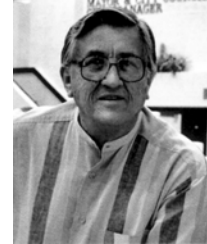




**BENNIE MONTAGUE GONZALES**  
1924-2008

1997  
Internationally Recognized  
Southwestern Architect



The following is an oral history interview with Bennie M. Gonzales (**BG**) conducted by Zona D. Lorig (**ZL**) for Historical League, Inc. on August 2, 1996 at his home in Nogales, Arizona.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.  
Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.*

**ZL:** This oral history interview is being conducted with Barnaby "Bennie" M. Gonzales on August 2, 1996 at his home in Nogales, Arizona. Mr. Gonzales was recently named a 1997 Historymaker by Historical League, Inc. of the Central Arizona Division of the Arizona Historical Society. The interviewer is Zona Davis Lorig.

Congratulations on receiving the honor of being named a Historymaker, Mr. Gonzales.

**BG:** Thank you.

**ZL:** Please begin by telling us when and where you were born.

**BG:** I was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1924 at 20th Street just south of Osborn which at that time was our family farm, and was quite a distance from downtown Phoenix. I started school at Creighton Elementary on McDowell Road. We used to walk to Indian School Road and 20th Street to catch the bus to the elementary school. Unfortunately my father had diabetes and he became quite ill. We had some property in Phoenix and we moved when I was six years old. My father died when I was eight and we lived on 16th Street just south of Van Buren on Monroe Street. Then I went to Longfellow School located at 19th Street and Monroe from kindergarten through the fifth grade. Then I transferred to Monroe School and graduated in 1938. I entered Phoenix Union High and went through high school.

**ZL:** Was Phoenix Union a large school?



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** Yes, it was one of the largest high schools in the country. It had over 5,000 students. Of course the colored, or the blacks, went to Carver High School on Grant Street. They weren't allowed to go to Phoenix Union. They had their own black high school. I graduated from Phoenix Union High and I applied . . .

**ZL:** Before we get to that I want to back up because your family background is so interesting. Was your father a mixture of Hispanic and Indian and German?

**BG:** Yes, yes.

**ZL:** Do you know how those people got together, when the Germans came over from the old country?

**BG:** Well, I heard about it from my mother, who gave me some of my father's background because he was orphaned. He was born in Phoenix but his mother was born in Tempe, Arizona. I asked my mother how my father's family came to Arizona and she said that his family was from Alamos, Sonora, Mexico. And I asked, "Well, what was his background?" She said, "There were a lot of miners who came to work the mines in Alamos and there was just a general mixture." I asked, "But what about the Indian part?" She said, "He was part Mayan Indian which was a close tie to the Yaqui Indians in the state of Sonora." That was my father's background as far as we know. He had only one sister who married S. L. Cahill, a contractor from Phoenix. Those were my early childhood memories of my father.

My mother's father was an engineer for the railroad when it came into Nogales, Arizona. It must have been 1900 or in the late 1800s.

**ZL:** Where did the train come from?

**BG:** As far as I know, it came in from Tucson, through Benson, and into Nogales. His whole family was in the railroad building business. My grandfather, George Montague, his father and his uncle were both engineers with the Central Pacific Railroad.

**ZL:** Mr. Gonzales is showing me a postcard. I'll let him describe the picture.

**BG:** This picture was taken at the time that they drove the Golden Spike, the final spike, at Promontory, Utah. It shows the Central Pacific locomotive, Jupiter, and the Union Pacific locomotive which was a coal burner. This was my great-granduncle and his brother, who was my grandfather's father, George Montague. He was born in Port Huron, Michigan. They had immigrated to the US from County Cork in Ireland.

It's quite an interesting way that my grandfather met my grandmother who was a Mexican and she lived in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. When he brought the railroad through Hermosillo, he met my grandmother



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



and married her. They had seven or eight children. His father, George Montague, came out of an old railroading family by way of England to County Cork, Ireland, then on into the United States. So we are native's way back.

**ZL:** Yes, and came West with the railroad. I'm not sure we clarified the fact that in the picture your great-granduncle is shaking hands with the man from the Union Pacific.

**BG:** That's correct.

**ZL:** And he was from which railroad?

**BG:** Central Pacific. That is Leland Stanford with the others who started that. A byline on that was that as a youngster, my mom would tell me that I had a scholarship to go to Stanford if I could get my grades up. (Laughter)

**ZL:** Did your grandfather eventually settle in Nogales?

**BG:** Yes, he did. That was in the late 1800s. He was one of the original members of the Masonic Lodge. He built the Temple here in Nogales, Arizona and carried the Masonic Lodge rights into Mexico. He was one of the people responsible for the Mexicans becoming part of the Masonic Lodge. It's interesting because they were engineers, builders, and contractors. I guess that's where part of my . . .

**ZL:** Your creative juices flow?

**BG:** Well, I hope so.

**ZL:** How did your mother meet your father?

**BG:** My mother was in her early twenties. She came from Nogales to Phoenix to live with her older sister, Rosa Cahill, and her husband who was a horse breeder/racer living in Phoenix. They owned a gravel company called Cahill. They would get gravel from the Salt River and use it on various building sites. His brother, S. L. Cahill, married my father's sister.

**ZL:** So that's where the double relationship is.

**BG:** That's the double relationship. It's a long line of builders and I guess that's one of the things I really like. Going back to when I graduated from high school, it was 1942 and I was attending Phoenix Union. I was a senior when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I went to the Navy recruiting office the next morning and enlisted. I wanted to be a naval aviator.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



I passed my medical exams in Phoenix so they sent me to Los Angeles and gave me another physical. My left eye was 18/20. I was told by the US Navy officer who interviewed me that I couldn't become a flier because of my left eye. I asked him what I should do. "I want to be a Navy flier," and he asked me, "What about the Army?" "No, I don't want any part of the Army." Not because of anything else, only that I didn't want to be a foot soldier.

He suggested that I sign up with the Coast Guard. I did, but they didn't have any openings from Arizona, so I came back to Phoenix and finished high school. I went to aircraft school at night during my senior year. When I graduated I went to work at Thunderbird Field, which was an Army training base for primary trainers. I worked there until I went into the Coast Guard.

**ZL:** How long was that?

**BG:** It was almost a year before I could get into the Coast Guard. I joined it because I was told that if my left eye got better I could go into the Coast Guard, and then transfer to the Navy Air Force. It is interesting that I would have been younger than President George H. W. Bush, who was the same age as I when he served in the Navy Air Force, if I had gone straight into the Navy Air Force.

I went into the Guard and was stationed in Oakland, California on Government Island. I was sent to quarter master school in Manhattan Beach, New York. I was picked out because I was over six feet tall and weighed over 156 pounds and that was their criteria. Quarter masters were signalmen and navigation-oriented people for the Coast Guard. The reason they picked fellows over six feet tall was that they wanted us to be landing beach masters when the war got to the islands in the Pacific. Fortunately I was sent to a freighter based out of San Francisco, the USS Ensalada. I served on it for a year in the Pacific; then I was transferred to a Navy personnel troop carrier as a quarter master and signalman. I was on board that ship until the war was over.

**ZL:** Did you see a lot of cities?

**BG:** Being a sailor you had a chance to see many.

**ZL:** Did your interest in architecture grow during that time?

**BG:** I was always interested from the time I was a little kid because I started working with my uncle when I was seven years old.

**ZL:** Yes, we want to cover that, but finish your Coast Guard career and we will come back to that.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** After my Coast Guard duty I came back to Phoenix because my mother had died while I was in the service. I only had a brother and I wanted to be sure that he finished his education at the time. He came back from the service and got married the day he came home and they moved to Alaska.

I was going to Arizona State University at the time and Lewis S. Neeb was the head of the Industrial Arts; they didn't have a school of architecture. It was difficult to get into a school of architecture in California because of the many returning servicemen. So I graduated from ASU in 1954.

**ZL:** During that time did you also work as a fireman?

**BG:** Yes, I went to work on the Phoenix Fire Department when I married Lupe Baca. She was going to ASU at the time so I decided that I had to go to work to support the family. There were openings at the Phoenix Fire Department and the Phoenix Police Department. I decided I'd rather work for the Phoenix Fire Department. I was there five years, until I graduated from ASU. Then I got a scholarship to the University of Mexico in Mexico City and took additional architectural courses.

**ZL:** You had a couple of professors at ASU who were instrumental in helping you focus on architecture.

**BG:** Yes, William Ensign was the founding head of the school of architecture at ASU. Mr. James Elmore became head of the school when it was accredited. I studied with both Mr. Ensign and Mr. Elmore. I had decided to become an architect because I could see that there would be a great future in building housing for the Valley.

**ZL:** Especially right after the war.

**BG:** This was at the time that John F. Long and some of the major builders were just starting out. I remodeled one of the old houses that our family owned. I put up a sign to sell it because I had thought about moving and building a new home. A fellow came by and said, "Do you want to sell the house?" I said, "Yes." He came in and looked at the house and said, "I'll take it." Then I bought a lot at 18th Street and Avalon, north of Thomas Road off 16th Street. Unfortunately, I couldn't build on the property because I was Mexican and the property was deed restricted against Mexicans, Orientals, and blacks.

**ZL:** What year was this?

**BG:** It must have been about 1955.

**ZL:** I can't believe that.

**BG:** It was sort of disheartening to me because I had faced this minority conflict before. I talked to the





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



mortgage people and they said that there had just been a revision of federal law stating that properties could not be restricted on racial grounds. I believe that was a credit to President Lyndon Baines Johnson. I went and bought the property. There was a mortgage broker on Central Avenue and Jefferson Street whom I had met when I was a newspaper salesman on the corner of Central and Jefferson as a kid of fourteen.

When I went to get the mortgage he asked, "Bennie, why are you going to school?" I said, "I want to become an architect." "Why don't you become a builder instead? I'm a mortgage broker and you can get as much money for building houses as any of the other builders that are in town." I said, "Well, I really want to finish my education and I'm going to go to Mexico." This was at the time when I was graduating from ASU in 1954. I told him that I had gotten the grant to go to the University of Mexico in Mexico City. He said, "I know you would like that, but architects have a hard time making a living. Why don't you become a builder? You've got everything going for you. You're the best around. I've seen what you're doing now and I've gotten mortgages for your jobs."

**ZL:** While you were in the middle of going to school and working as a fireman, were you also building houses?

**BG:** Yes.

**ZL:** You were a busy man.

**BG:** Well, I enjoyed it. I had a lot of fireman who used to work for me building these houses. The experience I got from building houses and going to school to become an architect was a good start for an apprenticeship program. When I graduated and came back from Mexico, Blaine Drake hired me to build houses. He had been with Frank Lloyd Wright, so I benefitted from that past knowledge that he learned having worked with Mr. Wright. I was with Drake for two or three years, serving my apprenticeship as an architect.

**ZL:** I want to go back to your uncle because he was such an interesting man. I am referring to the contractor S. L. Cahill. He took you under his wing, didn't he?

**BG:** Yes. He had two sons, James and Barney Cahill. Barney Cahill had been a super sports star at Phoenix Union. I think he had reached the level of being an Olympic discus thrower in track. He worked for my uncle and so did James. James left Phoenix after college. He went to California and became the head man for one of the largest bedroom furniture manufacturing companies in the country. My uncle would take me out on jobs, or my dad would take me out. I must have been five or six.

**ZL:** Your dad was in business with your uncle?



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** Yes, they built the adobes on a ranch at 20th Street and Osborn; then they built the stables at the Biltmore. They also used the adobes for the Camelback Inn. When they went to deliver materials to the jobs, I went with them. Sometimes I'd get to stay all day; my mom would pack my lunch. It was very interesting because I got in during the building of the Biltmore Hotel and the Camelback Inn.

**ZL:** As an aside, who did your uncle say designed the Biltmore?

**B:** Well, he knew Frank Lloyd Wright was around but it was really the McArthur brothers. I heard from others, (I shouldn't say this), that Frank Lloyd Wright had run away with a banker's wife in the Midwest. She had three children from the banker. She ran off with Frank Lloyd Wright and he took her to Wisconsin.

They had a Jamaican servant there who ran amuck. He killed the wife and the three children. Frank Lloyd Wright was somewhere out of the country, I don't know if he was in Japan or wherever. When he came back he had a suit filed against him by the wife's banker husband on white slavery charges. So Frank Lloyd Wright came to Arizona fleeing those charges of the Mann Act; that's how he came to Chandler. Two students of his, the McArthur brothers, were building the Biltmore at the time. They asked Mr. Wright to come and help them. Frank Lloyd Wright was almost penniless when he came to Arizona.

**ZL:** What about the blocks that were used to construct the Arizona Biltmore?

**BG:** They were wooden forms, wooden forms that had the texture on them and they were out of concrete. They built those right on the site. Here I am six or so, helping the men pour concrete into the wooden forms. Most of the workers were Mexican men from Tempe and a couple of the families lived in Papago Park. At that time, there was some housing nearby. The workers were plasterers and cement finishers. I think the block design was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's journeys to Japan when he worked over there.

**ZL:** Did your uncle also build the original house for the Heard family?

**BG:** Yes, he and his partner built the family home for Mae and Dwight Heard. It was later converted into the Heard Museum. Barney Cahill told me about setting the brick in the entry courtyard of the patio, early work they did when it was converted into a museum. When I had a chance to do the additions to the museum, I did the entire front.

