



During the Exposition in 1915

## FIRST JOB

I had quit school in 1964 and had been scrambling around with very odd jobs, although occasionally making ‘real money’ working for my dad on a homesite where he was foreman. My sweetheart and I wanted to marry, but I felt at such loose ends it didn’t seem right. My political life was incandescent, particularly with the draft hovering over me. One day I met a guy who was trying to organize his neighborhood to take part in the anti-war movement. It turned out he was a journeyman carpenter, and when I mentioned the work with my dad, he offered to sponsor me for an apprenticeship opening on the big project he was on – the reconstruction of the Palace of Fine Arts. I liked the idea and we set it up. I had some rigmarole to do with the union local for a week, and then the company agreed to take me on for the minimum three-months probation. I got a kit of tools together from the list the union gave me, bought a pair of mandatory white overalls, and made a simple toolbox.

Monday morning found me walking up the dirt road into the maze of trucks, scaffolds, shacks and compressors. Everything *loomed*, had intensified significance. Was this my life? I’d signed papers as if indenturing myself. I would go to school two nights a week, my pay was set by contract, I had a notebook in which to categorize my hours and have them certified by the boss. Every step that morning was echoed by those larger steps of life-design. Every *other* step I felt like turning around and leaving. A look at some hard-boiled faces in dirty overalls and hardhats...a glance up at the rugged formwork bristling with braces and scaffold rails. It seemed too adult, industrial...and grim. I would be dwarfed – I’d be a child again, a moron, a softy.

But with the *next* step I’d see it all as an adventure, like taking passage on a schooner with Dana or Melville. I knew I was physically up to it, and I sensed my wife-to-be would be impressed. The money wouldn’t hurt, and I needed to become something in the world that she could set her bearings to.

Then I shook hands with the Superintendent and felt like running away. He was a dour Texan who wanted me to get *the picture*: I was to be ready to work every morning at exactly eight, lunchtime was

exactly half an hour – no dawdling, no idling. “We expect you to learn and work at the same time. This is a serious and dangerous project and you have to be fully engaged at all times. Other men’s lives depend on it.”

Then he turned to Neil, my contact, and told me I’d be partnered with him for the first three months. I didn’t really know Neil that well yet, but he took over cheerfully. He introduced me to his brother and several others, each time with a word of endorsement that did much to make me feel I could fit in. There was an earthy tone to it which gave me a first sense of what the brotherliness of the union was meant to be.

But then we had to get to work. I felt ridiculous to have such clean overalls and new tools. Neil fixed that immediately by smearing dirt on my bib in front of everyone. “Now he’s initiated, right?” and everyone chuckled a little. It seemed right to get a mild hazing.

Everything that first day was as vivid as if I’d suddenly landed in the Amazon. The awkwardness of carrying the toolbox while climbing between scaffolds and forms, the way Neil’s first instructions sounded like Amazonian to me. My first actual carpenter act – cutting a two-by four with a Skilsaw after marking its length. Nailing something in place forcefully. Learning the wonderful names for the form work: *Catheads* that screw on to *she-bolts*; *hairpins* that lock down over *snap-ties*; *strongbacks* that brace up the *walers*. Neil’s explanation of the Rules of the Crane – the chokers, the signals. The confusion I had when trying to understand that a concrete form is the negative of the thing you’re building, a mold. Then there was the alien concept (for a 22-year old) of planning one’s work ahead. Neil would roughly sketch something and make a list with some sizes to cut, then we’d have to go down to the yard and prepare our parts to be lifted to us by the crane.

By ten o’clock I was tired. Neil reminded me there is no coffee break in the contract – but when we were out of view, he took a minute to chat. I looked at my wristwatch fifty times that day, and every time, was amazed at how slowly it was going. It’s strange to me now. In my last ten years of work, I was often unaware that quitting time had come, and felt like lunch break wasn’t essential. The days would zoom by. Did Einstein say anything about time being relative to how effectively you’re working? To age?

