DICK SKATES

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Oral History Transcript of Dick Skates

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Aubrey Jaap: Okay. So, it's August 14th, 2020. We're here with Dick Skates. Dick, I would like you first, tell me a little bit about your parents and maybe your grandparents.

Dick Skates: Well, I guess I was kind of an old American boy. I was born on September 29th, 1929. My parents worked on a ranch in South Dakota. My dad worked for his brother-in-law for a dollar a day and room and board. And my mother taught in country schools, grades one through eight for 13 years. She taught my sister the first five years of school. Anyway, we came to Montana in 1934 when I was five years old. And my dad's brother-in-law, the depression was on, he couldn't afford to give him a dollar a day anymore. So he came to Harlowton, Montana, in the central part of Montana. Anyway, my dad, at that time, his brother set him up in a gas station operation. And through the years that we were there about 16 years, my dad worked at gas stations. He worked in a flour mill. He worked in a grocery store. He pedaled a bakery truck. He worked for the WPA. He worked on a railroad. He did anything and everything he could to keep working because times were so tough during the depression.

And my poor mother, she couldn't teach school anymore because you couldn't transfer your credits in those days from one state to the other. But she was so talented that she cooked and sewed and babysat and worked every way she did for other people and her family. And she ended up, she went into the restaurant business and she had a restaurant for eight years and it was a pretty good sized restaurant. And she ran that for eight years. And at that time they didn't have gas in Harlowton and they had to burn coal and wood. And later on, she got a butane tank installed which made it a lot easier in that business. But after the war ended in 1945, it was like October 45, the restaurant burnt down. And so my mother lost her business and my dad started fooling around. I shouldn't say this on the railroad, being a Playboy and he and my mother divorced. And so my mother was going to go to the restaurant again, another business in another town. And my dad, he came back and said, "No, I'll make the living now." So she took him back, but in the end, my dad didn't change.

He was married five times. I was 14 when they first got divorced. So I never really had a dad again in my life because I went in the Navy when I was 17. So that was kinda my parents' history, I guess. But my dad retired on the railroad eventually. It was the best job he ever had.

But I got out of high school in my junior year, in 1946, and I got a job working on the Milwaukee railroad as a boilermaker helper. And at that time they still had coal burners and electric and diesel engines. And Harlowton was a juncture for burning coal, going east and using electricity going west. And so as a boilermaker helper, when they'd bring the old coal burners and you had to climb in there and caulk holes in the fire box and it was hotter than hell. And it burnt the soles off your shoes, burnt your clothes, and everything else. And then at the end, I ruptured myself, lifting a grate into the cab of one of the engines. My partner wouldn't help you do anything. So the doctor said, well, I had to get surgery on that. So they sent me the Butte and I

came up to Butte. That was in September of 1946. And I was operated on in the old St James hospital. It was a railroad doctor, I forget his name right now that might've been Swartz. But anyway I had the surgery and they didn't have recuperating rooms at that time coming out of surgery. I caught pneumonia coming out of surgery. I was 21 days on my back getting over that. They were pumping penicillin into me. And as crazy as that sounds, it was $6 a shot, which was exorbitant at that time.

So I finally got out of there and I decided against going back to the railroad to that job. And it was hard for me to get another job because most of the veterans coming back were getting jobs. So I decided to join the Navy. So I enlisted in the Navy in November of 1946 and they gave me a physical exam, but they said since I had that surgery, I'd have to wait about 60 days before they would send me to boot camp. So from November to the middle of the latter part of December, 1947, I went to boot camp at San Diego. So at boot camp, I went to boot camp and then from there I went to Corps school in San Diego and after Corps school, then I was stationed at the Naval hospital in San Diego for, I worked on a medical ward for four or five months. And then for some reason, they decided to send me up to the mental ward as a corpsman.

I didn't have any say so in it, they needed somebody there. And I was under orders. So I had to go up there. So I started working on the mental ward with mental patients, and we had guys there that cracked up going into the service of the Marines and the Navy at that time that weren't capable and they cracked up at boot camp. We had guys left over from World War Two that cracked up and went AWOL and stuff. We had them in that ward.

I worked up there for quite a while and they had a school down in Fort Worth, Texas, a public health service hospital. They called it the NPT school, the neuro psychiatric technician school. So I decided to go to school down in Texas. And that was a 16 week course. That hospital down there, it was four units. There were like four buildings facing each other. And you never walked around outside. It was all underground tunnels that you walked through to all the buildings. One of them was the administration building. One was a mess hall and the other two were ward buildings.

They had all the patients down there. It was run by the federal government. It was patients from Indian reservations. Have you ever been to installations where people had mental problems? They had people down there at that time for drug cures. One guy, believe it or not, was a movie star named Peter Lorre. You guys probably wouldn't have heard of him, but he was way back there. And he was sent down there for six weeks to take the cure for taking drugs. And that wasn't all that prevalent in those days.

But anyway after I got out of school there . . . we had all kinds of patients down there. The receiving ward was suicidal watch and this and that. We had a Navy commander that went down there. He had what they called polar disease now. I forget what they used to call it. But anyway, he was there about six months and they figured that he was cured. He went downtown on Liberty and killed himself. That's how that place worked. You never knew what they were going to do or how they were going to do it.

But anyway, after I was out of school, they decided to decommission the place and they sent all the patients there to VA hospitals closest to their homes. And we would escort him on trains to

these hospitals. It would be two corpsmen and a chief or a first class and the one patient. And we did on these trains and I took five or six trips. I went up to Augusta, Maine, Long Island, New York, Buffalo, New York, Iowa, California, two times, Wyoming, two times. And we had to do it all on these trains and sometimes these patients, they were perfectly alright. We would sedate them if they weren't so we could get them home, I guess you'd say, but that was quite an ordeal.

But anyway, it was a great experience and a great education into mental illnesses. And I think it helped me when I was in combat because a lot of guys were cracking up over there. And a doctor at the VA asked me one time if I thought I ever had PTSD and I just frankly told him, I said, when you're in a situation where all you're thinking about day-to-day is of not getting killed, keeping from getting killed and killing somebody else. I said, you have periods of PTSD. I said, it just warps your mind. But I said, when you get back to normal, then you'd forget about it. But to this day, I still think of things that happened to me in Korea. Believe it or not.

So, anyway, I left Fort Worth, Texas, they sent me to the Navy hospital in Long Beach, California, and I was there for about 11 months. Then they decommissioned that. Again, I worked on the mental ward. They sent me to the Navy hospital at Camp Pendleton, the Marine base in California. So I worked in the mental ward there. And I was due to get out in three months on my enlistment and the Korean war broke out. I got extended for another year. And that was in June of 1950, June 25th. So it happened so fast. You couldn't believe it. I was sent to the Tenth Corps Unit. They brought in 1500 corpsmen there from all over the United States to make up the contingency needed for the first Marine division.

And I was one of them. And then the next thing we were aboard ship headed for Japan and Korea. And part of the Marines, I showed you the picture over there first. The other two regiments in the fifth and the seventh, we went to Japan and reformed and reinforced, and then they sent us all in there into the Inchon landing. And that Inchon landing cut off the back end of the North Korean forces and kind of surrounded them and alleviated the pressure on the Pusan perimeter, which virtually could have ended the war, except for some of our high powered generals that wanted to unite the country decided to fight on and go into North Korea.

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That was General MacArthur. We should've never done it, but we did it. And we went up to the Chosin Reservoir on the east side. And we went up to Pyongyang on the west side, that was the Capitol. The army unit, the Marine 10th Corps unit went up there and we got up there. We were gonna go all the way to the border and chase the North Koreans, either out of the country or surround them and capture them. But in the meantime, wintertime came up there and it got so damn cold and nobody knew it at the time that the Chinese were sneaking forces across the border at night and camouflaging themselves in the daytime. And so that our unit intelligence never caught them and never knew they were there.