**ZL:** That must have been very special for you.

**BG:** Oh, it was, it was. Frankly, it was a great opportunity because when you get out onto the sidewalk, it is all my work that you see. The original house was behind the patio and that became the museum. Then



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



we did all of the additions, including the pergola. Edward "Bud" Jacobson, an attorney in Phoenix, and Sandra O'Connor, the Supreme Court Justice, were serving on the museum board. There was a lady who was an interior designer from California who had moved to Phoenix and she lived in the first high rise apartment complex by the Phoenix Library. She married some fellow that had a large ranch in Northern Arizona. She was on the original committee. That committee was made up of a group of local Phoenix people.

**ZL:** Let's discuss Mexico because that was an interesting experience you had when you did your graduate work. Was that kind of a culture shock?

**BG:** Well, I had not been to Mexico City previously; I had only been to Hermosillo and maybe Sinaloa. But I wanted to go to Mexico City because they had just held the Olympics. I knew the architecture that was going on in the city through magazine articles about the Olympics. I felt it would be a good place to grab some additional schooling from Luis Barragán, a famous Mexican architect, and from the Spanish architect, Félix Candela, who was teaching at the University of Mexico.

I went to Mexico and during the first year I studied at the old San Cosme which was the University of Mexico before they moved to the new University at Insurgentes in 1954. Then I interviewed with the chairman of the architectural school, a fellow by the name of Mariscal.

He asked me why I wanted to go to school in Mexico. "Well, I've admired your work tremendously from what you've done for the Olympics and the new buildings." He asked me, "Why do you want to come here? You went to an American university." I said, "Well, I want additional schooling and I don't want to go to any schools in the United States; I thought I'd be better off coming to Mexico."

He said, "How come you can't speak Spanish any better than you do?" "Well, I have been in the service and I haven't been around any Spanish-speaking people that long. My mother died a few years back so I haven't had any need to speak Spanish except when I go to Mexico." He said, "You ought to do better." I said "That's why I'm here." He said, "I can't let you into the school. You are going to have to talk to my father, Nicolas Mariscal." I asked, "Why do I have to talk to him?" "Because he is still the chairman of the school, I haven't taken over for him yet."

So I went to talk to Nicolas Mariscal. He must have been in his eighties, and he asked, "Where did you go to school?" I said, "Arizona State University." He said, "I haven't really heard of it." I said, "It was just recently accredited as an architectural school," and he said, "Well, what have you read?" I outlined some of the books that I had read and he said, "You've pretty good knowledge of the guys." I said, "Yes, they don't study at the academies in Paris anymore to be architects in the United States."

He laughed and asked who my professor was and I told him it was James Elmore, who had worked for





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and was a graduate of Columbia University. He said, "He went to Columbia? That's a wonderful school. What did my son tell you?" I told Mr. Mariscal that his son asked me why I hadn't learned to speak Spanish better. I told Mariscal, "He said that I spoke like a *poche*." That's what they used to call those people on the border. Mariscal laughed and said, "Well, he's young and you'll have to forgive him." I said, "Well, I want to take classes here." He said, "Sure." So he went ahead and accepted me into the school.

**ZL:** Did your family go with you to Mexico?

**BG:** Yes, my wife and my son BJ, who was eighteen months old, and I went down and lived in Mexico City. I had an aunt who lived in Mexico City and she had apartments. She had been born in Alamos, Mexico and was the daughter of my mother's father, George Montague. Her husband was a Spaniard and he had a livery stable here in Nogales, Arizona when she met him. He was the first one to have an automobile agency here.

**ZL:** In Nogales?

**BG:** Yes, a Chevrolet agency. Someone asked him to go to Mexico City because there weren't any automobile agencies in Mexico. So my aunt and her husband went to Mexico City and opened up the first automobile agency in Mexico. I think it was a Chevrolet agency.

When we went to Mexico City, I met him and was completely enthralled by him. Here he was, a Spaniard who could speak English, living in Mexico. They had adopted the daughter of one of his wife's sisters; incidentally she is buried here in this Nogales cemetery.

This sister had married a movie director from Hollywood, a Mr. Gottlieb. The sister was making a movie with an actor in Hollywood, I never got his name. While they were working on the movie, her husband caught them making love in an automobile. Gottlieb got a gun and killed them both and himself. They had a young daughter, about a year old; my aunt in Mexico City adopted her. Her name was Olga Gottlieb. She married some fellow here in Nogales and moved back to the States.

My aunt's husband, the Spaniard, had a wonderful library, just a wonderful library. I'd spend days there talking to him. He encouraged me to go to Mexico City. Of course, some of the books he had were on Mexican ruins. I would travel to the cathedral cities and the communities I had read about, and visited just about all of the ruins at that time.

One of my professors at the University of Mexico was the fellow by the name of Fernandez. He was serving on the board of aesthetics for the Mexican government. Professor Fernandez had been on the original team that had discovered Palenque and excavated it. He said to me, "You've got to go to



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



Palenque." Another of my professors was a historian, Dolores del Rio's brother, an Oxford scholar. Here I am in Mexico City, coming to class in Levis. Professor del Rio would teach class, walking in every day in his Oxford suit, you know, a tux, full dress.

**ZL:** Very formal.

**BG:** Yes, he was very much the actor. But he was wonderful from a historian's standpoint. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to have that type of background.

**ZL:** How did the students relate to you?

**BG:** There was a mix of students because it was all post-graduate work and they were mostly foreigners. One of the fellows that I became very close to was from Texas. He was an accountant who had married a Mexican girl. Her family was wealthy. Unfortunately he said, "Bennie, I can't take the family. I'm going to get a divorce and go back to the States."

There were fifty-two Russians at the University of Mexico while I was there. It was interesting the Russians spoke English and some spoke a little Spanish. One of the Russians asked, "Where are you from?" I told him I was from Arizona. "How did you learn to speak Spanish so well?" I said, "Well, I've been down here to school for a year and my folks were of Hispanic background." He asked, "Why don't you come to one of our meetings? We have meetings for the Mexicans at night at such and such a place." Of course, I had been in the service and I knew all about the Russians, so I said, "Well, I'm pretty busy. Why do you want me to go to your meetings?" He answered, "Well, we're Russians and we work for the Russian government and we are recruiting Mexicans." I said, "Well, I'm not a Mexican." "Hey, you're better than a Mexican; come on over and join our Communist party." I sort of excused myself.

There was a Mexican doctor I got to know. Our son became ill with asthma attacks while we were there. I asked this doctor to treat him and he did a wonderful job. But he said, "You know what? You'd better send your son back to the States. You come from a sterile environment where everything is clean, but this is Mexico." I told him, "I know, but I have to stay here a little while longer." He said, "Well, can you get him to go back?" I had my wife call her mother in Phoenix and she came and took BJ back to the States. The doctor was a member of the Mexican Communist Party, a very nice guy and he said, "Why don't you come and join our outfit?"

**ZL:** So you were being recruited from all sides.

**BG:** Yes, so I said, "Well, I'm US and I really don't want to get involved in it. I'm going to be an architect." He said, "Look, there are some wonderful Communist architects." I said, "Well thank you. I'm going to be traveling all over Mexico and won't have time to go to meetings." It was interesting that these Russians



really worked. I said to myself, "I'm going to find out if there are any Americans from the American Embassy here in Mexico." Well, there were only two employees of the American Embassy going to the University at the same time I was going there, but there were 56 Russians.

**ZL:** How interesting.

**BG:** It was because of Professor Fernandez and Professor del Rio that I had a real good opportunity to learn Mexican history and architecture. I've been back there again and that is still my favorite kind of work. When you see Indian ruins, like those on the Navajo reservation, they just can't compare to the work that those early Mexican civilizations did.

**ZL:** The Aztecs and the Mayans.

**BG:** Mayans, yes. It just was wonderful. That's something I taught at Arizona State University, at the University of Arizona, and at Berkeley. I would tell my students "Go down to Mexico; don't go down for spring break in Mazatlan. Just go down to Cancun and Oaxaca and some of those places and visit those ruins because you'll learn so much about architecture." The ruins in Europe are fine, but these ruins are pretty handy. They influenced me tremendously.

At the same time, Diego Rivera was doing a big mural and I used to stop and watch him work.

**ZL:** Where was that?

**BG:** In Mexico City.

**ZL:** Where exactly in the city?

**BG:** The theater, El Sargentos, and it was a big mural on the outside wall. Ted DeGrazia was down there.

**ZL:** At the same time?

**BG:** Yes, DeGrazia was studying with Rivera.

**ZL:** Oh, is that right?

**BG:** Yes. Can I tell you a side story?

**ZL:** Sure.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** One day a fellow in Phoenix said, "We want to do a museum for DeGrazia in Casa Grande." I asked him, "Where in Casa Grande?" He said, "We own a thousand acres outside of town and we want to donate the land to build a museum. Would you go down and talk to Ted DeGrazia about what he would like to see in the museum?" I said, "You mean DeGrazia would really be in it?" He said, "Yes, they were going to do one for him at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, but the board at the Center turned him down. So he wants to build a museum." I went to Tucson, out to the museum. Have you been there?

**ZL:** The Gallery of the Sun Foundation?

**BG:** Yes, I went there and I said, "Mr. DeGrazia, they want to build a museum out there." He said, "Oh, they've contacted me. Are you going to be the architect?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Sure. I'll come on down." I asked, "When can you come down? We'll have breakfast right by the site." He gave me a date. I said, "Fine. Do you want me to drive down to Tucson and pick you up?" He said, "No, I'll drive. I'll go from Tucson to Casa Grande."

We had the meeting at seven in the morning and it was in the house that the developer had built. I called Mr. DeGrazia and asked him, "Anything special that you'd like for breakfast?" He answered, "Yes, a couple of bottles of Scotch." I told him, "Well, it's a little early in the morning, isn't it?" He said, "Yes, but we'll handle that."

When I got to the house in Casa Grande, the city councilmen and the mayor were there. They wanted to meet DeGrazia and they had planned to dedicate the grounds for the museum. When I got there DeGrazia is drinking coffee, but he said, "Hey, where's my Scotch?" I said, "Well, we haven't had breakfast yet." But DeGrazia said, "I always have my Scotch before I have breakfast." So I brought the bottles of Scotch in and I saw the fellows with the city council sort of back off.

DeGrazia sat there and had four or five big drinks, I mean full glasses of Scotch and he said, "Are you about ready to go to work?" I said, "Yes, whenever you are." He pulled out a little silver box. It was full of marijuana cigarettes and he passed it to the council members and I'm concerned because . . .

We went up to the hilltop where the museum was going to be built and I asked him before he came to Casa Grande, "What would you like for background so that we can talk?" He said, "Why don't you get some 4' x 8' white Celtex panels and mount them on easels." I told the contractor/developer what he wanted and we had about 10 easels set up all around the hilltop. We started talking and DeGrazia would do a brush stroke and say, "Now show me what you're going to do from that." Then I'd do some talking and stroke the panels and all.

I was working on the fourth or fifth panel when DeGrazia said, "I've got to have a drag." By this time there were television cameras set up and people were gathered all around. He said, "Well, I'll just go behind this



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



car." Then he came back and asked me, "Do you want another shot of Scotch?" I said, "No, I really don't feel too good already." I had had a couple of drinks with him; nothing like what he was drinking. All of these people were gathered around. I had never cared for him as an artist very much. I always thought he was more of a cartoon-type painter than a real deep type of a person.

But here he was. We continued to paint and he said, "Go get me that little jug in my paint glass." I brought it up to him and it was milky white inside. I asked him what it was. "My priest, my Yaqui priest, fixed it for me. You're part Yaqui; you should have a taste of it." So I took a little taste, just a drop, and it was alarming to me because I took that little swig of it and I felt like I was walking two feet off the ground. I said, "What's in it?" He said, "My Yaqui priest made it." It was peyote that was in the bottle.

DeGrazia kept drinking and we kept talking. Pretty soon he said, "I think that's enough. Let's just go take a rest." That's how we ended the deal. We sketched outlines on the ground, then the contractor had a trench dug and they put walls up about two feet high. But the contractor/developer had some financial problems in Phoenix so he backed off the project.

**ZL:** That would have been an interesting experience.

**BG:** Yes, it was. After DeGrazia found out that I had been in Mexico about the same time as he, he took me to some early houses in Tucson that he had lived in. He said, "I lived in this house with my girlfriend." You know he had nineteen kids. He said, "I lived in this house with my girlfriend before I had any children. You'll love it." I walked in. It was a two bedroom house that had a bathroom with a cast iron tub. Every wall, including the bath tub, was painted. He had painted the walls and the ceilings with murals. I said, "Gee, that's wonderful to be able to live this way." He said, "It's the only way to live."

I had asked him about what he had wanted for compensation for doing this work for the people in Casa Grande. He said, "Oh, I can take care of myself." He passed away about four or five years ago and left every one of his kids a million dollars apiece. He also set up a foundation for the University of Arizona and put up money for that. I would have thought that he was a destitute kind of person. Anyway, that was my experience with Ted DeGrazia.

**ZL:** Fascinating man. How long were you in Mexico City?

**BG:** About two years. I was going to get my masters degree, but that's when our son got ill and he had to go back to Phoenix, while his mother, Lupe, was there in Mexico City. But she just didn't want to stay in Mexico any longer; she wanted to get back to Phoenix. So we came back to Phoenix.

I'm sorry that I didn't finish up doing my graduate work there because it was just a tremendous opportunity. I think when you see American schools of architecture compared with what the school of





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



architecture was like in Mexico City, there is more art and actual practice with students in Mexico. I don't know how it is today in Mexico, because it's been quite some time since I have been there.

While I was studying in the 1950's, it was like working in a Frank Lloyd Wright type of atmosphere where you lived and breathed architecture. It wasn't like ASU where you had to get all of your other courses out of the way and architecture was actually your elective, a secondary type of situation.

