

Ironworkers Documentation Project: AMERICA WORKS  
AUDIO LOG FORM

Interviewer's recording no(s): AWP00174\_SR01

Contact: William C. "Bill" Tanneberg

Interviewer: Jim Leary

Interview:

Date: Monday, July 11, 2011

Place: Workshop adjacent to Tanneberg home

Other people present: nobody

Background noise: occasional birdsong from outside the shop

Equipment used: (audio recorder brand and model; microphone(s), brand(s), model(s))

Marantz professional PMD 661 digital recorder; Audio Technica C87 condenser microphone

Recording medium used: Kingsport 2 gigabyte SD[Secure Digital]memory card 362.4 megabytes, uncompressed WAV format)

Recording engineer: Leary

Summary description of audio interview contents:

Now retired, Tanneberg talks about his experiences as an ironworker, as well as about his more recent artistic blacksmithing

Audio Interview Contents: Bill Tanneberg

Time	Topic
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0:05	Announcement, initial question—when and where born, how you got into ironworkers trade?
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0:40	I was born and raised in Ashland, Wisconsin. And when the powder plant down here started [on Highway 12 in Sauk County, north of Sauk City and south of Baraboo], my dad come down here to work down here at the powder plant. I lived here practically all my life. Have lived in Ashland for awhile. I lived up on the Iron Range [MN] for awhile. I was working in a, working iron up there. So I know all about the mines. And I worked the Great Lakes on the ore carriers carrying the iron ore down to the steel mills. So I'm pretty well acquainted with the process of steel. And then I got in the ironworking trade mid-sixties (1960s) and I've worked in it ever since. I've been to the east coast and the west coast, San Francisco, all over working. I've been on the ground, and I've been 1400 feet in the air on TV towers. In fact the one tower outfit
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wanted me to travel with them. But I didn't. Pretty well acquainted with all facets of the trade. Then I went to a [metal] fabricator's show about 13-14 years ago. Out in New Mexico. We went on a tour from there to a blacksmithing shop, and I fell in love with the blacksmith trade. Been doing it ever since. I've just really, really grown. Matter of fact, the guy that introduced me to it—I seen him up at La Crosse in “02—he said I'm doing a heck of a job. Just keep it up.

3:34 [Year born?] 1939. [What was your Dad's name?] Same as mine. [Was it after WWII they moved to southern WI?] Yeah. 1942. [What years did you work up on the Iron Range?] Early 70s. [How did you happen to get up there on the Range?] There was no work down here then so... The Iron Range started boom like heck so, yeah... So I went up there. [What were you doing when you were on the Range? Were you constructing...] Yeah, constructing and expanding plants. [How did you happen to get into it? How did you find out about the ironworkers trade?] I knew a lot of ironworkers. I was a laborer for a couple of years in. I ran around with guys who knew what it was and I had a chance to getting in the trade. [Can you remember some of the guys...or who did you start out working with?] JP Cullen and Jimmy Pintz, Buell Cuff, those guys. [What kind of work did you do starting out as an ironworker?] Re-rod. [Welding?] Right, right. [How did you pick up some of those particular skills...?] Just started doing it.

6:15 [Did anyone give you tips?] Oh yeah. [Can you tell me a little bit about that?] Let me think about that. I was working for Cullen...I pushed a lot of work for them, especially re-rodging. Jimmy Pintz said, “The office wants to talk to you. And I said, “Should I talk to them?” And he said, “Well, we want you to go down...to this job in Michigan. We want you to run that for us.” So I went down there. Monday morning, this guy said, “Well, I'm the foreman.” “Well, the office sent me down here and I'm supposed to take over.” So he quit and the guy working with him quit. So here I am all by myself. Big strapping laborer says, “I'll help you out, Shorty.” So I called the Milwaukee Hall and they said, “You can't put him to work. Ask if he wants an apprenticeship.” And he said “yup”... So I put him to work and signed him up. We finished that job up, you know. Then I went down to Rockford. There was a high rise down there. I was pretty well set up with Cullen. [Were they good to work with?] Oh yes they were. [How many years did you work with Cullen?] Probably eight years steady. [And was it places like Michigan, Northern Illinois...] Yup. [Were you in Wisconsin too?] Oh yeah. Ashland, Rochester, MN, for Cullen. Traveled quite a bit for them. [What were they building?] Elderly housing. High rises. [How many years did you work before you became a foreman?] Hmm... Probably 4 years at the most. [You mentioned working in San Francisco. Did you boom out to those places?] Yeah, yeah. I worked quite a bit down in Rockford too, at the Chevrolet plant. They needed help down there. The B.A. down there always gave me a call. “Come on down, Shorty. We need you down here.” I went down there right away. [How did you get out to San Francisco?] There was no work around here so I called out there and yup, we got work. I worked out there for two years. [Bridge work or high rise work?] Well, it was high rise work. That was in the 70s.

