

Mott Rainbow Arch Bridge  
Spanning Cannonball River  
Mott, North Dakota  
Hettinger County

HAER No. ND-1

HAER,  
ND,  
21 - MOTT,  
1 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

MOTT RAINBOW ARCH BRIDGE  
ND-1

DATE: 1921 (April to September)

LOCATION: Spanning the Cannonball River  
Mott, North Dakota

DESIGNED BY: Marsh Engineering Company,  
Des Moines, Iowa

OWNER: No longer extant, demolished 1980

SIGNIFICANCE: This structure is one of only two reinforced  
concrete bridges known to exist in North Dakota  
in 1980. It is a good representative example  
of the Marsh Rainbow Arch Bridge design.

HISTORIAN: Jane Silverman (Interviews), 1980

TRANSMITTED BY: Monica E. Hawley, Historian 1983

The structure crossing the Cannonball River in Mott, North Dakota is commonly referred to as the Mott Rainbow Arch Bridge. Construction on the structure was begun in April 1921 and completed in September 1921. The structure was opened for traffic on about September 4, 1921.<sup>(1)</sup> The cost of the structure was \$41,504.<sup>(2)</sup>

This structure replaced a wood and steel bridge that had been in place for approximately ten years. The existing structure was removed and rebuilt at a site about six miles northwest of Mott.<sup>(1)</sup>

The bridge was originally built for the North Dakota State Highway Department as a federal aid project. Subsequent to the construction of N.D. Highway 8 in its present location, the bridge was turned over to the city of Mott where it is part of the local street system.

The structure was designed by the Marsh Engineering Company of Des Moines, Iowa. During the early 1920's, Marsh Engineering was designing this type of bridge in the midwestern states. Similar structures were constructed in other midwestern states. The contractor who constructed the bridge was N. M. Stark and Company of Des Moines, Iowa. Both the Marsh Engineering Company and N.M. Stark Company are no longer in existence.

The surrounding environment is typical of a stream crossing in a small town. Commercial businesses and a few trees are located near the site. The structure is an integral part of the surrounding landscape.

The location of the structure is a typical stream crossing. No significance is attributable to the location.

This bridge is very similar to the bowstring arch truss design developed by Squire Whipple in 1840. The bowstring arch truss concept has been used at a number of locations throughout the United States. Many of these are older than the Mott Rainbow Arch Bridge.

The structure is a through arch type consisting of two 80' spans and two approach spans. The clear roadway width is 19.1 feet. There is a five foot sidewalk cantilevered outside the arch rib on the north side.

Materials used to construct this bridge were steel to form a framework over which concrete was placed to provide reinforced concrete structural members. Each span consists of two arch ribs from which the floor system is supported by means of hangers. The reinforcing or arch rib is a structural steel section built up of four angles latticed vertically and horizontally. Each hanger is also reinforced with four angles connected at top ends to gusset plates riveted to rib angles. The bottom ends of hanger angles are also riveted to gusset plates which provide field connections for two beam angles. The latter, with auxiliary bars provide the reinforcement for floor beam.

A characteristic feature of the rainbow arch type is the manner in which temperature movements of arch and floor system are provided for independence of each other. This is accomplished by building the floor slab free to move between arch ribs and over a T-beam built monolithic with arches. Between floor slab and arch beams, expansion plates are provided to insure free movement. The floor slab is also free to move over abutment and pier. This method of taking care of contraction and expansion due to temperature changes, provides a continuous floor slab throughout the entire length of each span, thus insuring rigid lateral resistance.<sup>(3)</sup>

The use of concrete to construct an arch was not a common type of construction. In North Dakota, there is only one other structure of this type. However, there are several in other midwestern states.

- (1) Mott Pioneer Press, September 1, 1921
- (2) North Dakota Highway Bulletin, December 1925
- (3) North Dakota Good Roads Magazine, January 1922

This is an interview with Reuben Buehler, age 75, at the State Highway Department, on July 9, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Reuben Buehler, brother to Oscar Buehler, is about 75 years old. He lived in Mott from 1921, when the Rainbow Bridge was built, until 1938. He now lives in San Diego, CA. He was in the area visiting Oscar, who lives at the Good Samaritan Home in Mott, and volunteered to see me at the Highway Department. Reuben used to work in the Truck Regulatory Division at the Department. He was very cooperative, but simply hadn't lived in Mott long enough to have many lasting memories of the bridge. There is one interesting story in his narrative, though, and he did give me the names of a few informants who turned out to be very helpful. JS)

SILVERMAN: You moved to Mott about the time the bridge was completed?

BUEHLER: That's right.

SILVERMAN: You lived there?

BUEHLER: I moved to Mott the latter part of September of 1921.

SILVERMAN: You lived there until 1938?

BUEHLER: 1938.

SILVERMAN: Okay. How did the people back then feel about the bridge?

BUEHLER: Well, they were elated because the old wooden bridge would wash out when they got high water, see? So, they were very much thrilled about it. I don't know when it was dedicated. Do you have any record of that?

SILVERMAN: No, I haven't come across that yet. Now, there is a dam below the bridge?

BUEHLER: There's a dam below the bridge. See, when the trains ran, when they had the steam engines, they needed water so they dammed the bridge, and my recollection of the dam was that at that time it was built according to the volume of water prior to that, see? Then later they raised the dam and I think that has been partially true for their flooding.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember when they raised it?

BUEHLER: No, I don't remember that.

SILVERMAN: After you had left or while you were there?

BUEHLER: No, it was before I left. I don't know just who you could contact that would know. If some people would have some records, I guess, you could find out.

SILVERMAN: Do you feel that when they raised the bridge that....

BUEHLER: Well, that raised the water up so that in the spring water would be higher, and the ice would be more apt to jam it at the bridge, you understand? Of course prior to the jamming on this bridge it used to jam on the Milwaukee railroad bridge which is west of Mott. Then it started flowing over west Mott and flooded the town before the ice jam even got to this bridge, see? But in the later years now the river is filling up with silt and it hasn't got the water capacity anymore. At least that is my theory for the reason it floods so much easier now. I don't know just what happened. They say they can't open the gates anymore. If they could open the gates, then, and flush it out, it would make a lot of difference.

SILVERMAN: They say they can't?

BUEHLER: Well, I guess they can if they would really get at it, but they don't, so....

SILVERMAN: What was the general feeling about the bridge when it was first built?

BUEHLER: Well, everybody was happy to have it.

SILVERMAN: That was the first bridge of its kind in North Dakota, right?

BUEHLER: I was wondering if that wasn't true.

SILVERMAN: Yes, it seems to me I read that there were bridges like that in other parts of the country but not in North Dakota.

BUEHLER: I know that everybody was very proud of it and it was a very substantial bridge. Still is. If they want to move it they'll have trouble doing it.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember anything that took place because of the bridge? Anything....

BUEHLER: No, I don't. I don't. The thing that I remember is that the people were so pleased about it. See, this is main street, and the old bridge used to go straight across. Well, now they put this bridge on an angle, which was much more convenient for travel, because anybody going across the bridge going south, they'd have to make a right angle turn, see. This was kind of on an angle and I remember how people appreciated that. In addition to my brother; and his memory is good but he can't see very good, so you'll have to tell him who you are and what you want and give him a little time; but his memory is very good, although, he doesn't remember too much about when the bridge was finished. He worked on the drayline at the time and hauled a whole lot of cement for it. He remembers that.

SILVERMAN: He was on the drayline?

BUEHLER: Yes. He stayed in Mott. He never left Mott from 1911 on. Another man that is an old timer there is Bill Bosanco. He was a section foreman for the Milwaukee for many years. And then there's another man I just thought of last night. He is a younger person but he has a good memory and he goes back a long time. His father was one of the pioneers there: Ernest Wangsvick.

SILVERMAN: Bosanco and Wangsvick are still living in Mott?

BUEHLER: Yes. The rest of the old timers have died off. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: Or moved away.

BUEHLER: Yeah, a lot of them have moved away. That's right; but a lot of them have died.

SILVERMAN: When you left in '38 was there still the same feeling surrounding the bridge as there was when it was built? Or have they changed any?

BUEHLER: I don't recall there was much discussion on that because everybody was happy with it and satisfied. We had...we didn't have a flood while I

lived there caused by the ice jam, but in 1937 we had a real hard rain on a Saturday night, and by Sunday morning the river was full of water. And it had washed out a bridge between Mott and Regent. Why I remember that so distinctly: I happen to be a member of the Congregational Church and our state minister was there and I was to take him to Regent. We found out the bridge was washed out. So he caught a ride with somebody to Mandan, took the train from Mandan to Dickinson, Dickinson to New England, and back to Regent.

(LAUGHS) Made that roundabout trip to go 14 miles. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: That was the only way to get there.

BUEHLER: It was the only way at that time, 'cause the bridge was washed out, see? I just thought of that, too, the other day. You have the name of the contractors build it, don't you? That built the bridge?

SILVERMAN: Yeah. They contracted it out to somebody and then he sublet it after that, right?

BUEHLER: Right, Joe Berry had the contract then he sublet it to Rue Construction. Milt Rue doesn't live here anymore either, so...his father is dead, but young Milt has moved away, as I understand, but this Lyman Lee who I thought had been foreman on this bridge didn't start work for Rue until '22, he said, and he worked for Charley Rue. Milt Rue's a contractor from Bismarck, and Charley, the two brothers had both contracted in the same field if I would say.

SILVERMAN: Did Lyman live in Mott, though?

BUEHLER: No, he lived in Bismarck. Well, I don't know where he lived at that time but, see, ah, when I worked for Truck Regulatory in 1955, well, I started in '54 till '65, but he was director of it for several years. And I don't think he left Bismarck since.

END

This is an interview with Oscar Buehler, age 90, at the Good Samaritan Home in Mott, on July 10, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Oscar Buehler, age 90, is a resident of the Good Samaritan Home in Mott. He has lived in Mott all his life since 1911. There is a discrepancy in that Oscar says he moved to Mott in 1911 and his brother, Reuben, says that he moved to Mott in 1921; while Oscar maintains that Reuben moved there immediately after he did. Oscar is the one person that everyone I talked to said to be sure to interview. He is quite frail, and his sight is failing, but his memory seemed to be good. He was quite vehement in some of his opinions, and only seemed to tire after nearly an hour of talking. JS)

SILVERMAN: Okay, now, you said you were born in Nebraska?

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: When did you come to Mott?

BUEHLER: I come here, ah, in February of 1911.

SILVERMAN: And you've lived here ever since then?

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: Did your parents live here too?

BUEHLER: What?

SILVERMAN: Your parents came with you?

BUEHLER: No, I come ahead of them, but they came afterwards.

SILVERMAN: When did they come?

BUEHLER: They come about a year afterwards.

SILVERMAN: How old were you when you came to Mott?

BUEHLER: Well, I voted the first time in my life in Mott, so I was just about 21 when I got here. (Oscar is interrupted by mail delivery.)

MAILMAN: Here's a letter, Oscar.

BUEHLER: Just lay it down; my eyesight isn't so good anymore.

SILVERMAN: Well, I'm glad you remember things.

BUEHLER: My mind is all right....for my age.

SILVERMAN: I hear you just had your 90th birthday.

BUEHLER: That's right.

SILVERMAN: That's quite an event.

BUEHLER: The 7th of July.

SILVERMAN: So you were about 21 when you came to Mott?

BUEHLER: Well, I came in the spring and I was 21 that summer.

SILVERMAN: So, when the bridge was built you were about 31?

BUEHLER: Well, now, you know, I can't tell you what year it was built. I was working at the drayline here. Later on I had it. We hauled a lot of stuff to it.

SILVERMAN: What was it like working on the drayline? What did you do?

BUEHLER: Hauled everything that came to town by rail and a lot of stuff around the country. Started out with horses and mules and ended up with trucks. Then days everything came in by railroads, you know. We hauled it all. Hauled the coal to all the residents and the mines. I did that for 39 years.

SILVERMAN: Did you work with horses all that time? Or when did you change to trucks?

BUEHLER: No, ended up with trucks.

SILVERMAN: So, you were moving things from the railroad to the people who needed them.

BUEHLER: Everything that come in we'd haul the stuff to stores, you know, and business places downtown. They shipped lumber and stuff by the carloads and we hauled that to the lumber yards.

SILVERMAN: Were you working with both railroads or just one?

BUEHLER: Oh, yes, sure. The NP and the Milwaukee.

SILVERMAN: Both the NP and the Milwaukee had just come into town when you moved here, hadn't they?

BUEHLER: They came that fall ahead of me. They come in here...well, I

guess it was....I was in Nebraska when they came. They had a big celebration here when the railroad came in. That was in the fall of 1910 and the NP was in the north end of town, and the Milwaukee was down on the south end. Come up around the river, you know. They come from McLaughlin, and the Northern Pacific they came from Mandan. They had passenger trains then everyday, and freight trains.

SILVERMAN: Do you think the trains changed the town very much?

BUEHLER: Well, it helped the town, at that time anyway. When people had to haul their stuff from Richardton until the railroad came in, that made a big difference.

SILVERMAN: What about the dam south of the Rainbow Bridge?

BUEHLER: What about it?

SILVERMAN: Was that built....

BUEHLER: The Northern Pacific built that so they could get water for their steam engines, you know. They run a pipeline from the river up to the water tank, you know, and that's how that got there.

SILVERMAN: When the crews were here building the bridge, do you remember how many men they employed?

BUEHLER: The railroad?

SILVERMAN: No, the contractor who built the bridge.

BUEHLER: Oh, I wouldn't know that.

SILVERMAN: Did you know any of those men?

BUEHLER: No. I hauled a lot of cement to them when they was building it. That was after they came here to work, you know, with their contractor.

SILVERMAN: How much cement is in that bridge?

BUEHLER: (LAUGHS) Many carloads. You know that pillar that's in the river that causes the ice jams that they talk about--they drained all the water out, you know, and they drove piling down there like long telephone poles, and then

they run cement in between them, you know, to give it some solid footing. They talk about blowing that out. There ain't enough dynamite in the country to blow that out, because if they'd start blasting that it'd break every window in town.

SILVERMAN: You don't think they can do it.

BUEHLER: No. Oh, of course some of these smart young people that wasn't born when that was done are the ones are causing the trouble. You see the trouble is our Mayor and our newspaperman got property in west Mott, and them is the yaps that started this, to get rid of that bridge. That was flooded before it ever hit the bridge, in the spring of the year when the ice was going out. It'd come across the west of town and come right down that street: but you can't tell them fellows that. I was here. I know. I drove horses in water so they had to swim in west Mott before that bridge was built.

SILVERMAN: What happened to the bridge that was there before this one?

BUEHLER: It always washed out. It was one of those common steel bridges, you know. When they got rid of that they moved it west of town on a country road, of course, and that didn't work out. Every spring that'd wash out so then they put some of them big culverts in and poured cement, but when the water was up they couldn't drive through that. That's still out west of town, but it didn't wash away anyway. The reason they had to have that was that the farmers, some of them, had land on both sides of the river and they couldn't get across if they didn't have some kind of a bridge, and they kept trying to fix them other bridges but they had trouble every spring when the water went up.

SILVERMAN: How many floods do you remember here in Mott?

BUEHLER: How many floods?

SILVERMAN: Uh huh.

BUEHLER: Two.

SILVERMAN: There was one in 1967, I know.

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: Was there one before that?

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: About when was that?

BUEHLER: It seems to me as though it was about 10 years before that. They were quite far apart.

SILVERMAN: Which one was worse?

BUEHLER: The last one. The first one just barely got into the Milwaukee depot not quite over the floor, and the second got as high as the ticket window.

SILVERMAN: The water came up to the ticket window?

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: Did you lose any property in any of the floods?

BUEHLER: No. I didn't live where it would flood. We lived on the east side. It delayed the trains. Track washed out.

SILVERMAN: Did they have any kind of celebration when the bridge opened?

BUEHLER: Oh, we had a big one.

SILVERMAN: What kind of things did they do?

BUEHLER: Oh, like a regular celebration. Carnivals came in and all that stuff.

SILVERMAN: Did they dedicate the bridge?

BUEHLER: Yeah...Mundstock named it the Rainbow Bridge because they got the arches, you know. But we never called it the Rainbow Bridge.

SILVERMAN: Who named it the Rainbow Bridge?

BUEHLER: That newspaperman. His name is Mundstock.

SILVERMAN: Oh. When did he do that?

BUEHLER: Now, when he got all that publicity about wanting to blow it up and so on.