Until late November of that year, the Chinese, like I said, there were 120,000 that hit our side of the perimeter. And there were about 200,000 hit the army on the other side. And so after all that happened in the first 24 hours of November 27th, that they hit the fifth and seventh Marines in which I was part of, my platoon sergeant got hit for one thing. We managed to hold our hilltop. And we were lucky because on our hilltop, the snow was so deep that the Chinese couldn't get

through it to fight us, but they fought all around. And the next morning when the sun came up, we ended up, we had 935 wounded Marines on the ground, outside of the aid station tents, and 150 guys got flown back by helicopter. But one of them was my platoon sergeant. After that onslaught, we killed so many Chinamen there. This one Marine Lieutenant in the one area alone, he counted 800 bodies.

But after that, the Chinese, we were overwhelmed, we shot so many of them that they didn't attack us like that again, but they just sat back and shot at us from all sides so that we were retired. And we were under fire, gunfire, 24/7 for three weeks, getting out of there. And so we had to get out. The first slog out was 14 miles from [inaudible]. It took the fifth and seventh Marines four days to fight back 14 miles. And when we finally got back there, we killed a lot of Chinamen and we had to do some night fighting ourselves to get through there. And the Chinese didn't expect it, but we surprised them and massacred them by doing it. But when we finally got back to Hagaru-ri, we were all going in and this Marine Sergeant, he said, "Everybody fall into ranks. We're marching in like proud Marines." And we marched in in cadence and we sang the Marine Corps hymn, if you can believe that. But anyway, we got into Hagaru-ri, the 5th and 7th division.

So we were in force again, so we had a lot more forces to fight our way, the rest of the way. And that they had dug an airstrip there in Hagaru. And they flew out in three days, 4,600 wounded Marines. And frostbite cases. 4,600. So the next trip down was 11 miles to Koto-ri. And that was the road right down between the two mountains like this, coming down. And on both sides of the mountains, the Chinese shot at us all the way down there. We ended up, I don't know how many of us killed, but we had over 700 casualties, the Marines did. We actually eliminated practically all of these Chinese units going down there. They kept shooting us. We fired everything we had at them. They would come out to shoot at us. They'd no more than show themselves and we killed them.

And then when they got down to the Kotori, the first Marine regiment was down there. [Inaudible]'s regiment. He was a marine. But anyway, they had adapted these torpedo bombers to haul casualties. And they would take about five at a time. And at that time then they flew out the 700 guys that were casualties. So then we were going to go down the hill. It was 10 miles from sea level, up to the top of the mountain and down the side road that you saw in some of these pictures. That was our last trip. And the Chinese didn't shoot at us too much from the way on the other side. But some did and we wiped them out. The air support came in and dropped napalm on them. But what did the Chinese do on that road? They blew a section of the bridge. And we couldn't go on that road any farther because the bridge was blown. So they arranged for the air force to drop us these bridge sections and they dropped about six of them. Two of them got dropped behind the lines, but the other four, they were picked up by our engineers and they reconstructed them across this bridge. And we got out. Otherwise we could have never got out of there. Our vehicular train . . .

[Recording stops.]

[00:20:42]

Waterhouse painted. He was a Marine Colonel, but he was quite an artist, a painter. And he painted this picture of us getting down to the bottom of the road. And I have one in my house. And anyway, that was one of the best pictures of escape. We finally got down to the bottom of the mountain. It was still 35 miles to the ocean side, but they had trucks to haul us down. We got down there, we got onboard the ship and I got back aboard ship and I hadn't changed my clothes, washed my face, brushed my teeth in six weeks. When I took my clothes off, I had lost 40 pounds. I was down to 130 pounds and at that time weighed about 175. Incidentally, I spent my 21st birthday in Seoul, Korea.

But anyway, we got back aboard ship and everybody was so damn under-nourished and hungry. They started out the mess hall and they kept it going 24 hours and you could eat and then go get in line again. And that's what everybody was doing because they were so damn hungry for hot chow and everything else.

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But anyway, then they took us down to Pusan to a place called Mason. And that's where they had their recuperation area for the first Marine division. And we were there for over two weeks over Christmas and New Years of 1950 and 51. And that was really great because we were resting and everything, and the guys were going nuts when Christmas time came. These guys are coming out of their tents, shooting their guns up in the air. This one officer said, "Go out and tell those guys to quit shooting it." The Sergeant said, "I'm not going to go out there and get shot because they're celebrated." But anyway, we left there, they took us up the east shore up to a place called Po-Hang. It put us right directly in the center of Korea, and we started chasing these straggler gorilla units there north then. And the Chinese that came down there. And we just barely ran into the Chinese. One area that my platoon ran into, there was an artillery unit from the army second division that had got wiped out. And we were the first ones that found them. There were all these bodies there in the Jeeps and trucks and everything. And nobody paid much attention to where the artillery pieces were.

And anyway, somebody said don't fool with the bodies because the Chinese might have booby trapped them. And they did that too. The next thing we know here comes all this artillery in on us from the Chinese. They had taken all the artillery pieces from this second division unit up the road, and they were firing them back at us. And so everybody found a place to duck. And this is kind of a crazy story, but we were right next to a Korean graveyard. And a Korean graveyard, they didn't bury them in the ground. They buried them sitting down under a mound like this and believe it or not, I hugged that mound for 45 minutes away from that artillery barrage. And that's the way the Koreans buried their dead.

And they also have a funny habit over there. The moon had to be right or something before they buried their dead. And they'd have a dead body laid out in a ditch for a month, stinking to high heaven before they'd get around to burying it. We'd come across them and we'd bury them. We'd take our shovels and bury them. And these civilians would come out and raise hell. They'd say, "Oh no, no." We'd say, "Too bad. You gotta do it our way now." But anyway, we got up into central Korea and we were fighting some hill tops up there against the Chinese. And that's when I got rotated back out. I was among the second bunch to get rotated back only because I had frostbitten hands and feet. And then I came back to the states and I hadn't had leave for two

years. So I got a 30 day leave and I came to Butte for 30 days back with my mother and everybody. And like they said, when we came back from Korea, there was no praise or big celebrations. It was like the Vietnam war. You just came back and everybody knew you were in the service, but it was kind of the forgotten war, you know, very regretfully.

But, I arrived in Butte in May of 1951. Then I had to go back to Barrow Island for four months. I was in the hospital down there before I got discharged. And it was kind of funny when I was getting discharged. The guy says, are you going to stay in the reserve? And I said, no. He said, "You're liable to be back in here in six months. The Korean war is still on." And I jokingly said, "If I am, they're going to bring me in screaming and kicking." And they didn't take it very humorously, but anyway, that was the end of it.

[00:27:08]

So then I came home. I've been here ever since. And since I've been in Butte, I looked back on my work record, I've spent five years in the Navy and the Marine Corps. I worked for Safeway for 14 years. I was a banker for 22 years at the old Metals Bank. They deregulated the banks in the late eighties. They went from 124 employees down to 10, which it is now. And then I went to work for the Super 8 motel which they newly built. I was a manager for eight and a half years. And I was going to retire in 96. I was 67 years old. And the boss said, "Do you mind doing book work for us for a while at the motel?" I said, "Sure. I'll do it." I took it home. So I did it for 20 years. So I actually retired when they sold the motel in 2017. So up to that time, I worked for 71 years for a paycheck. And I'm still alive, I guess. I'm lucky, very lucky. And I can say this, of all the places I've been in the world, Butte is the greatest place in the world to live.

Jaap: Why do you say that?

Skates: Because the people are so good. We take care of each other. There's not a lot of places that are like that. You know, there's bigger cities, and then they're having all this trouble now with the government and the black lives matter. Patrols and the police units and everything. And we got to change something to get back to some kind of normal. Quit these wars and all this crap to be able to live normally all over the world. Well, I thank you guys for having me.

