Kiwanis Club, downtown Kiwanis Club.

And I said "Dad, this is the new general manager of the downtown Y." So they talked for about 5 minutes. And before this man left, I put my arm around him and walked him out to the front and said "Now look after my dad. He's fainted twice down there in the last 18 months."

And he says "Oh, we're always looking after him. We've got signs up

everywhere.”

I said, “He’s not going to pay attention to a sign.”

And an hour-and-a-half later I get a phone call: “Your dad’s had an accident. He survived that accident. He was still breathing when they got him to the hospital.”

And Dr. Bo Farmer, who had been at St. John’s all of his career as the emergency room doctor, I had his daughter’s wedding that Saturday. That afternoon, as we were getting ready for his daughter’s wedding, he says, “Your dad was still breathing, his heart was still beating when they brought him in. We rolled him over and water came out. His temperature was 106 degrees. And he stayed on.”

And the next morning, they called me from ... What’s the emergency -- what do they call that where they keep the ...

JE: ICU?

JM: ICU. And they called about 5 in the morning and said, “Your father’s blood pressure is dropping. You’d better get up here.” And so I went up there and, I walked into his room (voice cracking), they had him seated up with a respirator on him, which I knew he wouldn’t like. And there was about a 4’6” nun who was probably 90-years-old herself, going back and forth around his bed talking to him.

She said, “Bob, when you get to the pearly gates, you be sure to get a picture of St. Peter” And, John, as I walked into the room, he saw me, and he sat up and put his hand out. So I went over and grabbed his hand.

I said, “Lay back down, Dad, you’re gonna be just fine. Don’t get upset here.”

The doctor came in, a wonderful woman doctor who I still would love to write a letter to, she came back out with me. She didn’t say anything. She hugged me. She said, “We need to get your father off of that respirator.”

And I said, "I want that. I want him off there. I want God in control."

So at noon that day they took him off and he finally quit breathing. His new wife, who'd been one of my mother's best friends, and he two daughters and myself stood around that bed and held hands and gave a prayer of thanks for his life. It was a beautiful life well lived.

JE: Yup. How old was he when he died?

JM: He was 2 months from being 89.

JE: And that would have been in the year...?

JM: 2003. He was born in 1914.

Chapter 04 – 7:27

Douglas Aircraft Plant

John Erling (JE): Betty, your mother, they had started a relationship before he left mule country, as you call it.

John McCormack (JM): Right. Yes. They were.

JE: So she knew he was coming to Tulsa to get a job and looking forward to moving to Tulsa, then, right?

JM: Yes. But, in those days, they didn't stay together. There was always a chaperone when she would come to Tulsa that she stayed with. Tom and Francis Leach is what I remember most of the time. And they looked after her.

JE: And so that took a number of years then before they finally got married, wasn't it?

JM: Oh, yeah. It was 1940 before they married. So, during The Depression, you just didn't strike out.

JE: Well then during the war years ... was he with The Tulsa World? Did he get out of their employment?

JM: He was there until August 15th, 1942, which is very interesting because he came to Tulsa August 15th. He started that career with Douglas in the war on August 15th. And the war ended on August 15th. And when the war ended that place closed down. There was no more work there, not at first.

JE: At Douglas Aircraft.

JM: Right.

JE: And did he -- what kind of work did he do at Douglas Aircraft?

JM: He was the head of the photography department. There were over 20 people within his department, but that's how they communicated before television -- certainly before computers.

As he said in a newspaper article in 2001, that there are pictures that he'd taken, that he'd captured, that he'd created throughout his life, but the very most important pictures were never really seen by the public. They were the pictures that showed people who had never been in a factory before how to put together parts for those planes of war, for the attack aircraft and for the bombers. They used photography to demonstrate, on workbenches and on boards in front of their work areas, how to assemble aircraft at Douglas.

JE: So there were blueprints but they couldn't read those blueprints, I suppose, so your father took images -- pictures -- to show them how to assemble.

JM: Exactly. There was no recording device more easily done than that. So it was very important.

JE: So that was his full-time job then for Douglas? Doing that kind of work.

JM: Yes, and that building is almost a mile long and it has no windows because of security. There's an interesting story -- I'll go ahead and talk about that 35mm. Mrs. Roosevelt came to Tulsa to inspect that plant and I think it was 1940. She had ridden the train to Tulsa.

My dad was asked to go by the paper to take a picture of her at the train station. And he took the very best equipment that had which was an 8 x 10 view camera -- 8 inches by 10 inches view.

He said it was crowded, of course, Mrs. Roosevelt would attract a huge crowd. It was hot. And it took a little bit of time to organize because he had to put that camera up, with a tripod, in the crowd, put the cape over his shoulders, focus her, and compose that shot on the ground glass underneath the cape with a magnifying glass to get it sharp. And when he finally got ready to take the picture, he used flash powder to light the scene.

So, all of the sudden -- *boof!* -- that flash powder goes off and Mrs. Roosevelt looked at my dad and she said "Oh, how quaint! You know, the boys back in Washington D.C. have these new little cameras that go 'click,' 'click.'"