SILVERMAN: What did you call it?

BUEHLER: We just called it the bridge across the Cannonball. Cement Bridge.

SILVERMAN: Do you know why they used cement for the bridge instead of steel?

BUEHLER: Well, they used steel but they poured cement over it.

SILVERMAN: Was that a common thing to do?

BUEHLER: Well, it's a safer thing, that didn't wash away, anyway. But it was the other kind that every spring the high water and ice jams would ruin the bridge and they would have to repair it. That was the reason that was for. And then after they made it with the cement, when an ice jam ever happened it wouldn't hurt it, you know. It was solid. Ice would hit it and didn't hurt it any.

SILVERMAN: This bridge is at a different angle than the one before it was, isn't it?

BUEHLER: Just a little bit. The other was more square. You go to the end of it, north of that, the old one crossed the river like you would come down here and you would cross the river like that. Now it kind of angles across it.

SILVERMAN: Does that make it easier?

BUEHLER: Well, it's easier for people who drive to come down and make that sharp turn.

SILVERMAN: When the bridge was built was everybody in town in favor of it?

BUEHLER: Well, yes, because the only thing was it cost the east residents had to sign bonds because nobody would buy the west side bonds, you know, unless the east side would sign them.

SILVERMAN: I guess I wasn't aware there was a division between east Mott and west Mott.

BUEHLER: There was a what?

SILVERMAN: That east Mott and west Mott were divided? Were they considered two different places?

BUEHLER: The only thing was that nobody would sell any bonds to build anything in west Mott. The residents couldn't get money to build in west Mott like they could in east Mott. That's what the difference was.

SILVERMAN: You mean if something was going to be built in west Mott, they had to get the bonds from east Mott, too?

BUEHLER: Well, that was the only way any contractor or anybody would take it, if west Mott didn't sign the bonds...because, you know, the west side property wasn't worth nothing, at least as far as loans was concerned.

SILVERMAN: Why wasn't it worth anything?

BUEHLER: Well, because it was a flood area.

SILVERMAN: Oh. Okay. Now I understand.

BUEHLER: Anybody who lived in the flood area, they couldn't borrow money unless somebody like east Mott or some resident would sign their--go good for it, you know, in case...West Mott should never have been. That's the trouble. And now they caused our side property owners to carry them through all the time and just because there were a few trees over there. See, when Mott was first built there wasn't a tree all along the river. Where we planted trees afterwards and took care of them, there were lots of trees--too many trees.

SILVERMAN: Did you live on the east side or west side?

BUEHLER: On the east side. Do you know where the Congregational Church is?

SILVERMAN: Yes.

BUEHLER: Right side of that. My nephew has got the place now.

SILVERMAN: Is that Wayne Bohn?

BUEHLER: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: I'm going to be talking to him, too.

BUEHLER: Oh, yeah.

SILVERMAN: So you lived on the east side, and east side never flooded.

BUEHLER: No!

SILVERMAN: Just the west.

BUEHLER: Just the west side.

SILVERMAN: Tell me, you were telling about planting trees by the river.

BUEHLER: I said there was trees along the river, a few box elders in the early days. That's the only place there was any. All the trees that's in Mott now were planted by individuals, you see.

SILVERMAN: Over the years, do you think that the feelings of the town about the bridge have changed?

BUEHLER: The only ones that made trouble about it is the west siders because they want to blow it out of there and build another bridge.

SILVERMAN: Have they always felt that way?

BUEHLER: No, people are different now than they used to be. The west side people, they knew that they was in the flood area; but they just took a chance. But now this younger generation like the mayor and the newspaperman, they're the ones that are making all the stink about it. They knew that they was in the flood area. They didn't have to go over there. The only reasons the west side was ever started was the Brown company owned the east side, the land company, and the west side there was an old fellow by the name of Barth; he owned the property over there and he made a town out of that. They used to have a store over there and bottling works and different businesses like that. Harness shop and so on, but that all died down after it kept a-floodin'.

SILVERMAN: When did that die down?

BUEHLER: Oh, after the second flood.

SILVERMAN: After '67?

BUEHLER: Yeah, people wouldn't listen. There were businesses over there. There was an elevator over there and oil company. You could buy a lot for less than half of what you paid for it in east Mott on account of they were in the flood area. Some people, they bought it anyway. They would build it up, and when they were in trouble, they on the east side would pay the damage. I never thought that was right. They knew that was a flood area but just because they could get it a lot cheaper over there and expect the other side, when they was in trouble, to pay your expense lot. That's the whole trouble today. That's what they are after, you know. I guess that's it. Before the bridge ever was built the water came across and was flooding the streets over on the west side. The horses had water up to their bellies; there were places where they had to swim; but these young people don't believe that. But I was young. I know.

SILVERMAN: What do you think could be done so there wouldn't be any more floods?

BUEHLER: The only way you can keep from flooding the town is to change the course of the river. Instead of having the river coming down through town they should cut across south of town there and fix a new channel. That would be the only sure way. You can't stop water if you don't turn it. You see, the river comes down from the southwest there and goes around like this and it's a fast flowing river and when that water comes it's bound to run over the banks. And they filled in the river and in dry years they plowed along the river banks to have a garden and they filled it in, of course, and then water from fields and country, that all filled in too. The river isn't half as deep as it was in the early days, and it isn't as wide because they filled it in. Anybody who dug a basement in town, they dumped the dirt on the river-

side banks, you know. There was a lot of that done. A lot of basements dug.

SILVERMAN: So the river just didn't fill in with silt. People were filling it in, too.

BUEHLER: Well, some silt, but that didn't cause the trouble. It's the ground that washed in from the fields...See, years ago we didn't have no plowed fields. It was all prairie land, and then they got to farming and plowed up everything and that made ground fill in the rivers and streams and lowlands. There used to be a slough come down through west Mott and now it's filled in so the culverts under the railroad Milwaukee bridge are all plugged full; they're under there so deep that the water goes over them. Of course, I don't know what they expect to do. The bridge isn't causing any trouble. I know that. West Mott was under water before it ever hit the bridge.

SILVERMAN: So when you look back to when the bridge was built and all the way from then until now, you have pretty good feelings about that bridge?

BUEHLER: I guess so! That was the best thing that ever happened, when they built that bridge, because the people from east Mott or west Mott, they could get from one side to the other any time they wanted to. No, I'd hate to see them try to blow that bridge out; but then I got nothing to say. They think I'm an old horse-and-buggy-day man, you know. That I don't know what I'm talking about; but I do! Because I was here and had the experience of high water here every time there was high water.

SILVERMAN: You worked on the drayline for 39 years?

BUEHLER: That's right.

SILVERMAN: You had to use the bridge a lot.

BUEHLER: I guess so! I used it every day. Transferred from the NP to the Milwaukee and back and forth. I used that bridge every day. Many times.

SILVERMAN: Who were you working for on the drayline?

BUEHLER: Fellow by the name of Moser.

SILVERMAN: What is his first name?

BUEHLER: Moser! Matt Moser. I worked for him for nine years.

SILVERMAN: Who were you working for the rest of the time?

BUEHLER: Lacy Roberts for a while and then afterwards I took over the business myself because business wasn't so good and they quit, and I stayed with it until I had to quit. I had the north contract and the express contract in my name for 39 years. I hauled the mail from the post office to the train, you know, and met the trains and hauled it back to the post office. Before the trucks started to run I had parcel post runs that I had a truck with a big flat box. I used to pile it up like a load of bundles, 40-50 sacks of mail.

SILVERMAN: Where in Nebraska were you born?

BUEHLER: Southeastern part. Thirty miles southeast of Lincoln. On the farm. Where we got our mail was Sterling, Nebraska. Sterling, Adams and Crab Orchard were all about the same distance from our farm.

SILVERMAN: Rueben didn't come here for a long time after you did, is that true?

BUEHLER: He come here right after I did with the folks. Why, did he tell you he come here later?

SILVERMAN: Well, maybe I misunderstood him. I thought that he came after the bridge was built.

BUEHLER: No, no, no. He was here when the bridge was built. His first work here was waiting tables at a big restaurant, the Horseshoe Restaurant. Then he run the Thompson lumber yard, let's see, the next 17 years, I guess. Then they transferred him to Valley City, it was the warehouse, Thompson yards

they called them. He was in Valley City about that long before he retired from the lumber yards. He worked for the Highway Department in Bismarck. He gave permits to truckers, you know, that wanted to haul something across the state where they used the roads. He issued them then.

END

This is an interview with Otto Maercklein, age 70, at his home in Mott on July 10, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Otto "Muggs" Maercklein, age 70, lived in Mott from the age of seven, in 1917, to 1938, and then from 1948 to the present. He was a model informant; very verbal, very concerned, and possessing what seemed to be a clear memory. I was later informed by several other people that Muggs and his brother, Spencer, were the two biggest storytellers in the county. I feel that the value in his interview may lie more in his vivid personal recollections than in the facts he gives. JS)

SILVERMAN: Give me some background on when you came to Mott...or were you born here?

MAERCKLEIN: No. I was born in Dickinson and we came to Mott when I was seven in 1917, and then I was away from Mott in 1938 and I returned in January, 1948, and set up my own real estate and insurance business here in 1948. I had been with the government and I got tired of the government. I was being shifted around so much, you know. My wife and I lived in ten different areas in seven years and she was tired of it, the kids were tired of it; frankly, I was tired of it. And I'd always wanted to come back, so I did. It turned out good.

SILVERMAN: Your brother came here when you did?

MAERCKLEIN: He came back in 1950, I believe. He came back right after the flood in 1950. That place you'll be going down to was in the flood in 1950. He rebuilt it.

SILVERMAN: Oh, his home there?

MAERCKLEIN: Yes, he has his own home down there on the river bottoms there and he went up the height of the flood. We moved the house back, what was left of it. He rebuilt the whole thing. He has a beautiful place down there.

SILVERMAN: Oh. Okay. There have been two floods. There was one in '57?

MAERCKLEIN: '50 and '70. I think it was '70, wasn't it? That's my recollection.

SILVERMAN: Okay. What were you doing at the time the bridge was being built?

MAERCKLEIN: I was a boy of about 12 or 14 and I think I spent every day down on the river on a plank 'cause that was all we did was swim, and I watched them build that bridge from scratch. 1923?

SILVERMAN: 1921.

MAERCKLEIN: 1921? Okay. Well, I lived down on the river when I was a boy. They had those bridge planks down there, and each one of us had a bridge plank and we'd lay there all afternoon. My folks never worried about me being in the river and the water was much cleaner in those days. So I watched the bridge from the time they started it until they finished it. I remember the old bridge very well. It was a steel framework with wood, you know. And it was just north of where the present bridge is. The old cylinders had round caissons that supported the bridge in the middle. They're still there under the water.

SILVERMAN: Oh, they are?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: Were there some problems with the old bridge?

MAERCKLEIN: No, not that I recall.

SILVERMAN: Why did they put in this one?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, that old bridge was really a horse-and-buggy bridge. That is all it was. It was narrow. It was small. I have no pictures of that one. It would be difficult to find that old bridge, but it had the sides that came up like this, that type of support. You know, like I say, it had a plank floor. Of course, it was built for horses and wagons and that was about the time when they built this bridge. This was supposed to be a memorial, I believe, wasn't it? I think World War I--I'm not sure. I was too young to remember in those days.

SILVERMAN: I looked at some old Mott papers and I didn't see anything about that.

MAERCKLEIN: I know the courthouse is a memorial; now the bridge may or may not have been. I never could remember the date the bridge was built. I was born in 1910 and if the bridge was built in 1921, I had to be age of 11. I say, I did watch it, the whole time. They had no problems building the bridge at all.

SILVERMAN: How did they build the bridge in those days?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, back in those days, Jane, there were two gates in the dam that are no longer functioning.

SILVERMAN: The dam south of town?

MAERCKLEIN: That's right. The dam that we call the Cannonball dam or the Mott dam. Those gates are no longer functional, but back in those days they could open up the gates and they would drain this flood pool, and when they got through all you had down here was a little crick that you or I could wade across, if you follow me, 'cause I remember that. There was a rapids just below where the present pier is now, and they could let all the water out, and the Cannonball was a shallow, very fast-running stream with sandy and rock bottoms. No mud whatsoever. And I believe it has the fastest fall of any river in the state. I think it is some 3-point some feet per mile, so it is very fast drainage. It was a terrific bass and walleye stream back when I was a boy, too. The water was clear. I remember that; it was clean. There was no sludge, no sewage, no nothing. It was a very pretty stream. So when they went to build that center pier that supports the bridge, they had no problems building. They built kind of a wall around and then poured the concrete sides. They could keep the water out.

SILVERMAN: How long did they have to have it drained while they were building?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, I don't recall. I know it was all that summer. I don't recall exactly how long it took, Jane.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember how many people they had working on it?

MAERCKLEIN: A lot of them.

SILVERMAN: Were there a lot of them from Mott or did they bring them in?

MAERCKLEIN: No, they brought them in. There was a crew, if I recall correctly, that came in from out of town. The contractor was somebody from out of town. I don't recall that we had too many people working. I remember one thing, typical of kids, to show you how the river is changed. We used to jump, after we got the nerve, and after the bridge was completed, we would jump off the top of the arch, diving. Now that arch is up there above the water a ways.

SILVERMAN: You were diving?

MAERCKLEIN: We would dive off into the river and at that time the water was deep enough. I can't say exactly how deep, but I am sure that that water was 12, 14 feet deep around that center pier. Okay, in 1937 or 1938, I think it was, a friend of mine was back here and he and I decided to do what we did 12, 15 years ago. So I climbed up on the arch first and I dove off on the north side without checking a thing, and Jane, I went head first into a pile of mud! Before I could back out and holler at him here he came and he did the same thing! That's how much silt had filled in, see. And one of the things that caused that silt filling in back in the dirty '30s was that in 1936 we had so many Russian thistles. That is all that grew in '36. That fall Russian thistles, believe it or not, I can remember spots where the river was bank to bank filled with Russian thistles, you know. They got waterlogged and then when the river flooded it held all that silt back. Then with our methods of farming now where we have the escalations getting the

water off the lands, you know, and with the erosion that we have and all that, that river is badly silted. It's not a nice clean bottom like it was 50 years ago.

SILVERMAN: Is there any way that you know of that they could get rid of that silt?

MAERCKLEIN: No.

SILVERMAN: Why don't the gates on the dam work anymore?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, we were trying to control the dam, the City Council. I was on the City Council, I don't remember the exact years, but from '64 to '66 or something like that, and every fall we would lower the water and then we would close it in the spring to raise the water. We had so much interference from people, individuals, who would open up the dam any time they felt like it and drain it. You know, this doesn't hold a lot of water, so we just cemented them shut. Then we use the side spillways where you have boards to lower the water in the fall, so when you get through you'd still have four, five feet of water in there instead of 10 or 12. With the gates we could lower it down to a stream this wide, Jane, you could jump it, the Cannonball River.

SILVERMAN: What about the side gates?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, they are built right into the dam itself and they have wooden planks that slide in slots, you know, one on top of the other like this and there was one on top of the other just like this. There is slots cut in the side of this opening on the dam and these slide down and they seal and very little water will go through, and then in the fall of the year they just jack those up with a crow bar, pull them out, the water runs out, and lowers that water height. See, the people in west Mott are very much conscious of flood, and they feel that if you'd have a bigger reservoir you'll have less flood, and, frankly, that isn't so. We had the Army Corps of Engineers tell

us back in the '50s, "Leave the gates alone. Don't. Get rid of the ice that you can." Because I suppose I shouldn't say this, but putting a new bridge in isn't going to cure the floods.

SILVERMAN: I have heard that before.

MAERCKLEIN: It won't. I have evidence that it won't. Because in 1950, Jane, this picture I wanted to show you shows the water. I'd walk down with hip boots and took the picture just east of the bridge, the water was about up to here about on me but I could walk down there with waders and the water is going over the railing on the bridge, and it's just as high south of the bridge as it is north of the bridge, and it's a mile wide above and it's a mile wide below, and here is this little 200 feet of bridge sitting in the middle like a pimple!

SILVERMAN: Where was it damming up?