[00:29:26]

Jaap: Yeah. Can we ask you some more questions? I know you were involved with the World Museum of Mining early on.

Skates: I volunteered up there for 16 years.

Jaap: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Skates: Well, Dave, my friend, Dave Johns, he passed away here a few years ago. He was an officer at the Montana Power Company. He worked up there for 32 years. They started in 1965 and he started it then. He started building it and putting the pieces together and gathering antiques and relics to put on display up there. When I went to work in the bank, some of the guys in the bank in the exchange club, they did volunteer work up there. So they asked me if I wanted to join them. So I went up there as a volunteer with the exchange club and it kind of drew on me.

I liked the situation up there. So I talked to Dave and I said, do you need anybody to work with you? He said, God, do I. He said, I'm all by myself. He said, I got so many jobs to do. So I worked for 16 years of Dave's 32. And poor Dave, he died here about three or four years ago. He came down with eye blindness, I can't remember what it's called. My memory for names anymore. His eyes gradually lost sight.

So he couldn't. I left up there in 93 and he left in 96 and we never up to that time charged admission. And Dave and I had accumulated through donations and our investments and our personal donations, $600,000 in our treasury. Wow. Believe it or not. And when the new folks got in up there, that's all gone. One guy in particular, I won't mention his name. He got most of it by digging a new mineshaft up there for tourists. And they started charging admission to get into the gate and charged another admission to go down that mine shaft. A few years ago, I went to an annual meeting of the mining museum. This lady, she was given a report on. She said we had 20,000 visitors this year. We took in $19,000. And when Dave and I were up there all those years, we had 100,000 visitors a year. So that tells you what happened to the mining museum. I heard that they turned over the real estate to the county, which is good, but it's too bad that the county can't take it over and run it like the business that it should be running.

Dave and I, we worked every Saturday practically of our life up there. In the summertime, we worked after supper two or three times during the week. Then every service club in town used to have little projects up there to come and help us do stuff. But we worked our tails off up there and we enjoyed it and we liked it. We figured we were really accomplishing something until after we left. Very sad.

Another thing I was involved with as a charter director was the Big Brothers in Butte. And that was like in 1967. And I was involved with that. We formed that up. And then later on, we took on the Big Sisters. And when we first started that up we hired two guys that were kind of social workers to interview perspective Big Brothers, because believe it or not, we did not want gay guys becoming the Big Brother. And I think anybody in their right mind would understand that except the gay guys. And so they did that. And so we paid them like $50 a month, but in order to raise money, the first three or four years, the first two years, we sold a hundred dollar raffle tickets and raffled off new Cadillac cars.

And that took about half of our $10,000. And so then we had $5,000 to operate other stuff on. And anyway, I remember one of the first guys, I forget his name, he was an insurance salesman, the second Cadillac we gave away. And the Cadillacs at that time, they sold for around $4,000. Believe it or not. And then the next two years they raised the price of Cadillacs. So we gave away two small foreign cars, which was kind of the same thing, but we still made that money.

But then I forget what year it was exactly. But I remember Nixon was in office . . . shoot, when was it? It was the year they had the big social program. And we got involved in that. And anyway, we put in and we got grants out of that to run the Big Brothers and Sisters on. And I don't know if they might still do it. I wish I could think of it now. But it was run out of the US government, but this raffle thing, it wasn't a raffle. It was just grant money that was allowed. And so we put in for a grant every year. But other than that, I guess I'd been busy all these years. I've been in my house 66 years. We bought that house in December of 1954. My wife and I were married for 62 years and she passed away a year and a half ago. But all the years were in the

house. It was a small tract house down on [inaudible] Street there, three bedrooms, but only about 800 square feet. I remodeled the front room, remodeled the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedrooms, dug out the basement, built a garage, hauled in dirt for the landscaping, sided it twice, painted it two or three times. So I kept busy there. And another thing I kept busy with and I gave some headframes to the . . . that was part of my hobby building miniature things. I built over 400 miniatures. 43 headframes for one thing. I built some buildings uptown, little miniature things. I built birdhouses, little Kleenex houses. Anyway, over 400. And I gave them all away, except for about a half a dozen. Somebody said I should have sold them. I said, once you get to where you're selling them, you're committed to building them on time and this and that, I never wanted to do this. So I gave it all away. So. I don't say that bragging or anything. I just said it was just what I did.

And my son is here with me today and he was born in 67 and he has had a tough go of it. He's got a mental disability plus diabetes. So he hasn't really had a normal life either. And he was picked on a lot when he was in school and the kids broke our windows, beat him and everything else. He was in junior high and finally he punched this one kid, knocked him on his butt. And after that, the kids left him alone. But that's life, I guess. But I guess I can't tell you much more. I don't know how uninteresting I can make it to you.

Grant: I was curious how your mom's restaurant burned.

Skates: It was an older building and there was a defect in the electric wiring, they found out. It was a pretty good sized restaurant. It sat about a hundred people. And my mother was one heck of a cook and she used to get up every day and make a different dish for that day. And she had a soda fountain in there and everything. My brother and I grew up there as crazy as it sounds. I think the first two months we were there, all we ate was hamburgers. After that we ate what was on the menu, but it was a great life for anybody to grow up in a restaurant like that. And my mother, silly as it sounds, Harlowton was a railroad town at that time and they had a flour mill.

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They had a lot of ranchers and farmers from out of town. But, at the height of World War Two, it reached about 2000 people and she had the biggest restaurant business in town. There were four or five restaurants. Yeah. Four or five bars, stuff like that. But now all that's gone down. Harlowton is probably lucky if there are 700 people. So how times change, you know.

Grant: At Big Brothers, Big Sisters, what was the rationale for preventing gay Big brothers?

Skates: What?

Grant: When you were working there, what was the rationale for preventing gay Big Brothers?

Skates: Gays are the ones that want same sex, you know? And so we didn't want to take the chance of them trying to sway any young boys into any such thoughts. At that time in history, I'd say the homosexuality, which kind of looked down upon as something really abnormal. And in fact, when I worked on the mental wards in the Navy way back there, they put homosexuals in the mental ward and until the time's changed to where it was more acceptable, but there was guys

that got discharged out of the services for that. And then later on, they accepted them in the services. So that's kinda the answer there.

Grant: I was curious too, we heard so much about, you know, after you, well, I mean, you were still really young when you went to Korea, but what about your childhood? Did you ever have fun?

Skates: Oh yeah. I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun when I was a kid. Uh, one thing you know, that you don't always, you don't always remember things about your early, early years. Uh, but when we came to Montana, I'd been out on a farm, a ranch there for five years. I don't ever remember that my folks ever took me into a town, and most of the towns were all small and they'd go in maybe to buy a few groceries. They wouldn't take the kids with them. We came to Harlowton. My folks rented this two story house. The bedrooms and the bathroom were upstairs and I had never seen a two-story house before. And I was crawling up and down the stairs on my hands and knees because I was afraid of it for some reason. But anyway, from the time I was five up to the time I was 10, I guess, when the second world war started, when this war started . . . I was always a great one for working with wood.

And I used to get these boards and I cut out these wooden guns and pistols and stuff, and we had a gang and we were going to war and all this stuff. We did that. And then as a kid, when you're a little kid, you have little cars to play with and everything. And here a while back, I picked up a Log Cabin syrup can in the store that was a replica of what they used to sell years ago. We used to keep those for our little cars to play with. And when I was 10 years old, my mother was in the restaurant business. She didn't have a lot of time to spend with me. So she asked me if I wanted to go back to South Dakota and stay with my relatives for the summer just to visit them. And so I said, sure, it sounded great. So I spent the whole summer back in South Dakota, went from one relative to another, stayed with cousins and that was all. And it dawned on me how we lived, before at that age, you kind of remember. Your memory gets better and you think back. And I enjoyed that all summer long and this one, a couple of cousins of mine, they had little Shetland ponies and this one cousin's Shetland pony would carry two of us, but the other one wouldn't. The two or three weeks I was with them, we rode those ponies all over hell and back. So, you know, kids don't do things like that anymore. If they do, you'd never hear about it.