And, so, my dad went back to Eugene Lorton and said, "Mr. Lorton, we're going to have to get some 35mm cameras."

And by the way, that camera -- my dad did wind up with that camera and it's in the same collection that we donated to the University of Tulsa. There's over 700 cameras in that collection. But that sits there proudly, still, available for a museum one day. TU could certainly have a camera museum.

JE: And, we should say, that was Eleanore Roosevelt who was the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President of the United States. So he was actually working for The Tulsa World, then, when he did that?

JM: Yes.

JE: Okay. So then how many years at Douglas Aircraft?

JM: 'Til the end.

JE: 'Til the war was over in 1945?

JM: That's one of the few questions that I ever really asked him about the second world war. And I asked him one day because these aren't things that a kid asks his dad much. But as I got a little older and we were visiting one day, I said "Dad, I know you would love to have learned how to fly as so many of your friends had learned. And you wanted to be in the Air Force -- how come you didn't do that?"

And he said, "Well, I attempted it, but they told me: 'No, Bob, we need you more here, in Tulsa.'" So that's ...

JE: So he had offered to be of service during the war and he was doing war duty, they felt. And he sure was, right.

JM: Well, and you'll see it in one of the pictures. Samuel Boorstin was a highly-honored legal mind who moved from Atlanta, Georgia in 1917 to Tulsa. And he loved photography. And he had met my father and thought a lot of him and got to know him so well. And there's a picture that he took of my dad and gave it to him in February of 1942. And on the back of that photograph is a hand-written note that says, "The safety of a country today depends upon the inaudible shots of intrepid photographers."

Well, that's a rather interesting statement but as I look at it today, I think how he was getting my father ready to fight the war to behind the lines but at a very important place in Tulsa, Oklahoma at the Douglas war factory. And as a lawyer could only put it in such poetic terms: "an intrepid photographer with inaudible shots."

And I'll speak more on Samuel Boorstin because that story is also a continuing, wonderful story.

Chapter 05 – 6:10**John Wayne, General Patton**

John Erling (JE): So then he set up his own business, here in Tulsa.

John McCormack (JM): Yes, he and Betty. She's very important as we all know.

JE: Well, he gets to take pictures and she was the manager.

JM: Yes.

JE: And she was the accountant and all the kind of things. They were a great team, then, weren't they?

JM: She dealt with the customers and on that other end (chuckling).

JE: Didn't, in that time period, he caught the attention of some national magazines?

JM: Oh, yes. Yes. He wound up -- matter of fact, at Douglas he did a beautiful color portrait of one of the generals and I can't think of the name.

JE: Was it General Henry Arnold?

JM: I think it was. I think it was. Was it "Hap" Arnold?

JE: His nickname was "Hap."

JM: Yeah. And he wrote a note to my dad that it was the best portrait he had ever had made. It was a color, too. So that and ...

JE: Let me just say, because I looked him up: He held the grades of General of the Army and General of the Air Force. He was an aviation pioneer, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, the only U.S. Air Force General to hold 5-star rank and the only officer to hold a 5-star rank in two different U.S. Military services.

JM: Wow.

JE: I just learned about him and it's fun to know those kind of names. So he took his photo and the General says it was the best he'd ever seen.

JM: Yes, yes. And that's a nice compliment.

JE: Absolutely -- from such an accomplished man.

JM: There is, somewhere -- I gave it to TU, something that my father had written about himself when he was seeking a Master's in photography degree. And I believe it talks about that in there. I haven't seen that in a long time.

JE: Okay. Who was seeking a Master's?

JM: My dad. He is a master. That is bestowed by other masters.

JE: It's not a school thing, it's a -- the business.

JM: Yeah.

JE: And didn't Life Magazine feature a photo of your father's General...

JM: I think so. I'm not real sure, John.

JE: Well, I'm going to tell you then. General George Patton who was here, visited the Spartan School of Aeronautics and he took a picture for Life Magazine.

JM: Dad told me the story that when General Patton came to Tulsa, he visited a barracks somewhere and that Dad was there. And that, as he came through the barracks, a soldier came out of the shower and he had a towel and he held it around his waist. And he saluted General Patton. General Patton, as my Dad tells the story -- and I would not doubt it, because every time I doubted my dad's stories they all proved true -- he said that General Patton took his glove and slapped the chest of that soldier with his glove and said 'I believe you're supposed to stand at attention.' And he dropped the towel and stood at attention (chuckling).

JE: (Chuckling) That's good. And the great photo of John Wayne?

JM: Well, John Wayne came to Tulsa and I'm going to say it was 1959 or 1960 and I never Googled that. But it was during the time, I'm pretty sure -- this is what I think, of The Alamo, the movie The Alamo. And John Wayne had put all of his fortune, most of it, into the making of that movie. And I think he may have come to Tulsa seeking some oil money to help back that movie. I don't know for sure. But I do know that my dad, who was getting ready to go to the airport, and he said "Come on and go with me."