MAERCKLEIN: It wasn't at the bridge here. The ice jam was a mile west of town at the railroad bridge out there. You see, the Cannonball is a very crooked stream and the bends are at right angles. You meet yourself coming back. In 1950 it jammed at that bend a mile west of town and when the flood came--I was here--at 9:30 on Sunday morning. It came straight from the west. There was very little ice down here at the bridge. The ice jam in 1950, there was no ice jam at the bridge. In 1970, we had ice jam that I think it was 19....(Calls to wife.) "Hon, was that flood in 1970 or was it in 1978?" I know in 1978, Jane, there was an ice jam formed over here just west of the courthouse. (Wife answers.) Yeah. That's the one: 1978, not 1970. There was an ice jam formed just west of the courthouse. The river does this, comes from the west and then decides to go straight south, and the water then started going into west Mott from the west again and then all of a sudden that broke and came down and hit the bridge and stayed. Then, of course, they got flooded; not bad, but they got flooded.

SILVERMAN: Was there a flood in '67? Somebody told me Josephine Matz left town for about ten years and she came back just in time to be flooded out in about '67.

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, we had a lot of close calls, Jane. The water would come up. One that I remember, and I was on the council at the time, but I don't think that was '67, I think it was in the '60s. They had an 8-inch rain west of here and we used bulldozers to keep the river out of west Mott. We could control it. That was strictly rain in June. No ice jam. See, what's going to happen: even in 1978 when the ice jam had pretty much stopped flooding here, there was an ice jam formed three miles east of town and the highway there was under water. Now can you see what raising the bridge will do? I am not against it; they want a bridge, fine! And we need it because it is a traffic hazard. But to say, as some people are saying, that the bridge causes all our floods, they're way off base. In fact, even the Army Engineers, at our last meeting we had at the City Hall, when he said that 80 percent of the damage or something like that was caused by the bridge, I says, "Fine, I won't argue with that. I don't believe you, I think the figures are different because I've been here all my life and to me they're different; but can you guarantee that we can't get an ice jam west of Mott that will not flood if we put in a higher bridge?" He says, "No, you can still have floods." And yet, I am afraid the people are going to relax. In 1950 we were warned there would be a flood. A fellow was here from the Corps of Engineers. He met with the City Council. I won't tell you what they told him because it ain't fit for anybody's ears. But I can tell you where they told him to go and what he could do. He could not get the people to move. They would not believe him. So you see, you can cry wolf. Now we cry wolf every time there's a shower. Somebody hollers there's going to be a flood.

SILVERMAN: What kind of flood control do you have now?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, they have a disaster committee, and everybody is on a committee of some kind, so that the people can get out, and we have trucks lined up. They'd go over and move people and move their belongings and store it somewhere else so they can get out. We did very well in 1978, I thought. We really got the people out. See, we used to have a flood hazard part of it. This is an old picture, Jane. Now if you look north of town you saw there is a dam there what they call a watershed dam. Okay, this is what used to happen. The old courthouse was where the swimming pool is now. This part is going up in an apartment house. But when there would be a flash flood north of town the water would come down and the culverts couldn't handle it and this is what happened and that is what darn near flooded me out in 1950. We were living here in 1950 and I had water up to where your car is, even closer than that. From the north, not from the Cannonball River! Then in the '60s a friend of mine was head of the SCS, he says, "Muggs, I think we can get you a dam north of town, will you work with me?" I says, "Boy, will I!" So he and I went on our own and we got the SCS interested in coming down here and we managed to establish a one-to-one ratio on the damage which would happen. Of course, this is all houses now where it wasn't then and we got a dam. I'm not worried about floods from the north anymore.

SILVERMAN: Now you just have to worry about floods from the west.

MAERCKLEIN: From the west, yeah. And that won't hit me here. I am very close to the 100-year area, and the 500-year area, I don't think it's going to happen often enough to worry me. Probably happen tomorrow now because I made that statement. (LAUGHS) But anyhow this is what happened. See all these pictures here, Jane, are....here's a good picture right here of the bridge right here that was taken, and you can barely see how it's up to the railings on the

bridge if you look very closely. This is looking south on main street, and you want to remember the river got higher than this. The river came up to where this guy was standing taking the picture, that's looking south....this picture is taken from the east....this picture is taken now where the post office is, Jane. You can get an idea, that's how high the water is.

SILVERMAN: Is this as high as it got?

MAERCKLEIN: Fairly close to it, yeah. I say about the only estimate I can tell you is that the water got up where this Michelin Tire Center is here. The water was up to that intersection. That's as far as I could walk without having hip boots on. There was water in the basement of the Pheasant Lounge. They had water. Moser's garage was in the water. Every building down there in the south end was flooded, so the south half of town was flooded. Oh, I will admit one thing if they raise that bridge two-and-a-half or three feet like they're saying, they're going to get away from ice jams, I think. I really do. I think that will help the problem, and we won't have these small floods that can come just because of an ice jam at the bridge. That will be eliminated.

SILVERMAN: I think they're going to take out the center pier. They won't have any pier in the middle.

MAERCKLEIN: No, there'll be no pier in the middle. See, and that's where it always jams up and then when that holds then it would stick on both sides and then the water would start to raise up and then the next thing you know it would hit the bottom of the bridge and there you were, bang! Boy, did they use good concrete on that bridge.

SILVERMAN: It's still standing.

MAERCKLEIN: They tried to blow it up with dynamite.

SILVERMAN: They have?

MAERCKLEIN: Yes, it wasn't worth it.

SILVERMAN: Now when did they try that?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, gosh sakes, what year was that? They tried to use dynamite. They shook it. Although a charge of dynamite went under the bridge with a flow of ice, got away from them. Bulged the floor a little bit on one side about this much. I say they really used good concrete in those days. I don't know what year that was but I could show you where the floor is bulged a little bit, but it's so minor you wouldn't hardly know it. But I would say if it wasn't for the traffic hazard I would fight this bridge.

SILVERMAN: What kind of a traffic hazard is it?

MAERCKLEIN: It's so narrow. It's so narrow. That was built back in the days when cars were all six feet wide. Model T's and that stuff, you know. It was a fine bridge. Now for most of us, I know, when I am getting onto the bridge if a truck is coming especially, we stay off; it isn't wide enough. So it's a good thing for that. And it does have some effect on flood, I won't argue that point either. The people over there, as long as they're paying the major share of it, at least I hope they are, so they learn what it costs to have some conveniences, I'm glad the state is helping us. But I hate to lose that bridge. Oh, my. That is a picturesque thing.

SILVERMAN: It's beautiful.

MAERCKLEIN: But I guess beauty doesn't always count, does it?

SILVERMAN: Have there been any accidents with cars there?

MAERCKLEIN: Yes. Especially at the entryway. Unfortunately, there have been a couple of deaths but they were not due to the fault of the bridge being too narrow. They were people coming too damn fast and lost control and hit the abutments, but on the bridge there has been a lot of fender damage with cars sideswiping each other. There has been that.

SILVERMAN: What kind of festivities did they have when the bridge was opened?

MAERCKLEIN: You know, I wish I could remember, Jane. I can't tell you. That's one thing that's a complete blank. I'm sure they had a ribbon cutting ceremony. I'm sure they had all that and I am sure I was probably laying down around the planks again watching the whole thing, because that is where we lived that summer, and they would let us use a bridge plank and we would lay there by the hour. I suppose by the time the summer was over you couldn't tell the difference between me and a black person, I probably was sunburned so darn dark, but we sure enjoyed it.

SILVERMAN: When that bridge was built to replace the one before it, was everybody in favor of it?

MAERCKLEIN: I don't recall any problems. There could have been a fight, I suppose. My dad was not the kind who would bring his troubles home and frankly at 11 years of age you don't worry about your parents' troubles, and they never objected to me going to the river. I had no duties outside of watering and feeding the chickens every morning. That was my total sum of work that I had to do. Maybe a little weeding in the garden now and then, so the minute I had breakfast I was off for the river, come home at noon and eat, go back to the river until time to come home. I dragged myself home to eat because I would be so starved I couldn't hardly walk. We just lived down at the river.

SILVERMAN: What a life!

MAERCKLEIN: It was. To me that is wonderful memories. There were a group of us, about five of us, a bunch. We were as thick as thieves. We just lived down the river, just lived there. Well, we just enjoyed it. I say the river was very clean in those days.

SILVERMAN: About how deep was it then?

MAERCKLEIN: Now at the dam it was about 10 to 12 feet deep and that went back that depth all the way back like I told you through the bridge. And, see, this

dam backs up water about a mile-and-a-half west, probably about two-and-a-half miles of river, and that river, out by the railroad bridge a mile west of the river was about 10 feet deep, so the river in this pool, this basin, backed up by the dam was, I would say, until you got two miles west, could run between eight and 10 feet and holes even deeper, because it stops out here one-and-a-half miles west at a crossing. That is the end of the water mark. That is why I say the raising and lowering of the water at the dam never does much good, because the pool isn't big enough. It can hold some water but not enough to stop a major runoff. It would fill up too quickly.

SILVERMAN: Over the years from 1921 when the bridge was built until now, do you think the feelings of people in town have changed?

MAERCKLEIN: In what way do you mean?

SILVERMAN: Have there been times when they wanted to get rid of it?

MAERCKLEIN: For other reasons?

SILVERMAN: Well, for any reasons. You said everybody was pretty happy at the beginning.

MAERCKLEIN: They were. They have been happy for years. I've got to tell you this, otherwise I can't explain it. In 1950 nobody argued about taking out the bridge. The people from west Mott did come when I got on the council in about '54 or somewhere in there, and periodically every spring they would come over and have a study by the Army Corps of Engineers and they would say something should be done about the flood control in Mott, and then they would give us facts and figures and the costs, and we'd say, "And where will the money come from?" and nothing was done. Nothing was done, nothing was done, nothing was done. Frankly, Jane, we couldn't afford it, and back in those days if you'd gone to the State Highway Department they would twiddle their fingers at you, right?

SILVERMAN: (LAUGHS) I wasn't there!

MAERCKLEIN: I know, but I am saying we had no place to go to get these funds. We never even talked about putting in a new bridge. This has developed into a hassle since, I think it is, 1978. In other words up until 1978, west Mott and east Mott got along like bugs in a rug. That isn't so anymore. That got to be a point of contention. West Mott said to east Mott, "You don't care what happens to us because you are not being flooded. You're disregarding our problem." We said, "We can't do anything about it." So when you talk about the bridge, immediately you were in a fight. You go down to the City Hall, I don't know how many meetings they had, you opened up your mouth there and say, "We can't afford a new bridge," and those people in west Mott just.... you had fighting matches! Actually, people got mad. They'd say you didn't care about them. Now we've got what, about 80 families over there, something like that, and we got 350 or 400 families here, and now we have this bone in between. West Mott wants a bridge put in, wants the dam taken out, wants a dike built. Where are we going to get nine million dollars?-and we have to pay for it--because that is what they estimated all these things to be, so the people in east Mott have not been fighting for the bridge to be replaced. We're not going to fight for the bridge to be replaced, but they won't fight against it. They finally said, "Okay, if you can get your bridge for what you say, go ahead. It's all right with us."

SILVERMAN: Will the money come from every family equally? Or will west Mott have to pay more?

MAERCKLEIN: No. They will have to pay more, how much more I don't know, Jane. But they are getting the major benefits, so they will pay the major part of it. There will be part of a general tax on the whole town which east Mott has said, "Okay, we'll go along with it." We are sick of fighting and we all agree that, okay, they've got a point, not enough to fight about

like we have been, but they do have a point. If we lived over there we might feel the same way, and we also do know, like I say, it's a traffic hazard. We know it'll help the floods. The thing that worries me is the next time we have a flood after we build the new bridge, then what's going to happen? Maybe it will never happen. I hope not.

SILVERMAN: What is the boundary line between east Mott and west Mott?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, it used to be the river. Now it starts on the main street. They increased the size of that ward because every ward has two councilmen. We have three wards. Here was a disproportionate share of councilmen, one-third of the councilmen, representing say 10 percent of the population, so this spring they passed an ordinance and they started the ward down the end of Main Street and it goes up along Main Street and then over. It takes in all that area around the courthouse and on the hill.

SILVERMAN: They have one side of Main Street, and....

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, they have that side of Main Street and on west Mott that's the first ward, then down here the dividing line is that street there, a block south. That is the second ward and from this light over is the third ward, and I'd say perhaps the third ward is the largest. The trouble with legislature: each ward is entitled to two councilmen; so I mean they tried to correct that, and they did to some extent. It was kind of a case of the tail wagging the dog; the two councilmen were representing a small number of people were making a bigger proportion of the city government than the other four. So now it's more equal.

SILVERMAN: Why do you think that the bridge started to be a bone of contention in '78 when the flood in '50 and the flood after that didn't do it?

MAERCKLEIN: I don't know. Some people over there got the idea that they'd gang together, because in the flood of '78 everybody moved out. It affected

everybody. A lot of houses had damage. I think in my office alone the insurance losses were....gosh, what was it....a couple hundred thousand? You want to remember most of those homes in west Mott aren't big plush homes. A lot of them are trailer homes and a lot of them are very old homes because originally, back in 1910, that was the business center of Mott.

SILVERMAN: Oh, I didn't know that.

MAERCKLEIN: Even when I came here in 1917 there still were a lot of businesses on that side. There were lumberyards, banks, barber shops, a pop factory, blacksmith shop. Oh, gosh, that was it. They all moved over here to east Mott later. But there were a few pushed it. And you know you have heard that the loudest cry is the one that's heard, and the mayor was from west Mott, so he was in sympathy with them, and I don't blame him. They called a lot of council meetings. They couldn't get anything settled. They blamed the council. The council tried to get the people to make a decision and all they got was fights. Nobody would talk coolly and sensibly anymore. Somebody would get mad. And many, well, I remember one meeting down here that was just last year....I made a statement of some kind that....I don't know what it was....it was not an inflammatory statement....something about having a meeting with the Corps.... and a woman from west Mott just next to me says, "You people in east Mott don't like us people from west Mott." Jane, I just about flipped. I kept my mouth shut the rest of the night. Then that started going around that we looked on them as people look on shanty town people, which you've heard down along the Mississippi. And we don't! We took 'em in in '78! The people in east Mott did everything they could for the people. You try to get a vote of thanks. In fact, if we had had another flood in 1979, a lot of people in east Mott said they could go shove it. I heard that statement, too. This all came from this dissension. But until this last time there would be talk about

replacing the bridge, talk about a dike, talk about this and talk about that, and that's all it was, because everybody had the impression...too much at that time....that the Great White Father and the Army Corps of Engineers would come in and take care of this whole problem if we just dragged our feet. But there was no way you could justify the cost on a one-to-one basis. You know, after 1950, Jane, west Mott became a desert practically. Practically every lot in west Mott was on the tax rolls. People moved out. There were no people living in west Mott, or very few. Then over the years from 1950 on we didn't have any floods, so the first thing that happened....people could pick up these lots with city water and sewer on them for back taxes. For \$300. You could pick up a 50 by 140 lot with city water and sewer on it for \$300. So you know what they did? Tyler Trailer Homes bought them and moved trailer houses in and then people with houses came in. It is a beautiful place to live: anything grows there, just stick it into the ground....all river sand. The people started fixing up their homes, and they did do a lot of work. They have made it a beautiful area. You go over there right now, you wouldn't know we had a flood in '78. They've cleaned it all up. They've done a wonderful job. On something like that I'm proud of them. They really have. I'm not mad at the people in west Mott, but I know if I open up my mouth at a meeting, I'd get shot. Because like I say....I have made no bones about saying, "I won't fight you, but I won't fight for you. I will never fight with you on replacing the bridge." And we'd get into why. I would always watch myself so I did not get into a bad argument because I said, "It will not stop the flooding, that's why. I know it won't. You can think what you want to, and that's my opinion, and that's it, and now I quit talking about it." That way I'd get out of an argument.

SILVERMAN: Is there any way that the flooding could be stopped?

