

RONNIE GILBERT

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Interview by Sharla Sitzman at her office in Table Rock

The Incident at the Bridge, 1960

Ronnie's unfreshed recollection 60 years after the event: "I was working for Doc Uhri. My first job was building some terraces for Vrtiska brothers north of town. I didn't know anything about bulldozers, it was all catch and catch can. I did a little job for Louie Jasa, edge of town, not sure what, probably pushing tress. Our next job was at George Taylor's and doc said to me, no need to haul, it's only a few miles. He says, when you get to the bridge, turn around and drag the blade. When you get turned around, drag the blade to distribu3t the weight. So I got it all squared up on the bridge, I looked around to make sure the blade didn't hook on the planks. When I looked around and saw that, I swathe left corner of the blade drop this much, showing about t yard. I don't remember much else. I hit the water standing up, water probably 3 or 4 feet dep. After IO hit the water, the bulldozer landed about this far beside me, showing about 3 or 4 feet... They figured I went about 30 feet through the air. I remember landing on my feet, I remember that. They had to call the county to drag the bank down so they could get it out of the creek."

RELATED ITEMS

Article from a 1960 edition of the Argus:

Bridge Collapses With Bulldozer; Driver Leaps To Safety		
<p>Ronnie Gilbert was better known during his high school athletic career as a miler, but his timing in a 25-ft. jump Tuesday morning probably saved him his life, when the TD-14 Bulldozer he was driving crashed through a bridge in the east end of Table Rock.</p>	<p>jumped as the machine and approach started plummeting downward, landing some 25 ft. below in the water, about the same time that the bulldozer hit the water and mud scarcely three feet from where he had landed.</p>	<p>The county drag line was pressed into service Tuesday afternoon, and by cutting down part of the steep bank, the heavy machine was brought up from the bed of the creek.</p>
<p>The accident occurred about 8:00 a.m. on the bridge over Taylor Branch, just north of the Highway 4 viaduct. Ronnie was backing the heavy machine over the</p>	<p>The bulldozer turned and landed upside down, half burying itself in the mud and debris. Steel beams, planks and debris missed striking young Gilbert as he hurriedly clambored out of the water to the bank.</p>	<p>The bulldozer, owned by Dr. Uhri and his brother, Gordon, of Humboldt, was extensively damaged, but no estimate on the total damage has been made.</p>
<p>bridge from the north and just before reaching the main structure, he noticed the west side of the north approach giving way. He</p>	<p>Gilbert was not hurt, though he was taken by his mother to the doctor at Humboldt for examination, and he was treated for cuts</p>	<p>Ronnie, son of Mr. and Mrs. George Gilbert, had been working on the Binder farm. By his split-second decision to jump at just the proper time, he miraculously escaped injury or even a worse disaster.</p>

2 family photos of Bobbie Vondrasek Bohling:



Photo labeled Last Steam Thresher Harvest



Jim Kotalik, Bob Vondrasek, Jess Vondrasek, Dale Goodenkauf, Johnny Kotalik, **Ron Gilbert**, Norman Marfice, & John Duder. (Sorry, the original picture had John cut off like that. No instant digital image to make sure your picture is framed....)

[Ronnie is in the striped shirt.]

Although the picture is labeled as the last “steam” thresher harvest, Ronnie said the machine wasn’t steam operated. It was a stationary thresher hooked up to an old Johnnie Popper [John Deere tractor Model A or H, etc., makes a distinctive sound]. The thresher was driven by a belt from the tractor.

They were harvesting oats from Jim Kotalik’s field. The oats had been bundled and arranged in teepee shaped stacks called shocks to dry, and now the crew piled the stacks onto a hay rack pulled by a team of horses, drove to the thresher, then offloaded them into the thresher. Ronnie, Norman Marfice, and John Duder were classmates at Table Rock. They did not know Johnnie Kotalik well, may have gone

to Pawnee. Jess Vondrasek was Ronnie's grandpa and Bob Vondrasek was Ron's uncle, brother to Ronne's mom Irma.

Ronnie:

“We went out and we pitched bundles onto the rack. Then we were up on the rack pitching bundles into the threshing machine. Jim Kotalik – you'd have to know him -- he said I wanna show you something. If you think you're overworked, I'll show you how to stop the threshing machine. [He showed them how to throw two bundles crosswise, which would jam the machine.]. It worked, the belt started slipping, Uncle Bob had to go and unclog it.

Jim had a team of horses that we used to move the rack. The old Joh Deere Popper was running the machine . The machine was just a thresher was all it was, it sat in place and you hauled the bundles in on a rack, we used the horses to do that.

[How the bundles had been made] I don't remember what they call that machine— it made bundles – put them in bundles and put them into a shock to let them dry. The shock was several bundles together. It bundled them together on a skid and when it got done it pushed and dumped. The shock looked like a teepee, so you picked them up and pitched onto the rack, I think that was called a “skid.” When got so many it would dump them.

So we pitched the bundles off the rack to the thresher.