And one of my parents' friends' daughters was also there. She was 2 years older than I am. He said, "Come on and go with me."

And we said, "Well, what're you gonna do?"

And he said, "You'll see."

And we drove out to the old airport. We went with him. We drove out to the old airport. There was a huge crowd in front of that old airport. My dad was able to drive right up and with his big camera box, we followed him in and they just made way for him. And there was a press room in that old airport. And we walked in there and both of our jaws dropped because there was The Duke, John Wayne, who stood tall. He was so friendly, laughing. He and Glenn Dobbs were friends. They had played football across from each other. John Wayne, I believe, played for Southern Cal and Glenn, of course, for TU.

And at the end of that assignment, my father said, "Mr. Wayne, would you mind having a picture taken with my son and his friend?" And I could still remember his cigarette lighter clicking as he had just lit a cigarette and he clicked that shut, that lighter, put it in his pocket, took the cigarette from his mouth, shoved his hat up -- just a little bit, put his arms around the two of us and says, "Well, now, come on, kids." And we stood there and had our picture made. I keep that picture by my desk now. I still enjoy that because John Wayne -- there was only one John Wayne ever (chuckling) on this earth. And I do respect him.

JE: And you're talking about that as if you were there right now, aren't you?

JM: I am! I can hear it. I can hear that lighter.

JE: So he would take you on assignments then?

JM: Yes, yes. And you'll see that he took me as a little baby boy, too.

Chapter 06 – 5:13

Chapman Barnard Ranch

John McCormack (JM): But about Life Magazine. I would say there's two stories about that that I shouldn't forget. One was canceled by the family -- by Mr. Chapman. And he had been hired to go to the ranch, the Chapman Barnard Ranch and I think it was Mr. Chapman; it could have been Mr. Barnard, I'd have to find out which was probably the more, a little bit more demanding lately. But before that ever made it to the magazine, they were able to cancel it. They didn't want to have that publicity. The pictures are of the real cowboys doing their work. And my dad had a story about one of the pictures he was trying to take of a cowboy. And he was posing it a little bit because, you know, the inability to stop action like he'd like to because of the limitations of film and cameras at that time.

But all of the sudden, Mr. Barnard -- I think it was ... you know what, I'm going to have to ask the family. One of them rode up, jumped off of his horse -- a big cloud of dust -- grabbed my father by the collar and said, "Don't you ever stop my cowboys from working! They have important things to do. You leave them alone! You can take pictures from the side, but don't bother them and pose them."

So that was part of that story that developed there. The other one that I remember is Mr. Chapman and Mr. Barnard with their horses, full length, and in the middle is the ranch manager holding his hat up high above his head.

My dad had asked him, "How did you get to be the foreman of this ranch?"

He says, "I'm the toughest guy. Anyone who can beat me can have the job."

So that's how -- it was toughness. His name was Ben Johnson. The father of Ben Johnson, who would become an Academy Award-winning movie actor.

JE: Wow...

JM: He took a load of horses from the Chapman Barnard Ranch to Hollywood for movies and he would look after the horses. And he got out there and he says, "This is a lot easier work than that back there on the ranch."

But that story needs to be told. Guy Logsdon did tell it. It's on film.

JE: The Ben Johnson who was foreman you said was the father of the actor?

JM: Yes. And they look identical.

JE: They were just ... Okay. And they drove -- cattle?

JM: The Chapman Barnard Ranch, I guess, made a deal to deliver a herd of horses to Hollywood and somebody had to look after them. I'll -- lemme finish that story then because Ben Johnson is very important. It tells a lot about Oklahomans and about their morals and their will and their strength.

A movie came out in the 60s -- late 60s, I believe -- and it was called The Last Picture Show. And I think that that director -- he has quite a name, too -- he wanted Ben Johnson for this one role and Ben Johnson read the script and he said "That's a dirty movie, I'm not going to be in it."

And he called him twice more: "Please."

"No. It's a dirty picture show. You can have it."

Then this Howard Hawks or whoever that would have been -- I'll have to look that up -- called him and said, "Ben..."

He said, "Yes, Mr. Hawks. What can I do?"

He says, "Well, I have a favor to ask. There's a movie role that you're the only person on this planet that can play that role."

He says, "I'll do it for you."

And he says, "It's The Last Picture Show. And they're going to give you a percentage of the take and gonna give you a big salary."

He says, "Mr. Hawks, I don't want money off of that. Just pay me the standard -- whatever the movie actors' guild pays -- that's all I want. And the only other thing I want is to be able to control the words that come out of my mouth. I'm not going to talk dirty."

And he did that and he got an Academy Award for it.

JE: And the movie was...

JM: The Last Picture Show

JE: Right.

JM: And Cybil Shepherd was in that and did swim naked, which, of course, as a young man, made me want to see the movie, so I have seen the movie and I've seen Cybil Shepherd dive off of that diving board at the high school naked.

But Ben Johnson said something at the very end of that to Guy Logsdon. He says, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

And I thought, "Wow, that's a great Oklahoman and a great model to follow."