**ZL:** Did you work on projects when you were in Mexico City?

**BG:** No. They would give us individual projects to do, and you'd just do sketch work. It wasn't drafting, it was just sketch work of projects that you would do. They would ask you to go to various Mexican churches, cathedrals and so forth. I went to Puebla and other areas where I had to do a lot of field sketches. It was very interesting.

**ZL:** Were you with Blaine Drake's firm before you went to Mexico?

**BG:** No, I joined him when I first came back from Mexico. Before I went to Mexico I worked for Weaver and Drover, an old Arizona firm, for about a month and a half. Frankly, I worked for them because I felt I needed big office experience. I knew enough about construction and residential architecture, but I wanted to get into bigger deals. They were doing branch banks for Valley Bank, and schools and churches. I worked for them briefly before I went to Mexico. When I came back I worked for Blaine Drake. I interviewed with a couple of other offices, but all they wanted me to do was supervise their jobs and I thought, "Hey, I don't need this."

I worked for Ralph Haver in his firm, Haver, Nunn, and Jensen for six months. In the meantime Blaine Drake, I had worked for him previously, had a client that I had done a house for at Paradise Country Club. In fact, he was the old golf professional, Al Zimmerman.

He had bought an island property in the San Juan de Fuca Straits by Seattle. Al Zimmerman called Blaine and said, "Can you get Bennie to come and build my house there?" Blaine said, "Bennie, can you come over? Al Zimmerman bought a lot near Seattle and he wants you to build their house there." I had built their house at Paradise Country Club. I said, "Gosh, I'm working for the firm, Stevens." Stevens had formed an engineering/architectural company and I worked for him for about a year. I just had to get that big office experience.

In fact, we did some work for Phoenix City Hall, the early city hall, but it wasn't my kind of architecture. We called it "Gringo" architecture. Then I went with Blaine Drake for about two years and built Al Zimmerman's house at Paradise Valley Country Club; then there was a fellow by the name of Allison, his son is an architect in Phoenix now - Rex Allison was chairman of Allied Department Stores out of Seattle.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



Then I built a house in back of Camelback, up on the high mountain, Blaine Drake designs. While Blaine was in France, I also built a house for Mr. and Mrs. Stouffer of Stouffer Restaurants.

Blaine called me to tell me about Zimmerman's lot and that they want me to build on it. I said, "Blaine, I'm working for this Phoenix office." He said, "Forget it. What are you going to learn there?"

**ZL:** So, you went to work for Blaine Drake. Then you left him and went to work for this other one, but came back to Blaine Drake?

**BG:** Yes, when Blaine called me saying he wanted to talk to me, that's when I came back to his office. He'd never had anyone work with him in his office. He did all his drafting/building by himself. When I came back he said, "The Zimmerman's bought this place and they want you to go up to there and build their house." I said, "Blaine, I've never been up there." It was then about the end of January, "Well, you can't start it until March first. You can't get started because it's too wet and you can't even get onto the property." I said, "Well, I'll take it."

I wanted to leave the other firm and this gave me a good excuse. So Blaine said, "OK, you'll be up there March the tenth. They're already in Canada. Here's the information about the lot and they've opened up a bank account for you at Anacortes and they've also opened a lumber company account for you to do their house. I asked, "Where are the Zimmerman's going to be?" Blaine said, "They're cruising with some clients."

I remember I went to Anacortes and loaded the pick-up truck with batten boards and other material to get started. I had never seen the lot. I had never been on the property. My brother came with me on the ferry. When he was in the Navy he had been stationed at Bremerton, Washington.

He said, "You've got to be crazy bringing me up here. It's wet all the time." I said, "Look on it as a vacation. We'll be through by July." As we were boarding the ferry, a fellow from the lumber company runs up and says, "Bennie, wait a minute." He gave me a cardboard box. "What's this?" "That's for you. Mr. Brown wanted you to have it." I opened it up and there were two bottles of Scotch and two bottles of vodka and bottles of wine. "What's this for?" He said, "Mr. Brown said you're going to need it." We stopped at the ferry landing on Shaw Island. Have you ever been up there?

**ZL:** No, I haven't.

**BG:** It is right across from Marco Island. The ferry went in there twice a week. I got out and they told me, "The fellow at the grocery store will tell you where the lot is."

**ZL:** You hoped you had the right lot.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** I was hoping I had the right island! I got out and saw a bunch of people sitting around a wood-burning stove. A man looked up, "You're Gonzales?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You came to build this house at Pneumonia Point?" I said, "Yes." He said, "My son is going to take you up there." I asked him, "How far is it?" "Oh, it's about six or seven miles. But you can't make it in that pick-up you've got. It's too muddy yet. He's got a jeep. He'll take you there." I asked, "Can I find a house to live in up here?" He said, "Yes, we've found one for you. The people won't be back until winter." I didn't know who the people were, but he said, "The people will put you up."

We went to the house and my brother, who was a carpenter, said, "Look at the ceilings." There was water dripping from all over. The house had been locked up all winter long. He said, "You're crazy." There were two beds in it, two mattresses. I said, "What about the rest of the furniture?" The fellow said, "You'll have to finish building it. The man told me that." "You mean they didn't have any furniture?" "No, they were building it when they just left; it's been sitting idle for about five years."

My brother and I moved in and went out to see the lot, a beautiful property right on the water. I had to build a boat dock, plus the house. It was a beautiful lot with huge redwood trees on the property. I asked the fellow, "Are there any carpenters here that we can hire to work with us?" He said, "No, most of the guys here are loggers and a couple of them have chicken farms, but they'll work for you because they need the money." We went back to the grocery and sat around with these fellows. I hired a bunch of local farmers, loggers, and chicken farmers and we built the house.

**ZL:** Had you designed this house before you went up?

**BG.:** No, but I had worked on it with Blaine Drake. He used to give me rough sketches and I would say, "Mr. Drake, aren't you going to draw the plans for me?" He would tell me, "Bennie, you know more about it than I do. Just make it look like this when you're through."

**ZL:** Would you draw any plans from the sketches?

**BG:** No, I would just go out in the field and I would just lay out work on a daily basis.

**ZL:** So you could visualize from a sketch how to do it?

**BG:** Drake would give me a floor plan and an elevation of what he wanted it to look like. Because he had studied with Frank Lloyd Wright, I knew all of Frank Lloyd Wright's work. We built our own furniture there and everything, all built-in. It was a beautiful house with a big dock on it. The interesting thing was, I asked one of the fellows, "Where am I going to get the materials, lumber and stuff that I need to build the dock and frame the house?" He said, "I'm going to take you to a lumber yard on one of the other islands."



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



They are loggers there." I said, "Well, good, but how do we get over there?" "We'll go in my boat." He had a small boat. We went over there and met an Indian fellow and another fellow who had a saw. You've seen these log cutting saws. I thought to myself, "Wow!"

I told them what materials I wanted. But the guy asked me, "How do you know what you're going to need for the dock?" I said, "I was a quartermaster in the Coast Guard and I know about navigation and tide tables." "Oh," he said. I asked him, "How much is it going to be for this lumber that I picked up?" It was basically logs and planking. He told me and I wrote out the check. He said, "When do you want us to deliver it?" I said, "I'd like to have it on such and such a date and at such and such an hour." He asked me why. "Well, that's high tide." He said, "How do you know that?" I told him, "Well, I have a tide book from the service and I know when the tide is going to come in."

I asked him, "Can you give me a receipt for this?" He looked around, and there was a beer carton. He tore off a piece of the carton and wrote twelve timbers for such and such, plus the wood. I asked, "Is this it?" "That's all you need. You can read tide tables."

We started the house and on such and such a date the tide was down and we put up the basic foundations. He came in the next high tide with all his lumber and we tied it up to the foundations and we built the dock. It was good size and went out 150 feet into the water.

**ZL:** How were the workers?

**BG:** They were wonderful. I had all that booze with me and they were happy. Every Friday afternoon after work we had a party. They would want to have a party. They were just wonderful people, just great people. One of them had been a policeman in Portland, Oregon; another had been on a tug boat, and the third had been a mining engineer. They had gone up there to retire and needed something to do. It was just a great little enclave of people.

When I was almost finished with our place, I had my wife and our son come up and they spent some time there with me. That's the wonderful thing about architecture and building that normally you don't get to do, just a good friendship.

The young man who took me out, his father was the captain on one of the ferries. They were Seventh Day Adventists and he was rather religious. He had an airplane, an early Cessna. It was a two-seater, one seat in front, and one in back. He would take me wherever I had to go to talk to suppliers. We'd fly there and come back. Then he became a stunt pilot. He bought some World War I Corsairs, fighter planes. He bought those and he landed them on the island.

He had a small field right there and told me that he bought the planes because they could land on aircraft



carriers. Later on I heard that he took one of his planes, a four-seater Beach Craft, and flew it all the way to Australia from that little airport. I asked him how he had enough fuel. He said, "I took out all of the seats, put in fifty-gallon drums, filled them up and flew to Australia." Can you imagine? They were wonderful people.

**ZL:** A pioneer spirit.

**BG:** Yes, a real pioneer spirit. Anyhow, we finished the house.

**ZL:** How long did it take?

**BG:** Well, we started March 10th and we finished on the 3rd of July.

**ZL:** Very fast.

**BG:** Yes, the Zimmerman's were coming in with their fifty-foot cruiser they used to charter. Before he came to Paradise Country Club, Al Zimmerman had been a golf pro in those islands, so he knew them well. People from Phoenix used to fly to Seattle. Al would pick them up, put them on his boat, and they'd cruise the northwest golf courses. Then they'd go up to the city of Nanaimo and Vancouver and places like that. It was a wonderful experience for them.

We had a party there on July 3rd and the Zimmerman's moved into their new house on the 4th of July. I packed up and came back to Phoenix with my brother and he stayed with me. It was just fun, working in very remote types of situations. I think that has helped me out tremendously being here in Nogales and working in Mexico.

**ZL:** Because you were constantly facing challenges of how to get materials and workers. How much longer did you stay with Blaine Drake?

**BG:** I finished just that house. While I was working on it, I was taking my exams.

**ZL:** Were those for the state of Arizona?

**BG:** Yes. You had to serve a three year apprenticeship before you could take your exams. There were five or six parts and it took two or three years to pass all of them. I went to work for Ralph Haver while I waited for my grades to come in. When I got my registration, I went on my own. Ralph Haver was a very good architect. I don't know what's happened to his firm or whether he is alive or not. But he was a very good friend of James Elmore. Jimmy now lives in Flagstaff. He's a skier and heads up the ski patrol.





**ZL:** What kind of staff did you have when you started your firm?

**BG:** When I first started it, I had five or six people. We started out on 43rd Avenue and West Van Buren. I converted a little house into an office. Later on we converted it into a restaurant called Maximilian's. Have you ever heard of it?

**ZL:** I don't remember that one.

**BG:** We moved into the Luhrs Tower. Mr. Luhrs knew me when I used to sell papers on the corner. He was a grand person; he knew me as a school boy. I guess I was about eleven or twelve when I sold papers on the corner of Central and Jefferson and he owned that entire block. When I moved into his office, the mortgage people were right there on the corner of Central and Jefferson. Later on his son started Continental Bank.

**ZL:** What was the first project under your own firm?

**BG:** Our first project was with a fellow who owned a cooling and heating company on 9th Street and Van Buren. This was in 1960. He had done some work for me when I was with Blaine Drake. When I went on my own, he called me, "Bennie, my wife and I would like to remodel our house. Would you do it for us?" I said, "Sure." That was my first job.

I went out to his place by South Mountain and remodeled his kitchen. I still remember that first job; I charged him \$35.00 for the drawings. He had been a good friend and I wanted to cover just my costs. I had a partner who was a civil engineer. He and I had worked together in an office in Phoenix. He was from New Mexico.

**ZL:** Carl Ludlow?

**BG:** Yes. Carl Ludlow. He was from New Mexico and he was a civil engineer. He had worked with one of the government agencies, so he was very sharp when it came to dealing with bureaucratic requirements. He was a young man and he and I started together. We moved to the Luhr's Tower and then we moved to West Van Buren.

One day he came over and said, "Bennie, I want to be an architect." I said, "Carl, you're my partner; we're doing work on the Indian reservations. We're just starting out and we're doing great. Why do you want to be an architect? You know, you're the civil and structural engineer in the office and the office manager."

Carl said, "My wife doesn't think it's fair that you get all the newspaper publicity." I said, "Carl, every time they put our names down, it's Gonzales and Ludlow." He said, "Well, she's not satisfied with that." I told



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.) © 2012



him, "Carl, I can't do that. You've got to take your architectural exams and all." He said, "Well, I've had enough practice with you. I've learned everything about architecture through you, and I think I'm qualified." I asked, "Have you talked to the state board?" "Yes." I asked, "Well, what did they say?" "They don't want me to do it unless I go back to school and learn architecture." I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to sue them and I'm going to sue you."

"Sue me for what?" "Because I want to become an architect and I've been working with you for this length of time and you've got to attest that I'm competent to be an architect." I said, "Well, Carl, you haven't done any architecture here. It's only been structural and civil engineering." He said, "Well, I'm suing you and my lawyers will get in touch with you."

I had to go before a judge in Phoenix with the state board people. Carl was there and the judge asked, "Why do you want to be an architect?" He told him. The judge said, "You're a registered structural and civil engineer and you're a partner with Gonzales and your name is on the front door. From what I gather, you guys are doing great." Carl said, "Well, I'm not satisfied with that." The judge told him, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'll have to turn you down," which he did.

So Carl left me; he didn't fight or anything. He left and went back to Texas and worked as a structural engineer for Exxon or one of those other big refineries. See how much you get out of architecture?

**ZL:** How do you define your style of architecture?

**BG:** I would say it's a regional style. But it goes beyond being regional. It's sort of an inherited type of philosophy of what a building should be like, using materials that are present in Arizona. That's basically what I've tried to do.