And of course, the depression was still on. And I remember we used to collect beer bottles and sell them back to the bars for a penny a piece or something. And kids used to get in fights over stealing beer bottles and everything else from each other. And that was the way we lived. And if you had a nickel to buy a bottle of pop, you were really rich. And the only way a lot of times you'd get a nickel we used to go out and pick up scrap metal, copper and brass and stuff, and we'd sell it to the junk dealer. He'd give you a few cents. You go down, buy some candy or something. That's what we used to do as kids in those days. So how times have changed, huh? Yeah. So I don't know if I could tell you much more or not.

Grant: What about your injury on the railroad? I guess I wanted to hear a little more about that.

Skates: Well, one of my jobs was they had these coal burners. They were like a big furnace, you know. And the grates, they were about that long. And they were like a furnace that we had in our house. It was a coal burner. God, it was that big around. It had these grates and you'd grate the

ashes down through, and then you'd pull the ashes out and hauled outside. Well, they did that same thing in the steam engines. They'd pull the ashes out of the coal through these grates. They'd get too hot and they'd partially melt and bend and you had to replace them. Okay. So I had to take this one out, which I didn't have too much trouble. I pushed it out over the thing and I had to go get another one. And I don't know, it must've weighed a hundred pounds or better. I don't know. And I was only a kid, 16 years old at that time. Didn't have that much muscle. Another thing I did when I was in high school, I worked for a guy that was a spud farmer in Harlowton there, and I helped him plant cut spuds, seed spuds, plant them and pick them up and sack them, carry them around. And that was all during World War Two.

They brought Mexicans up here to harvest spuds in those days. That was quite a wartime thing too. But anyway, I was trying to get this grate up. And I asked this guy, I said, can you help me? He was the boilermaker. I was the helper. No, he said, you can get that by yourself. And the grate was about that high up. The floor of the cabinet was about that high up. Maybe higher. Because those edges are big, you know? So I'm up there pushing them, pushing them, pushing. And I finally got the damn thing up there. And about the time I got it up there, I felt this push in my gut and it didn't feel right. When I got home that night, I took my clothes off, I had this bump sticking out of my groin and I knew it wasn't right. So I went to see the doctor and he said, you got a hernia rupture. He said, how'd you do that? I told him. He said, well, don't do that again. But the crazy part of it was throughout all my lifetime, I've had five hernias from different things. One of them was working with the mining museum. One of them was working at Safeway and I'm trying to think, another was when I was working at the motel. The last two that I had.

One over my navel and one on my side. And I had four operations. The last one was a double one and the last one was, they didn't cut into me. They used that type of surgery. I forget what they call it. And that was the best one that I ever went through because it wasn't so painful. I guess I just had a weak gut or something. I've had a lot of physical work in my life. Yeah. And I didn't mind, I guess when I was doing it. I felt good and that's why I did it, I guess.

Grant: Can we talk more about Korea?

Skates: Well, Korea, I had a lot of personal experiences that I won't talk about. But most of the time when I was a corpsman, I was servicing wounded guys. Bandaging wounded guys. And believe it or not, in-between bandaging wounded guys, I shot my weapon at the Chinese. I carried an M-1. I had a story that was in the paper about when I ran into the . . . we were sent to North Korea. We were about halfway up the hill. We were in this confrontation. It was called Su-Dong. It was a village. The Chinese hit my regiment here. We fought for three days, and we got rid of them. And all of a sudden they quit and they just disappeared and we killed over 700.

And anyway at that time we were still going up the hill. It turned nighttime. And this item company called up and said, can you send some corpsmen up. I think we got a guy that got appendicitis. He's really hurting and he can't hardly move. So they designated four of us to go up and get this guy. And he said, you go across this riverbed and up to the railroad tracks, you follow the railroad tracks up till you see an item, come in to help this guy come back. So the four of us, it was black as coal out. You could hardly see. We went across this riverbed, going up to the railroad tracks and had these telephone lines there. So going through the weeds, we were all

following the telephone line up there and they'd had one line. And for some reason, I didn't realize it, I had another line and I got up to the railroad tracks first and the guys, my three buddies weren't there and I hollered out, nobody answered. So I thought, well, they just took off up the railroad tracks. So I walked up the tracks, maybe about a hundred yards, like a football field or something. And I saw these three or four figures standing there. So I thought, well, there's my buddies. So I walked up to these guys. I got a foot from these guys and I realized I'm standing in front of a Chinese soldier.

And I thought, Holy Christ, my time on earth is gone right now. And I had my weapon strapped across my back in such a way that if I tried to pull it off, they'd have shot me. The other three guys are standing over there. So this guy is waving his hands and he's pointing towards the lines and talking in Chinese. I don't know what the hell he was saying. And so I started talking English. I was pointing toward my lines and the thought came to my head. I got to get the hell out of here. And so I thought, so I turned around to walk and I motioned for this guy to follow me. I started walking and the guy was following me. He puts his hand on my shoulder for me to stop. So I stopped and turned around. And he puts his hand out. I shook hands with him and the guy went with me, if you can imagine that. Here comes my other three buddies up the tracks. And I said, “Hey, there's some damn gooks up here.” These other two guys jumped up and they were going to start shooting. I said, “Christ, don't shoot or we will all be dead.” And so I said, “We gotta get the hell out of here.” So this other buddy, we disarmed this Chinaman. He had a burp gun. He had grenades on him. He had everything. And we disarmed him, but he followed us like a dog. And we took him back to H and S company, MPS, and turned him over.

And the funny part was the next morning, this Captain [inaudible], that was the head of H and S company. He was a spit-polished Marine. He carried a pearl handled pistol on his side, his clothes were all clean and nice. Everybody else was dirty. He came to the aid station. He chewed out our chief. He says, "The next time, your goddamn corpsmen, bring a prisoner in here, don't bring them into the middle of the compound." Like we were supposed to know that. And so our chief said, "Well, they didn't know it, but we'll tell them." It was the only time I ever knew that anybody ever brought one in like that. Anyway, to tell you a funny story, not funny, a story about Captain Barber. When we got all shot up at [inaudible], and we were starting to reform to come back. Well, they sent him up the hill to take over a platoon where the platoon leader / Lieutenant had got shot.

So Barber went up to go up the hill and on the hill, he got shot and he got evacuated. And he was in the Chosin, a few years ago, I saw him. I'd never talked to him, but I saw him and he was there. But I guess when we were in Korea, in Japan, he had married a Japanese gal or something. He was funny.

I'll tell you a funny story about our times over there. There was a book written about this Zamperini called, *Unbroken*. Have you ever seen it? If you get a hold of one, there's a DVD out on it too. Get it and read it. It's about this Zamperini. He was an air force guy. He was a gunner or a navigator in the south Pacific and his plane got shot down and there were four guys that got out of the plane. The rest of the guys got killed in the plane when it was shot down. They were in a lifeboat on the ocean for something like 43 days. They didn't have anything to drink, no water, nothing. They'd catch these fish with their hats, like nets and stuff. They'd eat them raw. When it rained, they tried to save the rainwater to drink. Anyway, finally, they came to this land mass.

They didn't know it. They were going to go to the shore and there were Japs on it. The Japs had taken it over and the Jap started shooting at them out in the water.