MAERCKLEIN: No. Not unless you get the Guy Upstairs to shut the water off, and get the farms to farm differently, put the whole doggone area back into grass. No more croplands. Jane, to give you an example of what grassland does: We put this dam in up here and the area drained at that time was only about a four mile drainage. It was all grass. We had a two inch rain in this little area. I think it was about a year or two after the dam had been closed. Boy, I drove up there with my car. I was going to see just how bad that washed in. That grass acted as a dam. That doggone dam didn't go up enough to shake a stick at; and no dirty water. The grassland is your finest land you have. But can you see the farmers taking \$300-\$400 land and putting it back into grass? I can't. But that would be it. If you had a belt on each side....you'd have to have a belt of grass on each side of every crick that fed into the Cannonball or that fed into a crick that led into the Cannonball River. I remember one thing, Jane, when I was a boy....maybe I shouldn't say it....it kind of antedates me, doesn't it? (LAUGHS) But anyhow, we would get these hard spring rains or cloud bursts in the summer. You know how long the water would remain muddy down here? Before we could go swimming again? One day. One day. That would be the debris that had been on top that floated in. That would go over the dam, and in one day the water would be clear again. I remember that. But there was no land going in, no dust storms, no erosion. I say again, going back to those years, back in the early '20s, there was no big crop boom, you know. Wheat was a \$1 a bushel like it's been for years--except now. I could walk along the Cannonball River for 10 miles and never cross a fence and never step on plowed ground. Just walk and you'd be on prairie grass all the time, so any rain that fell or any snow that accumulated.... we had snow in those days too, you know....the water was clean....the grass acted just like a sieve....like gauze which sifted out. So that shows you

what man has done and if you ask me if I'm an environmentalist, I'll tell you, you're darn right I am. I get so mad at some of this stuff, but there isn't much you can do. 'Cause I can see what we're doing to ourselves. What we are doing. Yes. And that Cannonball River, I say, I used to could watch fish swim it it, you could see them.

SILVERMAN: It was that clear?

MAERCKLEIN: Ah, it was that clear.

SILVERMAN: If money weren't any problem, what would you like to see done with that bridge now, when they take it out?

MAERCKLEIN: When they take it out? Why, I would love to see it saved and put somewhere. I don't know where. There must be a place for it somewhere. I don't know...if money was no problem...I don't know. You could set the darn thing up here in the park.

SILVERMAN: It's not that big.

MAERCKLEIN: No, it would fit up here in the park like a darn. We wouldn't need that high center pier. We would need part of it, you know. I'd go for that. We got a big park up there. That would really be a keepsake if money was no problem.

SILVERMAN: You'd have to take it piece by piece, wouldn't you?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, you would. But that could be done. Gosh, when you see what they do with engineering now...how about you guys in the State Engineering saying, "Well, if money is no problem...." They could do it, because you see it wouldn't have to support any traffic. What we would have to do up there is cut it in such a way that when we put it back together those pieces would kind of be forcing against themselves. I would love to see that thing saved. I would just love that. Man! And if they blow it up they are going to have a hell of a lot of work, too. Because boy, that's good concrete. They can't tell me it isn't. If that could cut into sections, and I'm on the Park Board....

boy, I can tell you right now you'd get a place to put it because I can be pretty ornery. I would love to see it. I would really love to see it, Jane.

END

This is an interview with Spencer Maercklein, age 74, at his home in Mott, on July 10, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Spencer Maercklein, age 74, has lived in Mott most of his life except for 12 years spent in Seattle, as nearly as I could tell. He was vivacious and very helpful in the interview. In one instance, he mentions "H-T" in connection with Teddy Roosevelt. He says that H-T is the Cross Ranch. The librarian at the State Historical Society says that H-T is the brand of the Huidt-Tarbell ranch, located about 10 miles west of Amidon, c. 1882. No one I have talked to yet seems to know the connection between H-T and Teddy Roosevelt, and Mr. Maercklein claims it was the Cross Ranch but cannot say whether Roosevelt stayed there or what the connection was. Other than this, his narrative was very helpful, and he seemed eager to talk about the bridge. He is the brother of Otto "Muggs" Maercklein. JS)

SILVERMAN: Did you come to Mott with your brother? You came later, didn't you?

MAERCKLEIN: No. I came at the same time. He was about seven years old when he got here.

SILVERMAN: Where did your parents live?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, we got a picture of that. Muggs has got it but it's my picture. It's above his desk in his office. Maybe you might have seen that.

SILVERMAN: No. I was in the living room.

MAERCKLEIN: I mean in his real estate office. I used to have the negative and I think it's up in the office somewhere. We lived up there where the Methodist Church is, where Charles Crane lives, that's where we lived, that's the second house. We lived across the alley east first for one year from there. That was our principal residence through the years and my mother and dad lived there until they died.

SILVERMAN: The bridge was built in 1921, so you were about 15?

MAERCKLEIN: I know I worked on the bridge that summer. I was going to high school.

SILVERMAN: You did work on the bridge?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, that summer. I was a freshman in high school.

SILVERMAN: What did you do on the bridge?

MAERCKLEIN: I was just a helper. I worked for Ray Kingsley. Carpenter work and stuff like that. Helped pour the concrete. I only worked there for about a month.

SILVERMAN: Was he a subcontractor?

MAERCKLEIN: He must have been. I don't think he had the general contract, although he was general contracting around the country. I don't remember who the general contractor was. I just don't remember. It might flash through my mind sometime, some place.

SILVERMAN: Joe Berry? Does that sound familiar? J. D. Berry?

MAERCKLEIN: I used to know a Joe Berry. I don't know if that is the same one or not.

SILVERMAN: Okay. So you did carpenter work and just kind of helped out.

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. Just during the summer because I was still going to school.

SILVERMAN: How did they build a bridge in those days?

MAERCKLEIN: Just the way they would now. They made forms and poured the concrete.

SILVERMAN: Did they have to drain the area?

MAERCKLEIN: Yes, they drained the area. See, the gates in the dam worked pretty good then and they drained it out, although there was still about 12 feet of water after they drained it down. The river was a little deeper there than it is now. About ten feet deeper as a general rule. I know we used to have as much as 27 feet of depth through this area here; and around the corner where we made ice; around the corner over there; and over here, where the old ice house used to be; and the river was 27 feet deep at that time. It was quite deep--and clean. When the bridge was built we still had delivery stations across where the old bridge was, just this way from that bridge. The

old Barths still run that and there was an old bottling works there, Mike Malinsky run that. Muggs would remember him, too. We used to play around there. We always used to chase the girls in the hay loft in the barn, (LAUGHS) and the old American House, rooming house, was there across the Hotel, you know. Practically the only trees in town. There were a few big trees in this area and some big cottonwoods down there right across the bridge. Otherwise, there were no trees.

SILVERMAN: Did they have to be planted?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. The trees had to be planted.

SILVERMAN: Who did that?

MAERCKLEIN: The people did.

SILVERMAN: Was there a committee to plant trees? (LAUGHS)

MAERCKLEIN: No. No. No. They just did. When they started building houses, more or less. Of course, the main part of town was west Mott, see. From where Muggs lives now all the way up the hill there was nothing. There was a Catholic church up there, a little bitty Catholic church and our house where Shirley Crane lives and the old courthouse was there at the end of the street where the swimming pool is. Oh, yeah, we had a barn right there across from where the drive-in is, the Pool Drive-in. There was a rooming house. Gail Rounds run the rooming house. We had a big barn behind that and there's where we kept our horses. We had horses instead of cars in those days. I always had three or four horses to ride. Our pasture was up north of the railroad tracks. We never walked any more than the kids do now. If we had to go two blocks, we rode a horse, you know. (LAUGHS) Of course, there were cars. Everybody had cars. My dad got his first car in 1910 when we moved to Dickinson. We had a corral in the back of....I remember more of those days....in early Dickinson....we had a big corral in back of our house and the H-T....Teddy Roosevelt used our corral for when the cowpunchers came

in for the weekend, you know, to Dickinson, and the cowpunchers would tie me up. In fact, my dad knocked one cowpuncher out one time because they tied me on a horse that I couldn't ride. He bucked so hard he bucked me off. I was pretty small, only six or seven years old, when that happened, but they insisted that I ride that horse. Of course, they were half oiled, you know.

SILVERMAN: Was Teddy Roosevelt there?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, yeah. He'd come in once in a while. That was in 1910. I wasn't too big. I was about....I saw him just before....I saw him once.... they had the celebration on the south side, and they had the first airplane there, and they got off the ground along the railroad tracks there. There was nothing in there except a big pasture. He was there at the celebration. He wasn't president anymore. He had been defeated. But those were the good old days. Like so many of the old timers like old Bill Challoner, the foreman of the H-T, and Frank Peters, he was the last foreman....I mean I knew those men real well. He and I used to go up to Watford City there. Old Bill Challoner, in his latter years, to make a living he ran a road grader on the road between Watford City and the bridge, and he used to drive the wildest horses. We would go out and get horses. They'd never been broke and we'd hitch them up to that road grader and he would grade the road with horses. He was a terror with horses. He could really handle them.

SILVERMAN: Oh, gee.

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, that type of man you don't find anymore. He would literally brow beat those horses, you know, into doing what he wanted them to. I hated to see all those old guys go. We should have written down some of those old stories that they used to tell about the early days. Muggs should have known some good stories. Old Frank Weingartner was a cowpuncher, his father-in-law.

SILVERMAN: He says everybody tells him he ought to write it down, but it's an awful lot of work to do that.

MAERCKLEIN: I never have, although I did spend three-and-a-half months in 1931 in the Badlands with a pack on my back. You know, just looking it over. Walking. We rode horses for the first three days going straight north. We had some friends living there. Well, old Bill Challoner lived there and we got the horses from him. We had quite a time up there that first week getting those horses, but we got them, and then we tried riding horseback but we couldn't make any time on horseback. There were too many washouts, and a horse was just a nuisance so we just finally went on. There are still places in the Badlands that the Historical Society don't know. They always say there are no crane rookeries in North Dakota. I could show you....I bet it's still there....about a mile long on the Little Missouri or at least one-half mile long of big cottonwoods and the nests right up in the top and there are hundreds of crane. There must be some coming in.

SILVERMAN: Sandhill crane?

MAERCKLEIN: Sandhill crane, you bet. I know one place in the Badlands where there is 90 feet of coal exposed. Ninety-foot vein. We measured it. Nobody has ever told me that they found it up there in the Badlands. I was reading a book and they said there are no crane rookeries in North Dakota. Well, there sure the devil used to be, and I'm sure there still must be remnants left, because that was a tremendous growth of trees. I'm sorry. For someone who doesn't talk, you start to drop a nickle in me and....

SILVERMAN: No, you're doing exactly what I wanted you to do. You fell into my clutches! (LAUGHS) Were the crew members who worked on the bridge mostly local or did they bring them in from out-of-state?

MAERCKLEIN: They were brought in. Most of them were brought in.

SILVERMAN: From Minnesota?

MAERCKLEIN: I don't know where they came from. I didn't know them.

SILVERMAN: Did you know them? Did you get to be friends with any of them?

MAERCKLEIN: Not really. No.

SILVERMAN: I suppose you were a lot younger than they were.

MAERCKLEIN: Yes, I was just a kid. Well, I worked for a while and then towards the end I used to make more diving for tools. We got 10¢ for a hammer or a saw or something that they dropped. You know, there was 12 to 14 feet of water down there. We were expert swimmers, and we'd go down and we'd find those tools and we wouldn't give them to them unless we got a nickel or a dime. I made more money during the day that way than I did working. (LAUGHS) That I remember clearly. Oh, I remember now why I stopped working on it. That was when I slid down on a 2-by-4, you know, coming down off the bridgework by the arches, and I wanted to get down quick and I just grabbed a 2-by-4 and slid on it, and the sliver went through these four fingers, I remember that, just kind of tight. And I went up to dad's office and he cut the sliver in three places, you know, cut the ends, and then he had to dig to cut the....it just went kind of right through....of course, not through the bone but through the hard part, you know. It didn't hurt; my hand was kind of numb. But it kind of hurt a little bit while he was digging around. But that's why I quit working and went to swimming. That I remember. I couldn't use my left hand for a couple of weeks.

SILVERMAN: You made more money with a bum hand than....

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, I made more money with a bum hand. (LAUGHS) It's funny for me to remember that, but that's what happened. A piece of that sliver later came out way down in here. My hand hurt me for a couple of years, you know, ached like a toothache.

SILVERMAN: It went all the way down and came out here? (Indicates heel of hand.)

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, it worked its way down and festered and finally came out. We took about a half-inch-long piece of sliver out. Isn't that funny?

SILVERMAN: What do you remember about when the bridge was opened in 1921? Did they have a dedication or any festivities?

MAERCKLEIN: I honestly don't remember a thing about the festivities. I am sure they had, but I don't remember what it was.

SILVERMAN: I think you and your brother must have both been on the river that day!

MAERCKLEIN: We surely must have been. I don't know. I really don't remember. I don't think I was a part of it. They tell me I was part of some doings, but I don't remember those, although they do show me a picture. I have no recollection. It's just gone. Some of that stuff I forgot. I had a couple years in '37-'38 when I was pretty sick. I had a pretty high temperature and I just forgot....it just erased part of my memory.

SILVERMAN: How did people feel about the bridge when it was first erected?

MAERCKLEIN: Loved it. They have been saying the bridge is the cause of our floods, you know, so don't start me on that.

SILVERMAN: I want to start you on that!

MAERCKLEIN: In 1950, when we had that bad flood and high water and then we had the town meeting, and at that time....I am more or less an engineer by trade, you know; of course, I built bridges and houses, too, to start with. But I had an engineer, I think it was Holt, come to the meeting because I wanted....they were agitating then to blow the dam out and also the bridge, and I said when you get that much water, neither one cut any figure toward flooding or this or that, you know, had no bearing on it, but you couldn't convince the people living in west Mott. I lived down here in the 1950's when I moved down here and built down here right after that flood because I

like it down here. Well, anyway, Holt and the people stood up and I can remember Otto Hense says, "You don't know what you are talking about." I said what I wanted to do is to either leave the dam open and leave the water down or leave it closed. I didn't want them....they were going to drain the river every fall and let it fill up again next spring, you know, because they said it would create less ice. I didn't get it across to them and that's why our river is filled in with silt because they raise and lower it and change the water level, and the wind erosion, by changing the water level, undermines the banks and caves in and you fill the river with silt when you proceed that way. But they still do it. I tried for years....every year I tell the city, "Don't open the dam this year," but they do it anyway. Because what happens--and living on the river here you can see it--before, they used to leave the water in and there was more water so the ice would freeze.... you'd get up to three feet of ice as a rule, and then we'd get the spring runoff and the water would get in and the ice would raise up and three feet of ice would go down and hit the bridge. Do you understand? Now, what they do.... what happens every year....about 20 feet out from each bank the ice freezes to the bottom....the water isn't deep enough. Do you understand?

SILVERMAN: Okay.

MAERCKLEIN: The ice freezes to the bottom and then raises in the middle but you still got that shore ice that froze to the bottom. Then you get the spring runoff with the spring waters coming down and then it's carrying ice with it when it's coming down and you get a double layer of ice on the sides for six feet of ice. It happens every year and then when that hits the bridge it has a tendency to block, and I've never been able to get it across to them that that is what happens every year. After the ice goes down there every year, I've got six feet of ice sitting on my banks down there and in my yard once in a while....it even comes way up here.

SILVERMAN: If they left the dam alone....

MAERCKLEIN: If they would leave it full, we'd have less ice.

SILVERMAN: Even if they started this year to do that? Would that help?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. Yeah. We'd have less ice jams. The bridge was in from '21 on to 1950 when we had the bad flood, the worst flood. Okay. We had ice jams in there about one out of every five years; we'd get an ice jam, you know, we would get too much water and too much ice. But since they started raising and lowering and creating that six feet of ice, we have had an ice jam in there every year.

SILVERMAN: For about how many years?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, ever since 1950 until now. We didn't have an ice jam this year because we didn't have any runoff this year, see, no snow; but every other year when you had a little snow and runoff--and we had a lot of years when we had a lot more snow and runoff before 1950 when we had no damage or water problems whatsoever--but you can't tell the people that.

SILVERMAN: Does that center pier in the bridge make things worse or not?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, yes. It has. Well, no, that pier wouldn't do it. It's.... actually this last time in 1950, no, not in '50 but a couple of years ago when it jammed down there so bad, the jam really stuck on the old piling from the old original bridge. The piling is still there. I mean way down deep.

SILVERMAN: Was that in '78?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. Because I happened to see it. First it jammed right here at the corner, see. Then the ice jam moved down and it stopped right about 150 feet this way from the bridge that's in there now. That is where it really jammed then and it kind of filled in from there down to the bridge. Oh, we had a lot of water behind it. That didn't cause the water in west Mott. When you get that much it's got to spread out. So, anyway, well, if they don't

want the bridge in there, make a dip out of it. I put in two dips on the Cannonball here myself.