JE: We should say that Guy Logsdon, of course, became a great historian in music and expert on Woody Guthrie and we have his story elsewhere here

on VoicesOfOklahoma.com and he was a librarian at Tulsa University, as a matter of fact.

Chapter 07 – 3:25

Two Famous People

John Erling (JE): Your father persuaded Humphrey Bogart in a trenchcoat? Tell us that story.

John McCormack (JM): Yes. Well, I don't know too much about it but I know I can see it in my mind. Tulsa, you know, was the oil capital of the world so there were some premiers here of movies. And I'm sure that's because there's Oklahoma money and Tulsa money was probably helping to supply the funds to get them produced. But Humphrey Bogart came to town -- and this would have been in his young career.

When asked by my dad if he could take his picture, he said "Yes." And my dad started to pose for it and he said "No, let me show you what I'd like to do."

He took him over to the side of the street there -- and it was kind of dark outside at that point in time -- and he pulled up his coat, and he put a cigarette in, and he pushed his hat up a little bit and then he said, "Now, I'm gonna put my cigarette in here. I'm getting ready to light this match. When I put it up to the cigarette, try to capture that."

So the light from the match was to light his face very dramatically. And I'm sure that came from Hollywood. But just something else...

JE: So Humphrey was directing that picture.

JM: Yeah. (Laughing) He was, he was. Yeah. My favorite story about a movie actress coming to Tulsa... Dad went out to the old airport to take her picture at the airport. My mother was visiting, they weren't married yet, so this is later 30s -- before 1940. This movie actor showed up and he was able to make contact and take a picture.

And she said "Well, how am I supposed to get in?" I think it was The Orpheum Theater. And they looked around and nobody was there. And my dad said, "Well, my girlfriend and I are going back to Tulsa, do you want us to give you a ride?"

And she said, "Sure."

And so before they got in the -- I think it was before they got in the car -- he took a picture of my mom with this woman, this actress, movie actress. And they took her downtown and were able to get her to the people that she needed to be with. The next day, my dad had developed that film and made a print and given it to my mother. And my mother looked at it and could not stand the way she looked in that picture and she tore it up, and she says, "I want that negative. I'm going to destroy it. I don't want anybody to see me looking like that, especially next to somebody so beautiful."

I wish that I could see that picture. I can kinda see it in my mind's eye, but that was a very young actress who was appearing in a movie. And I think it was called "Alice Blue Gown," but she played a dramatic role in that movie and it was not a success, but she would go on to great fame as a comedy actress with red hair by the name of Lucielle Ball.

JE: (Laughs) You had me sitting on the edge of my seat like our visitors who listen to this will be.

JM: Isn't that a great story?

JE: That is a wonderful story.

JM: I love that story. I should have been writing things down every day.

JE: But you've got them in your head and in such great detail.

Chapter 08 – 9:39
McFarlin Mansion

John Erling (JE): Okay then; how do we get into the McFarlin mansion?

John McCormack (JM): Well, so, my dad was always looking for a home that would have authentic background to work with. And so he'd already looked at a couple during the years. He was very successful in photography. As I say, Dad was a great photographer. Tulsa was his home; he loved it, and the Tulsans loved him.

One day, in 1969 -- early 69 -- a young lady was having her bridal portrait made in her home. My dad has been there before to take pictures and at parties. It's a beautiful home at 1610 South Carson -- the McFarlin Mansion as it's called. It's actually by John Brooks Walton it's called the McCormack-McFarlin mansion because the McCormacks were in there longer than anybody else ever.

The Chatlins were the first to live there after the McFarlins. That was Mrs. Chatlin's parents. Anyway, my dad was up there taking pictures of Christie Seager. Christie Seager and her bridal portraits. She lived there and at the end of that session, Mrs. Seager said to my dad, "Well, we're getting ready to move; I'm going to move into the 2300; I'm going to put this on the market."

And he said, "Well, Mrs. Seager, let me go down and get my wife." And he did and came back up the hill from 1722 S. Boston to 1610 S. Carson. They heard the price, they shook hands, and that was that. In April of 1969 my parents had obtained the great McFarlin mansion and when I came home from school, I was very impressed; but I was still thinking about being a dentist. Two years later, when I was having to wait around for dental schools, I started working for them in that house and it was a beautiful home to work in and it was a great time to spend most of my adult life there -- we were there for almost 40 years.

JE: You lived there?

JM: No. No one lived there until about 1979 and my parents moved from their house to out here and they were going to start traveling a little bit. I was helping to run the business by then. And they were going to do some traveling. They had a little condominium in Hot Springs Village. They loved Arkansas and the races. So they moved into the second floor and were going to travel. It was going to be their lock-and-leave in a way -- place.

Shortly after they moved in, she was discovered to have breast cancer. So they only lived there for about a year and a half before she died. And then I moved in there when I graduated from college in 1972 and lived on the top floor, which was just wonderful. And I actually lived there for 8 years on the top floor of the old McFarlin mansion.

JE: So it was your place of business and your place of residence.

JM: Kind of just -- same place we'd started, in a way.