**ZL:** You like adobe. But in Phoenix you couldn't use adobe.

**BG:** You couldn't use it because Phoenix started building to city code. Adobe wouldn't pass the earthquake code. Phoenix copied all of the codes that California used. Of course, California had a seismic code which prohibited the use of adobe because you couldn't fill the voids up with concrete and put steel in them which is what they do now. They take adobe and make their voids in the adobe and fill them full of concrete with steel so they can get by the seismic code.

**ZL:** Are they using that method very much now? It seems that would be expensive.

**BG:** It is, but I still like adobe. I think it's my favorite, but again, I was making mud pies with the workers when they were making the adobes. So it was a natural inherited deal and a lot of it came from my uncle's talks with me about what architects should do. He wasn't too fond of them. He felt that they didn't know



enough about construction. A lot of that stuck with me.

**ZL:** Do you consciously incorporate elements from the Indian pueblos?

**BG:** Not really. I've been influenced by them, but more so by Mexican pueblos or Mexican ruins that the Aztecs did because their nomenclature was pretty much what we still do today; only the Aztecs did it better.

**ZL:** As an architect you have to wait for somebody to commission you for a project. When do you begin to get your basic ideas?

**BG:** I begin as soon as the client has a piece of property, shows it to me and talks to me about what ideas he has. Doing residential work, it's usually the woman who handles what it's going to be and what it's going to look like. It's always been that way. I listen to them and assimilate what they are talking about. I guess they come to me because they like my style of work, so they're not going to argue with me. Sometimes, I'll get ladies with thousands of magazine cuttings and stuff and this is what they'd like and then I have to go through a teaching lesson before I do anything.

**ZL:** Do you visualize a floor plan and then the exterior?

**BG:** I think it's a concept. It's not just a floor plan, but it's done at the same time you're doing the floor plan. You can envision what the building should look like in relation to the floor plan and its environment. It's basically the way I feel about the project. I guess that's why I didn't go back East. I worked with some Eastern architects and I was asked to go work back there. I just didn't care for steel and glass kinds of buildings. You can't really say anything about this house here, but I don't like to be eclectic and I don't like to steal ideas from people or be influenced by ideas from others. I just don't feel comfortable doing it that way. I guess if I've been successful, that's why. I'm not ashamed of pointing out buildings that I've done. (Laughter)

**ZL:** Are you usually or always involved during the construction process?

**BG:** Usually I want to be. Rarely will I take a job where I'm not. Sometimes, people would give me a floor plan and tell me that is what they'd like, that this is what they want it to look like. If I'm living someplace where it's going to be difficult for me to supervise or be in touch, I usually recommend someone else to do it.

**ZL:** How often do you make changes as you go through construction?

**BG:** Not often. I think it is one of the things that has helped me build my architectural practice. I never had



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



too many change orders, especially with city or school projects. The worst thing you can do is start getting change orders out to the contractor. I hate it and I've been in their position before. I don't care to make changes, especially when they see something new that they'd like to do.

**ZL:** You're a native of the desert with our long, hot days and our constant shortage of water. How has that influenced your buildings?

**BG:** Usually I try to get enough insulation so that the building can handle the heat. I don't worry about the winter, having been born here on a ranch. It was just a pine house with one little bedroom with the bath outside. There was an outdoor toilet and a kitchen/dining area. The kitchen was just a little wood stove that Mom would cook on. She would make tortillas on the wood stove and there was a sink that you had to bring water from the outside to wash the dishes. She'd heat it with a little wood fireplace outside, bring the hot water in and pour it into the sink; that's what she did the washing with. It was the same thing with clothes. They'd have tubs outside and build a wood fire and put the clothes that needed washing in the hot tub.

**ZL:** What did your mom do after your dad died?

**BG:** We had about four rentals in Phoenix that my father had built with my uncle, plus the house that we lived in. When we were living on the farm, just before he died, he built an adobe house. It was a two bedroom house built of natural, sun-dried adobe that they made right on site, and we moved in to Phoenix, to 12th Street and Monroe. That's where my uncle, the contractor, lived.

My aunt had already died; she died young. They had eight kids, two boys and six girls, and my uncle raised them. He was rather strict. In fact, he was strict with me. We moved to a little apartment. He had some apartments around his house. We moved into one of them and my mother, brother and I lived there. My mother lived off the rents from those other houses. It wasn't much. I think those rents were about \$10.00 to \$15.00 a month for each of the units, but it was enough. We lived there about two years. Then we moved back to Monroe, to the adobe house. She died in it. She was very young. She was about forty-five when she died.

**ZL:** Oh, my goodness.

**BG:** My brother and I were both in the service but they would only let one of us come home for the funeral. She had remarried a fellow from Tucson, Arizona and his daughters lived in Tucson. One of them was at Mammoth and the other lived in Tucson.

**ZL:** Were these children she had from the second marriage, or his children?



**BG:** His children from a former wife. So we lived on a very stringent budget. That's why I worked after my dad died. I sold newspapers; then I worked in a dry goods store on Washington and 2nd Street. Elias Abraham, a Syrian, had the dry goods store. I remember, before that, when my dad died, I was about eight years old. My cousin was working in Donofrio's ice cream store. Do you remember Donofrio's?

**ZL:** I've heard of it.

**BG:** Well, Donofrio's had a factory on 15th Street and Van Buren where they made ice cream and candy. Sam Donofrio was a fairly old man. He had two sons, Sam and another one who was an attorney and became a judge. I was about eight years old when they gave me a job. They made popsicles and I would put the sticks into the ice cream, and then put them in the refrigerator. I used to help with the popsicle bars and sweep the floors.

Before that I had worked in a grocery store owned by Mr. Pedigo. He and his family were from back East. They opened up a grocery store and I used to sweep the sidewalks. He owned apartments and I used to sweep the sidewalks there. I also cleaned the canned goods in the grocery store. That's what I did first. Then I worked in the dry goods store.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, I still worked with my uncle part time as a carpenter's helper. He said, "It's about time you learned how to do construction. We're going to build a house." He marked the floor plan on a piece of wood "You're going to build it." I said, "OK, but we need a permit." He said, "We'll go get a permit." I said, "Who's going to be the owner of this house?" He said, "Barney." His son, Barney Cahill, was working for the city. He worked in the tax department as an accountant. He said, "We're going to build it for him this summer." My uncle said, "I'll watch it, I'll watch you, but you're in charge of it."

We got a permit and came back and I got the adobe workers, some Mexicans. They built the adobes in the back yard. That's how they used to build a lot of houses in Phoenix; built the adobes in the back yard. Then we poured the concrete floors and put up the adobes and then we did the framing.

**ZL:** How long would those adobe bricks have to dry?

**BG:** Until there's no moisture in them.

**ZL:** So it depends on the weather.

**BG:** It does. That's why, around here if you poured them late, around monsoon time, they used to cover them with tin. Do you remember seeing the galvanized tin? The adobes would be underneath until they were dry. Of course, they used straw at the time. That was the binder for the adobe. I built that house.





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



Then he had some apartments on 7th Avenue and Grant, back where the old depot was in downtown Phoenix. My uncle, Mr. Cahill, had about twenty apartments there. So he gave me the job of being the maintenance man, taking care of the apartments. I was about fourteen then.

They were low cost apartments. I think they used to rent for about \$10.00 a month. I collected the rents and I did repair work, plumbing and electrical and whatever needed to be done. There were a few black people who rented them. Some, we called Arkies from Arkansas and a couple of Okies, the rest were Mexicans. They were all fruit pickers. They used to come into the Valley during fruit season and then when the fruit ripened in California, they would leave.

When they were leaving, one of my jobs was to be there when they were packing up their cars because they would take the toilets and sinks and anything else that was removable in the houses. There used to be a second hand swap shop fairly close by and they'd go hock things and get 50 cents or \$1.00 for the toilets and all. I'd have to go buy them back from the guy who bought them, bring them back, and put them back in place. It was quite an interesting experience.

I remember there were a couple of colored prostitutes living in one of the houses. Here I was fourteen years old. My mom was a very bright woman. She said, "You've got to be very, very careful of these women. Don't think because they're too old, they're not going to come out and cause troubles for you." So I grew up with my mother's lessons.

I remember this little one-bedroom house; it had wood floors and part of the wood was missing. They had an old nickelodeon in a corner of the room. I asked my uncle what happened to the wood floor. He said, "When it gets cold at night, those gals rip the floor up and they burn the pieces in that wood stove to keep the place warm."

**ZL:** You had a challenge there. I understand that you like to use a lot of materials that are native to the region. When you can't use adobe, what else do you use?

**BG:** Well, we used concrete block. Since Super Light concrete block came onto the market, we've used that.

**ZL:** You've kind of made that a trademark.

**BG:** Yes, because of price, stability and durability, and from a fire prevention standpoint. Having been a fireman, I know what fire can do to these little wood houses in a couple of minutes, whereas the block houses are pretty fire resistant.

**ZL:** You also made a name for yourself with a color called Aztec White.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** I was doing some apartments for the Brothers Four. They were a singing group about the same time as the Kingston Trio and Elvis and all of those. They came to Scottsdale from Washington, D.C. and bought a lot. Their real estate fellow brought them over to me because they wanted to build some apartments on their property in downtown Scottsdale on 2nd Street off Goldwater Boulevard.

We were working on the building; the block was up, they had been framing and were getting ready to paint. The Brothers Four were young guys, but very intelligent, great guys. They walked around with the contractor, Bud Twist, who's still in Phoenix. "Bennie," he said, "What color are we going to paint it?"

I just happened to be walking by and there was a piece of old newspaper that had yellowed. I asked them, "How about this color?" The painting contractor was with us. He said, "What about this color?" I said, "Take it down to Deer-O-Paints." They used to be on 20th Street in Phoenix. The manager of the paint company said, "This is yellow. It's not like you can go into Wal-Mart and get it. What are we going to call this color?" I said, "Let's call it Navajo White." That's how that color came to be.

When we painted the Scottsdale Civic Center, we used an off-white color and one of the guys said, "Are we going to use Navajo White here?" "No," I said, "This is a lighter white." He said, "What do you want to call it, how about Aztec White?" That's the name that stuck with that one.

**ZL:** So you really started both Navajo White and Aztec White.

**BG:** Just Navajo White.

**ZL:** Let's talk about some of your projects. One of your early ones was the library in Nogales, Arizona. You've talked about your grandfather being here, but you used to come down and visit as a child.

**BG:** Yes, my grandmother lived here in Nogales. She had adopted a girl who had been born in Patagonia. Her name was Socorro. She was younger than my mother and all of the others, but my grandmother adopted her. She went through school here in Nogales, Arizona. She became the assistant librarian at the old library that was on the second floor over the fire station. Mom, at that time, hadn't remarried. She would send me down here to spend summers, because we didn't have cooling in Phoenix.

**ZL:** What a treat!

**BG:** Yes. I used to come to spend the summers here with my grandmother and Socorro. I used to go to the library and spend a lot of time reading. I just sort of inherited Nogales. One winter I was going to try to go to school here. I signed up for classes, went to class and everybody spoke Spanish. That didn't bother me, speaking Spanish.



But they were giving lessons in Spanish instead of in English. You had to write in Spanish and the whole bit. English was not an afterthought, but just something you did after you got your Spanish homework done. It was just too difficult for me. I told Mom, "Mom, I'm afraid that I'm going to become more Spanish or Mexican than I am. I've got to learn English. I'm not learning it fast enough there. She said, "Okay, come back to Phoenix. That's when I went back, but I used to spend summers in Nogales with my grandmother.

I remember some of my favorite times. She had a house with a porch on it. I'd sit out there in the summer time and if you went to a higher elevation, you could see the mountains over there and the lightning would be hitting them.

**ZL:** The thunderstorms moving in.

**BG:** Yes. I remember there was an older man who would sometimes sit on the porch with us and I'd ask him, "Where are those storms coming from?" He said, "The Italians are fighting over in Africa." I said, "What's that got to do with it?" He said, "It's all that black powder they use; it floats down." I was young, but I couldn't connect that. I remember that it was the Italians fighting over there in Europe and they were causing these monsoons here in Nogales!

**ZL:** You were young, but you weren't that gullible.

**BG:** But it was a good story.

**ZL:** How did you get involved with the Nogales library?

**BG:** I had met a couple of contractors from Nogales and had done houses for some people in Nogales at the Meadow Hills Country Club. I also built some other houses for tomato brokers. I met a fellow, Pierre Baffert, who was the Democratic chairman of the area, the mayor and some of the councilmen. They had the request to do the library. They had a piece of property right next to the canal the Mexicans smuggled things through.

I told him, "You know, that's an awful small piece of property." He said, "Well, that's all we can afford." I said, "Why don't you buy the property that's a used tire company in front? Why don't you buy at least that piece of the property?" He said, "It's too much money. We've only got so much money to build this library." I said, "My partner, Carl, said we'll have to put caissons down to take the loads off this building." He said, "Okay." Then I asked, "What about a contractor?" He said, "Well, how about Eddy Pearson? He's on the school board and he's a very nice guy. He's built a couple of houses that you've done and he really likes to work with you." I said, "Okay".



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



So we went ahead and designed the library, on a budget type of deal. I used adobe that had been fired in Mexico and they brought it down from Mexico. We got a lot of the wood from the Apache Indian reservation. I think the library cost about \$14.00 a square foot. This was in 1961. If we were building the same library today, it would cost much more. At that time we were building great adobe houses for seven or eight dollars a square foot. Now, they would cost \$100.00 a square foot.