SILVERMAN: What do you mean, a dip?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, a dip crossing, just a concrete crossing with no railings or anything on it and sloped on both sides so the ice and water can just go right over it and certain times of the year when you have high water, it'll have culverts, you know. There's certain times of the year when your water's high and you won't be able to use that crossing, you understand? It won't be up above the water--but only when you got high water. Other than that you always got a crossing and it wouldn't cost a couple million dollars to build. I can build one down there for, well, it would cost \$10,000 to \$15,000 now. You could get by with something like that.

SILVERMAN: How would you get over it if the water was high? How would you get across?

MAERCKLEIN: We got that bridge down by the black bridge to get over to west Mott. Let them drive a half mile for a couple of days. It makes a lot more sense to me than spending all that money, but people have to have what they have to have, I guess.

SILVERMAN: As an engineer, what do you think of the engineering in the bridge?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, at the time it was pretty good.

SILVERMAN: Was that a new idea back then?

MAERCKLEIN: Not really. No. No.

SILVERMAN: The arches?

MAERCKLEIN: No. There were several bridges in the US that were built identical with that. I don't remember where, but I am sure there were. The sand and gravel....I remember the sand came from the Chalky Buttes, that I remember.

That layer of sand that is in there is from the old White River, original prehistoric material from the White River bed, just a layer of it. That's good sand.

SILVERMAN: What bridges have you built?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, I built the one across the Rogue River cut of Portland. I built half a dozen bridges in the Seattle area. Yeah, there was three of us.

SILVERMAN: You had your own contracting company?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. Yeah. Dewey Brothers out of Seattle. Dewey Construction. That's defunct now. We folded up in 1950. Bridge building: after the war the contracts were going for about six percent under cost, and we couldn't see putting our name on a bridge and putting some money into it on a contract, so we just quit and put our equipment under wraps, and in fact, the government leased most of our equipment with option to buy and took it to Alaska. They had that clause in there that if they didn't want to bring it back they would buy it which they eventually did at a song; (LAUGHS) I think they stole it. Some of it they said they didn't want and the only way we could get it was to go up and get it. I was down here then and I started building swimming pools. The one in Mott is the first big swimming pool that was built in the state.

SILVERMAN: Did you build it?

MAERCKLEIN: I built it.

SILVERMAN: When did you come back to Mott?

MAERCKLEIN: 1950. I spent 12 years in Seattle. The first year I was in Seattle I was recuperating from being sick and had been in bed for over a year. They said I had four years to live. That was in 1938. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: I guess you showed them!

MAERCKLEIN: Well, you never know.

SILVERMAN: If you believe everything those doctors tell you....

MAERCKLEIN: My dad was a pretty good M.D. and he told me, "Spennie, you're the only one who knows what you can do. You just go out and build yourself back up. If they tell you not to do any work, never to go up any steps.... you know what you can do." The first three months I went to Coeur D'Alene in the woods and I wound up topping trees. Now that's quite a job. That was a good job. I did the topping because it paid more. We got \$3.50 a day. Good wages. Going up there a-sawing the top of the trees off and then dropping 25 feet, and when it bent over it just bent....you had your belt and when it straightened up it gave you quite a whipping. I enjoyed that.

SILVERMAN: \$3.50 a day?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. Good wages. (LAUGHS) Most of them working down below were working for \$2.50. An extra dollar was an extra dollar. Yeah, we put in long days, too. Twelve-hour days was nothing. That was good money.

SILVERMAN: Where did this house used to be? You moved it up here after the flood, right?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, it was about 25 feet further west.

SILVERMAN: And down lower?

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, it was about three feet lower. It was a little bent right here. I put a wall in there and filled this all in about three feet, see? I moved the house 25 feet this way. I've only got a 16-foot basement, half basement, on account of flooding, so....this is an old house but it suffices.

SILVERMAN: How much of it was destroyed in the flood?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, it was a mess. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: What was left?

MAERCKLEIN: We had to take out the walls, inside the walls and everything, and put in a new floor.

SILVERMAN: But the frame was still up?

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, yeah. The doorway was right here. You see these steps going out here, and there was a bedroom right there, and the kitchen was west. Where our bathroom is now, that was a pantry. I took off this wall, this bearing wall. The ceiling joists are 2 by 12's. Pretty heavy, but that's all they had, I guess, and I had quite a chore of bridging. When I took this wall out, I had post up there on the outside and over here I had about four inches coming out, a beam going across to support those 2 by 12's, and my wife and Leola, Muggs' wife, come down. My wife said, "I don't like that job," and she says, "There's a jog in the ceiling." This ceiling here was four inches lower than this part here. She says, "Can't you straighten it?" I said, "Yeah, but it's a lot of work." She says, "Can you do it?" I said, "Yeah, but you oughta see what will be up in the attic, because you will have to build a regular.... just like a bridge to support." Well, that's what's up in this attic. It's a bridge work and I took the beams off, the supports off and everything is straight down here and we dropped the ceiling four inches and straightened them up, but I mean that's the way you build. Now after this last flood, I don't know. I need a whole new roof on this house....I hate to go through the expense of it, we don't need it in our lifetime, so....

SILVERMAN: That's a job, too.

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, that would be a \$10,000 deal at today's expenses, what it costs for material. This is a very nice place. Everything grows down here. About once every five years I have to clean out all this brush that is growing. This low stuff....I just get right in there and I clean it all out, let it start over again, so I can see the river. If I can't see the river I feel confined. I want to be able to look out over it.

SILVERMAN: Nice and private, though.

MAERCKLEIN: Oh, yeah. Nobody looking in our windows. But before you go you just have to take a little look out there.

SILVERMAN: A place with this many birds has to be great!

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, they have a time. Oscar Buehler, we had a nice argument; I told him when we first came here in '17 there were no angle worms then, so we brought some down from Dickinson, which we actually did.

SILVERMAN: Imported angle worms? (LAUGHS)

MAERCKLEIN: No, we brought them for fishing. There were a lot of angle worms at Dickinson and Oscar says, "No, we got them from Bismarck in 1918." We put them in the manure pile behind....well, Oscar was working for Lacy Roberts at the time hauling dray, stuff from the depot, and I knew Oscar real well, and in 1918, the last year of the war, I was helper at the....I learned telegraphy. Keith Robb was the telegrapher and I got \$10 a month but I delivered messages and I also did a little.....you know....I was working with the telegrapher. They had special depot agents, it wasn't the depot agent but the telegrapher, and I worked with him. And after school, why I used to run around town delivering those messages that came in during the day, and I got \$10 a month for that, which was extra money. I mean good money. I remember that. That must have been 1918. That was the last year of the war. Yeah, and now,...I used to be able to....I knew both the International and the Morse codes real well and now I'm completely blank, and I've tried several times to relearn it but that high fever I was telling you about....and I was good at it. I could....if somebody sent in a message....as fast as they wanted it....and I could do it....and I can't learn that again.

SILVERMAN: A fever makes you forget strange things.

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, it does. It does things to you. I always say I've been a half-wit since then. (LAUGHS) No, I mean it's just hard to explain it to somebody, how you could possibly forget something like that and yet you do. It's possible.

SILVERMAN: Well, it goes to your brain and takes out what it wants to.

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah, part of my brain just doesn't want to function. It doesn't. No, I've tried. I hear a little phrase like da de da de da de da, like CQ or something like that would come through, a few little things like that is just like somebody talking when you hear a key going, because it's like typing, you aren't conscious of what keys are K, R, you know. Somebody asks me where an A or D is on the typewriter. I don't know but I can sit down and I can hold a conversation and be typing something altogether different. You can, too, I think.

SILVERMAN: (LAUGHS) I can't talk and type at the same time. If you can do that, we could use you at the Highway Department!

MAERCKLEIN: I can. I can be typing something different at the same time. I've done that. I do a lot of typing.

SILVERMAN: Let me ask you one more thing about this bridge. Look back starting in 1921 and then to the present; have the people's feelings about the bridge changed any over the years?

MAERCKLEIN: We have gotten a little different type of....the original people that were here living in west Mott loved the bridge and then we had a couple of farmers since the bridge was built who moved in, retired. They're the ones who have caused all the trouble about the bridge. I'm not going to mention any names. They are the ones who are against the bridge because they blame their high water on the bridge and that's not it at all.

SILVERMAN: Has this started since 1950 or real recently?

MAERCKLEIN: Just since 1950. That's when it really started because there had been a couple years before that when they scratched the bridge....the ice would jam at the bridge and they would throw sticks of dynamite, you know, to loosen it, which was a good way to....I always said, well, just get one of our old 75's and park it on the bank and blow a couple of holes in that ice,

you know. But, no, they wouldn't do that now. I would have done it if they'd let me. I wouldn't use dynamite. I would have just got one of those old twin 75's and I'd have blown some holes in that ice and it wouldn't hurt anything.

SILVERMAN: Oscar says there's not enough dynamite in the world to blow that bridge up.

MAERCKLEIN: That bridge is awfully solidly constructed. That's good concrete. We put a lot of steel in it. That's what gives it its strength, heavy steel with concrete around the steel. They can just get a boom, just a big boom and all they have to do is just tap, just keep tapping. You don't have to hit it hard. Just keep tapping. I could knock that bridge down...well, I can blow it out of there in one day's time. I took all....they had big concrete piers going up 15th Avenue, oh, between Queen Ann Hill and 15th Avenue Northwest in Seattle. They had overhead railroads up high, you know, way up high, and they had these concrete....and the railroad track running....and steel, like a big bridge, you know, and I blew those all out of there. We just dug pits along side of them and we cut and drilled down below the concrete and we just blew them and they tipped over into the hole and we just buried them. They were too bulky and stuff to move out of there so we just dug a deep enough hole to get rid of them; and they could do the same thing with this bridge. They don't have to....just a big concrete ball for knocking the superstructure. We used a big boom and a big ball, steel ball on the end of a cable, you know. Just kept hitting it, you know. Concrete will shatter if it's hit incessantly. Just keep pounding it.

SILVERMAN: What kind of feelings do you have about the bridge?

MAERCKLEIN: None whatsoever. I like the old bridge. I like to look at it. Something just carries....takes you back a little bit. I used to be able to see it, you know. Too many trees have grown up now. I mean you could see it

real good from the top of the road. But even my own trees here are starting to....there weren't any trees in east of here. That was garden space, but in '50 I just let it grow out.

SILVERMAN: Did you plant all these trees?

MAERCKLEIN: No. No. No. This tree here....I lost one the other day. It was over 150 years old. The wind broke it off. I only got about half of it. Now these trees here, these trees are old. This tree here looks like it is coming out of....it was....when I moved this we had to cut a bigger stump than this, cut it off to put the foundation on there and then my well is right there. My well is under this concrete slab. We have our own well and sewer system here. I have a problem once in a while with the sewer system. I got to get enough drain filled in so that it doesn't get to the river, you know. Right now I've got to put in some more drain fill because everything's getting waterlogged. I'm gonna have to go west. I don't want that coming up and it's been backing up on me. I got to dig it up or relay it or get some pipes, you know. I thought I could get by about another ten years, and then it wouldn't bother me. (LAUGHS) There are ways they could leave the bridge there. They could put any kind of a shuttle causeway to bring it out to the center so the high water would go to the side, and that end of the street there's nothing built there anyhow; they could just let the ice and water go past the bridge off to the side of it. It could go right out if the engineer could just do that....I mean, they could build something coming out from the bridge so your ice wouldn't go....you'd have a little jam right on the north side of the bridge but the ice would still be able to be relieved. But the way it is now the banks are so high, you know what I mean. They could build it up, but it would just confine everything to the river.

SILVERMAN: So that center pier isn't really causing the problem.

MAERCKLEIN: No. The center pier isn't really causing the problem. The bridge is too low. What stops it is when the ice gets up and hits the railing. No, the center pier doesn't really do it.

SILVERMAN: You're an engineer. Is there anything that you could think of that would take care of the flood problems. Because obviously the bridge isn't....

MAERCKLEIN: No, you got water, you got water. There's nothing....when you get that....the river was just as wide east of town as it was here or up west. I mean when you get that much water, you got water. They talk about diking and this and that, and that would take care of a little bit, but when you get as much as we have had two or three times in the last 50 years, you're not going to handle it with dikes or what have you. If it happens to fall real fast with a rapid runoff, you're going to have water. The river will be a mile wide.

SILVERMAN: What kind of a flood plan does Mott have?

MAERCKLEIN: Well, so far as I am concerned,...(his wife interrupts, "Get rid of the bridge.") Yeah, get rid of the bridge, get rid of....yeah, they think and they feel that if you got rid of the dam and got rid of the bridge, you wouldn't have the ice jams, and you wouldn't, and if conditions are just exactly right and the last couple years, three years ago, when they had the last high water, we got flooded here. We had....when the ice....we were safe....and they were getting water through west Mott and the ice was jammed right here and the water just going around the bank. The water was about two-and-a-half feet deeper above the ice jam here than where we were but when the ice jam moved through it jammed again at the bridge, then temporarily we had about two feet more water right here than we had over in west Mott. I mean we were right above it. The water was coming in and building up. It took

only a few hours until the water found a way through the ice, you know, and then leveled off and went back down again, but that's a very temporary deal, to keep the ice jam from jamming under the bridge. They would have had.... the ice....that didn't make any difference, and when the water went down that was a normal....in other words, after the water went down the ice jam doesn't enter into it anymore, you see? But we still have water up to the floor here outside there, see? But the ice jam wasn't entering into it at all anymore.

SILVERMAN: So there's really nothing to do.

MAERCKLEIN: Really, no. There is nothing we can do and you can't tell them that. I mean they won't believe you. They just won't listen. They get mad at you because I argue with them or try to, but you can never convince them, so I just give up. The home town boy never does anything anyway, you know; he never grows up. (LAUGHS) They figure I don't know what I'm talking about. I warned them at the time, that by raising and lowering the water, in 15 to 20 years they'd fill their river beds with sand. They said, no, no. Well, that's just history....one, two, three....you study that when you're going to school. You know what I mean, what happens when you put up a dam. Look at the Mississippi Delta, how much higher the Mississippi is than it is to the land surrounding it. But they've got all these deltas, I mean they've got all these levies built so that the river is higher than the land around it. And that's not a normal,...that's not a natural deal.

SILVERMAN: No.

MAERCKLEIN: Man has created that. Putting up these dams and things. Let the river run free. The river will still....you will still have ice jams on the Cannonball and even down at the bridge. Like where it is now, you'll still have ice jams down in that area. I will have ice jams here at this point even after you take the bridge out. Maybe taking the bridge out you

can convince them....hopefully that is what it takes...and maybe they'll believe it then, but they'll never admit it.

One thing I remember about Fritz Fenneman, a lad from this town, and myself were sitting on top of the bridge on top of the center of that big pier and we were eating ice cream and a few kids were swimming down below and we kept count on them. There were eight of them. They were swimming out, coming off the center pier; just kids who were learning to swim, and we were sitting there, and I counted them and I only come up with eight....er, with seven. I said, "There should be eight kids down there." Only seven. So we hollered down to the kids and we said, "Who's missing?" The kids said, "Where is Leo? He was here a little while ago. He was out there and he was going to swim across." Leo Storter. About that time I looked over to the other side in the middle and I thought I saw something that didn't quite come to the top, and of course there's big carp in the river--that could have been it--but my mind just jumped to conclusions that that was Leo down there in the water. The water was a little clearer then than it is now. I stood up and I dove off the top of the pier. I was a good swimmer in those days and I had a big Scout hat on. I remember that. And when I hit the water with that hat on it just jammed my head down between my shoulders. I got rid of it. That didn't bother me. I swam towards the spot and under water, and the water was about 14 feet deep there, and I had to go to clear to the bottom, and you had to swim to get to the bottom in 14 feet of water, and I was feeling around with my eyes open and I finally found him, and he was on the bottom, lying on the bottom, and he was already out, you know, and he sunk. I pulled him up and we got him over on the bank and rolled him and pumped him and got him going again.

SILVERMAN: Oh!

MAERCKLEIN: Yeah. The kid was pretty far gone. We got him quick so we got

the water out of him, out of his lungs, got him coughing. Finally we got him going.

SILVERMAN: You said you got \$2 for that?

MAERCKLEIN: His mother was postmistress at the time and I didn't say anything, but the kids told her, and a couple days later I got this check in the mail, \$2 from her. I kept it for years. I don't know what ever did happen to the check. I never did cash it. I should have kept it. She couldn't afford it. Two dollars was a lot of money. She was scratching. She was a widow. Her husband had died and she was raising the kids. She was our postmistress.