11:06 [Did you meet any of those old timers like Al Zampa and others who worked on the Golden Gate bridge?] I don't remember.

11:23 [Shorty, that's what they called you?] Yeah. [Did other guys have nicknames on the job?]

Most of them usually do. [Can you think of some of them?] Most of them usually do. PAUSE Buffalo Bob. LAUGHS Yeah... [Was he a character...?] PAUSE Always bragging what he could do and stuff like that. We called him "buffalo" because he always buffaloes his way through stuff. LAUGHS [When I was a kid in the 50s...there was the Howdy Doody Show with Buffalo Bob. He was a big bullshitter.] Yup. [At what point did you work at the Great Lakes?] Well, when I was 18-21. [You said that it would have been between Duluth and Gary, Indiana or where did you go?] The whole Great Lakes. Duluth, Superior, Taconite Harbor, Cleveland, Toledo, Buffalo, New York, Ashtabula. [Did you work with Fins on a boat?] I don't remember. I was in the engine room, running the engine. I had got certified papers to run the engines, maintain them. [Probably noisy, eh?] Yeah, noisy. I remember one time we were anchored out from Port Huron in the river... Captain rings back, we're taking off. Daniel Morrell was ahead of us. She pulled anchor, she's going. So we followed her out. An hour later, he tells us that we're going to the river. Daniel Morrell just sunk. [Whoa... That was in Lake Superior?] Lake Huron. [Oh... It was rough weather then?] Oh yeah. [I have some friends who live in Rogers City...right on the...] Yup. I know where its at. [Note: Daniel J. Morrell, Great Lakes freighter ... sunk on Lake Huron on 29 November 1966, taking with it 28 of its 29 crewmen.]

15:26 [Did you have any close calls as an ironworker?] No, not really. [Any accidents?] No. [Did you see a few?] Not really. Guys I worked with were pretty safe.

15:55 [So what part of the trade did you like the most?] Rigging and erecting. [You had to have a pretty good gang to have things run smoothly.] Yup. [Did you have any particular good guys you worked with who were really skilled...your ground men or connectors...or what have you?] Well...most of them were pretty good. [Good operating engineers?] Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I did have one accident. Out at Truax, we picking some heavy stuff up. It was such big sheeting on this one building. Like I told the foreman, "It's not very safe doing it this way." "Oh yeah, we'll do it." And a whole piece broke loose. Hit my left foot. Almost took my toes off. The operator baled out of his rig right away and came over to me. Even he said it was unsafe the way they were doing it.

18:08 [Wet weather was pretty tough too then.] Wet and cold. [Did you work all times of the year?] Oh yeah, oh yeah. [Any memories of particular cold or hot or... Did you experience with extreme weather?] Not really. PAUSE

19:00 [Sometimes the iron workers have conflicts with other trades. Did you ever get into it with the carpenters or...?] No, no. PAUSE No, not really.

19:25 [You mentioned that one place in New Mexico... When was that?] In 1997 I think. [And what kind of work did you do with the blacksmiths?] Well...all kinds of stuff. I started with railings. I like making headboards for beds and stuff. Some pretty fancy stuff. [Is there some connection between the ornamental part of the ironworkers trade and what you're doing now?] Well, in a way, yeah. [Could you say a little more about that?] In ornamental work the stairwells and railings were done by the fabricating shop and installed by ironworkers, where a blacksmith uses a forge and power hammers and stuff. Shape all the stuff that way. You build jigs up to be able to bend stuff.

21:30 [When you were active as an ironworker, did you ever make or modify some of the tools? Spud wrench or a sleemer bar or...] No, not really. I think some guys have done different things.] I suppose, yeah. [...get their hands...] Yeah. [Some guys would use the stuff, maybe some rolled piece, and put their names on it.] Oh yeah. [Did you do anything like that?] Oh yeah. You usually mark all your own tools. [So do you have any of those around so you could show me at some point? Some of your old tools that are marked with your symbol?] I don't know. Not really, I don't think. No. The blacksmith, you know, you've got... They've got a stamp, called a touch mark. You hammer that into your metal. Mine is two Christmas trees on a hill, which means Christmas Hill, that's what my last name means in German. [Oh yeah, oh tannebaum...] Yeah. And "berg" is hill. [Yeah. That's the name of your street here too, right?] Yeah, right. [I saw that coming in. I hadn't thought of that. That's cool.]