I got to know Pierre Baffert. His family had worked for the railroad. They knew my grandfather, or his grandfather knew my grandfather. Pierre Baffert was on the State Parks Commission. He asked me, "Bennie, do you want to go to Seattle, Washington?" I said, "What for?" He said, "They're having a World's Fair, and Arizona's been asked to put up a building for our state. I told them that you're the perfect guy to do it." So I went to Seattle and we did the Arizona exhibit at the World's Fair. I asked Phillips Sanderson, an artist/sculptor in Scottsdale, and a couple of other fellows including my brother, to come with me to Seattle. We all went and did the exhibit. So that's how I sort of became acquainted here.

Then a big shrimp storage company for a national ocean gardens burnt down overnight and I got a call from the contractor. He said, "Hey, this big warehouse burnt down and they want a new one put up. We have just a very short time to do it." So I went down to Nogales and designed it and they built the shrimp storage place for these people from Mexico. Work came back and forth on that kind of basis.

**ZL:** So you've done a lot of projects in Nogales?

**BG:** Mostly residential, then I've done some warehouses. I've done a couple of big warehouses. As we came in to your left over the railroad tracks, all of that big complex, I did that. It was 28 years ago I designed that.

**ZL:** Long before you moved to Nogales.

**BG:** Yes, I moved here about eight years ago.

**ZL:** You designed the city of Scottsdale complex. I think that was around 1968 to 1972. Which building did you design first?

**BG:** The first buildings we did were city hall and the library. Next we designed the police courts, then a building for the county. The last thing was the Scottsdale Center for the Arts.

**ZL:** Mr. McDonald was the city manager at the time. You said he gave you a lot of freedom to design buildings the way you wanted.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** Yes, the council pretty much went along with whatever his suggestions were. I think they were fortunate to have a man of his . . . He had been assistant city manager in Beverly Hills, California

**ZL:** Did you know when you started that job in Scottsdale that you were going to design all of the buildings? Was there a master plan?

**BG:** They had hired a company from California to do a downtown plan for the city of Scottsdale. We took off from what they did. Our program was to design the civic center complex, which included lakes and all of those outdoor areas. Of course, there were restaurants there, and a hotel. So we pretty much had freedom of what to do.

**ZL:** Scottsdale was still small at the time when you began the project.

**BG:** Yes, I think it probably had a population of 5,000 people.

**ZL:** So they really did look to the future.

**BG:** I think, frankly, it has been one of the most progressive cities that I've ever worked with. It's too bad that Phoenix didn't do the same thing years ago. But, of course, Phoenix had a different political group heading it up.

**ZL:** Would you like to tell us something about the buildings in Scottsdale, about the library or the Center for the Arts?

**BG:** We had very restrictive budgets, but we tried to get an impressive entrance into the city council chamber because that is where people met. Louise Lincoln Kerr, director of the Kerr Cultural Center had a piece of property where the Borgata is now. She was very instrumental - she was on one of the boards and she wanted a place where she could bring in children and their families on weekends to have chamber music. We designed the Scottsdale council chamber so that the city could use the chamber for their business during the week, yet she could have her chamber music groups on Saturdays when all of the elementary school kids would come in. She was very instrumental in that.

When we did the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, she was instrumental in developing the type of facility that she felt would go well. She had an attorney, Mr. Lewis Ruskin, who was very instrumental in the early cultural activities of Scottsdale. He was her companion. Mrs. Kerr bought the grand piano that I think they still use.

Mrs. Kerr was a very, very remarkable person to work for, just a wonderful client. She had enough money and political power that she could overrule some of the other political people who didn't want to have





anything other than a strictly normal civic center. Of course, I was very fortunate that they hired me, a local architect, instead of going to someone outside of the city to do those facilities.

We did have a very good acoustical engineer from Connecticut who worked with us. He had worked in New York City. Frankly, if we had any success acoustically, it was because of him. I also was impressed by some of the facilities that I'd seen in Europe and in Mexico that were more than just a concert hall. The little lobby space for smokers, I felt, could be a part of an art gallery. They can roam around which has worked very well.

Our prices for the project were very much in keeping with prices in the Southwest. I think the development came in at about \$50.00 a square foot. We did the city hall and the old library for \$17.00 a square foot. The pricing was competitive because of the materials we used, concrete block and precast roof beams, all manufactured locally; so we were able to hold costs down. I've always been one for simplicity in design and I think that helped the cost as well.

**ZL:** One unique concept you had in the Valley was the design of the Biltmore branch of Valley National Bank. At the time you designed it, someone said of it, "It was a diamond in the box; a faceted glass structure inside a rectangular enclosure." Were you particularly pleased with that building?

**BG:** It was an interesting building because Valley National had just hired a new property manager, an engineer from Pittsburgh who was more than the local talent. He wanted the bank to be prestigious rather than just a typical commercial banking institution. When we first talked he asked about using pre-stressed concrete for the building. I said, "Well, let's take a look at it." But when we went to get prices, they were extremely high. So we used a steel structure with a material called Dryvit, a plastic skin with fiberglass over the surface, with a plastered finish.

Another reason for the bank branch building's unique appearance was that we were restricted as to what size building we could put on the lot. Trying to get the prestige factor built into it, I asked the city building department, "Can I put a wall of glass block around the glass building?"

"Why build a wall?" I said, "Well, I want to give a little more spread to the building, rather than having just a small glass box building, also to shelter the glass." That's what we did. I didn't tell him I was going to go forty feet high with the exterior wall, but that's what gives the building its presence. It's worked very well. I've been very happy with it.

**ZL:** I believe you designed the Ocotillo Branch Library for the City of Phoenix.

**BG:** The Ocotillo Library was in South Phoenix on Southern Avenue off Central. South Phoenix didn't have much of a presence then. Actually, people thought of it as just an annex to Phoenix. But they gave me



the liberty of doing something. We used masonry materials for the walls. I wanted a Southwestern type of character so we kept it rather simple, but we used ceramic tile at the book check-in areas and at the front desk. I've been very happy with that concept. Again, we had a strong budget constraint. We could only do so much; that's why I used those materials.

**ZL:** Tell us about Eloy Junior High School.

**BG:** I was asked to design Eloy Junior High as a middle school. I had already done some work for the Casa Grande High School system. I had designed the little library for Casa Grande. The principal/superintendent of the school lived in Eloy. His wife was a concert pianist. He had come to Arizona just to get away from everything. He wanted something that was nice. Of course, my budget was very restrictive, so we did it in slump block and precast concrete beam tees. It worked out quite well, although it wasn't what people thought of as a traditional schoolhouse.

I had some people come to me and I said, "Look, I had a very restrictive budget." I think the budget for that school was seven dollars a square foot. We can't even do foundations for that price now. It was semi-windowless, but we added air conditioning. We just wanted to keep everything low-cost and low-maintenance. It's worked well and it's held up.

**ZL:** You've designed many, many residences, but two of the first that you did was your own home, and then you designed a home for John Driggs and both of these won awards.

**BG:** John Driggs was with Western Savings; I think his father was still the Chairman of the Board. Mr. Driggs bought a piece of property on Central Avenue and we designed their house. It was in an orange grove; a very nice, restful type of a house. Here again, I think that construction was concrete block, but nice, with open spaces inside the living areas.

**ZL:** You received an award from *Architectural Record* with your own house and it was featured in *Life Magazine*.

**BG:** That was the house that was next to that little hotel in Scottsdale, Rancho Mañana. It had an interesting story because I had designed a house for that lot for a client but he was transferred to California. He owed me for the architectural drawings and said, "Bennie, how about taking the lot in lieu of me paying you the architectural fees?" I thought, "What am I going to do with this one acre in Paradise Valley? It's a very prestigious kind of neighborhood."

But I went ahead and designed and built the house using Mexican adobe floors. I used concrete block which was slump block from Super Light. For the roof, I used wood beams four feet on centers with the material on top of it, which was both insulation and roofing material. It worked out very well.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



I finished the house and a doctor who lived in Scottsdale approached me to see if I would sell it to him. I said, "Why not?" and sold him the house. I thought I did pretty well, getting a good profit on my building. Then within about a year and a half, he gave me a call. "Bennie, I've got some people that are interested in the house you designed for me and they'd like to meet you."

So I went to meet them and it was a lady with her interior designer, and a man who turned out to be the cowboy in the Marlboro ads. So the doctor did very well selling the house to them. I thought, "Well, it will be interesting to have those people living here in Phoenix." The woman redecorated some of the house, and she told me later that she had some people come by who wanted to look at the house. They went through it and made her an offer she couldn't afford to turn down. So they sold the house.

But while I was living in the house, a man had come to the door and said, "I'm with *Life Magazine* and I'd like to look through your house."

**ZL:** You mean this wasn't pre-arranged?

**BG:** No. I asked, "Who are you?" He said, "I'm a stringer for *Life Magazine* and I have been vacationing here and saw this house." At the time the magazine was doing residences throughout the United States. He went through the house and asked me if I would mind having it featured in *Life Magazine*?" I thought, "Hey, what a super deal!" So I said, "Sure." He said, "There'll be somebody else from the magazine coming here to take a look at the house. They will see if they'd like to do this story." When they came through the house, they said, "Fine. We're going to send our press team to do the story."

The team came and stayed there four or five days. Their photographer was a fellow who later on was hired by *Penthouse Magazine*. The woman who was going to write the story said, "I think I'd rather have a friend of mine do this who is more versed in this type of architecture." It was Jordan Bonfante, a writer for *Life*, a very nice young man. We got to be rather good friends. He admired some of my paintings, so I said, "Here, this is for you."

While he was there writing the story, he told me that he had a house in Spain on one of the islands, La Palma, and I said, "How come you don't have something to stay in out West?" He said, "I like it on La Palma. It's a great place for me to go and write."

He later on became editor of *Time Magazine*. I felt pretty good that I had met him when he was just a young writer. It was fun working with him and it was a big help for my architectural practice. I had calls from several people who saw the article.

**ZL:** Advertising you couldn't pay for.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** Right. A lady had made a movie here in Nogales; she was a young starlet at the time. She married William Holden and they went to Africa. I forget what her name was. She wrote me a letter and wanted me to do a house. She had seen the library while they were making a movie here in Santa Cruz County. Then she saw the article in *Life* and said, "I remember your library and I was happy to see it. Would you be interested in doing a house for me?" But I was pretty well tied up doing other projects and I couldn't do it. I wanted to but I just couldn't. There was Ben Johnson, the cowboy . . .

**ZL:** Who recently died?

**BG:** Yes, he came over to my office and was sitting out in front. My son walked through and said, "Dad, that's Ben Johnson out there." I said, "Who is he?" "Oh, he's a cowboy movie star. He plays with John Wayne and some of those other guys." Well, Johnson wanted a house but he wanted me to design it in California. I told him I couldn't. I was just snowed under and I couldn't get to it for a while. We had several people contact me. It was surprising - people from Michigan and Colorado, and a fellow from Las Vegas. All wrote me letters wanting me to come out and do houses for them.

**ZL:** Did you get some business that you could take?

**BG:** I don't think so. I was doing some school work at the time and I was just not in a position to take on another job. These houses needed to go up right away and I just couldn't take them on. I'm sorry I didn't, in a way, but you just couldn't overload your time.

**ZL:** One project you were involved in was the Litchfield Park Core Redevelopment. That sounds interesting. What did that involve?

**BG:** A company from back East, from Pittsburgh, bought Litchfield Park. I had done a house there for Paul Litchfield but he had sold it. This was at the time that the company bought Litchfield Park and the Wigwam Resort. The new owners sent a man out to redevelop it, dress it up. There was just a little grocery store, a service station and some other small buildings in the town. They asked me to redesign the main street. We put in a health club and swimming pool and did a face lift with new light standards throughout the community. Then I was asked to do a housing project on one of the lakes in Litchfield Park.

**ZL:** What years would that have been?

**BG:** In the 70s, probably, although it may have been in the late 60s. The community housing we did at the camp was the first project where the state of Arizona allowed condominiums. I remember the family residences there were in the \$45,000 to \$65,000.00 price range. Today they sell for about \$140,000 and up. It was a nice project and it was nice working with this man who had been with a large developer back



East. He sort of gave me a free hand. In fact, he was the one who took the job with Valley National Bank Properties. He hired me to do Valley Bank on 26th Street and Camelback.

**ZL:** You also worked with Yavapai Junior College in Prescott. Did you design the master plan for that campus?

**BG:** Yes. I had a partner, an associate named George Christiansen who has his own office now; his brother was the city attorney for Prescott. George said, "Bennie, we should interview for this new community college in Cochise County."

**ZL:** Yavapai.

**BG:** Yavapai County. I said, "OK." We interviewed for it. The president of the college was from Texas, the same little community where Van Cliburn, the concert pianist lived. The college president was from that community and had gone to school there. He wanted me to see the Texas schools he had worked on. We did build Yavapai Community College. I remember it was a tough, tough budget, about \$17.00 a square foot, so we had to keep it pretty comprehensive. But it was a good job and I think it's worked well.

**ZL:** I heard that you were very cost-effective on that project.

**BG:** Yes, we were. Then we did student housing. Of course, what threw me there was that it was coed housing. I thought to myself, "How are they going to have a coed dorm at a college?" It was interesting because my daughter went to school at Yavapai.

Then after that we did South Mountain Community College. The president was also from Texas. It seemed that I hit it off better with outsiders than I did with local people. I think the interesting thing was that I was the first Mexican architect from Phoenix. They didn't know whether I had the capabilities to do the work. I did some additions to South Mountain High, then to some of the other schools in the area.

**ZL:** Then you got involved with the Woodlands, which was an entire city outside of Houston, Texas?

**BG:** Yes, I was working with a group that built the Scottsdale Conference Center at McCormick Ranch, Steve Harrison and Gene Colucci. It was an interesting experience because they had a conference center/hotel in Glen Cove, New York. They asked me to go to New York and do some work at Peak Construction Corporation. They were going to convert an estate formerly owned by Jackie Kennedy, before she became a Kennedy. They were going to turn it into a conference center.