So the guys in the boat held up their hands. So the Japs brought them in to be prisoners of war. And the Japs question them about everything. And they realized that they were air force. They were the ones that were bombing them and this and that. And they were all officers. So instead of shooting them right away, they decided to send them to Japan, to a POW camp, to question them and get information out of them. So that's where this Zamperini ended up in Japan. One of his cellmates was a guy named Lieutenant Harris. I forget his first name, Lieutenant Harris.

And he was a survivor of the Bataan death March in the Philippines when the Japs took over the death March. And he survived that and he escaped once, but they caught him and they brought him back. And so he never got out again until when the war ended and he was relieved by the Americans. And his dad was a two star general. He was the head of the first Marine Airwing that was our savior in Korea. That airwing that dropped bombs. Anyway, he decided to stay in the Marine Corps after World War Two, this Lieutenant Harris. He got to be Lieutenant Colonel and for some reason, they sent him to Korea to be a battalion commander.

He was our battalion commander and he was one hell of a likable guy. Everybody liked him. And he was a good officer and everything. When we got surrounded up in North Korea and we got the hell shot out of us and everything, he was the head of the seventh Marine, or he was the head of the third battalion, seventh Marines. Anyway, he took a lot of casualties. We were on a move, fighting our way out of there. And this one night he started acting strange. I guess the only way you can put it was that he cracked up, up there. And he walked off and he started giving away stuff, weapons and everything. And all the guys thought it was kind of funny and they didn't question it because of who he was. He walked off in the middle of the night and they never saw him again. He disappeared.

They never saw him again. And one of the last things he said to one of the guys was, he said, "I'm never going to be taken as a prisoner of war again." That's a story that not too many know, but I didn't realize it until I read this book. This Zamperini. Isn't that something? Oh, that guy. Yeah. But there were so many stories like that.

But personally, another thing that's happened to me treating one of my wounded. We got up on top of the hill at [inaudible]. And our artillery in back of us was shooting over our heads at the Chinese. And the cold weather affected practically all of the weaponry that we had, the rifles and the artillery and the mortars and everything. A lot of them would misfire. They were short range and the automatic rifles wouldn't fire automatic. Some of them wouldn't fire single shots until you played with them.

They had these water tanks on the heavy machine guns, the water would freeze. And this is funny, but the guys would pee in them to get them thawed out. The other light machine, they would get so hot that sometimes the barrels would just go over like that. But anyway, we were on the hill top, a 105 round, short circuited, right in the middle of our platoon.12 guys were wounded. One guy was killed. The guy who was killed was named White. Another guy, he probably wasn't any further away from where that thing hit than twice this length of this room from where I'm at. And I saw him right away, laying out there and the blast of that thing knocked

everybody over. I had these little shrapnel things in my coat. I went out to this guy right away and his leg was blown off. And the first thing I did, I got a tourniquet out. It was right above the knee. Put the tourniquet on, wrapped up his leg. And his name was White also. That's funny. The guy that got killed, his name was White. Anyway, there were 12 guys wounded there. And I forget offhand, how many guys, most of the guys, it was all shrapnel wounds, you know, and most of the guys weren't too bad. They got arms and legs from the shrapnel. This one guy, the shrapnel just literally, probably burnt the flesh off of one arm.

And I had to wrap him up, just wrapped his arm up all the way, to keep him from bleeding. Then they finally brought the litter bearers up. They had some civilian Koreans that came up as litter bearers. They took all these guys down the hill. And I guess maybe a week later or so they came up and they told us that this White with the leg, his mother had gotten back our battalion with a letter or a wire or something and she thanked us for saving her son. He'd been flown back to the United States already.

[01:03:20]

And this Pat [inaudible] guy that I told you about, my platoon Sergeant, he and this guy with the leg thing, they were the only two guys I saw in the Chosin Few after I came back to this country. This White kid lived out in Reno, Nevada, and he worked for the government. He had a government job. And I went down there. There was a Chosin Few unit that had a little meeting down there. I went down there mostly to see him. I went down there and we [starts crying] hugged each other and cried and everything else. And he was such a nice kid and everything, and I bet it wasn't five years later, he got cancer and died.

Another story I'll tell you too, was there was one guy from Butte that I ran into in Korea. Originally, there were seven of us from Butte that were in the Marines unit that was in Korea. I'm the only one left that I know of, but this one guy, his name was Art St. Peter, if you ever see any St. Peter's here in Butte. He was in the Marine Engineers and he heard by his mother's letters or something that I was over there from Butte. And he came and looked me up and we got together three or four times when we were in Hagaru-ri there.

And he was a nice kid and he was one of the guys that helped build the airstrip, flew all the guys out. Anyway, I never saw him again until I came back to Butte. And when I came back to Butte, we lived out on Wyoming Street across from Butte High. So naturally we hung out at Charlie's New Deal Bar. I met Art there. He came in there and, God, was I surprised. And we greeted each other and hugged each other. And we used to see each other up there. He was going to the university in Missoula. And it's as bad as it sounds, he got killed in a car crash, going to college after all that. So, like I said, I'm so damn lucky. I just cannot believe it sometimes. What happens to you before and after.

I guess I could think of a lot of stories. When I came down off the hill at Yudam-ni my feet were killing me. And at that time to deter frostbite, they said, change your socks every day. And we had some pads in our shoe packs. Change those every day. And you carried your socks and the shoe packs inside your shirt to dry them out. But my feet sweat in those days and these damn shoe packs, the moisture built up here and you got frostbite whether you wanted to or not. No matter what you did. So I came down the hill. This was after Pat [inaudible] were shot. And I

ran across my doctor. His name was Dr. Flynn. I'll never forget him. He was from Los Angeles. Nice guy, good guy. And anyway, he said, “How are you doing?” I said, “You know, doctor, I don't know what, but my feet are killing me.” He says, let me see your feet. I took my shoes off. My big toes were like raw meat and the rest of my toes had black blisters on them and on the heels. And he said, “You're not going back up there again.” He said, “You're going to be evacuated.” And we had these green tags that we'd hung out, guys that were wounded. He hung a tag on me. And so then I went over with the wounded guys and I was considered like a walking wounded. And fortunately in the few days that we were still up there, I got in some warm tents at night. My feet started to heal up, I guess, because they just quit hurting me. And I was changing my socks and stuff better.

At any rate during that time, though, all these 935 guys that were wounded laying on the ground, I helped all those guys. And believe it or not, it's never been publicized that much, but it should be, when we were leaving Yudam-ni, we had these 935 guys wounded up there. 150 of them took a helicopter back. But all the rest of them, they carried them, laying on the tops of Jeeps, trucks, and artillery pieces, every place they could to carry them out of there. And all the walking wounded walked out and there were guys that had slings and crutches and everything else. They walked out. Plus the fact that from there all the way out, we fought our way out. Wounded guys like myself, we didn't take evacuations.

We helped fight our way out. You couldn't believe the guys that had one arm to work with that still fired their rifles at the goddamn Chinese. And if we hadn't had the help of them, plus all the able-bodied guys, we'd have never got out of there. And all those guys, some of them got killed like everybody else, even though they were wounded. The other thing is that a lot of them froze to death. They'd sit down and rest and they'd freeze to death. It didn't take that long. And when guys sat down to rest, you'd keep waking them up and tell them to get up and stand up. So they didn't freeze to death. It was that bad.

Years later when we got friendly with the Chinese, Mao Zedong confirmed the fact that we killed 45,000 Chinaman, but he also said that 20,000 more of his men froze to death over there. And they were so ill-equipped you couldn't believe it. We had Chinamen coming up to us to turn in as prisoners. They had frostbitten hands. Their hands were covered with big cakes of ice and legs from the knees down to their feet with big cakes of ice. And they were begging you to shoot them. And of course we didn't shoot them at that time, but they were begging you to shoot them. And a lot of them shot themselves, a lot of the guys just shot them too. And the Chinese did not have any systems where they had to take care of wounded guys.