JE: Tell our listeners who the McFarlins were.

JM: Well, Mr. McFarlin was a great, great rancher/cowboy who became a fabulously wealthy oilman. Mr. McFarlin and his wife, of course, very giving. Though their lives, they established the McFarlin library. There's a McFarlin Methodist Church in Norman which also tells a lot about the McFarlins because in their travels they had stopped in Norman and Mrs. McFarlin had a baby boy who was not well. And the Methodist women in Norman, Oklahoma had been so giving and loving to Mrs. McFarlin and that baby -- and it did die -- that Mr. McFarlin would remember those Methodist women in Norman and built a beautiful stone structure that is still there today in Norman, the McFarlin Methodist Church.

John Brooks Walton, getting back to that...

JE: The architect.

JM: ... the architect ... kept wanting to include that home in his books and my dad kept saying no. And the reason, my dad finally told me, one day at lunch why he didn't want that to happen. He said, "If that gets publicized then the city will come in and increase the taxes on our property." So that

was the reason. My sister talked him into it the year before the last book that came out that John Brooks Walton had done. And he said okay, my sister had talked him into it. But my dad died the month before the book came out.

Anyway, in that book, John Brooks Walton appreciated my dad so much and that we'd been there the longest that when he came to name that house, he called it "The McCormack - McFarlin Mansion" because we'd been there longer. I thought that was sweet of him.

JE: And I've interviewed John Brooks Walton and we have his interview here on our website, VoicesOfOklahoma.com. I gotta circle back here: Lita Chapman married ...

JM: ... her cousin.

JE: Her cousin. First cousin.

JM: Yes. It was Mr. McFarlin's sister's son. But...

JE: Didn't that cause... a few ripples in the community?

JM: I don't think so. I think that there had been a lot of cousins in previous generations, possibly. I know that this was not a highly-populated area, plus they lived in a different world than most people by that point in time. That house was built in 1917; I'm not sure how old Lita was at that point. I know my dad did portraits of them -- of Lita and Mr. Chapman. Nice portraits; very beautiful portraits. Then Allen Chapman was adopted because of that, though.

JE: They knew they weren't going to have children.

JM: I think that was it.

JE: So they adopted Allen.

JM: I can't speak for the family.

JE: Point is that they didn't have children.

JM: Yeah; as far as I know, that Allen was adopted, and I think it may have been because of that. I don't want to speak out of turn, though; I just know that when you go around town, you see the McFarlin name here and there then you see the Chapman name everywhere, but that's all one family.

JE: And we have the story of Allen Chapman on our website because Donnie Pittman, who oversaw their foundation and still does, told the story of Allen when Don was very young and they became attached and became an aid to Allen.

JM: Oh, okay.

JE: So I've actually told you something maybe you didn't know.

JM: Yes, yes, yes. (Chuckling).

JE: And then, we should say, you were married to your wife; and her name is?

JM: I'm married to Diane Ruggles. Patricia Diane Ruggles. We married in 1981 on Valentine's Day. We both had been married previously. I wound up adopting Diane's two daughters and we've been married 38 years and celebrate our love every year on February 22nd when I was late for a blind date that neither one of us wanted to go on. I was watching the American hockey team beat the Russians for the first time in the winter olympics. And I just couldn't leave the TV. And this is before they had TVs in restaurants and bars. So I just kept looking at my watching and thinking, "Oh, I've gotta go, gotta go ..." Finally, I did go in 20-minutes late and we fell in love and married a year later. But that was February 22nd, 1980.

JE: And you had children?

JM: I adopted Nicole and Lisa. Lisa is now 48-years-old and Nicole is 40. We have 7 grandchildren.

JE: Well, you are a historian yourself.

JM: It's too much, isn't it?

JE: No, it isn't. It's just remarkable what you have remembered and thank you for this session.

JM: It's impassioned on me because I love this city, but I love my mom and dad.

JE: You do. Well, this has been fun.

JM: Well, I've enjoyed it, too.

JE: And you and I have talked about doing this for a long time and we've finally did it; and maybe this will be the first session and we'll do some others.

JM: Well, I hope so.

Chapter 09 – 0:48
Baptism



John McCormack (JM): This one picture shows Dr. Baskin was at Boston Avenue Church as he's getting ready to baptize me and I'm just a newborn baby almost. My father holding me, my mother standing next to him, then my mother's father and mother standing next to them. And then the people that represented my dad's family was Ivy and Bonna Gordie. And Bonna Gordie was a math teacher, Ivy was in real estate; they had no children and Nancy and I were their closest thing to having children. Plus, Bonna was from Warrensburg, Missouri which is where my father's family was from originally.

John Erling (JE): And then the little girl here?

JM: The little girl is my sister, Nancy, who was being patient.