I did another project on the site of a former convent at Lake Bluff, Illinois; I did those two jobs with Peak. We were going to design a hotel/conference center at a new town on the East Coast. But before we began,





there was a flood and they couldn't put sewers into the project, so they weren't allowed to build.

At the same time, Bill Messenger, who had been developing some buildings in Palm Springs, asked me to design the conference center at McCormick Ranch in Scottsdale. He brought in the same people, Steve Harrison and Gene Colucci, to be the managers. Connecticut Mutual Real Estate was their partner, but Bill Messenger had some problems in Palm Springs, so he had to back out of the project. So I finished the project for Connecticut Mutual. Then Gene Colucci became chairman of the conference center and he brought in Richard Yoakam as manager. It's been a very successful project.

The next design I worked on was in Mazatlan, Mexico. One of the fellows who had worked at McCormick Ranch became the manager of the hotel/conference center in Mazatlan. Now he is the manager for Hayes Residence, a large conference center in San Jose, California. It's been nice to grow up with these young men who became . . .

**ZL:** How did that get you to the Woodlands?

BG. Steve Harrison, the fellow that I was working with on a project in Maryland, was going to be project manager for Mitchell Energy, an oil company in Houston. He had me take a look at their property. George Mitchell was in the gas/petroleum business; he bought a 20,000 acre piece of property and wanted to develop it into a new town. I was retained by Leonard Ivins who had worked in Maryland. He was the president in charge of Mitchell Energy Development of the Southwest and hired me to be their master architect.

While I was there we did a hotel, a commercial center, some office buildings and apartments. They put in the golf course, and Doug Lee Sanders, who was an old-time golf professional, ran the community club house. I stayed with that firm for two years, until we dedicated it.

**ZL:** Did you move to Houston?

BG; I did, but my wife wouldn't go to Texas. It was funny. She was born in Flagstaff, but her parents were from New Mexico and she was dark. She said, "They don't like Mexicans in Texas." I said, "Hey, you're not a Mexican. You're from New Mexico." She said, "Well, I know, but I've heard bad stories. You can go." So I went ahead and stayed there for two years while I did the project.

While I was there I met a young Arab. He had studied at the University of Missouri and Washington State. He had a mechanical/electrical engineering degree, a brilliant kid. He was very young, in his early twenties. He asked, "How would you like to go to Saudi Arabia with me?" I said, "What am I going to do there?" He said, "Well, my family wants to get into development and my brother is the chairman of the



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



school of gas and petroleum in Saudi Arabia. My other brother teaches at the University of Riyadh. He's a vice-principal or something. Why don't you visit first?" So I went with him from the Woodlands project.

He wanted me to stay in Saudi Arabia. He said, "Why don't you move here? We have great potential. Let me tell you, my father was the advisor to the first King of Saudi Arabia so we've got a very good track record. If you come here, I know that we can do a lot of business." I thought about it and I called my wife, "How would you like to come to Saudi Arabia?" She said, "I don't think so." I said, "If you'll come to Europe or wherever you want, they've offered to put our kids in private school." My son BJ was about fifteen or sixteen and Bianca was about eight. I said, "Why don't you meet me in Rome? We'll take a look at the schools there and then we'll go to Greece."

Some of the Americans put their kids in schools in Rome, Italy and some in Greece. "Let's take a look; you can live there and I can live in Saudi Arabia. I can commute back and forth. It's a lot easier than going all the way to Arizona." So she came to Rome and she liked Rome and she liked Florence too. But she said, "I'm not going to move here." That's when my break-up came. It was just too rough. She wouldn't go to Texas; now she wouldn't come . . . I thought it would be great to live in Rome.

**ZL:** You liked these international projects and moving around the country.

**BG:** Yes, from an architectural standpoint, if people like you and they take you to those countries, I had more freedom than I do working in Phoenix with the planning and zoning requirements. It was just so much easier. So I stayed and did some apartments and other buildings for him.

At the same time, there were some other Arabs that came through the Woodlands and they hired a company called 3D International, who had worked in Houston with Newhouse & Associates and Taylor Wimpey PLC. 3D International was a large firm with about 1,000 employees. They called me. "These people saw some of the work that you were doing at the Woodlands. They had talked to you, they liked you. We have a job offer for you to go to Saudi Arabia. We have a man over there now, but he's not an architect. If you would go over there with a design team, I think we can get the job."

**ZL:** Did they tell you what you were going to be doing?

**BG:** No, they couldn't tell me what the job was. But he said, "It's a very important job and when you get over there, they'll tell you what it is." So I took five guys from the Houston office with me to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. When we arrived, I was met by their man and a young Arab who was the Minister of Protocol. He was an Oxford scholar; spoke fabulous English, the whole thing.

I said, "I'm here, but I don't know what I'm supposed to design." He said, "Well, it's the King's project and we're going to take you to Dhahran and Dammam so you can see the site." We went there and it was



thousands of acres of nothing but desert sand. But they had two big pipelines running through it.

I said to the minister, "You still haven't told me what the project is." He said, "Tomorrow we're going to take you through a couple of palaces, including the King's palace. I can't tell you more than that." I figured they were going to build a palace out there.

So he took me through the palaces. I had worked there before and I told my guys, who had never been in Saudi Arabia, "Look, don't ask questions, but count the bedrooms. They're allowed four wives and I don't know how many families he has living here. So the only way we can tell is to count the bedrooms." The next day, the Minister of Protocol told us, "The King's coming up to see you at the palace in Riyadh and he'll tell you what the project is." The five of us went to meet him.

The King drove up with his entourage and military, the whole thing. He shakes his head and says, "Hello," and sits down. We sit around him and then the Minister of Protocol tells us, "Now you can ask questions." I said, "Your highness, I would like to know what the project is." The Minister translates and the King says, "Tell him he's the architect. He's going to tell me what the project is." I'm still trying to get a lead. I figure it's a palace because the Minister had told me that people who lived in the area wanted a palace where they could have lunch with the King. There, the people can knock on the door at any of the palaces where the King is staying. They have huge dining rooms that the people can go into, sit down and have lunch. So that's what he wanted.

**ZL:** The common people could come and spend time with the royalty?

**BG:** Right. Then the Minister said, "Any other questions?" I said, "Well, he hasn't told me what the project is." The minister said, "You heard him; he said, 'you're the architect and you're going to tell him what the project means.'" Then I said, "Well, I'd like to know what the budget is." The Minister tells the King, "He wants to know what the budget is." The Minister looks at me, smiles and says, "The King just told me to tell you 'Don't be ostentatious.'"

**ZL:** You had never been told that.

**BG:** No, I never had. So we smiled and went back to our villa-type big house, we did all these drawings and we'd take the drawings to the King and pin them up on the palace walls.

**ZL:** This was in Riyadh?

**BG:** Yes. I think the drawings had nine dining halls that would each seat 500 people at a time. We designed a palace for the King and a palace for the Queen so she could have her family. There was also a guest house, but we didn't ask any questions about it. We had buildings for ambassadors who would come



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



and stay there. David Rockefeller from the United States would come and stay and so would other people from the U.S. I stayed there and these architects from Houston asked me to stay there, if I would oversee the project.

I said, "That project's going to take five to ten years to build. I don't want to be gone that long from my family or my office." I still had a small office in Phoenix and one in Houston. They asked, "Why don't you sell us your companies? We'll buy them and then you'll be a principal with us and you'll be in charge of design for this company." I said, "I don't feel like I want to work for such a big company."

I came to see them and I stayed two or three months in their Dallas office just to see if I wanted to accept the job. I would come in every Monday morning. My duty was to check all of the designs they had going on all over the world. I thought to myself, that's like teaching school, looking at student's work. So I decided against that and I came back to Phoenix. I heard the cost; they spent over \$1,450,000,000.00 on that project.

**ZL:** How far were you into it?

**BG:** Design wise.

**ZL:** So you had completed the design.

**BG:** Yes, floor plans and the exterior designs. I have a fellow that I'm working with on a project in Mexico right now who had worked in Saudi Arabia. He's an American and he lives in Phoenix. We were driving to Guaymas, Mexico and I asked him, "Did you ever go to Dammam and Dhahran to see that palace complex?" He said, "Yes I did, Bennie. It's huge and it has a huge wall around it and it's all landscaped beautifully." I said, "Does the King go there?" He said, "You know, he's never used it once." Can you imagine? The royal family, I think, was producing something like 10,000 barrels of oil a day out of that region. That money had to stay there with the King. You can imagine the amounts of money that these people had.

**ZL:** How did you like living there?

**BG:** I enjoyed it. It was different for me. I liked their food. They would eat a lot of lamb. Most of their meals were like ranch meals, very simple, vegetables and wheat and rice. I enjoyed it and the family liked me very well. Gosh, weekends I could fly to Rome or I could fly to Barcelona, Spain or London. It was all just a very nice lifestyle. It's a shame that my wife - probably I might still be married to her if she would have stayed there with me. I came back to Phoenix then.

**ZL:** To jump from one side of the world to a totally different culture, you designed the Hopi Cultural



Center.

**BG:** Yes, up on Second Mesa. Here again, they had a very low budget. They wanted to train a lot of Hopi workers to work on the project to give them something to do. They are very good stone workers, so I designed it using masonry. It was basically a training school that they set up and a lot of Hopis worked on that project. Here again, a very, very inexpensive project. I hate to quote figures, but they sound good to me because I know what costs are now. It cost around seven dollars a square foot for that whole project. Today, if you wanted to do it, it would cost \$150.00 a square foot. The Hopis were good clients. They never said very much. The artists among them were the communicators. Some of the people that I had met were artists like Dennis Numkena.

**ZL:** Did he help on that project?

**BG:** No, he wasn't there. Here again, from my experiences having worked with the Navajos up at Kean's Canyon and other areas, I had seen some old Indian ruins. I still think they are the best thing that's ever been done in Arizona. So I worked with the Hopi's on their cultural center. Basically, I was trying to do a job where they could utilize the talents of their people.

**ZL:** Did you live up there?

**BG:** No, we used to fly into Polacca and go up on the job. The contractor had worked with the Indians before. I think he was out of El Paso.

**ZL:** Did you do an embassy for the United States in Benin?

**BG:** Benin, Africa.

**ZL:** How was that?

**BG:** I had done some remodeling work on the embassy in Mexico City while John Gavin was ambassador to Mexico. I met some of the people from Washington who had come out to the project. They asked me to come to Washington to meet the administrator for the office of foreign buildings. He wasn't an architect; I think he was a history professor. He interviewed me for the project and I asked him, "Where did you get my name?" He said, "Oh, a couple of the architects that I know here in the East said that you would be the ideal guy to go over there to do this embassy in Benin." I asked him, "Where's Benin?" He said, "Well, it's in West Africa. We'll give you some literature." They had booklets about the government and people of each country where they were sending people.

I flew to Lagos, Nigeria. The fellows had told me, "Now be careful. These guys don't like Americans." I





said, "At least I don't look like one. That'll probably help me." I had a driver in Lagos who drove me to the country of Benin, a small country on the ocean front.

I asked one of the embassy fellows what my job was. He said, "You're here telling us what the job is going to be. We have some property. We haven't been to the location because it is quite a ways from the capital. We don't go out before sunrise and we don't stay out after sunset." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Politically, the dictator doesn't like Americans."

I told said, "Well, I've got to go out and see the site." He said, "We'll get you a black driver and he'll take you out." They got me a young black driver and we drove out to the project. The French were building a huge hotel. "Gosh, how long has this been going on?" He said, "About ten years. They haven't finished it yet."

We walked through it and it was better than any hotel I had seen in the United States. It was luxury, first class. They had all these cabinet makers and carpenters working there who couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak French.

I told my driver, "I need to get a map of this property." We went to a local official and I asked him, "Do you know where this building is going to be?" "Yes," and he went with us and pointed it out, "You're here."

The site was about 150 by 350 feet deep. I said, "Who's next to us?" He said, "The Cuban embassy." I asked him, "What about the one that's adjacent to us?" I think he said, "Pakistan." So I came back to the American embassy in Benin and I asked, "Hey, do you know what is going on out there?" He said, "No, why?"

I said, "Do you know you have party walls with the Cuban embassy and the Pakistani embassy?" That was when they were having problems in Russia, when the Russians wired the entire American embassy building and they had to tear it all down and rebuild it. I said, "I think you're asking for trouble." He said, "We'll have to call Washington and tell them." The fellow in Washington said, "We didn't know it was that type of situation. They just told us that we had a piece of property. Come back to Washington and we'll talk about it." I had a good chance to see Benin, Africa.

This is sort of an aside. What was interesting to me was that it was a French colony and they had turned it over to the Benin government about fifteen years before I went there. They had beautiful boulevards, like the French do, with mahogany trees that were 200 or 300 feet tall, with trunks about eight feet in diameter. When the Benin government took it over from the French, the new government cut all of the trees down and left them right there in the streets. I asked, "Why did they leave them?" He said, "Just to tell the people who's boss." They just left them there!



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



I asked if I could go into the government mansions and offices. He said, "Do you dare?" I said, "Why not? I've got to find out what I'm working with." We went inside one of the buildings and found goats and dogs running through it and black families living inside. They were slums. The families had taken over those beautiful homes. "Why don't they improve them and make nice residences out of them?" He said, "Our dictator doesn't want us to have anything to remember the French by." It was that way all over the country. What got me was that they had cut down those huge trees just to spite the French. Anyway, I came back to Washington and told them, "Frankly, I think you ought to wait a while. It's not really the best climate to build over there." I don't know what they did with that information.