When they got wounded, they either laid there and died or else their Sergeant shot them or they froze to death or whatever. None of them came back alive, hardly any of them, except the ones that survived, you know, and that's the way the war was. And the Chinese, it was no wonder that we beat them. They were beaten by the weather worse than we were, you know. We had two wars over there. We fought the enemy, and we fought the weather. Yeah. That was the way it was.

Grant: Why do you call it the forgotten war?

Skates: Well, I've been asked that question. It was only three years long, but when I came back, it was like the Vietnam guys that came back. We weren't welcomed back by the people or anything. Everybody just said, "Well fine, you got back." You know, and that was it. There were no parades or anything like that. Or anybody said, thanks for your service or nothing like that. Didn't do that for years later. And I think people just kind of wanted to forget about it because if something happened so unexpectedly and the way that we had to reform our service branches and everything to fight it and everything. And the beating we went through before we finally, we never really came out on top. It was an armistice, you know, and the North Koreans are still trying to shoot us if they can. Every chance they get. And I think it was just something that people want to forget about. They figure the hell with it. But there was one little book that I had at home describing it.

[01:12:58]

This one journalist said, "Of all the wars in history, those that were present will never forget it. And the ones that were there will always be out of place." Not knowing what took place. So that's the way it was. And the Chosin Few organization started in 1983. I didn't get into it till 1990. And they still do. They have a reunion every two years and they have them all over the country. I went to Las Vegas. I went to New Orleans. I went to Miami. I went to Portland. For the 50th anniversary I went to San Diego and that was really a big one. That was the 50th anniversary of the war. 50 years from 1950 to 2000. And we had a huge crowd there.

I was telling you about, I was losing all the weight and everything. And the guys that were dropping us supplies over there. And they had different code words for different things. One codeword they had was Tootsie Roll. And the codeword Tootsie Roll at that time meant mortar ammunition. They would say you're going to get so many rounds of Tootsie Rolls. So something got mixed up when we were over there, they were dropping all these supplies of ammunition, food and medical supplies, sometimes clothing, everything that they could. They dropped off a whole bunch of actual Tootsie Rolls. And everybody thought, "God, is this nuts or whatever?" But we started eating them and it was the best thing that could ever be given us, because it kept us from starving to death.

And you could eat those frozen, partially frozen or not. You didn't have to cook them or heat 'em up or anything. And every damn Tootsie Roll that they dropped to us got eaten. And when we were going down the last hill towards the reservoir, there was an army unit guarding the road from there to the ocean. That had these dump things down there. This one army guy was guarding his dumps and it was all these cases of Tootsie Rolls. And so there were about six of us and this guy says, "What are you going to do with those Tootsie Rolls?" "Well, they're going back aboard ship." He said, "Yeah, they are. But a lot of them are going with us." So we raided the Tootsie Rolls. And at that time, the Marine dungarees had these big pockets and they'd button up. And I had mine full and everyone else did too. We carried all the Tootsie Rolls and ate every damn one of them. And I don't think I ate a Tootsie Roll for 40 years after that or 50 until I got to this 2000 convention. And there was a lady and her husband from the Tootsie Roll company, believe it or not, out of Chicago. They were invited there as honored guests for us survivors on Tootsie Rolls. I was telling you about all the miniature stuff I made. I made these little four holers. They weren't little, they were this wide, that square for bathrooms. The guys did their duty in them. The guys would eat chow and then go out there and do their duty.

And the Koreans use that feces, human waste for fertilizer in their patties. And there were times when they would come up there with the bucket they'd dip in there, fill it up and take it down to the rice patty. But anyway, there was one of these in one of our Chosin Few pictures, these two guys that they put in there as a joke, it was actually a photograph of these guys sitting on this thing, doing their duty. I saw that. So I thought I'm going to make some of those. So I made these little miniatures that are about like that. The four holes, little things opened up and I cut these pictures out and I got a bunch of them made. And I put these underneath the little four holes that I made. I put a little note on it and instructions for use. And I made over 50 of those.

And I gave them to all my buddies, mostly in the Chosin Few. I gave one to a four-star general. I gave them to all kinds of people. But anyway, when I went to San Diego at that time, I had eight of those. I was carrying them on my arm, giving them away. And I ran across this couple from the Tootsie Roll company. This man and his wife, very nice people. I don't know, I got their name, but I forget what it was now. And they were just so nice to everybody. And I told them about how we raided the Tootsie Roll pile going out. And she saw that I had these things on my arm. She says, "Can I have one of those?" And I gave her one of the ones. So here's the head of the Tootsie Roll company who has got one of my four holers on her front desk. Isn't that something? And I gave the rest of those away. And a kid came to the house the other day. I got one at home there and he says, "I'll buy one of these, if you'll make me one." I said, "No, you won't." But I said, "I'll make you one." I don't know if I gave the Archives one or not. I'll have to bring one up.

There were a lot of good stories like that, but anyway, Tootsie Rolls. You'd never believe that something like that would be saving your life either, you know. And here this lady said, “Can I have one of those?” And this four-star general that I gave one to. His name was General Davis. He was the head of a battalion, I guess, of the seventh Marines. And he was one of the big head officers that led us out of the Yudam-ni. And he got wounded. He had to put a special force together to get us out of there. Then we went out of there by night and the Chinese were sleeping and freezing and everything, and we killed them and we didn't lose any guys. We had to fight our way down to the juncture there where Fox Company was at. Fox Company guarded this junction in the road to keep the Chinese from cutting us off there. So we could get out of the perimeter of the Yudam-ni. And this General Davis, he was a Lieutenant Colonel. He got a medal of honor for that. Then there was this Captain Barber at Fox Company. He got a medal of honor for being there. Then there was a private from New Jersey. I forget his name. He got a medal of honor. The Chosin few guys, there were 17 medals of honor awarded per 12,000 troops.

And in Iwo Jima in World War Two, there were 23 medals of honor for something like out of 60,000 troops. So it was the most Medals of Honor for any one unit in military history. So that gives you an idea of how much fighting went on. In all of the Korean War there were 46 Marines that got Medals of Honor. And there were four Navy corpsmen that got Medals of Honor. And this one Navy corpsman, one story of this one guy, he was treating these two Marines that were wounded. These two Chinamen came up, threw two grenades at him over this little mound. And he picked up the grenades, ran down to them and put them both in their chest, blew them up and blew himself up. He got the Medal of Honor. So that tells you about how things went. There were a lot of guys that fell on top of grenades and sacrificed their bodies and got Medals of Honor. They saved the other guys around them.

[01:22:42]

One of the first things that happened when we first got to Korea, I'll never forget, we dug our foxholes for the night in a garden or a pepper patch or something. The smell was terrible. It was garlic, I guess. The Koreans raised most of their food or whether it was onions or garlic or peppers or rice patties or whatever. They had very little meat and stuff, you know? But anyway, this one Marine in the night, something happened to him and he mistakenly pulled a pin on a grenade. And it almost blew him in half. It hit him in the middle of his groin. It just blew his bloody right in half. And he mistakenly did that. That was the first casualty that I came to in Korea. And it was just all a mistake. And there were different things like that that happened. And then like the friendly fire things that happened more.

They never publicized that much because they didn't want people to know it, but it happens in every war. And it's a terrible thing. Like I was telling you about the artillery round that hit us, you know? Yeah. And it's funny that an artillery round hit us, our company commander's name was Johnson. He was a First Lieutenant. When we got hit by that artillery round, this White guy, he got killed. He had to write things about everybody that got killed or wounded. And it went back to the parents. Death notices. So he wrote that this White kid got killed in the battle at Yudam-ni rather than say it was friendly fire, which to me made sense. And this Johnson, he came to Montana. He had a cabin over by Helena. He was quite a guy. He was a pharmaceutical sales rep. He flew his own airplane after that and everything. Great guy. He passed away too.