23:32 [So the blacksmith work... Do you have any particular customers...people you worked for or do things for now?] Oh, there's one famous...blacksmith and teacher... He's dead now. He always said, "The forge is for the general, not the general public." LAUGHTER Because the general public wants the stuff for nothing. These candle holders, I'm making now, there's some in the house. One woman said, "Well, they're worth \$25 aren't they?" For three hours labor? Please...please. Insult. [Did you find a few generals around or do you end up making them mostly for yourself?] I'm still looking. It's coming. It's coming. I sold the headboards I got. The cheapest one I got was for \$4,000. Some of these headboards take 100-200 hours just to make them. And all my work. They are original. I didn't copy nobody. [And this is steel?] Oh yeah, steel, copper, brass...and in the winter time when it's too cold to work out here, I'm getting started at forging gold and silver which... Copper now...when you forge that, you heat this stuff up in the forge, throw it in cold water, whereas iron, I'll heat it up and throw in cold water. Iron heated up throwing cold water in, it hardens the stuff. With copper, it softens it. So as you hammer it, it gets hard again. [Interesting stuff. I remember about iron in a foundry... would be more brittle.] Right, right right. [And also we had ladles as you heated it up. And the guys working it... The ladles had to warmed up] Wow... [Guy didn't warm the ladles and the steel bounced and hit me right in the eyes. I thought I was going to go blind.] I bet. [But I came out of it alright.] Yeah. Well... The iron, if you heat it up...you put it in vermiculite until it cools off. Then it's pliable as heck. [Really.]

27:27 [So where do you get your... metals? ] All over. Different suppliers. [Some of it is scrap too?] Some of it is, yeah. I sold pop cans at a junk yard down in Madison, walked in the scale house to weigh the cans. There were two four foot by six foot sheets of quarter inch copper...that was about 8 years ago. I snapped them up immediately. They were worth about 5 times what I paid for them. What someone else's scrap is not scrap. [That's right.]

28:35 [You said that you started as an ironworker in the 60s. At what point did you retire from the trade?] I retired June 5, 2008. My wife says, "Retire and stay home with me. Two days later she died. Two days later. I sure miss that lady. We did everything together. Everything. [That's really hard.] It's a bitch. [So the iron keeps you busy.] Yeah. [Leary offers sympathy about being on your own.] Yeah.

30:18 [So do you get together with old ironworkers now and then?] At the meetings and stuff, yeah... I go to quite a few. Lots of blacksmith conventions. I have a lot of friends there, an

awful lot of friends. [That's cool. Leary talks about a blacksmith in Brill, WI, and also about another one who worked in Waunakee and lived on the east side of Madison.] Damascus. [Damascus.] Yeah. Pound and weld, pound and weld. Oh... That was... That's the oldest type of welding there is, done by a blacksmith using Damascus steel. Six layers of steel, at different times... You put borax on it, heat it up and where it starts running, pound it. After it's pounded, you split it in half and do the same thing. So you when you're through, before you know it, you have 600 layers of steel, all pounded together, before its welded. [Strong stuff.] Yup. People think the price of this stuff is already high. Damascus...many hours pounded that stuff together.

33:16 [So when you look at that, what do you think of the trade of the ironworker? What would you like to say about it?] Its one of the best there is. Yup. [What did you like about it?] Variation of work. Always keep busy. [You did a little bit of everything?] Oh yeah...yeah... Yup.

34:00 [I think you mentioned rigging as one of your favorite things?] Yup. [What was it about that? Was it rigging cables on crane or...?] Taking heavy equipment and stuff up. Real heavy machinery. [So...could you describe it with a particular job that you had to do riggings that were challenges or... I haven't really seen it in action so I have to imagine it.] These taconite mills, a lot of the stuff there were these balling drums, all heavy stuff. Really heavy. They had probably 3 inch cables that they were working with. [With a crane?] Oh yeah. All big stuff. [So how do you get the heavy equipment like that... Are there places built in that you can grab on to the cable?] Well, you see, there are usually picking eyes on the stuff. Loops (?) welded on the side of it. Picking eye...that's what they called it. [Kind of like an eye bolt on the side for a way to pick it up?] It's a piece of steel that is welded to the piece. Put a heavy shackle through that.

36:28 I liked working on TV towers too. The first tower I was on, the guy said, "You gotta go up in the air?" And I said, "Why not, what the heck. That's part of my job, ain't it? No problem." So they had this picking boom on the side of the tower. It was a piece of the tower, you put it in place, bolt it in place. Then you jumped the picking boom on the tower on to the next one, keep on jumping it up. This was a utility tower out of Kansas City. [Leary talks about Tinker Nelson building WKOW TV tower also worked on it in the 60s. It's pretty cool. He's up there holding a camera with one hand and holding on to something else. He's riding the heavy ball down.] Right, right, right. That's how you get up there. [Tell me about that.] Then you have a special safety belt that you sit in. It's more than a belt. It's a whole harness and stuff. [when I saw this film and what some of these guys did, just wearing T-shirts. They weren't wearing hard hats, things like that.] Nope. [How did it used to be then?] The same way. Yup.

38:45 [So what did you think when OSHA came in?] Some of it was good and some of it is a bunch of bullshit. [Like what?] Well, some of the regulations are fine and dandy but to me it should be up to that individual, what he considers safe and nonsafe. [Where the requirements you had actually more dangerous when OSHA came in?] I don't know. Government, government, government...I don't know. LAUGHS [Well, they would've shut down the foundry I was working on.] Right, right. I know.