**ZL:** So you didn't complete that project.

**BG:** No. It would have been interesting, but the site was too far removed from the center of town. It was in an outlying community and we felt from a security standpoint, it just wasn't the right place.

**ZL:** For a while you were designing a lot of things around the Valley. Then it seemed you backed away. Was that deliberate or was it because you got so involved internationally?

**BG:** It was because I got involved in international projects. I had things going on in Mexico and I was still doing some work in Texas. I did the civic complex in Palm Desert, next to Palm Springs, California, and a science complex for the University of California at La Jolla.

Battling in Phoenix, trying to get a cheap residential or governmental project, I would have to go through the legislature, picking out people to work with. Politically, I had to be either a Democrat or a Republican. Phoenix was not fun. I just didn't feel comfortable working in that atmosphere. I did do churches; I did the church at Sun City. Then I did the Lutheran Church in Paradise Valley, Gloria Dei, which was mentioned in the *Arizona Republic*.

**ZL:** Yes, it's on Stanford Drive.

**BG:** I also did Phoenix Christian Church which is now the Jewish Synagogue on Stanford, fairly close to Gloria Dei and where I used to live. We did a church for a Phoenix Christian school group, and had just finished it when Jewish people came by. I had done a Jewish Synagogue on Lincoln Boulevard across from the Franciscan Renewal Center. But some of the Jewish people left it and bought Phoenix Christian Church and converted it into their own synagogue. I thought that was amusing. Here is a Jewish group buying a Christian church and converts it into their own. I was doing that type of work.

**ZL:** You did Saint Pious the Tenth church in Tucson.



**BG:** Yes, that was for Monsignor Fuller. I will always remember him, because he was a young Episcopalian who converted to Catholicism and had become a priest. He rose high within the church and received the title of monsignor. He'll probably be a bishop one of these days. He didn't have much of a budget, but said, "I want you to do an open feeling kind of church." He was one of the first to have a singing choir up front. He was bringing in the new practice into the Catholic Church.

**ZL:** Right after the Second Vatican Council?

**BG:** Yes. So I worked with him on that. Then we did some additions to the church itself. Here again, it was a very low budget project, but it was nice. It had that clean, southwestern look to it.

**ZL:** You've also done some teaching. You've taught at the UofA and ASU and Berkeley.

**BG:** Yes. I began teaching at ASU because Jim Elmore, the dean when I was a student, asked me to take the place of one of the professors, Bob McConnell, who was leaving for a new position in Kansas. Jim Elmore called me in the middle of the school year. "Bennie, I know that you don't want to teach, but could you help me because Bob's leaving and I'm going to be short? I said, "Jim, why do you want me to teach 'Professional Practice'?" He said, "Well, you're a practicing architect. At least you can tell them what things they're going to get into."

**ZL:** Not just from the theoretical standpoint.

**BG:** Right. So I taught there that year and he asked me to come back. I taught there for three or four years.

**ZL:** Did you enjoy it?

**BG:** I had an office at the time and enjoyed teaching, but it was a strain because having to teach, I couldn't travel when people wanted me to do work out of town. It was enjoyable working with Jim Elmore and the other professors. ASU was a smaller school then.

Then I went to a convention in San Diego or Philadelphia. The chairman of the school of architecture at Berkeley came over and introduced himself and said, "The fellow with me is an architect and he said I should talk to you about coming to Berkeley." I said, "That would be an honor. What could I do at Berkeley for you?" He said, "We're a good school, but we would like to have other ideas than those from our own group." I said, "Is it because I'm a Hispanic?" He said, "Well, that helps." So I went to Berkeley and taught a graduate class for a semester. It was very interesting because they had kids from all over the world.

**ZL:** What was the class?



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** It was theory of architecture. I had kids from all over who were very interesting. The teachers and professors that I was working with were very good architects in the Bay area. I stayed there for one semester, and then they offered me tenure. They offered me tenure!

I told them, "I'm flattered, but I'm not cut out to be a teacher. I still enjoy working on my own and traveling." They replied, "Any time you want to come back, Bennie, there's a spot." I enjoyed it, but it was right after the hippie kind of deal. Some of my students were brilliant, but they were hippies.

I gave them a problem to design housing in a business area. They asked, "Why do we want housing there? Houses should be in the parks. We should take over the parks and put the houses in the parks." It was that type of thing. You know what it is with some of these young students. It was fun working with them, but I thought, "Arizona State University was such a strict kind of school; but at Berkeley there was the most liberal type of teaching." They were all brilliant kids, but they were . . .

**ZL:** Free thinkers.

**BG:** Free thinkers. Some of the professors were that way also. When I moved to Phoenix, Bob Hershberger, the dean of the school of architecture at the University of Arizona asked me if I would come and take over some classes. I taught at the UofA for three semesters. It's fun teaching when it's spaced out.

**ZL:** What do you think about the future of the Salt River Valley?

**BG:** Jim Elmore created the Valley of the Sun redo of the Rio Salado Salt River project. I thought it was brilliant, but I said, "Jim, before you can do anything, you're going to have to get the Indian tribes together, because you're going to have to put in a dam at Red Rock. Otherwise you'll flood out the river area every year when the floods come." I was a consultant to the Fort McDowell tribe at the time.

I was a consultant when they were starting the Fountain Hills project. I met with C.V. Woods, the director. As a consultant with the Pimas, I negotiated with Fountain Hills to put their sewer plant in another location. But I knew that the Indians were pretty tough to deal with.

When the Fort McDowell tribe found out that I was working with the Pima tribe, they should have been happy that I was working with both of them. But the Fort McDowell tribe said, "You can't be our consultant if you're going to work for the Salt River tribe. I said, "Hey, it's a mutual benefit to both your tribes." He said, "Yes, but we don't like them." So I suggested to the Salt River tribe to let the government put up a dam at Red Rock. When you go to Fountain Hills, you see the road that leads into Payson. I wanted them to put a dam there to control the floods.



**ZL:** North of Fountain Hills.

**BG:** That's right. There was an area by Red Mountain that would have been ideal for a dam to control the water coming into Phoenix from the Salt River. Instead of flooding it out, they could have permanent lakes. I was working with the Salt River tribe when that was going on. Then the Fort McDowell tribe didn't want to have anything to do with me. I said, "It's mutually beneficial. You can have a nice big lake, and they can control some lakes farther down on the reservation and develop it much more beautifully."

While we were working on the idea of the dam, a lady came by and said it was going to kill the nest of three bald eagles. You can imagine, as an architect, what it was like to get into these little political fights. I told Jim, "You've got to get a dam there because at times it even wipes out part of the airport." They never could get the dam approved because the tribes wouldn't go along with it. One tribe didn't want to do whatever the other tribe wanted.

**ZL:** They had to cooperate, but you couldn't get cooperation among the tribes.

**BG:** That's right. When I was doing the South Mountain Community College project, I spoke to the city council and asked them, "Why can't you guys get along? South Mountain has the best potential of growth of any place that needs it. Scottsdale and Tempe are bordering you on one end and you've got the chance to really do something all the way down to South Mountain." There was a Hispanic woman on the council who represented that area of South Phoenix. She tried to get something done, but the city wouldn't go along with it. They just didn't want South Mountain to get any industry, housing, parks or anything else. It could still be one of the most beautiful sections of the valley.

**ZL:** I read that you thought it would be a good idea to put the airport south of South Mountain, or move it even closer to Casa Grande and make it a regional airport.

**BG:** Right. I wanted it to go on the South side of South Mountain because there was no problem with drainage there. It was isolated yet close to the freeway.

**ZL:** This was long before Ahwatukee and Mountain Park Ranch and the Foothills were developed.

**BG:** They said, "Oh, you're crazy, we've got to have the airport in Phoenix."

**ZL:** You also thought they could tunnel through South Mountain.

**BG:** Yes. That would have been easy because I talked to some people who were in the engineering end of it. That would have opened up Central Avenue all the way through. People don't understand the politics that we, as architects, get into sometimes.





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**ZL:** You thought there could be light rail along Central Avenue that would go from South Mountain all the way north to Sunnyslope.

**BG:** We did a project in Sunnyslope at that time. A fellow from Nebraska, one of the largest wheat farmers, was doing research on alcoholic additives. His plan was to plant grains to make an alcoholic additive so automobiles would use less gasoline and that would reduce pollution.

We talked with the city about putting high rise buildings in the hills of Sunnyslope. That way they wouldn't break up all the land, but there would be nice high rise towers in place. People could go from the beginning of North Central Avenue in Sunnyslope all the way to the airport without any interference. But neighbors who owned mobile homes in the area objected. "We don't want this to happen; it would destroy our homes." After a while I lost patience with Phoenix.

**ZL:** Another idea you had was to design light industrial buildings or parking structures with condominiums on the upper floors.

**BG:** That's what I wanted to do in Phoenix. We have to remember that both the basketball stadium and the baseball field are downtown. I know the city intimately because my dad was born there and I lived there for many years. I thought that would be the best usage for Phoenix. That way, the city wouldn't die at 5:00 pm when everybody is leaving downtown to go home. Currently the traffic jams start on Camelback.

**ZL:** Do you consider yourself a futurist?

**BG:** I would say, yes, in a way. I would rather say that I'm more of a practical practitioner, or that is what I would like to be. I don't believe in miracles. I've had a lot of experience fighting public and governmental agencies for all of these projects. If you grow up in Phoenix, and you've wasted all of these years dreaming . . .

That was the nice thing about the Woodlands project in Houston. We did the entire Woodlands project in just two years. Can you imagine what it would be like trying to do something like that in Phoenix or Tempe?

**ZL:** What was the climate that allowed you to do that?

**BG:** First of all, there were no city agencies.

**ZL:** This was in a county? Was it unincorporated?



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** Yes, Montgomery County was unincorporated. The thinking was that the Woodlands would grow to be its own community, so they allowed a lot of leeway for us to design it. They brought in Ian McHarg, a master planner from Philadelphia, a visionary guy.

My job was to see that things got built. In essence, I was a bit of a city hall and planning and governmental agency. Whatever we sketched out, we would start building the next day. In Pima County, Arizona, it would be three months before I could even get zoning. I've got to go through twenty-three different design review committees in Tucson and Pima County. Can you imagine?

**Z:** You thought Arizona State University should stop concentrating on their main campus and spread out. Now they've done some of that. Do you think they're going in the right direction?

**BG:** I thought that individual schools, like the college of medicine, could be in one location, the college of teaching could be in another, and architectural/engineering in a third area instead of concentrating all the colleges on a single campus.

You can't even find parking spaces. Have you gone over to Tempe? You can't find a single parking space, yet they still maintain a rigid conformity to tradition. The main campus should be made into a cultural center and spread out these new colleges instead of trying to keep on building there.

**ZL:** It may help that they're going to use the former William's Air Force Base.

**BG:** That will help tremendously. I think that's going to be great.

**ZL:** I think they're moving the agriculture school out there.

**BG:** Yes.

**ZL:** What are some of the buildings you like in Phoenix, architecturally?

**BG:** To be honest with you, I don't have a favorite. I don't think I like very many buildings. (Laughter) There's nothing there. The high rises downtown were designed for the most part by Los Angeles or other outside architects.

I've only seen photos of it, but the new city hall was designed by a firm from back East. If you've been around those guys, their thinking isn't Western. We do the same thing in the office: we've got the draftsmen and we put them to work.

But frankly, there really isn't much there in Phoenix. I like the old library and the Heard Museum, but of



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



course they are traditional buildings. I've been inside the new library and I think that big space works well, but it doesn't have any specific ingredients that say it's Southwestern. That's the problem.

You can transplant all of those buildings to Philadelphia or Atlanta and you would never know there was any regional kind of look to them. I think that's why, not because it's my work, but that's why I like the city of Scottsdale library and city hall, because they fit and it's pleasant to walk around them. I've gone over there after they have those concerts, and sometimes when they have the gourmet cooking school out on the lawn, and I will see people getting married in some of those areas. I think, "That's the way it should be; instead of don't get near because the jail's right across the street."

I'm sorry to say there really isn't too much in Phoenix - the Phoenix Civic Center. Can you imagine that big slab of concrete in the summer time? People can't even walk on it. Here again, they brought in architects from California, Luckman's firm. I never did care for his kind of architecture, but he was a good peddler. He was with a soap company before he opened up his own firm; it may have been Lever Brothers. Then he tied up with a good architect from California, so you can blame it all on him. (Laughter)

**ZL:** Who do you think were some of the wonderful architects? Maybe you don't have any in Phoenix.

**BG:** I think the fellows who did those 1920s buildings, who had borrowed ideas from Europe. It was not a great design deal, but at least the buildings were subtle and they fit in; some of those downtown churches, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church and even Saint Mary's. But everything they've added to those buildings, it doesn't even fit. I don't know how you feel about it.

Of course I like the Arizona Biltmore Hotel. I think that the Biltmore was very fitting. Most of the other stuff was done by architectural offices out of state and they really didn't know what our weather was like. From a practical standpoint, you've got to live in the summertime downtown, and you can't do it with all of the concrete that's around there. And those big multi-glass type buildings that you can't really sit near the window because it's too hot. It's hard to pick anything that really stands out.

**ZL:** You designed your Nogales home seven or eight years ago. Would you describe it? It is a most interesting house.

**BG:** I think that the reason I did this was that my wife and I moved here, we were going to build in Cave Creek. I had bought trusses that came out of an old hay barn and the columns came out of the oil fields in Texas. Bunger Steel had the trusses in their yard. I saw them one day and asked, "How much do you want for those trusses?" He gave me a price and I said, "Great." My wife said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to build a house with them." She said, "You don't even have a plan."