But anyway, the Navy and the Marine Corps to show you how chicken shit I'll put it that way they were, after all this found out that this kid was killed by friendly fire. They kind of punished this Johnson, this Lieutenant Johnson for doing that. It said that he illegally wrote that. That he should tell the truth, but by him not telling the truth, it was a much better way to put it, rather than say that had shot our own. And so he stayed in the Marines and retired, but they would never give him another promotion because he did that. Isn't that something? Yeah, but it happened all the time. Yeah.

So let me think. I'm running out, I guess. So I've probably taken up too much of your guys' time.

Grant: I was just curious a little bit about Butte after you came back, why banking? You spent a lot of years banking.

Skates: Well, that was kind of funny. You know, you hear a lot of stories about guys that come back from the service with PTSD. Well, it really happened during Vietnam. PTSD. And a lot of it was because there were a lot of drugs over there. There weren't so many damn drugs during the Second World War or Korea. But once the drugs got in there, I think the military, they still have a problem with it, you know?

But anyway, you hear a lot about the guys coming back, the veterans can't get jobs and stuff. Well, when I came back, I got out, I took the bus, went up to Olympia. I met my mother up there. My sister lived up there and then we spent a couple of weeks there. Then we came back to Butte on the train and I didn't know what I was going to do. And I went up to the VA to see about going to college on the GI bill, the Korean GI bill. So the VA guy said, "With your time in the service, you got 18 months coming on the Second World War GI bill, because I listed in 1946.

He said, you got 22 months coming on the Korean GI bill. I said, "Well, does that give me four years?" He said, "Nope. You could only have one or the other." After serving five years, and eight months of combat. That's the way they gave it to me. So I did use the Korean one. They gave you like $24 a week to go to school. I went down to the old Butte business college. And I brushed up on the bookkeeping and typing, and I never did much of the typing, and I always hated bookkeeping, but all my life, I spent one way or another in bookkeeping.

So anyway, jobs, when I came back, I had no idea where I was going to go to work or anything. And my mother babysat for this guy. He was the big shot for Safeway company, the whole division here. They had a little 9 or 10 year old girl and my mother babysat her. She made her clothes and everything. And they loved my mother.

[01:29:02]

And the guy's name was Barrett Cane. And my mother said, "Mr. Cane, my son just came home from Korea. Would you know if there were any jobs with Safeway?" And he said, "Hell yes. Send him up to see Edgar Peterson tomorrow." He said that he's in personnel. He said he's got a job. So, what happened? My mother got me a job, right? In other words, I've said, all these guys come back. Why don't their families help them? My poor mother got me this job. And I worked for Safeway. You know where the ACE hardware moved out of, that originally was a Safeway store. I don't know if you remember that, but next to it was the old Safeway that burned down. I went to work and I didn't have a car or anything. I lived up across from Butte High School. I had to take the bus down. And at night the bus was gone. So I had to walk home from there up to Butte High School.

Anyway, I got a job as an apprentice clerk, a dollar an hour, 48 hours a week. That was the first job I got. And so I just learned everything. And everybody liked me. And a lot of them asked me questions about the war and everything. This Barrett Cane came in, "Weren't you here during the Korean War?" I said, "No, no I wasn't Mr. Cane." He says, "The hell you weren't." He said, "I heard all about you." That's what he said. But anyway, I worked there for, I guess, about six months as an apprentice clerk. They wanted me to join the union even. This one guy told me to hide every time the union guy would come in. But after six months, I heard of a job working for Consolidated Freightways as a teamster, and they paid a hell of a lot more. You had to only work 48 hours. So I went up there and worked for about maybe five, six months again on the dock. And it was all hard physical work. We didn't have such a thing as forklifts or anything. It was all two-wheeled trucks and all that stuff. And so this friend of ours that my mother went to church with, he was the manager of the old Safeway dry goods storage facility up by the Silver Bow Homes.

And anyway, he asked my mother one time, "How's Dick doing with his work?" She said, "He isn't doing too bad, but they changed everything to three shifts down there. And he has to work three shifts around the clock in order. One week and another week." And she said, the guy isn't too easy to work with. He said, send him up here. He said, I'll put him to work and give him more money. He'll only work the day shift. He said, "I'm sure he will be a lot happier." So I went there again. I went up to the Safeway warehouse to work. And I spent seven years in a warehouse.

And then when they built a new warehouse way out there by the bowling alley, way out Harrison Avenue. They closed our warehouse. They closed the grocery warehouse, which was down on Utah, and then we all moved out there. But, working in the Safeway by the Silver Bow homes, we had all the dry goods stuff down there - coffee, paper, soap products, everything that didn't freeze. The only thing that froze was the help. And there was no heat in the warehouse, only in the doghouse and the restroom. We had to eat our lunch in the restroom, and we only got a half hour for lunch. We had to put everything on these four-wheel trucks and load them up and push them. And we didn't have any forklifts or anything. When we moved out there, then they had forklifts. But anyway, so I went up to work up there and then anyway, I moved out with this guy. I should say he was a horseshit guy.

And I knew him as a truck driver when I was at the store. He wasn't a bad guy then, but they made a boss out of him. And he was riding the hell out of everybody. And for some reason, he got after me. He was always coming over there to the warehouse. And he'd say, if you guys don't get more tonnage out, we were going to get fired. That was something that they always threatened. Yeah. So then it was the same way in the new warehouse, I went out there and I was out there a year. And then I got a job out there driving a forklift, and it was a standup forklift. And you drove that all day. Your weight was on one leg all day and you pushed the pedal with the other leg, steered. And when you get off that at night, you didn't have any coffee breaks or anything like that or to sit down at all. Your damn leg just about didn't hold you up as you were looking for a place to sit down.

So my wife and I were married at that time. We got married when I was at the old warehouse. She worked for Safeway too. That's how we met each other. But anyway I said to my wife, I said, I'm getting tired of that crap out there. I said, those guys are horseshit and everything. So her boss was a district manager. So she told him about it. And he said, you know, he says, he's had store experience. He says, I'm going to put him back in the stores. So at the store, where the ACE hardware was, they built that brand new store. I went down there to go to work. Well, at that time, with the time I had at Safeway and everything, they had to give me full clerk wages and everything.

And this guy that was about my age, he was a manager. They brought him up here from Miles City. He was another horseshit Safeway manager. And he didn't like me for some reason because he had to pay me full wages, I guess. And he used to come around. First of all, I'd worked in the produce with this guy.

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I knew him for a long time. We got along great. And then I go work in the groceries and I'd be stocking the shelves and he'd come around and he'd say, "What are you gonna do next?" I'd say, "Well, I'm going to do more stocking." "Where are you going to do it?" I'd say, "Well, wherever I have to." Finally, I was there not very damn long and he decided to get rid of me because he thought he had to pay me too much salary because his other apprentice guys working there didn't get paid that much. So they sent me down to the store that's on Front Street. The store that's there now was built in 1962. And I was the assistant manager there in '62, but I went to work in the old store that was this way. They tore that down and they built that new one and it was a little store number, 1946. And the guy I went to work for down there, his name was Harvey [inaudible].

And he was a great guy. A guy that you'd want to work for. I went to work down there and we were there for about five years together, I guess. And I was working and so here comes another horseshit guy. He took my wife's old boss's job, and he wanted to get rid of my wife because he dated her when he was single and she was single. And so his wife was jealous, so she didn't want him to have her as a secretary. Talk about soap operas. He sent me up to the store on Granite Street. There used to be five stores up on Granite Street. So this guy that was up there, I got along with him alright. But he was dumb as a crutch and I knew more than he did and everything that came along, he was always asking me questions about it. In fact, he didn't even know how to open the safe right until I taught him.