Chapter 10 – 1:08
Hopalong Cassidy



John McCormack (JM): This one is Hopalong Cassidy, Bill Boyd. Bill Boyd, I'd always heard from reliable sources that he was originally from Tulsa. Bill Boyd was actually born in Ohio but he was raised here in Tulsa and he lived here until he was 18 years of age. But he played the part of Hopalong Cassidy and on the other side of this Life Magazine cover is Bill Boyd with me. And I'm going to guess I'm about 4 there. And so this is about 1952. Well, Bill Boyd became the first television -- besides being a great movie actor -- he became the first television series of Westerns. And Gabby Hayes was his sidekick and one of his young characters in that series was a young George Reeves who would later go on to play Superman. But anyway this picture was -- my dad would have been hired to take pictures for some reason and that's how I wound up with this picture of myself and Hopalong Cassidy.

Chapter 11 – 1:02

Boston Ave Adult Choir



John McCormack (JM): This one was the Boston Avenue adult choir singing on KTUL radio -- I think that's in 1946 maybe. They sang to the nation. And what makes it even more interesting is this woman over here, Helen, was my child's choral director. I can tell stories about her but I see her every Monday now. She's 99 years old. Her husband, Dr. Richor, at one point, there were over 1300 people in the choirs alone at Boston Avenue Church. He oversaw that entire operation at Boston Avenue. But that was broadcast to the nation from KTUL radio from right here in Tulsa..

John Erling (JE): To the nation?

JM: Yeah. Yes. And I don't know if it was a prayer day or it was something about

...

JE: ... to CBS. It was broadcast to the Columbia Network.

JM: Yeah.

JE: ... and heard in the United States, right?

JM: Yes. Yes.

Chapter 12 – 0:43**Bob McCormack-Bomber**



John McCormack (JM): There is Bob McCormack looking out the nose of a bomber with his Speed Graphic 4 x 5 inch camera. He would talk about those photographers out there. They were all very daring as I guess all but pilots were at that time.

John Erling (JE): So who would have taken a picture of Bob McCormack?

JM: Well, there was a staff. There were over 20 people in there. One of 'em was a guy I used to see at the downtown Y who played racquetball -- championship racquetball -- Ray Crowley was his name. And that could have been Ray. There was actually a picture of Ray inside of an aircraft taking pictures, my dad taking pictures of him taking pictures.

Chapter 13 – 1:54
City of Tulsa, 1942



John McCormack (JM): This next picture that you see here is a very famous picture that my dad took in 1942 and he would later use this in all kinds of magazines and advertising; but he captured this one morning overlooking the city of Tulsa and the factories, refineries across the river, hard at work -- pumping out black smoke and white smoke. That has all been cleaned up by now. By the way, in 2012, that appeared on the front page of The Tulsa World -- half page. And my dad wasn't given credit; he should have been. But they had sent a reporter out to the Tulsa Historical Society to look for an image that would show Tulsa in 1942 when the census had been taken and then, in 2012, the census had been taken again so they were trying to relate the two periods and they came up with that picture. And so I keep thinking my Dad had such an eye for images that that's still attractive to people in 2012.

John Erling (JE): And he's flying, obviously, to get this picture.

JM: He'd have been coming out of Douglas. They used -- those photographers used to hang out by their heels and their legs to take pictures in the underbelly while landing and taking off.

JE: Your father included?

JM: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

Chapter 14 – 0:37
Stop Action



John McCormack (JM): Here's a picture of my dad as he is high jumping. My dad built a high jump pit for me down there behind the house on South Boston and we had a cane pole for my stick to go over just like he's got there.

But this picture just shows how the boys were trying to stop action, because the film -- they had to not try to capture movement from the side, but capture it going away which would help to slow down the stop-action appearance.

Chapter 15 – 0:30
Bob McCormack Harvest



John McCormack (JM): If my dad would have stayed in Lathrop, this is what he would have done. There is my dad -- shirt off, lifting up a bale of hay that's in this picture. I believe there's -- you'll see 5 mules and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 men and there's no radios going. There's no motors going. That's all human and animal power at work out in the bright sunlight.

Chapter 16 – 0:54
Kodachrome



John McCormack (JM): I just throw this in because that's a Kodachrome slidepicture of my picture of my grandfather on a metal-wheeled tractor, harvesting hay. But Kodachrome was invented in 1935 and those Kodachrome images are still good today. Anytime I come across a Kodachrome it still has retained its color. In 1945, during the war, Vericolor was invented -- Ektacolor -- and ektacolor was a simpler process but does not hold its colors.

So I think about and I wonder about digital if it's going to hold the colors and stay in there or if something else will happen after due time. But anyway, it just shows you how an expensive process was invented.

Chapter 17 – 0:19
Tracy Park



John McCormack (JM): There is Tracy Park where my dad spent his first night. He would photograph from there. It is quite a beautiful park. It's not taken care of today quite like it was then. I throw that in because that was where he spent the night August 14th, 1935.

Chapter 18 – 0:21
Eugene Lorton



John McCormack (JM): The next morning, he goes into see this man. That is Eugene Lorton with his grandson, Bob Lorton, sitting on his lap. And my dad did take that picture of the young Bobby Lorton and I do like to always give thanks to the Lorton family for hiring my dad and starting him on his career.