END

This is an interview with Bill Bosanco, age 88, at his home in Mott, on July 11, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Bill Bosanco, age 88, has lived in Mott since 1911. He worked for the Milwaukee railroad from 1911 to 1961. He agreed, over the phone, to an interview, but when I called him from Mott to confirm, he said that he was sorry he'd told me he would talk to me; that he really didn't know much about the bridge and hadn't paid much attention to it. I talked him into an interview, and said if it didn't work out, that that would be all right, too. He turned out to be an invaluable source of information on railroading at the beginning of the century, and had some interesting things to say about the bridge, too. Bosanco is a sociable man, and did not seem to be prejudiced against any particular group; however, he uses certain ethnic terms in this interview which may or may not denote a slur: for example, "nigger" and the "Jew store." For my part, I got the impression that these terms were simply the product of ninety years' use; that he felt at ease and was speaking naturally, the way he had learned to speak; and that no derogatory meaning was intended. Incidentally, I learned from others that Bosanco had a very bad stuttering problem up until a few years ago. There is no trace of it today. JS)

SILVERMAN: First of all, tell me when you came to Mott.

BOSANCO: I wish you'd talk a little louder; I can't hear too good.

SILVERMAN: Okay. When did you come to Mott?

BOSANCO: 1909.

SILVERMAN: Okay. And you were telling me on the phone last night that you left for a year?

BOSANCO: I left in 1909. And I come back--was gone for a year--I left in the fall of 1909, and I came back in the spring of 1911, and I went to work on the Milwaukee railroad on the 10th of April.

SILVERMAN: Where were you born?

BOSANCO: Sioux City, Iowa.

SILVERMAN: Oh. What brought you up here to Mott?

BOSANCO: My folks moved up here.

SILVERMAN: When you moved to Mott, how old were you?

BOSANCO: Oh, let's see. Oh, I must have been about....it's pretty hard to figure that. As I say, I forgot a lot of that. I remember being in Mott

and I couldn't vote. I know that. I wasn't old enough to vote where I was at. Let's say...18 years old, pretty close to that.

SILVERMAN: Okay. And when you came back in 1911 you went to work for the Milwaukee railroad.

BOSANCO: Yes, ma'am.

SILVERMAN: What did you do?

BOSANCO: Section foreman.

SILVERMAN: Okay, in those days what kind of work did you do? What did that involve?

BOSANCO: Patrol the track, raising tracks, plying ties, rails--all kinds of different work. I done everything; and then I had the pump station. I run the pump station off and on for 40 years. We had a coal dock, and we had a lot of men, lots of men off and on. Summers more. During the winter there wasn't much, mostly in the summer. We had all kinds of men. We had 'em shipped in here in the spring. We had a carload, down there to McLaughlin. Then they'd move 'em west, so many on each section, and dump 'em off. Each section foreman got so many men and that went on for several years until later. They started to pay more money and then they could hire men in each town where the section was, see? And it went on from that. The men they paid some more money, not too much but enough so that other help would go to work, see? That went on until 1961. I retired in September the first, 1961.

SILVERMAN: At first, when you first started to work for the railroad, were most of the men local or did they bring them in from somewhere else?

BOSANCO: They shipped 'em in from Chicago, Illinois, a lot of them from the Illinois steel mills. They had men from all over. They had niggers in 1915. They had a nigger gang up here, about 100 men, and I had niggers that summer. I had one nigger on the coal dock. We had two coal dock men and we had niggers. Nine of them. I had 'em that summer. And there was mostly foreigners on up, as I say, in the '20s.

SILVERMAN: And they would work for less than local people would?

BOSANCO: Yes, ma'am. They paid 15¢ an hour. Ten hours a day. \$1.50 a day. I got \$55 a month. Us foremen, we were subject to call day or night. We would go out on derailments. We had a lot of derailments. I worked as high as 36 hours and I never got more--just \$55 a month for that month. Section foremen was working by the month. Section laborers was working by the hour. They got straight time. If you worked 20 hours you got paid 20 hours. We had Bulgarians, Greeks, Italians, and Macedonians, Austrians, and niggers and all kinds of people. They'd come out here and work for the summer. The railroad would ship 'em out here in the spring. They'd give 'em a contract, ship 'em out, and they was supposed to work until mid-October and then they'd give 'em a pass back to wherever they come from, see? Most of 'em wouldn't stay that long. You couldn't blame 'em. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: Where did they live when they were here?

BOSANCO: Well, the company furnished a bunk house with a stove and a place to sleep and cook. They did their own cooking and that's how they got by that way, see? They done their own cooking. They were glad to get a job, something to do. Poor people. It was pitiful to see some of them guys come out here. I used to take 'em to the Jew store. They had a Jew store down here. I used to take 'em up and I used to stand good for 'em. They were broke. They didn't have nothin'. I'd go up there and tell the Jews to give 'em credit for 30 days. I done that for years, as long as I handled that kind of men, and I never lost a nickle. They always paid their supplies. Them people were honest and they paid at the end. Of course in them days we worked 30 days and we didn't get that pay until the next 30 days. We always had a month coming. The railroads are all that way, too. One month a-coming. You had to wait a month before you'd get that there--unless you were discharged

or quit, then they'd CG your time--they could cash it, see? Because they was leaving. Otherwise there was always a month coming. Funny thing. But it's true.

SILVERMAN: What is CG?

BOSANCO: That's a form that you fill out and they could cash it anywheres. Of course they had to be approved by the superintendent. We had a superintendent here in Mobridge at that time for years and years and the roadmaster had to approve it. They had roadmasters same as they have now and superintendents, although they ain't got many now, and it was pretty rough. It was pretty rough. Rough life. Rough life. People don't realize what the men went through in the early day. It was hard to stay with it. I was here and the folks was here; and my folks was hard up. They didn't have much. I more or less stayed here to help them. I had other chances to go in different work on the railroad, but I don't know, I was afraid if I'd leave that I'd starve to death and I couldn't help the folks. It was true. I kept on staying and staying and staying. Others said, "Why don't you go and train somewhere? Why don't you go in the B and B department--more money?" I was afraid. I was afraid to leave. I never had too much education. You know that was one thing that held me back, and I just went on and on, just kept a-going, going, going. They would send me from one end to another, always sending me out. I don't know. I didn't know no more than any of them, but I was great to work. I always wanted to get things done, and they'd send me out on a branch or on the mainline, on the south line, and I think they done too much of that, but that's what they done, they overdone it. As I say, I was afraid if I'd leave I would starve to death. Yeah, that's true. See, I had a great life on the railroad. I got a gold pass, 50 years of service, yeah. Of course, it's no good. There are no more trains, you know. (LAUGHS) It used to be good, see?

I could ride on any train anywheres, see? When they started them, then the train men, you know, the conductor or the engineer would get one of them passes--oh, you could hear it all the way down the line. "Gold pass, gold pass." Yeah, I got one. You had to work 50 years to get it, too. Sure did. Yeah. And they didn't all get them. Because a lot of them didn't work that long. And I used to pump water; I had a pump here. I got seven-dollars-and-a-half a month pumping water. I had to pump on road side or else I would lose the job. I had to go down and start that pump. That was over a half mile from the section house. I had to go down and start that pump. We had five trains, as a rule, a day up here and they all took water and coal. I had to take care of the coal, oversee that coal, the tons they had ordered. I had lots to look after. Lots to do.

SILVERMAN: When you pumped water, was that the water that they got from that dam?

BOSANCO: That's the Cannonball River.

SILVERMAN: Yes, but is that the dam that they put in?

BOSANCO: The NP put in a dam, right straight down there.

SILVERMAN: Uh huh, below the bridge....

BOSANCO: Yes, ma'am, and the lower bank backed up here. That's right. That's where we got our water. Otherwise that Cannonball, there was no water in it hardly. You could almost wade acrost it, you know. Of course, they put that dam in and then we had high water, see?

SILVERMAN: What's the one thing that you liked best about working for the railroad?

BOSANCO: One thing best?

SILVERMAN: Uh huh.

BOSANCO: Pay checks....I would say. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: Was that pretty good money in those days? Were you making pretty good money?

BOSANCO: \$55 a month.

SILVERMAN: In those days, was that a lot?

BOSANCO: Oh, it was average. \$60 a month was a pretty good wage for a lot of people. Yeah, pretty good. Of course we had hospital fees and all that. I forget what it used to cost, around \$4 a month, \$4.50, for hospital fees, see? And that was about it, see? Well, I was pumping water and got \$7.50 a month for pumping. I got \$55 a month on section. I got, you know, \$62.50 then. I don't know. I kind of liked to work. I kinda liked it. I always done what they told me to do, you know. If they told me to do anything, I'd do it. But I always got along with the company fine. And did the job, you know. Work from the time I started up until the First World War started was pretty scarce. When that war started then there was all kinds of work, you know, and from then on. When I left I got \$440 a month. That was in 1961. Pretty good money, I thought.

SILVERMAN: Were you section foreman all that time?

BOSANCO: Well, you take 1911, I started and I was a new man. And I'd work and somebody older, older man, would come and bump me. Section foreman job was a pretty good job in them days. I got bumped a few times for a short while. One month I got bumped and another time I got bumped. I guess two or three months in the winter--and then there was another time I got bumped. These were short times, see? Then I would go back on the section. I would work out on the section and then they would call me back and give me the other job back.

SILVERMAN: When you retired, were you still section foreman?

BOSANCO: Oh, yeah.

SILVERMAN: Was the job different in 1961 than it was in 1911?

BOSANCO: Same.

SILVERMAN: You did the same things?

BOSANCO: Yeah, it was about the same, not much different. Well, it changed, you know. I started out with a hand car. I had 15 miles of track and I used to pump over that track with a hand car. Then they finally gave me a motor car because they started sending me around here and there on other sections. They give me a motor car and from then on they furnished all of us motor cars. Then when I left we had a truck, a pickup, that went on the rails and on the road both. See, that's what we had. Oh, yeah. We ran on the crossing. I couldn't tell you just how it worked in the front, but we had pulleys with extra wheels we dropped on the rail and we'd fasten them and we could run on the rail. Take it off at any crossing, put it on any time, and that's what we had when I left the railroad. That's what they got now, see? Yeah, then we had lots of trouble with bridges. We had bridges going out. We had a bridge this side of New England that used to go out, the piling. Then we had one four miles west of Mott, that used to go out, the piling. Ice came on. Then we had one up there about a half mile, almost a mile, west of Mott. We used to lose that bridge. I don't know how many times we lost that bridge. And we was so damn mad, we was out there dynamiting and trying to keep the ice broke up from taking the bridges--and we done a lot of that. I don't remember how many times them bridges went out. And down at New Leipzig there's a bridge. We lost that a couple times. We had a lot of trouble on our bridges. Now, of course, in late years they've put in these girders. See, they done away with the piling, see? They should have done that in the start. We use to have an awful lot of trouble with them bridges. Ice, you know. We had a lot of trouble with ice every spring about. We had more snow and water. More ice. Until here, now...them railroad bridges used to

help Mott down here because they used to hold that ice. When they put the girders in, that let the ice free to come down; see, there's nothing to hold that ice. We used to have ice jams up there; you know, at Cannonball, the way that goes. Ice jams here and jams there, and it was awful. In 1950, we had our track--we had a lot of track all washed out. It tore out telephone poles, a lot of bridges, and all of that. In 1950. It was awful. We was living on the west side, too. Two years ago, that was a big one, too. That was a big flood. You know I think that bridge we got done more damage than anything else with that flooding. I'm pretty sure of it.

SILVERMAN: The Rainbow Bridge?

BOSANCO: This concrete bridge here. This was the worst one. In '50, '43, and 1978, I was running back and forth and running back and forth until our railroad had been washed out and I couldn't go no further. But this bridge there, that's the sticker. 'Course, there's more to it. This dam down here never helped either, you know. That never helped none. If they had drained the river in the fall so it went down like it would--you know, no water in it, no ice--it would have helped a lot. But they never did it. So there's different things on that flood business, and the bridge, of course. This bridge, though; that's too old, you know. Ice always jammed up against it. Ice jams wouldn't go through.

SILVERMAN: You remember when the bridge was built, in 1921?

BOSANCO: That is something I couldn't....I think you could get that at the courthouse. I'm pretty sure you can, I'm pretty sure. I never had much to do with the bridge. I went across it a thousand times. We had a steel bridge there at first. That was built in the early day. It was a steel bridge. Wagon bridge.

SILVERMAN: Did you have problems with that bridge?

BOSANCO: Never did. It was funny. For several years there we had that bridge, we never had no water over there. No, we never had no trouble. Those rounded piers, you know, that held it up. It was a funny thing, nothing happened until 1943. That was the first one. First flood. We had some heavy rains in some springs, you know, that had high water that never done no harm, you see? They would come up and go down. Yeah, that old steel bridge was a funny thing. Never had nothing there. And I couldn't tell you, as I told you on the phone, the date them bridges were put in; I never paid no attention. The railroad--that was all I thought about. I never come over on this side until 1961. I was in two floods, '43 and '50, so I got out. I got nothing. I lost all I had in '50 about. It was in the '60s we lost everything we had. So we got out in 1961. Yeah.

SILVERMAN: Over the years, do you think that the way Mott feels about that concrete bridge has changed? People were happy when that bridge was put in.

BOSANCO: Oh, that was a big deal.

SILVERMAN: Do you think they feel differently now?

BOSANCO: No, it's too narrow. You take two trucks, you know, to go through, and there's so many trucks now days, you know. It ain't too safe. I crossed over the last time; when I see a truck coming, I stop. Sometimes we stop if there's a car coming. I don't care to cross there when there's a car coming, and a truck--no, I stop and don't cross over. A fellow can get through but you know how some drivers are, they drive right close to you, you know. You know how they are. It's too narrow. It's too narrow for our time now. At that time it was built it was all right. We thought that was one of the finest things....everyone liked that bridge, you know. It was a nice bridge, but it's outdated now--too low, too narrow. It cughta be out. I think they're going to do it, too. Yeah, I think they are. Yeah, it should be, by all means. I wonder, you wouldn't know where they're going to put it?

SILVERMAN: Where they're going to put it? As far as I know, right in the same place. Do you think if they put in a new bridge it will help the flooding?

BOSANCO: Oh, absolutely! No doubt about it. That bridge has got a lot to do with the westside floods. No doubt about that. Because when that jam comes down around there and hits that bridge and starts a-crowdin' up on the bridge, then that holds the water back, and during the '50s, started right down the track. Everything downhill was all plugged and the water come down the track, come down here on the westside. Yeah, the bridge was holding it. '43, too.

SILVERMAN: Was there a flood between 1950 and 1978? Was there one around maybe '67?

BOSANCO: Sixty-seven, there was just a light one.

SILVERMAN: A light one?

BOSANCO: We had some water around our track west but there was no damage. We had some bridges out. I think we lost this here west bridge to piling. I'm pretty sure we did. I'm pretty sure. This railroad bridge, one-half mile west, was the worst one. We had trouble with these others but more so up here, but it didn't affect Mott. No flood or anything in '47. That's right.

SILVERMAN: Was that in '67? That one?

BOSANCO: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Ernie Wangsvick, I was talking to him last night and he remembers. He was born and raised on the west side. Yeah, was talking to him last night. He knows quite a lot about that, too.

SILVERMAN: Yes, I'll be talking to him this afternoon.

BOSANCO: Oh, yeah. Another guy that would know, he worked down there, he used to work on the section down here from me. I don't know if he would help you but he might, and that's Kasper Laches, he works on the section here.

I don't know if he was there in the '40s but he was there in '50. He was on the section, see? He might have some little things that maybe would help you on that. It's pretty hard. The people in town, it's been quite a while since 1950, you know. And 1943, that's longer yet. Ernie Wangsvick, he's pretty bright and he has a good memory. He oughta furnish quite a lot. There ain't many of us here anymore that was here at that time, you know. Kasper Laches, he was one that was on the railroad that was young, you know. He started when he was young. Outside of him I wouldn't know. There's people out here in the country, some of them. A few that has been here as long as I have, but they don't know nothing about this bridge, you know. Just us in town here.

END

This is an interview with Ernest Wangsvick, age 68, at his home in Mott, on July 11, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Ernest Wangsvick, pronounced "Wanswick," age 68, has lived in Mott all his life. He owns a local appliance store, among other things. He was a little unsure about some dates, but had a few nice recollections of the bridge and of life in Mott. This interview seems to contain more of his opinions than his memories, however. JS)

SILVERMAN: Were you born in Mott?

WANGSVICK: Yeah, I was born in Mott February 24, 1912.