This was oats that we did. The field was Jim Kotalik's, south of his house, right south of the barn. Jim fed it to his livestock.

The John Deere ran the thresher. No, not a PTO, it was belt driven. The pulley on the tractor was on the side, it was belt driven.

It was strictly for wheat and oats. I think sometimes they may have used it for rye but that was before.

This was just before when the balers were coming in. With the balers, you could then feed it as hay. Before the balers, they used the threshing machine. Then Allis Chalmers and New Holland came out with combines. [These were not self-powered at firsts.] I think the Allis Chalmers was PTO driven. If I remember right it had a really big head on it, like 36” head. Dad got an Allis combine which he later traded for, I think, a New Holland, which had a Wisconsin motor on it that ran

the machine, and all the tractor had to do was pull. No. Not New Holland. It was a NEW IDEA, not New Holland. That was a combine that you pulled. Dad traded up to a 52" head, and instead of augurs there was a canvas belt.

[The day of the picture, how long were you out there?] We were out there just one day. Hotter than the dickens.

[How did you get the job?] We were kind of hand picked for this escapade. Normally when they went to thresh for whoever, they had their own crew. Grandpa and Uncle Bob gathered us. This was designated as Grandpa and my Uncle Bob's last threshing job.

But it wasn't a steam thresher. Those were HUGE machines. It was belt driven.

The wheel on the tractor ran clockwise...so when you ran it up to the pulley on the threshing machine, you twisted the belt, which made the threshing machine run counter clockwise in order to pull the stuff in the machine.

[Say something about each of the other young men in the picture]

[Dale Goodenkauf & dad A.P. Goodenkauf, the incident of the chewing tobacco] This is a lesson to be learned. Me and Lavon Blecha and Dale would get together and work on cars in our garage. We'd get to talking about things we'd done. Dale's dad was Alfred Goodenkauf. A.P. we called him, said, "Guys, you been going on about how tough you are. I'm gonna put you to the test." He gave us a plug of tobacco, took a knife and scraped some off, said 'just take a little pinch.' He took "Day's Work" tobacco. He'd sit there, it'd dribble off the side of his mouth. We all took a little piece, and in about 10 minutes we were all sick. A. P. said, "Who's the toughest now? I am. I don't even spit."

[Johnnie Kotalik,] I didn't know him much. Not sure if he went to TR, might have gone to Pawnee. He was a cousin of Alice Siske's.

[Norman Marfice]. He was probably one of the smarter guys I knew. He was from a big family. [Anything else? Did he get I trouble?] They were pretty well disciplined.

[Johnny Duder] Now HE had a tendency to get in trouble! Not bad stuff. He would like to play pranks. I don't know how else to say. Johnny Duder didn't get in a lot of trouble with the law or anything, just enjoyed devilment. One time we were in 7th, , probably 8th grade. Joe Smith, his folks had the old folks home on the corner. Joe had his hair always slicked back in a ducktail. It was longer than most

of us had, he was ahead of our time. Joe got ready to go home for lunch one day and John took some glue from a tube and took his hand and slicked a little across the back of Joe's hair. Joe couldn't get it washed out, had to cut his hair.

Ronnie about himself.

[Was asked about other jobs he's done]

Myself, I was probably the smallest one around. When I graduated, I weighed 112 pounds. I was 112 and just about 5'7, I wanted to be a jockey. I thought I'll work a year, then go to Aksarben and start working horses and build where I can become a jockey. My first year out of school I gained another 15 pounds and grew 2 or 3" and that really screwed things up!

When I was 16, I had got my first job for pay. The building that sits east of the depot was my first job that I got paid for. The folks had to sign a certificate that I could work, I was just 16. I was on the ground crew putting –grain bins across the railroad tracks from Binders.

From there, I've had more jobs than some people could count. From Table Rock our 2nd job was Nebraska City and that building still stands southeast of Nebraska City. I helped put up the AT&T building north of Humboldt, then another near McCook. The grain bins, we were all over the state of Kansas with them. Gary Bedea worked there also. George Frisby Construction from Gypsum, Kansas. We were all over Kansas, worked 10 months. Our longest stay was in Topeka, which was a little over 3 weeks, not more than 4. We usually had not more than 2 weeks at any one place, at the most. It was exciting.

Traveling with George Frisby, we had an incident. I don't remember the town but Gary Bedea could tell you. When we got to a town we had our regular crew and would hire someone to seal the panels, use "spaghetti.". We got to the job site one morning and there sat the cops. The cops said there was a robbery last night, and we think one of your guys was involved. We all had to go in, we were finger printed. It turned out that one of the guys we hired from the local was the one that did the robbery. We was all morning getting taken in. I don't remember what the town was. So my finger prints are in Kansas!

I did farm work, cut weeds out of the corn for my uncle, worked for Mervin Willet and my uncle Kenneth Gilbert, uncle Elmer Penkava, Pete my uncle Pete Gilbert. I

did the landscaping for Doc Uhri's house. I drug dirt from the front of the house. It was just an old slip on a tractor. All that rock along the sidewalk, the railroad ties they're replacing on the west, I put those I there to start with. I did all the landscaping around that house, every bit of it. When? It was shortly after the problem at the bridge, so 1960.