Chapter 19 – 0:37
Philbrook Gala



John McCormack (JM): There is my dad and probably what he looked like the night Philbrook had a gala and Waite Phillips and his wife had given that beautiful home to the city of Tulsa and my dad photographed that event. His pictures are on display in the library at Philbrook of that night. That is the night that they had the gala event at Philbrook and I think this is Mrs. Ed Lawson. Ed Lawson's mother, but I need to ask. Anyway, what a great gift; what a great city.

Chapter 20 – 1:45
Chope Philips



John Erling (JE): And let me just add here that Chope Phillips...

John McCormack (JM): He's coming (chuckling).

JE: ... the son of Waite and Genevieve, we've interviewed him and we have him on our website and he talks about that night so here he is.

JM: Yeah.

JE: Wow.

JM: This is where my dad's career and my careers sandwiched together. My dad was already gone but I was hired by the family to come out for a mini-reunion and I spent an hour with Chope and the rest of the family

wandered off to go places. Chope wandered off by himself for a bit. He wanted to go up and see his old bedroom, which was upstairs. It was, of course, a display room now.

But I sat with him in the grand rotunda there and we visited for awhile. And everytime someone would come up -- a woman would come up -- he would stand up and take that hat off and stand at attention. Quite a gentleman. Always wanted to be a rancher and lived on a ranch all his life.

Chope quoted to me, when I took this picture, I said, "Well, you've seen quite a bit in your lifetime."

He said, "Yes," he says, "but my dad gave me some wisdom when I was just a young lad. He said, 'Son, there's only one thing that stays constant in life...'"

And then he hesitated and I said, "What's that?"

And he said, "Change."

So I've retained that because that is true.

JE: And when I asked Chope about living in this house, he said, "Oh, it didn't make any difference to me. As far as I was concerned, I'd rather be living in a log cabin somewhere."

JM: I believe that.

JE: Yeah. He said that.

JM: He was very earthy.

Chapter 21 – 4:55
Wrong Way Corrigan



John McCormack (JM): This is a picture that my dad took, I think, in 1939. That is Wrong Way Corrigan. There's a great story there and that is Mr. William Skelly. And Mr. William Skelly, of course, was very significant in our town, but also in aviation. He was the man who put the original money in founding Spartan Aviation in Tulsa.

Wrong Way Corrigan was another one of these great, young, romantic figures of action. He fell in love with aviation early on and actually worked and helped Lindbergh build his plane to fly across the Atlantic. And he's also given credit for talking Lindbergh into building each wing 3 feet more wide for more fuel storage to ensure his ability to get across the Atlantic ocean. That was in 1927. Of course, Lindbergh was successful and highly honored.

Mr. Wrong Way Corrigan then built his own plane and then kept trying to get permission, for 11 years, to fly across the Atlantic. And he built his own plane and the authorities kept saying, "No, we can't let you do that." They finally, in '38, allowed him to fly. They said, "Try a transcontinental

flight.”

So he was going to fly from California to New York and from New York back to California. Well, they got to New York and he spent the night. The next morning, he asked the airport owner, he said, “Which runway can I take off from?”

And the airport owner, who I’m sure knew exactly what he was going to do, he says, “Well, you can use any one of these runways except for the one that goes to the west there. That goes over my office building.”

And so he took off to the east and it was overcast and cloudy and he got the name “Wrong Way” because he said, “I just didn’t know which direction I was going.”

He wound up flying all the way over the Atlantic Ocean and wound up in Ireland. He was then penalized for 2 weeks. They said, “You shouldn’t have done that. And you cannot fly for two weeks.”

Well, he was able to dismantle that plane. By the way, that plane -- on his way over to Ireland -- he had fuel tanks in front of the front windows. He couldn’t even see out the front window. He had a fuel leak on the way over and he had to figure out some way to get that out of the cockpit because it was going to suffocate. He knew which side of the engine was going to be the hottest so, on the other side, he took a screwdriver and poked a hole in the floor and then tilted the plane to drain that fuel out so he wouldn’t be overcome by the fumes.

And when he got back to New York City, he came back on a ship. He got a bigger ticker tape parade than Lindbergh because he had raised the spirit of this nation to such a high level coming out of The Depression. So he was a bigger figure than Lindbergh. And I think, “Wow. What figures we have to watch.”

JE: And your dad took that picture.

JM: Yes. My dad took that picture. These guys built their own planes. I mean, there was no plan manufacturers

**Chapter 22 – 0:22
Printed Backwards**



John McCormack (JM): There is the front page of the New York Post, which they printed in the headlines in reverse because -- “Hail, Wrong Way Corrigan!”

John Erling (JE): (Laughing)

JM: That’s pretty brilliant.

JE: That is funny.

JM: These people. These people were great thinkers. But you can see the ticker tape parade there, too.

JE: That is great.

Chapter 23 – 0:57
Truck



John McCormack (JM): My dad was always in the right place at the right time. And this is about 1940. October 14th, 1940 he came around the curve there. I think that's 2nd and Elgin and a oil tanker truck was smoldering. And as he came around, it blew up. He jammed on the breaks, swung open the car door, set the shutter speed, set the shutter aperture, put the film in, pulled the slide, cocked the shutter, and took that picture.