Well, I knew mentally what I was going to do. So I brought them out and at first I was going to do the



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



house and these walls were going to be adobe. But when I started looking into adobe, I realized I would have to reinforce it and it was not giving me the openness I wanted, so I went with wood. Wood was a lot less expensive, and the insulation qualities work well. The windows came out of the old ice plant here in Nogales.

**ZL:** How did you manage to get those at the right time?

**BG:** I was working for a contractor in Nogales who was rehabbing a new building. I was doing some work for him on the building they were taking down. I asked what they were going to do with the windows from the old building, and he said "Take them to the salvage yard." I asked, "Would you sell them to me?" He said, "Sure." So they delivered them out here in the front yard; then I brought the trusses in.

I knew the city building inspector and we went to lunch. He asked me, "What are you going to do with all that material?" I said, "I want to build a house with it." He said, "Why don't you sketch it out and give me an idea what you're going to do." I said, "Well, I haven't drawn the plans yet." He said, "Sketch me out the idea." I sketched it on a napkin. He said, "Well, it looks good to me. Why don't you stamp it?" So, I went out to the car, got my stamp, came back and stamped it. He said, "That's good." That's what he used to issue me the building permit. Of course, they knew me around Nogales. I had already done a lot of work in the city.

**ZL:** You moved to Mexico and painted down there.

**BG:** I went to Mexico. I had a condominium; my client that I did a big hotel for down there gave me a condominium which was right across from the hotel. I moved to Mazatlan while I was working on the hotel. The condo was sort of like my office. The workers would meet with me there. But my wife didn't like Mexico and she wouldn't come down. So there I was in Mexico. I think I got my divorce while I was living there, going back and forth. I used part of the hotel's storage area for painting. I started painting there.

**ZL:** Were you still doing architectural work?

**BG:** Yes, I was doing architectural work while I was painting. I had some of my guys come to Mazatlan and they enjoyed working on the hotel. Of course, working in Mexico is completely different from working here. It's almost a day to day thing. The poor Mexicans couldn't even read plans. You'd have to describe to them each day what they were going to do. I enjoyed that and I stayed there and kept the condominium. It was a good location because it was right across from the hotel.

When I got the divorce that was the only thing the judge gave me. So I came back to Phoenix and traded in my Mercedes for a pick-up, and turned over my suits to the Salvation Army, bought a couple pair of Levis,



and I went to Mexico.

I was living in Mexico and a friend of mine bought a big house down there. It had belonged to a lady from California. John Wayne used to stay in the house. The woman had to go into the hospital in California, so she asked me to sell her house for her. I sold it to a friend of mine from Texas. He moved down there with his wife. He was a painter and was going to paint there. He had a guest house and all. He had a heart attack one night. I was living in my condominium and he was living in the big house. His wife called me and said, "Lamar is having a heart attack." I came over to the house and took him to the emergency room at Mazatlan hospital and they put him to bed.

Lamar told me from his hospital bed, "Bennie, I'm going to move back to Houston. They've got great hospitals there." I said, "I can understand." He said, "Will you sell my house for me?" I said, "I'm not a real estate guy." "Yes, but you know a lot of people here. All these Americans know you coming back and forth. Sell my house."

So he went back to Houston with his wife and we rented out his house to the Mexican Consulate. The American Consular lived in the house for a while. Finally the house sold. I owned the condominium in Mazatlan, but I was still doing work in Phoenix, so I would have to commute back and forth to Phoenix. Frankly, I never thought I'd come back here. I'd just keep on going to South America from Phoenix. I was painting and I thought it would be nice to write books and paint and do that kind of thing and get rid of my clients. I was very serious about it.

About that time I came back to Scottsdale. I was getting ready to close my office there and that's when I met Diane, my present wife who was from San Francisco. She had moved to Tahoe and friends of hers had suggested she come to Scottsdale, that it was a great town in the winter time. I met her through some friends of mine who knew her. She had five kids; one of the girls was married.

Diane went with me to Mazatlan where we got married. She's an artist, so she understands me a little bit. I'm not a macho Mexican; I'd like to be a macho Mexican, but she understands me. We lived in Mazatlan for a short time until I finished another project there. I was doing another project in Cabo San Lucas. When it was finished, we came back to Phoenix. That's when we were looking for a place around Cave Creek, Pinnacle Peak, or Carefree, but we decided to come down to Nogales.

Diane had gone to Mexico with me in the winter time and it was just lovely. You know how it is. She asked, "Why don't we move to Nogales?" I said, "I'm going to have to commute from there to Phoenix and Tucson." She said, "Well, you're commuting to there from Mazatlan. Why don't we just move to Nogales? You can go to Mazatlan and Cabo from Nogales." So, that's what we did.

**ZL:** What is your style of painting?





Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** I would say impressionistic. I don't like to get into a lot of detail in my paintings because I think out my problems mentally and then I don't want to take a lot of time putting them down. This little painting here is the type of sketches I used to do architecturally. They're rather an impressionistic type.

**ZL:** Do you decide mentally what you are going to paint before you start?

**BG:** I usually do. Sometimes - if I've had a couple of shots of tequila. (Laughter)

**ZL:** What medium do you use?

**BG:** I had a very good teacher at Arizona State University, Dorothy Bergamo. She was a water colorist who studied at the Art Institute. I took water color classes from her. I also studied and worked with Phillips Sanderson.

**ZL:** Was he also teaching at ASU?

**BG:** Yes, he was great with pastels and also a very fine sculptor. I think he was probably the best sculptor I knew up to that time. You know there are others, the cowboy groups. He could do the cowboys, but he didn't like cowboys and he didn't like DeGrazia. But he was very good with pastels and pencil. I worked with him and with some of the people I had in the school of architecture, like Mel Ensign, an old cattleman's son who went to Harvard. He was very good with pencil. I worked with these people who taught me various techniques. I like pastels and pencil because they're fast; you can do them and walk away. I also use acrylics and do quite a bit with them. Oils are just too slow a process for me.

**ZL:** Do you have favorite subject matter?

**BG:** No, not really. I think basically it's mostly buildings, landscapes and horses. I don't know whether you saw them, but when I did the bank in Phoenix, Bank One, they bought some paintings that I had done. One was an abstract of a pueblo and then I did some horses. For the board room, I did one with acrylics of a Navajo Indian horse. I painted things that I enjoyed looking at, doing fast, and walking away.

**ZL:** You're also into sculpture.

**BG:** Not too much, but I'd like to do more. I learned welding because I wanted to combine welding with sculpture. Phillips Sanderson was a tremendous artist in wood. Working with him I learned to work with wood using my design background. It's got to do with space and buildings. Maybe that's a throwback to the Mayans.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**ZL:** Is there anything in architecture that you would like to do that you haven't had the opportunity to do?

**BG:** I think that the best projects that I like are resort projects. The nice thing about resorts is that so many people visit them. You've got to suit their taste and they've got to be happy in that environment. You have freedom to design and the owner doesn't tell you what to do. It's not like a single house for a residence. I think designing resort property or even planning a city; that would be a lot of fun. Those are my favorites.

**ZL:** You've received many awards. Are there any special ones that you would like to mention? You received the man of the year award from the Mexican Chamber of Commerce in 1968.

**BG:** Token Mexican. (Laughter) That's what it really was. I think because of the people involved in giving me that award were in Vesta Club from small communities around Phoenix. They had all gone to school and had gotten their educations.

**ZL:** Tell us about Vesta Club. You were working with them when you were at ASU.

**BG.** Gene Madin, from either Globe or Morenci, was in Vesta Club. He had been in the service. I think he was a navigator in the Air Force. Others included Dr. Pisano, an optometrist in Phoenix and the Amado brothers, school principals. Joe Borrell, who had gotten his doctorate, was school principal at Wilson Elementary School. Gene Madin's wife, a school teacher, was also a member. Most of the people in Vesta Club were school teachers, although there were a couple of attorneys. One was a city councilman, Cordova, who later became a judge. So basically I was the only free spirit.

They wanted to set up a scholarship program and began Vesta by sending two high school graduates to a college of their choice. They had to be Hispanic students. It was fun working with Vesta. I admired their objectives, although they were school teachers. Not that I have anything against teachers, but you know that they're pretty functional kind of people. I'm not saying that about you.

What I liked about Vesta Club was that none of the members had much money, but they went out, went to Friendly House in Phoenix and really worked hard. They held annual dances where the students were chosen and presented with their awards. We used to hold the dances at Westward Ho and I enjoyed them.

Vesta Club started first, and then Chicanos por la Causa was organized. I never was too much into that group; I was gone by then. But Gene Madin and his wife were both school teachers and they really got out there and did things for those kids. That must have been in the early 1970s. After all these years, to see some of the kids who got scholarships then working as school teachers now, is just great. I enjoyed working with that organization.

**ZL:** You also received the ASU Alumni Achievement Award at Founder's Day in 1970.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**BG:** I think that was because of the notoriety I was getting as an architect. I think that Jim Elmore was one of the nominating people and some of the teachers at ASU brought it up. That was good, because it was part of the profession.

**ZL:** What hobbies do you have?

**BG:** I don't really have hobbies. My work is my hobby. I tried to have each project I do as a hobby type thing. Sometimes projects don't work out, because of financial pressures or other reasons. I can't think of anything I would rather do than what I am doing.

**ZL:** Do you have any plans to retire?

**BG:** No. What's surprising to me, and I tell this to my wife, "Frank Lloyd Wright was 92 years old when he died; he was still working. Picasso was 92 when he died and he was still working. If I can get to be their age and die and still be working, that's what I'd like to do. I can't imagine not having something to do."

**ZL:** Of all the things that you've accomplished in your lifetime, of what are you most proud?

**BG:** Making it through college. (Laughter)

**ZL:** After serving as an architect in this state for thirty some years, what do you think your legacy will be?

**BG:** I still have some dreams, or goals, or hopes of seeing Arizona become a really beautiful state. I know it's pretty far gone, but there's still hope. We need to redo some of the neighborhoods that have become so decrepit, like Tucson.

You know they shoot two or three kids every night in Tucson. I think a lot of that has to do with the environment. I think they need better neighborhoods, more schools, playgrounds, supervised school grounds, and places for these kids to take their minds off of dope or whatever it is that leads them astray. It's a tragedy and you see it every day, but Tucson, can you imagine Tucson? A small, well it's not a small community now, but every night on TV, you will see some kid who was shot at a playground; or they'll shoot somebody on their front porch. Such violence makes me feel just tremendously guilty. I think a lot of it is because of the architecture. There shouldn't be houses right on the street where it's so easy to shoot somebody. Or if you're walking, instead of having sheltered pathways, you have to walk on the sidewalks. In these new subdivisions all they have is just a rolled curb so you've got to walk in the street.

My vision would be for a utopian kind of paradise to live in; then hopefully we can get rid of some of this violence. My wife's son was an up and coming movie director who worked with Kurt Cobain and filmed



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



Cobain's stuff. But Cobain killed himself in Seattle. The founder of Lollapalooza went to Yucatan, in Mexico. He and my wife's son did a film together. He worked with a lot of those high end guys in the movie industry, but unfortunately, he got into the dope. So I've been living with his problem, although not just because Diane is his mother.

I've been living with his problem and now he is thirty years old and now he just had a baby - first time baby, this last week. That's why Diane's over there. And he can't leave the drugs alone. It's just a tragedy, a terrible tragedy. You can't legislate these kids. You're going to have to do something else to get them off of that track.

**ZL:** If you could talk to young people today, what is the one message that you would give them?

**BG:** Get your education! It's fun; it can be fun. School's enjoyable. Just go and listen to your teachers and do what they ask you to do. Hopefully some day you can go and be your own teacher. You know, you were a school teacher, so you know. I can tell you these things because you're very much aware of them. I'm surprised what the problems have been, but it's having that closeness with this kid that makes me see the problems.

My son and daughter both went to Phoenix Country Day School and the reason for that was that we lived fairly close. I could see what was happening at other elementary schools that I'd go to, so I had them both stay there through high school. My daughter then went to Yavapai in Prescott, and my son, BJ, went to ASU.

I think it was because I was a stiff parent and my wife, their mother, was a stiff parent too, that we never had any problems with them. This dope and everything else never has been a problem. Hopefully, they're of age now that I never have to worry about them.

But I think it's that educational background that's so important for kids' now days. You can't politically do it. It's catching up with us. If you think of what's going to happen in the next hundred years, it's just a tragedy. Hopefully I could interest these kids into building their own homes and learn the way I did. I've often thought about it. I say to myself, "It'd be nice to have a private school of your own where you could take kids and teach them carpentry and architecture and the whole bit and work with them on that kind of scale."

**ZL:** It's a great thought.

**BG:** Well, it's a tragedy. I think it's not because of economic circumstances, because I know what that was like. I was selling newspapers at the age of seven or eight years old. I even sold newspapers here in Nogales at the border.



Arizona Historymakers  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections  
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012



**ZL:** In the summer?

**BG:** In the summer. I had a little paper bag and sold newspapers. It's not unfortunate because I don't regret growing up that way. It's good that I've been able to see it and if somebody asks me, "What do you know about it?" I say, "Hey, I've been there." As far as I'm concerned, I think every kid, when he gets out of high school, automatically goes into the service for three years. The best thing to do is put them on a boat where they can't get to the city. (Laughter)

**ZL:** Well, can you think of anything else that you'd like to add?

**BG:** No. I hope I haven't talked you out. Helen Hobson has some good articles about me that you'll like. I like one that Blake Brophy did. I think it pretty well covers things. It is a magazine type of article, and the awards and education are all in there.

**ZL:** Then this concludes the interview. Thank you very much.

**BG:** Thank you for coming here and putting up with me.

**ZL:** It was a pleasure.