SILVERMAN: Did your parents homestead here?

WANGSVICK: Well, my mother homesteaded. She filed in about 1908 and she lived on the homestead and she proved it up in 14 months, and it was located about 10½ miles southwest of town. My father also filed on a homestead. However, he had the opportunity to buy a blacksmith shop so he relinquished his rights and bought a blacksmith shop in Mott in 1910. They were married in 1910 and I was born in 1912.

SILVERMAN: Did many women homestead in those days?

WANGSVICK: Oh, yes! There was about four or five of them down in that same area. They arranged to try to have their homesteads close together, and located in different quarters, however, but as close as possible. She had four women that were right near her there within a half a mile or something like that.

SILVERMAN: What kind of things did they have to do to prove it up?

WANGSVICK: Oh, there was a 14-months residence required to prove a homestead.

SILVERMAN: Did they build a home or did they live in town?

WANGSVICK: Oh, yes, she had a sod house which I have a picture of here in the den. It was approximately 24 by 36 feet with a steep roof and she had a good well there. I can remember as a kid going out there. The cattle ruined it

when I was about seven years old, but I remember it well.

SILVERMAN: So you were about nine when the bridge was built?

WANGSVICK: The bridge, I think, was built in 1924.

SILVERMAN: 1921.

WANGSVICK: '21? Is that right? They started it in 1921. They didn't complete it, I don't believe until 1922, is that right?

SILVERMAN: I looked at some old Pioneer Presses at the Historical Society and it seems that they started it in '20.

WANGSVICK: Oh, is that so? Okay.

SILVERMAN: And they started work on it in the spring of '21 and they finished it in September of '21.

WANGSVICK: Okay, that is right, because my father moved his blacksmith shop across the bridge in 1924. That's where I get the '24. You're right. It was in 1921. That's about right.

SILVERMAN: He was on the west side first?

WANGSVICK: Yes, there were more business places on the west side of Mott than there were on the east side. We had a pop factory over there, a garage over there, a tailor shop, and of course the ice house, and a church, and the Riverside restaurant. I remember all those places. The confectionary and the Barth Store, and then they're tearing down the old American House now we call it. The large rooming house. Next to that was the Barth store which was approximately 140 foot long, a large building that burned down, and then the confectionary east of that. The photograph studio was east of that; where that studio is now would actually be out in the river because when they raised the dam the river banks caved in and that's where that was located.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember anything about when the bridge was opened? Any ceremonies?

WANGSVICK: I don't recall a ceremony but I do know there was a lot of us around...Two horse-drawn wagons had plenty of room. I would guess it is about four feet wider than the old bridge. I remember the old bridge real well. In 1920 we had a flood and then the other bridge must have been under construction, probably, then; but the ice cakes were going over the old bridge and they dared me to cross it on stilts and I got halfway across and then I decided that I should go back but the ice cakes had piled up so behind me that I couldn't go back, so I decided to go on ahead and I took the licking on the other end when I got there. My dad was waiting, you know. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: Did you know any of the men on the crew of the bridge?

WANGSVICK: No, I really don't, but that information you could get. There is a bridge that was built by the same company at Valley City and there is one other one in the state.

SILVERMAN: Not the same kind of bridge?

WANGSVICK: The same kind of bridge.

SILVERMAN: Really?

WANGSVICK: That's right. There is a bridge at Valley City on old 10.

SILVERMAN: Do you know how soon after this one was built that the one at Valley City was built?

WANGSVICK: I really don't, but I know my father referred to it as being built by the same company.

SILVERMAN: What year did you say your father moved his blacksmith shop?

WANGSVICK: I think it was 1924. We sawed the building in two and we had six inches clearance on each side and got it across.

SILVERMAN: When did people really start moving from west Mott to east Mott?

WANGSVICK: Well, we had the flood in '20 which was a factor, but it wasn't nearly as bad as our '50 flood. That was the worst flood we had. We had one

in '20, and then we had a flood in '43, '47, then '50 and '78.

SILVERMAN: Was there one in '57, too?

WANGSVICK: That could have been, but it wasn't--yes, in '57 our basement filled in our business place, that's right--but it wasn't up over the floors in my mother's home in west Mott where my son lives now. That was flooded in '50 again. Let's see: in '47 we had about a foot and a half of water over the floor over there and this last time we had only about six inches.

SILVERMAN: Well, was it after one of these floods that the trend started, to move across the river?

WANGSVICK: Well, definitely yes. It seems as though each flood has been a deterrent to any construction over there for logical reasons, you know. So it has stymied the construction, and now of course it's practically nil over there. I don't think we'll have any construction there in the future. Unless we can get some more dikes or something constructed to protect the area there.

SILVERMAN: Was there still a downtown area on the west side in 1950, or not?

WANGSVICK: No. I wouldn't say that there was.

SILVERMAN: How about in 1940?

WANGSVICK: Yes, there was still--let's see--1940. That garage was still over there. But it wasn't doing much. I doubt there was much in '40. Of course, the garage was still there then, and some of the other buildings. Right where my dad had his shop, there were a lot of businesses around that area, but I don't think any of them were operating in '40. Some of the buildings were there, but they were being used as residences then.

SILVERMAN: Has your family lost any property or anything?

WANGSVICK: I should say we did! We were the heaviest losers in the 1950 flood! We lost--the Bismarck paper listed it as \$175,000 but it should have been over double that. We were Ford dealers and Case machinery dealers. We were distributors for appliances. We lost 19 Ford cars. We had two warehouses

that were 240 feet long over in west Mott and 40 feet wide and they were loaded with merchandise. We just unloaded 250-some air compressors; some were electrically operated and some had gas engines on them; we only recovered eight out of the entire deal. We had a carload of welders there. We were distributors, and I would say our loss was nearer \$360,000. We had to minimize our loss because you had to write it off in one year at that time, you know. That was a rough deal. There wasn't anything left of either warehouse. I have a Maytag washing machine I could show you that's about seven inches thick--the conventional washer, not an automatic, now, and it's still in the crate and never been opened, and Lee Hoff brought it in from down in Brisbane. It's about 100 miles away the way the river travels, you know. I should say: We had five ovens operating for better than six weeks drying out electric motors. We had 2400 new electric motors we tried to salvage. We'd have been better off if we'd just junked them, because we sold them at a discount and then if they went out in two or three years we refunded their money for them. Ah, we had a terrific loss in that flood.

SILVERMAN: When you look back to when the bridge opened in '21 and from then until now, have the feelings of the town changed about the bridge at all? Maybe they've changed several times.

WANGSVICK: Well, the feelings regarding the bridge get pretty....there was a lot of conversation at the time of our floods because there are those who think the bridge was a factor in the '50 flood. The ice jammed at the bridge and all the water, I'd say that 90 percent of the water that flowed down the river went through our warehouse. I could show you our warehouse back there. It's 140 feet long and it broke the back end in, and it just cleaned out everything in the warehouse. But we did get some of those cars out, but the water was over the cars when we got them out. There was none of them but what they were flooded before we got them out. We were in there until the

water was about seven feet deep.

SILVERMAN: There have been five floods in your lifetime.

WANGSVICK: I suppose there have been more than that if you go back far enough, but I remember those in particular. In 1920 I would have been just eight years old. It's possible that I could have been just eight years old when I crossed the bridge there but I remember its happening all right; and the bridge--I didn't remember its being completed. But the old bridge just had planks on it, you know? It was a steel bridge.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember why this concrete bridge was built in the first place? What was the matter with the other one?

WANGSVICK: Oh, the other one was too low. Ice cakes were going over the platform of the bridge. It just had to be raised, that's all. It is about four or five feet higher than the old bridge. But the silt, you know, builds up in the river. There seems to be more runoff when we have floods. There's less there to retain the water up the river, you know. That '50 flood was a real bad one.

SILVERMAN: Do you think there's anything that can be done to prevent flooding in Mott?

WANGSVICK: Well, they talked of a dam out west of Mott a while ago, you know, I mean several years ago, and if that dam had been constructed and if it was large enough so that it would be safe, why, that surely would control it, you know. They were close to doing something about that at one time. It seems like it'd have been a practical thing to do. It's hard to say. But as far as protecting west Mott with channels and one thing or another it's pretty futile, I think. I don't know of any way that it would help much.

SILVERMAN: Well, the impression that I have gotten is that when the bridge was built everybody was in love with it. It was the greatest thing that had

come along. And now some people feel that way and some people believe that it has a lot to do with the flooding. I guess what I'd like to know is: is there a certain point where feelings about it started to change?

WANGSVICK: Oh, definitely. That's right. That's right. It wasn't any problem as long as we--but when you have that much water as we had in '50, I think the bridge might have been a factor there but it surely didn't represent over probably 15 to 20 percent of the problem, you know. Because of that much water; it's got to go somewhere. But the ice jams there, and once the ice jams it raises the water level above the ice flow and it's got to go somewhere. In '50 it went through our warehouse. It went through our warehouse in east Mott. The other warehouses were over in west Mott. The warehouse in east Mott was 140 feet long and the others were 240 feet long. They were constructed of wood. The one over on this side is of steel. But there wasn't anything left of the warehouses. There wasn't as much as a stick of wood two feet long that was left. It just completely cleaned it out. See, that's along the railroad right of way and the river changes its course then, because it also jammed out at the railroad bridge, then, west of town, and now they've clear-spanned that so that problem has been eliminated out there now. They've got a clear span out there. That was a big factor because that ice broke loose. Now, getting back to this flood in '50: the damage was caused by the dam being dynamited out at the Regent Lake by Raymond Larson. The dam was on his property and he dynamited the spillway just at the crucial time and raised the water level eight inches in a matter of an hour and a half, and that's when we got our damage. If it hadn't been for that I don't think that we would have had the terrific loss that we had. Because when that water wall came down from that dam, that water couldn't get through at the railroad bridge so it came down through the railroad track, and that's where our warehouses were. It just cleaned them out. That was a big mistake. That

should never have happened. You would think that the Bureau or whoever was in charge of that would have those people oriented as to what they could or could not do. Of course, they probably didn't anticipate a flood. But to have gone out there and dynamited the dam out at the spillway just at that crucial time was a big mistake. It sure was. That's the danger of dams, you know. Golly! Look at our dams that we've got now. Out here at Fort Peck, there's a blister on that dam that comes up every year and they go out there with a patrol blade and grade it down. Well, that's been happening for many, many years. Now, on my short-wave radio last spring when they were talking about the Garrison problem they never once mentioned Fort Peck. Fort Peck was the serious problem. I got that news from Melbourne, Australia, on my short-wave radio, but we never heard it in this country. They give so much attention to the Garrison project, the Garrison dam being four or five feet over the point to which it was engineered, but that Fort Peck dam was way over that and that's the one that's most apt to go out, and if Fort Peck went out then it would take Garrison and the other two right on down the stream, wouldn't it? No doubt about it. You know, in case we have a war it wouldn't take much, would it? Boy, they could wipe out Mandan and possibly a big part of Bismarck.

SILVERMAN: North Dakota is not the place to live if you're going to have a war.

WANGSVICK: No, that's right. We have too many missile bases out here.

SILVERMAN: Secret missile bases. (LAUGHS)

WANGSVICK: Yeah, that's right. Supposedly. (LAUGHS) Yeah, that's right.

SILVERMAN: Is there any one thing in particular in addition to the things that you've told me that you remember about that bridge when you were a boy?

WANGSVICK: Oh, yes. We used to dive off that bridge and we always worried about some piling that's in there from that pier on the south side. It's out

there about eight feet to the southwest of the pier. There's one big post in there that we've never been able to pull out.

SILVERMAN: Is that from the bridge before?

WANGSVICK: That was when the bridge was built. No, the bridge before was located north of this bridge about 150 feet. No, that post is still there and when the water goes down you can see it. We've gotten...when I was probably 15 years old we got a couple blocks and tackle from the garage and a lot of chains and hooked on to the bridge and tried to pull it out, but we couldn't make it. We were afraid that if you'd dive off from there, you know, somebody would hit it, see? It's only normally about five feet below the water level.

SILVERMAN: How is the river different now then what it was back then?

WANGSVICK: Well, it's a lot wider, of course. Also, it's not as clean as it used to be. When I was a kid we used to drink the river water. We wouldn't think of doing that anymore, but we didn't have all the sewage coming down there from Regent and the like. Regent operated for 20 years without a filter system. Dumped the raw sewage and the sewage went right into the river. The Health Department can't do anything about it because they don't have any means of enforcing--they can reprimand somebody, but there's no one that can enforce those things. They finally got it squared away now but there were, jeppers, years that we even hesitated to swim in that river.

SILVERMAN: In the summertime what is the normal depth of the river now?

WANGSVICK: You mean above the dam, I suppose?

SILVERMAN: No, let's say around the bridge.

WANGSVICK: Around the bridge, now, I was down there before these boys had their accident. They said they were going down 15 feet to find Tommy Burwick's glasses. They did find them. They said it was about 20 feet there right at

the bend by that elevator, you know. But you know, that used to be about 35 feet when I was a kid. Oh, yeah.

SILVERMAN: Thirty-five feet deep?

WANGSVICK: Oh, I should say so. There was really a channel in there. But that's filled in with silt now. There used to be an island out there too, and it washed out the island. I still go swimming down there about twice a week right now. I've been in there about six times in the last two weeks. I go down to the dam, swim up a ways, and back again.

SILVERMAN: What's caused it to silt in?

WANGSVICK: Well, I suppose as it gets wider it decreases the flow and it settles down. Same way right down at the dam, you can come in at the south side of the dam and you can walk over halfway across now, and I could touch about halfway across the dam on the silt, but right where they cut out the spillway it's deeper there, probably 20 feet deep there. Or 15 feet would be about it. If they get the gates open on that dam, you know. There used to be a deal...my dad was a blacksmith and he built a wrench one time to open them, and when we were kids just for the devil of it we went down there to open it one night. Now, they claim they've cemented them shut. I don't know. Why shouldn't they have these gates so that they'd open them in the fall and let the water down? You know, if they'd let the water down in the fall, why, we wouldn't have nearly the problem, because we wouldn't have the ice problem. They do open up the spillway and that lets it down a little but they can't drop it to the bottom of the river level over there, which is something that surely could easily be worked out. I know we could work it ~~out ourselves, a couple of us, if they'd just let us go ahead, but they've~~ got to have engineers do that sort of thing; and they don't get it done. If that had been handled that way in 1950, we would have got rid of this ice all

the way up the river, you know? We wouldn't have had the jam at the railroad bridge, and if we didn't have one there we wouldn't have one down here. A lot of it's just management of this flooding.

SILVERMAN: You have to know what's coming....

WANGSVICK: Well, they can tell by the amount of snow that they've got and the amount of precipitation. That year we were really in for it. It was pathetic that the water flow wasn't--the river should have been drained ahead of that. They could do that during the winter, you know, before it freezes up. Yeah, there should be somebody obligated to be responsible for that, but there isn't, you know, see? The city--they do and they don't.

END

This is an interview with Wayne Bohn, age 64, at the Mott Water Department, on July 11, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Wayne Bohn, age 64, was a taciturn and reluctant informant. He had forgotten about our interview, and one of the men who works with him had to go get him and bring him back to the Mott Water Department building to talk to me. He is the nephew of Oscar Buehler, and several people told me that I should talk to him, because what he lacked in age he made up for in memory and in stories his uncle had told him. He was very busy that day; the phone rang several times during the interview, and he seemed anxious to be done with it and get back to work. He was also quite bitter about the bridge situation, and suspicious of me because I was from the Highway Department. JS)

SILVERMAN: When were you born?

BOHN: Sixty-four years ago. I was born here.

SILVERMAN: Okay, so you were probably just a very small boy when the bridge was built.

BOHN: That's right.

SILVERMAN: Do you have any memories about it at all?

BOHN: All I can remember is coming across the bridge one day. The old one. When they were building the new one. That is the only thing I can remember about it. That was in '22 or '23, wasn't it?

SILVERMAN: It was built in '21.

BOHN: '21.

SILVERMAN: Did they build them side by side?

BOHN: The old bridge was just to the north of it. Straight down that street. First street, the one straight down.

SILVERMAN: It was at a little bit different angle.

BOHN: It was straight across. Oh, it might have been a little angle, might have been, yeah. The road wasn't as nice then as it is now, straightened out like that.

SILVERMAN: Did you know any of the guys on the crew?

BOHN: I was only about three or four years old.