I worked at Campbell soup, too. I hate to think of all the places I've worked. But I've had a really good education in life that way.

The most fun I ever had, was after I retired. I went down to work at the casino, that didn't work out. On the way home, I stopped at a grocery store I'd been buying groceries at for a long time. I walk in, this manager of one of the departments was standing there. I went up and said, do you hire old people? I'm looking to get a part time job. There's one thing you need to know. I'm pretty sure I don't like to stock shelves. If I'm talking to a customer and you want me to do something just come by and nod, but unless it has to be done right away just leave me alone, I might be telling that person a story and it would really upset me to be interrupted. I got hired, worked there for 8 years.

The funniest thing I remember about that grocery store job is that this little blonde haired boy, maybe 3 or 4 years old. We had those little grocery carts and he was pushing it. I went up to him, I asked him, "What kind of groceries are you gonna get today?" He summed it up in one word: "Toys"

Storbecks

[Was asked about Evert and Zelma Storbeck]

Their son Eddie -- Edward -- Storbeck, I graduated with him. Evert worked for Rudy Karas at the Ford Garage, was a mechanic, was a short small guy and lived where Gary Harris lives now. He was just a quiet person. He walked kind of slumped over. He was a great mechanic. You'd look at him and think Oh golly. In that day, that era, he was probably as good as they came. Zelma, she was just a house wife.

Eddie was real quiet, never got into trouble.

Aprons

In those days, all the women wore an apron. You think about today all the Clorox all the disinfectants we have today. Think about grandma's apron. When she was wearing it out by the chicken house, she'd fold it up and put eggs in it. Our in the garden, she'd pull carrots or pick beans and that went into the apron. Then there's be a snot nosed kid and she'd wipe his nose. And use that apron to wipe the counter.

Classmates

John Reuter and I were the youngest in the class.

Egg Money

I think it was 1951, mom and dad were coming to town and mom said, we need to stop at sochor's when we get to town? Why ? I gotta pay him for that tv set. Dad was surprised. "Where'd you you get the money to buy a tv?" She said" "Egg money." We got a little 14" tv. Joe and Frank Sochor came out and put the antenna up there.

Reno Inn for TV & Pie

[Ronnie's folks ran the Reno Inn for some years in the 1950s] At the Reno Inn on Saturday nights. Lloyd Jasa, Lyle Rolofson, the ag teacher, and I don't know how many other, would come to the Reno and watch the tv, Lawrence welk and wrassling, and eat pie.

I think Lawrence Welk played in this area back at the beginning. Don't quote me on that, but I think Grandpa Vondrasek said he played with him.

Country School, teacher Noma Schuetz

I went to District 49. There were two of us, Gene Boston and me. Gene was a few year older. Gene had an old grey mare, big enough to work, but she was a saddle mare. We'd take bottles of water on her out to the guys threshing. I don't

remember her name, old grey mare, His family lived east of the school. He'd ride her in bareback. On the sidewalk in front of the school, the steps were high and he just slid off her and send her home, she'd go home by herself, and she'd run around all daylong. [Did she come back to get him?] No, she didn't come back.

My Grandpa Gilbert told me well, they burned coal and wood and cobs in old pot bellied stove. This is probably where I got some of my tactics I do sometimes. Grandpa said they'd take rifle shells and put in a corn cob and put them in the cob shed and when the teacher brought cobs in to get that fire started and they'd go off.

My teacher was Noma Schuetz. [She was mean!] Oh hell yes! She had these big heavy eyebrows and when those would come together you knew it was gonna be bad.

See this left ear of mine? It's still longer than the right. I don't remember what the heck we did, I just remember hitting the ground about every third step. She set me down and she instructed me, "You don't say nothing, do nothing, unless I ask you to." After school she took me home and told my folks about whatever I did, and that was not a good thing. I remember that.

Teacher's husband Sam Schuetz, Ed Gunzenhauser's Corn Shed

Her husband Sam was totally different. I was part of a shelling crew for him. We'd go around to different places. One time we got down to Edwin Gunzenhauser. Edwin wasn't supposed to drink. He'd hide his whiskey bottles in the corn shed, forget they were there. We started shelling corn and those bottles would start coming out in the chute!

Sam also did custom baling, too. Sam was a nice guy? Oh god yes! He was a total the other side from she was. She was a Hunzeker. Her brother was the sheriff in Pawnee County for a while.

Bunker Hill country school, did it close early? I dunno but it seems like Michals came to our school at District 49. We went from 2 of us, then Evelyn and Leland started school in March or so, then Penkavas moved in where Doc lives now, so we went from 2 to 6 overnight.

Dorothy Penkava

You've got to go talk to my Aunt Dorothy. She's 92. She is probably one of the last resources to learn about her times. She's in assisted living. [Ronnie called her and persuaded her to accept a visit for a possible interview.]

End of the chat, about 2 hours! SC