And the byline underneath that picture said, "Probably the most fantastic news picture ever taken in downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma." I'd say it probably still could compete.

John Erling (JE): 1940.

JM: Yeah.

Chapter 24 – 0:23
Skelly Stadium



John McCormack (JM): This image is of Skelly Stadium long before they put in the south end bleachers. But I looked at that and I thought, “Hmm...Now how did he get up there? There’s no building over to the south. There’s no building there today that would allow him to do that.” Somehow, he was elevated beyond normal means.

Chapter 25 – 1:17
Fire Truck Tulsa Rose Garden



John McCormack (JM): So this next picture will help explain that. My dad had access to a lot of city utilities. And this would be a fire truck. And this is 1958; this would have been for a publication, I'm sure, for the '58 US Open that was put on at Southern Hills -- golf tournament. And Dad told me that ladder moved about 18 inches as it swayed back and forth. And he had an 8 x 10 view camera that he was taking a picture of the Tulsa Rose Gardens. The Tulsa Rose Gardens at that point in time were considered one of the 4 greatest rose gardens in the world. And we'll pray that it gets back to that one day.

John Erling (JE): Yeah.

JM: But anyway, that's -- he was being taken to different heights by means that not the average person would ...

JE: When I -- and we shouldn't, I guess -- think about all the things that went into taking that picture...

JM: Yeah!

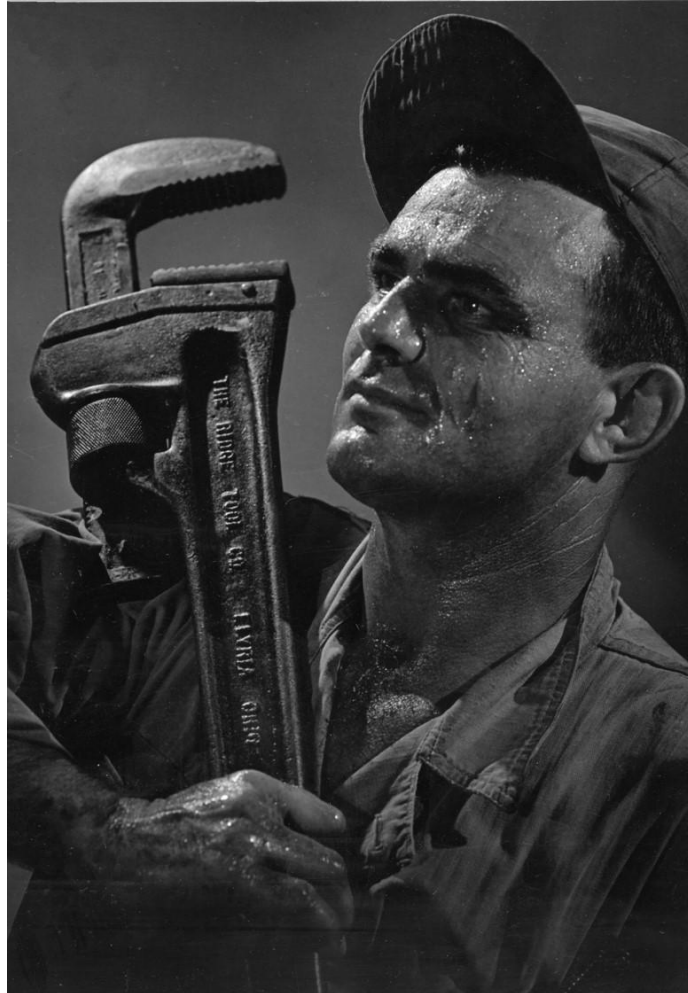
JE: ... the joy should just be there. But it is interesting to know behind the scenes ...

JM: Well...

JE: ... what went on, because it was hard work.

JM: Yes, it was hard work.

Chapter 26 – 0:47
Beads of Perspiration



John McCormack (JM): This is something I threw in because it reminded me of what my dad had learned throughout the years about light and how it's reflected. When you see this up close, you can see the beads of perspiration on this roughneck's face.

These specular highlights -- this would be hard to do with digital cameras because they don't like to record dark and light in the same image as much as film could. But he has put -- I know what he did -- he put vaseline on this man's face and then he either put water or glycerine to create that image. But it's powerful. And it makes you think, you know, "He is working. He is hot."

Chapter 27 – 1:30
Over Exposed



John McCormack (MJ): This is tied into that last picture. And this goes back to when my dad was still in Lathrop. That is my dad. That is learning to take pictures with incandescent light. And the artsy part of it is he's got oil all over his body.

John Erling (JE): Wow.

JM: ... so that it'll show some depth because those highlights are what bring out the depth of field. Well, I found that negative and -- it's very funny -- it says, 'Bob McCormack, Lathrop, 1931' and then he's put in quotations: "Overexposed" (chuckling).

JE: (Laughing) And that's your dad.

Chapter 28

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories.

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