SILVERMAN: Have you heard anybody talk about any of that? Like when they were building it? Maybe how the bridge was built in those days, what they had to do?

BOHN: Well, I know it was all done by hand. All the cement was mixed by hand. It was hauled in wheelbarrows. That's the way it was all built. They didn't have no modern machinery then to do it with. Maybe had a crane there for something, but that's all. There were a lot of men. I don't know how many they had but there sure were a bunch.

SILVERMAN: Were they local or from someplace south?

BOHN: I don't know. Contractor from Bismarck got half of the job, I'm sure. A guy from Mott got the job but he subleased it to what's their name, a big contractor down in Bismarck; Rue, Milton Rue. As far as I know he built it. My uncle was in the lumber yard down there in the corner, and he sold them all the cement for it.

SILVERMAN: Oh, that's where the cement came from.

BOHN: Yeah, he ordered it in, it was hauled over there. Come in by trains.

SILVERMAN: Everybody tells me what great cement that is and how it's going to be a lot of trouble to get rid of it.

BOHN: (LAUGHS) You bet it is! Just mixing it by hand makes a lot of difference, too. For some reason or another these big cement mixers cannot mix cement right. They just can't do it.

SILVERMAN: They have set off dynamite already, haven't they? For ice jams.

BOHN: Yeah, a chunk of ice floated and got under that bridge and it knocked a hole about this big.

SILVERMAN: That's all it did?

BOHN: But I still don't think it's all the cause of all of our floods. During the war the WPA or somebody raised our dam up about a foot or two. When the

two was built, they had them so they was perfect. Now you raise this up a foot and a half, that stops the water from over here, right?

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

BOHN: That's what's happened. We never had floods before, you know. Before that thing was raised up. Of course, I realize our river is not near as deep as it used to be. Not near as deep. But that's one of the reasons why we have floods. Now the '50 flood I worked down there on that bridge for a day and part of the next day until we had more ice going down across the bridge than we had going underneath it. So the bridge wasn't holding the ice up, cause the jam was back here someplace.

SILVERMAN: Before it even got to the bridge.

BOHN: Yeah. Cause we had it clear under the bridge. There was about 15 or 20 of us poking it under. All of a sudden the engineer said, "Boys, we'd better get out of here!" Telephone pole started to fall down and it come right down the road over there. Right across the bridge. Big hard chunks. Big as this building, some of them.

SILVERMAN: Oh, gee.

BOHN: So we got out. Of course, then the ice jam moved up against the bridge, and jammed again, but it was already flooded by that time. Bad, too.

SILVERMAN: What about the other floods?

BOHN: The others were small. They weren't nothing serious. Well, we had this much water, but maybe a foot or two of flooded water. Enough to flood over the basement, and some got the first floor flooded.

SILVERMAN: But the one in '50 was the worst one?

BOHN: Well, that was rough. They took one guy out of the house over there, drove up with a boat and took him out of the upstairs window. Drove right up to it and he stepped right out.

SILVERMAN: Was that on the west side?

BOHN: Yeah. That's how high it was over there. Must have been eight, ten foot of water. It was all over. He wouldn't get out of the house but when it got so he had to get upstairs, he got out. In fact, he's the sheriff over in Amidon now.

SILVERMAN: Did you lose any property during the '50 flood?

BOHN: I've always lived all my life over on this part of town. I wouldn't be so stupid to live over there. Only reason they live over there is they get them cheap. That's the only reason. There isn't a place over there that's worth--really, I don't think anything over there is worth a thousand dollars. The buildings are old and they're not allowed to build new ones. Most of them are 60 to 70 years old. They've been hit by four floods. You know what's left. Not much. Mundstock, that guy runs the Press, he completely built his house over there, of course, he raised it way up. He thinks it's going to be out of the flood, but that's what they told him, anyway. He's the only one that's got anything close to new.

SILVERMAN: Looking as far back as you can remember and moving up to today, have you noticed any difference in the way people feel today than way back then?

BOHN: It was a beautiful bridge them days. It's still a wider bridge than 99 percent of the old bridges yet today. The only difference is, it's too low. We never had a bridge that wide around here until--let's see: they built this one down here, must be about three, four years ago. The one south of town. The other one sure wasn't that wide. They had three down there already since I've been here. There was one we used to call the old black bridge with the high centers and then they built this lower one and the ice just about ruined that one. Then they built this one. They said, "Oh, we got this one up plenty high," and the first year it almost went out. Just a little bit more and she'd have been gone.

SILVERMAN: Mott seems to be kind of tough on bridges.

BOHN: The river has an awful current. A really, really fast current. When it gets going it's terrible. Like two boys found out this summer riding in that canoe. Real good swimmers, both of them. You can't fight that thing.

SILVERMAN: Just in general, how do you feel about this bridge now?

BOHN: Well, it's been here for 50 years. I think it can stand another 50. We're not that big. We're losing people all the time. I can't see where we should have to build a new bridge. The people over here are going to have to pay for it. There isn't hardly no one living over there anymore. They are going to have to pay more than we are but eventually we will have to pay for it all, just like everything else. The thing should have been brought up to a vote, to the people, not the way they try to run it; the way they're running it.

END

This is an interview with Elethe Furness, age 77, at her home in Mott, on July 11, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Elethe Furness, approximately 77 years old, was a very hesitant informant. I had been scheduled to talk to a Josephine Matz, but when I got to the Matz house Josephine told me that she had been thinking about it and really didn't have much to tell me. She wouldn't reconsider. She did sit down and go through her photo albums and found a few good pictures. She then called Elethe Furness, who she said had dated one of the men who worked on the bridge. Mrs. Furness agreed to see me, but I found out when I arrived that she really didn't know much or remember much about the bridge, and had been gone from Mott for many years. She was very nervous during the interview, and nothing I said or did seemed to put her at ease. She simply didn't have much information to give me, but she did her best. JS)

SILVERMAN: Were you born in Mott?

FURNESS: No.

SILVERMAN: Where were you born?

FURNESS: Brinsmade, North Dakota.

SILVERMAN: When did you come to Mott?

FURNESS: 1908.

SILVERMAN: Have you lived here ever since then?

FURNESS: No. I lived here until I finished high school. Then I was gone for many years and I came back.

SILVERMAN: What year did you finish high school?

FURNESS: '21.

SILVERMAN: Then you left right away?

FURNESS: '22 I left.

SILVERMAN: So you were here while the bridge was being built. Did you know anybody who was on the crew?

FURNESS: I did, but I can't remember their names.

SILVERMAN: Oh, that's okay. Did you date one of them?

FURNESS: I don't know what his name was. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: What kind of things did he tell you about what they had to do in those days?

FURNESS: I don't recall anything about it. I know there were several of us girls in town who dated them, but I don't know. I don't recall anything about their work.

SILVERMAN: Were they local boys or out-of-town boys?

FURNESS: They were from out of town.

SILVERMAN: Do you remember where he was from?

FURNESS: No, it sort of seems to me he came from Kansas or Nebraska or somewhere down there. I just don't remember. I had forgotten all about him.

SILVERMAN: What do you remember about while the bridge was being built? Did they have to drain the water out?

FURNESS: No. Not that I recall. There was another bridge there beside of it that they used. As I remember the water was not drained out.

SILVERMAN: What do you remember about 1921 when the bridge was finished? I've read a couple of newspaper articles that said they had a big celebration.

FURNESS: No. I don't remember that they did have one. I suppose that they did but I don't remember it.

SILVERMAN: Did a lot of people have cars back then, in '21?

FURNESS: Oh, there were cars. Not as many as now, of course, but enough. Oh, yeah. Of course, there weren't as many people then as there are now.

SILVERMAN: There have been four floods as far as I've been able to find out. There was one in '47--or was it '43?

FURNESS: I wasn't here then.

SILVERMAN: It seems like it was '43, and then in '50 and '67 and '78. Have the feelings of the town changed any about the bridge because of these floods?

FURNESS: I think so. They do think that possibly the dam has made a difference in the flooding of the town. They raised the dam. I wasn't here those

years so I don't know.

SILVERMAN: When did you come back?

FURNESS: 1951.

SILVERMAN: You missed a big one then. You were lucky.

FURNESS: I came out just to see what it looked like. (LAUGHS)

SILVERMAN: Well, from what people have said, from '51 until now, in those 30 years, have you been able to detect any change in the way they feel?

FURNESS: Over in west Mott, yes. They feel that nothing has ever been done to protect their property because of the bridge and the river.

SILVERMAN: What things would they like to see done?

FURNESS: Get the bridge out of there.

SILVERMAN: They feel the bridge is making the floods worse?

FURNESS: That is what they seem to think.

SILVERMAN: Is there anything else that you have heard?

FURNESS: No. I really don't pay much attention at all. Because we're living here where it's high and dry and we're not concerned. But those in west Mott are concerned about it. I believe if you would go up to the nursing home and talk to Oscar Buehler....

SILVERMAN: I talked to him yesterday. He's the first one I got.

FURNESS: He has a marvelous memory. Could you get any information from him?

SILVERMAN: Oh, yes. All kinds of it.

FURNESS: I have a brother who lives in Montana. When he comes we get to talking about the old times. My husband thinks it's a waste of time, but to me it's kind of interesting. But Oscar Buehler seems to remember, and Bill Bosanco also remembers a lot because he's lived here all of those years.

SILVERMAN: You were just about ready to graduate from high school when the bridge was built. Was there anything that happened to you on the bridge,

any stories that you heard anybody else telling about it? (Furness shakes head, "no.") Do you think on the whole that it's helped Mott or hurt it?

FURNESS: The old bridge?

SILVERMAN: The one that's still there.

FURNESS: I don't think it's hurt it any because people still are moving in. People come, people go. Young people leave. There isn't any work to do here. Could Oscar give you the name of the company or about contracting?

SILVERMAN: The contractor? Yes, we pretty much know about that. What we're after is personal stories.

FURNESS: There were four of us girls that dated them. There is one that lives here yet. One of them has passed away and the other one--I don't know where she is. I didn't know this one was married to one of them until I saw her in Chicago a couple years ago. I got her address by working on the high school reunion we had in '71. We were going to Chicago and I thought, "I'll write her and maybe we can get together." And so we did. She married one of them and then they separated.

END

This is an interview with Thelma Olson, age 70, at her home in Mott, on July 11, 1980. The interviewer is Jane Silverman, representing the State Highway Department and the State Historical Society.

(Thelma Olson, about 70, seemed at first to be a good informant. She moved to Mott in 1937, but has done extensive research into Mott history, and may people suggested that I talk to her. It seems, however, that her research has not been on the Rainbow Bridge. She was very interested in the project, and gave me as much information as she had, but it wasn't much. She didn't even move to Mott until 16 years after the bridge was completed. She has painted numerous pictures of the bridge, which are scattered throughout the world. She is the only current resident of west Mott that I talked to, excluding Josephine Matz, who would not be interviewed. JS)

SILVERMAN: How long have you lived in Mott?

OLSON: We moved into this same house in October 1937. My folks came here.

SILVERMAN: Did you ever meet anybody who was on the bridge crew or who worked on the bridge? What was it like then?

OLSON: That was '37. It had been in there about 20 years or so then. It was built in about 1920-21, wasn't it?

SILVERMAN: '21.

OLSON: I don't remember anything about that.

SILVERMAN: In your research, what have you found out about the reason this bridge was built in the first place?

OLSON: I don't know as I recall ever having met anybody....

SILVERMAN: Was there a problem with the bridge before it?

OLSON: They had a red bridge. I don't remember if it was steel or not. The only thing I remember talking about was that Mr. Bosanco and Mrs. Bosanco remembered when the bridge was built and the bridge before it, but I don't myself, but maybe I can find out for you, if I call somebody.

SILVERMAN: Okay. Tell me about the 1950 flood. How did that affect you?

OLSON: It was a bad flood. The water came into the house and up to the windowsills, and I can show you outside where a chunk of ice left its mark

on the house. It was a mess to clean up. We didn't have carpeting then as we have now. We had linoleum and we didn't take those out because we never had a flood as far as we could--I guess they never had one that way before--this was the first one that was that bad. We worked quite a while before we got the house cleaned up. When we came back, everything was kind of tipped over. Especially the bedroom furniture was all tipped over. It floated, I suppose. I think we got rid of our davenport and chair as they were soaked.

SILVERMAN: How much damage would you say that flood did? How many people were affected?

OLSON: How many people were disaccommodated by it? The whole city. They evacuated all this part of town. I remember Charles Wangen, especially, he was right near town. He had a boat. He came over in the boat at night and took people out like us. Some of them didn't want to leave right then, you know. They thought it wouldn't come up that high, but we went out. It must have been about eleven in the morning. It was right in the middle of the day sometime. We stayed with my husband's folks until we could come back.

SILVERMAN: Downtown Mott used to be in west Mott?

OLSON: Yeah, this was one of the main areas of town at first. They seemed to like it. They had an abstract office over here and as far as the history of Mott is concerned, I guess the first building was the Brown Hotel and the Mott Supply. Those were the two buildings as far as I know, but over here, they liked this part of town. It's really a nicer part of town. We have some lovely older homes over here.

SILVERMAN: When did the downtown main area change? Change sides of the river?

OLSON: When we first moved to town I think the--I don't know--when they went over to the other side. There was buildings still over here along that street by the river where the store and bottling works were. They were still

there then, but I don't know how long. They were empty then, as I recall, anyway.

SILVERMAN: Was it still pretty busy over here by 1950?

OLSON: As far as businesses are concerned?

SILVERMAN: Uh huh.

OLSON: Well, they have had the grain business over here and I think they had a big warehouse or storage bins. The Mott mill over there had built over here. They stored 300-some thousand bushels of grain in those long bins over here then. There's always been something going on over here, it seems. We like it over here because we've got room. We haven't got a house right close next door. We have breathing room. My husband is a fisherman. He has a place and room to keep his boat and all that stuff. I'm suppose to walk a little every day and I like to walk over here because there's shade all the time quite a bit of the way in the summertime and we're protected from the wind. This last winter it was a nice winter and there was only one day that I didn't take my walk. I walk twice and walk an hour. So we like it over here. We must because we've lived here quite a few years.

SILVERMAN: Have the feelings of the people in town changed about the bridge since it was built or since you can remember?

OLSON: I don't know. I painted a picture of the bridge for a lady that now lives in California. She wanted one and I painted one for her. She thinks that's such a treasure because her husband worked at the Mott mill and in high school she would come over that bridge and that is where they would meet and have their little romance, you know. Her husband just died and that is one of the treasures that she really liked and she was very upset that they were going to take the bridge down but that's just a sentimental reason there. I suppose there are other people in town that feel that same

way--sentimentally--about it. I, myself, have sort of a sentimental feeling about it but actually, when you think about it, it's no more really than a sidewalk that's broken up and needs to be replaced. Maybe it is too small. I have to stop. Some people get on it when there's a car on but I wait for them to cross so I can have a little more room. We have to creep by. We have a smaller car now so maybe we can slip by a little easier but there is no room at all when there goes a big truck over it. I like the looks of it. It's pretty. I painted it. I even have a painting of the bridge over in Australia. Some are in California and Washington state. The people have gone away. It's kind of a nice memory for them. It's Mott to them.

SILVERMAN: How many pictures have you painted of the bridge?

OLSON: Oh, many. I never stopped to count, but 18 or 20 I suppose. Some of them are small. The one that went to Australia is about that big; of course, this doesn't record on the tape, but about 10 by 15 or something like that. It means something to the people that are away but they don't have to use it, you know, like we do. I don't suppose I would miss it if it wasn't there. I kind of like to look at it when I go there in the morning early against the sun with the trees and the snow, too. It's pretty. It has artistic beauty.

SILVERMAN: Is there any one thing that you first remember about that bridge?

OLSON: Well, I remember....they aren't there now because vandals are so prevalent in this day and age. They can't stand anything like a light bulb. But they had round globes, about three of them, I think, on each side, and I remember that and the lights on at nighttime.

SILVERMAN: Were those gas?

OLSON: No, they were electric.

SILVERMAN: Oh, they were.

OLSON: I think one post is even broken off now. They just gave up on it because they couldn't keep those globes in there. When we first moved to town, they were there for many years, but I don't know when they started to shoot at things like that, or whatever they use, rocks or stones. Kind of a shame that they can't leave something nice like that alone.

END

Addendum to:

Mott Rainbow Arch Bridge  
Spanning Cannonball River  
Mott  
Hettinger County  
North Dakota

HAER No. ND-1

HAER  
ND,  
21-MOTT  
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