But anyway, my wife was in an office on Broadway where the Pre-Release center is now. And she used to go up the street to have coffee up there. And this barber from across the street, his name was [inaudible]. He used to talk to my wife and somehow we got to be friends with Tweed and his wife Louis. And we used to go to the Elks together with him and his wife. Lois was an officer in the Metals Bank. And after I had been at Safeway and I was up on Granite Street and I didn't mind it up there, but the guy was always coming up there, riding me.

And so anyway, my brother-in-law's mother died. And we went to a funeral in Helena. We came back. There was a restaurant across the street from the Finlen. It was a chicken place. We ran into Lois and Tweed up there and we were talking to them. Lois said, "Are you still in a Safeway?" And I said, "Yeah." She said, this guy is retiring at Metals Bank. She said, "You'd be the guy that should be down there working at the bank." And I said, "Well, I don't know. Do you I'm qualified?" She said, "God, yes. You've handled a lot of money at Safeway and everything." She said, "I'm going to recommend you." So I thought it over. Plus they paid more money as a teller. So I went down and I applied for this job. This guy's name was John O'Neill. And so they accepted me and they said, "You can go to work, but you have to wait two weeks so that Safeway doesn't think that we are steeling their help."

So I went down to work there in January of 1966 and I worked until January of 1988. And that's how I went to the bank. So there, again, not by my mother, but my friends helped me get a job. So that's the way you get jobs. It's not what you know, it's who you know. I don't know about you guys, but have you got jobs up here or are you volunteers?

Jaap: I work up here. Clark is just doing this oral history project with us.

Skates: But it's a nice place to work, isn't it? But anyway, that's about how I went to work at the bank. I was a teller. And then the head teller retired, I became the head teller, the vault teller, and that was boss over all the tellers. And I did that. And you had the responsibility of $2 million in cash that was in the bank at that time, plus all the tellers, they had to bring their money to put in a balance every night. They'd bring their drawers, put it in the vault at night. So then from there, they made me the administrative assistant. I worked for the cashier and then we got a new president and he promoted the cashier to a vice-president.

They promoted me to being an officer. I was an assistant cashier. Later on they promoted me to be an assistant vice president. And that's where I was when I left the bank. And I left the bank when they deregulated the banks in the late eighties. And when they did that, all the banks in Montana previous to that were all, there were no bank branches in Montana. And when they did

that practically all the banks in Montana became branch banks out of Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle and all over. So they downsized the bank. They started out, there were seven of us. I was one officer. There was another officer too, but I was one officer with eight other people. And those other eight people worked for me. And I was reapplying for a job for one of the seven jobs that was going to be left available. I guess there were 14 of us for seven jobs. And so they kept interviewing you and interviewing you.

Well, Christ. I had more knowledge about everything. Before the deregulation, they had the deal called AIB, the American Institute of Banking. It was actually an educational college type educational that all the banks in the country lived by. And you could get educated through this bank that taught classes. How to do loans and personal banking. I taught that for three years, the principles of bank operations. And anyway, if you've got five of those courses, then you got a number one recommendation. I forget what they call it. It was a kind of a little degree thing, but anyway, I even did that. And so the longer it went, and so all of a sudden, they changed the qualification thing on these jobs.

And so the qualification they put down there, I was the only guy at the bank that qualified by all these things. So that meant they wanted to keep me. So I talked to the guy that was becoming boss and he said, "You can stay, but your job will probably end when you collect social security at 62." I was 58 years old. And I said, "Well, that's very nice." And so the more I thought about it. So then wouldn't, you know, in the meantime, this kid that I worked with at the bank that had quit, he and four other guys, they bought property out there. They built the Super 8 Motel. So he heard that I was leaving the bank. So he called me up and he says, "I want you to come out and be my hotel manager."

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So, anyway, the more I thought about it, I thought, well, the bank, they're changing so much. First they didn't want me. And now they want me. I says, do I want them? Or did they want me? So I decided to leave. And the best thing that happened when I left was with the time of service I had, they changed their policy and they gave you, instead of giving you an annuity thing, a retirement and stuff, they give you a complete payout on what benefits you had. So I had profit sharing benefits, retirement benefits, and then I had a medical hospital insurance that they gave me. Plus they gave me a $5,000 life insurance plan.

But I'll tell you guys and don't tell anybody else. I got $90,000 out of my profit sharing, $30,000 out of my retirement. But if I spent any of it before I was 59, I think, I had to pay taxes on it. So I didn't spend any because I had a job anyway. But the biggest catch was when I went to work at the motel, I actually gave up $10,000 a year in salary. But to make up for that every time there was a payout of the owners, they gave me a good bonus. And from 1988 to around 1992, the four owners of the motel, believe it or not, all each got a million dollars. That's how good that business was. And those different years that they were taking every time, every month they'd take a payout and sometimes they'd get 50, $20,000.

We had total a hundred percent occupancy from March to the end of September, every year for at least 10 years. So I was there, first 10 years. I was there. Yeah. So that shows you how they got their money. And I was going to retire, of course, I had all the other money that I could use,

which I have used. But I still got some of it though, believe it or not. Then my wife was lucky. She got IRA from [inaudible]. She worked for the KBOW for 27 years. She was a saleswoman for 14 years. She was a log writer or whatever they call it for 11 years, I guess it was, she used to type up all the logs for the announcers and stuff. She left to become a saleswoman. She was a salesman for 14 years. For 10 consecutive years, she sold a hundred thousand dollars in insurance.

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The only one that ever did it down there for shag, and it got so bad and my wife was born and raised in Butte. She knew everybody and everything that some of the other salesmen tried to steal her accounts. Shows you how greed kind of enters into things sometimes when you can't keep up with the other guy or something, you know, but anyway, my wife was very successful too, and she had got an IRA head and we still got some of that. My poor son, he's got a mental disability, has got diabetes and he's at home now. And he was picked on as a kid and these guys, they bullied the hell out of him. Christ, they broke our windows and every other damn thing before it finally stopped.

This one kid that was the most instrumental of all for picking on Randy, he got married. He married this gal. He had four kids bang, bang, bang, bang. She divorced him and he committed suicide after all the crap that he pulled on everybody. Sometimes justice happens in the strangest ways. Doesn't it? Yeah, I guess I should write a book and be on a soap opera, shouldn't I? I hope I haven't bored you guys too much. Have I? But you know, I look back and I'm not bragging or anything, but I probably had a life that most people won't ever live, you know. Going through the Depression, the Second World War, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, and these middle east wars now. All the years, I worked in the different jobs and all the people that I knew and all the times in the service and everything. I've lived a good life, I think. And I'm not bragging or anything. I know I've never been one to brag, but I just believe in telling the truth. That's it.

And I always apologize to everybody. Yeah. We go in the store and they wait on me and I say, thanks for putting up with me. I'll say that to you guys too. Thanks for putting up with me. Anything else you want?

Grant: That's it for me.

Skates: I hope I gave you something to write a story on or something.

Jaap: Yeah, you did.

Skates: But I'm 90 years old now. My poor wife, she was 90 and five months later, she passed away. Damn diabetes ate her up. When she retired in 96, she got diabetes [inaudible]. Anyway, the last four years, she was living, it was just one thing after another. She got that drop through her legs and she got these diabetic comas and stuff. And then insulin reactions. And there's more of that damn diabetes around anymore than there ever was. It seemed like you read it all the time. And plus we got this Coronavirus. I don't know. So you want me to get the hell out of here?

Grant: I wouldn't put it that way. Well, thank you, Dick.

Skates: Let me give you guys a gift, just a small one. It's kind of fun.

Grant: Nice. Thank you.

[END OF RECORDING]