Those first few days I was noticing social things too, how all the carpenters were white, all the laborers were Black or Latino. It looked like the Deep South. Then there were the union rules. There were imaginary lines dividing the work between carpenters and laborers. Sometimes it felt like we had servants to do the carrying. But why were carpenters erecting the scaffolds, even though it was a metal assembly? Apparently any process that *had* been carpentry was held onto by the union even though a new technology may have made it accessible to any quickly trained person. Then there were the brotherly codes, the tacit unionism. In that first week, I asked questions about things on the job during lunch break, and got stiffed. Neil had to explain: “everything between 8:00 and 12:00, and 12:30 and 4:30 belongs to the boss. Not a minute more – and we don’t let their time spill over into our time. That’d be like working overtime for free.”

I had surges of learning and feeling more competent, and then days when I felt totally alien again. Pretending to fit in leads to gaffes as much as simply feeling *out*. One day I was assigned to watch a concrete pour at ground level, inside one of the big column bases. It was a bedroom-sized hollow space, and the boss was worried about the strength of our braces and form work. I thought it was absurdly easy and a waste of time. Just stand there for an hour or more, watching? I settled in and they

started emptying those huge crane-carried buckets of concrete. I could hear it slumping down into the forms in front of me, and there were shudders... and the peculiar limestoney smell of the cement...but nothing was squirting out. Then I saw Howard, the foreman, walking slowly past inspecting everything, and had the smart-ass notion of fooling with him. I said quite audibly, "UH-OH!" from inside. Howard leapt into the room alarmed and said sharply, "It's leaking?!!?" In that instant I knew how wrong I'd been. All this bracing was his design for withstanding the great weight and pressure. I mumbled, "oh. nothin, just, nothin." I saw a frown grow on Neil's face, so I confessed: "I was just bored, just kidding around." Howard lined up with my face and read off this little warning.

"Don't you ever kid around about a concrete pour dammit! If I tell you to watch, there's a reason. You ever seen a form give way? That's hundreds of tons of liquid stone you fool, it's a goddamn disaster!"

I never was *that* kind of fool again.

Learning how dangerous it was came rapidly that first few weeks. There are errors that only can happen once, and warning shots across the bow. I was climbing down a scaffold ladder when a man two levels above me lost control of a two-by-four ten feet long. It snaked through the scaffold and fell vertically right on my hard hat. The blow nearly knocked me off the ladder and gave my neck a fierce sprain. I picked up my old-style aluminum helmet and saw a dramatic caved-in place right on top. *Shit, that would have been my skull!* No one had to remind me to keep my hardhat on after that.

Another time the roles were reversed. I laid my hammer on the formwork I was nailing, and it got knocked off a minute later, falling end over end toward a guy walking beneath me. I couldn't do anything, just watch and pray for that two seconds. When it landed behind him, he looked up and yelled at me: "You had better keep hold of your goddamn tools boy!"

Neil explained I should never leave a tool where it can fall, never. Either it's in your tool loop or pocket, or it's in the box. But he said I'd done the right thing not to yell down at the guy. "If you do, a man will stop and look up. Then the hard hat is no use is it?"

I saw one accident in that probationary period. A carpenter was signaling a load of lumber onto one of the column-groups, and the scaffold he was standing on had no guard rail up yet. With his eyes on the load, and his hand signaling the crane, he lost his balance and fell off, maybe thirty feet to the ground. Quite a few of us saw it, and everyone stopped work. Luckily the man landed feet-first...but unluckily, the bones in both feet were broken-up badly. A few hours after the fall, Howard made the rounds and told every man individually that he had a responsibility to all the rest of us to look at all scaffold problems and fix them. And especially: "...never work on a scaffold that has no rail yet. Put it up yourself if it's missing. No excuses!"

Many impressions streamed in on me that first few weeks, and being young, I was adapting very fast. It was beginning to feel right to me, like, a feather in my cap? But I never did get interested enough in the rarity of the project. I never knew who Maybeck was until long after. Like a lot of things in one's youth, one turns around twenty years later and sees that the very first time may have been the best.