



Video Story Transcript

CONSTRUCTION

By: Storyteller Jim May
<http://jimmaystoryteller.com/>

Link to YouTube Video:
https://youtu.be/SM4Plxi_JoI

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

I was about 16 years old, somewhere in 1963. I had my first construction job, the first time, really, out of my little town, Spring Grove that I had grown up in. This was the first time I had the chance to work side by side with African-American workers and learned from them and learned a little bit about work, what the world of heavy construction was to them, being middle-aged and black versus the experience of a 17-year-old high school kid.

Well, it was the summer of 1963, and I got a job during high school summer vacation. It felt like my first real job, although the summer before that I had worked on a thoroughbred horse farm, and it was a real job, we worked six days a week, 11 hours a day sometimes. But it was farm work, the kind of work I grew up with; the working climate was a little more informal than my job during my junior year in high school, which was working for a union excavation company, concrete and excavation work. And this was the best company to work for. This company almost single handedly raised a good deal of farm boys out of the working class to the middle class during those years. Not many companies, that I knew of at least, were paying union wages at that time. Now my brother had gotten a job working for this company, and my brother was sort of a construction genius as it turns out, we were already beginning to realize that. He dropped out of high school but really could run machines, really understood everything about a construction project.

He got me the job. So, I was 16, 17, I didn't know anything about construction, barely knew, which end of the shovel was up. I was the kind of guy the old guys were talking about, telling jokes about, sending the kid to the

trailer to get a left-handed hammer. You know, I probably would have gone a couple of times before I figured out what they were doing to me. So what do you do with a dumb, fairly strong kid? Well, you give him the hardest, dumbest job on the job, and on this job we were pouring thousands of feet of curbing, cement curbing. And back in those days you had to take a steel form, by hand, drive it into the ground with sledge hammers and steel form pins. They poured the concrete between the curbing forms and then it all had to dry for several hours at least to set up, and then someone had to go and pull all those pins, and you did it basically with a crow bar and a chain. And you leaned over, set the crow bar against the steel form—you didn't want to get into the concrete, because you'd notch it or make a dent in it if it was a little bit green. Sometimes the job was moving so fast that you had to pull the pins when the concrete was little bit green, and then you would just pull. You would bend over and take the crow bar and just lift with your legs and your back and pull; oh, some of them were close to an inch in diameter, those pins. And this was in Zion, Illinois, so it was Lake County, which was notorious for the clay-packed soil.

So, it was hard work, and no overtime; you got union wages, but someone would put the crow bar on the curb before you started in the morning. You got out of your car at exactly 8'o clock. You got back into your car at exactly 4.30, no overtime. Someone else would put the tools out. As the foreman would say, "All I wanna see from you guys is arse and elbows. You know, I wanna see you guys bending over, pulling pins. You're not paid to think, you're paid to work." So that naturally was the job that the kids got, high school kids, college kids, "dumb kids" they called us and worse. So that was the low job on the crew. Now, so basically that was my job and couple of other high school kids and a couple of younger college kids and two middle-aged black guys who knew a lot about construction, much more than we did, but they did not have any connections with the company. They were union, sent out "from the hall," as they said, and they were right there with us doing the lowest, hardest job on the crew. And though they must have felt some humiliation to be in that position, they were always very kind to me at least and everyone as I remember. They gave us good working man hints on how to survive in heat and that kind of hard work. I remember I would look at my watch sometimes and would be suffering from that heat, pulling those pins, and they would say, "Oh, Jim, don't look at your watch, don't look at your watch, that will slow the time down. Never look at your watch!"

So, I just I had this sense of privilege that I was only sixteen and somehow had gotten into that position where these men had been working construction all their lives and hadn't gotten any higher in the company than that particular skill, which required brawn and that was all. On the positive side, if it hadn't been for the union they wouldn't have been there at all, out in the "Ru-burbs" way out in the country. Where the company was based there wouldn't have been any black men living, or very unlikely to have that position at all. So, the union was slowly changing things, looking back on it. But I also had this sense that there was an injustice. The work slowed down, and we got laid off. All the young kids got laid off, and these black guys got laid off. And I remember having a sense that maybe I wouldn't be able to go to college, because my father had died that year before and there was no money and this was how I was going to go to college. And I remembered being called back and being very relieved but I didn't see, didn't hear those two black guys were called back and I asked about it but never received any information.

I was telling someone about this, and they said, "Did you ever bring this up? Or talk about the inequity?" Someone asked if I brought it up with the foreman. My first thought was I was afraid to even talk about the weather with the foreman. The foreman, you know, wore these state-trooper, mirrored-glasses and ran around screaming at people. He had a big bumper sticker on his car that said, "I don't have ulcers. I give them." He was known as "Firing Dick" I think was his name. But he eventually kind of took me under his wing and kept me working for several summers, helped me get through college. He was under that same pressure. When the owner would come, he would take his helmet off and put under his arm like a good cadet and take his glasses off and scurry right over to the boss' big car. Everybody was under this kind of intense pressure. I

think most of the workers that I worked with had grown up working class or were raised poor or the only alternative was farming, and farming was dying at that point in the late sixties, mid-sixties and seventies. And this was a union job, and you couldn't afford to take care of yourself; if you were asked to do a job that wasn't safe, you couldn't afford to say, "I think I'd better wait till somebody gets here with some safety glasses or a helmet." You just dug in and you just did the job, because it felt like survival. So everybody was under that system, and the owner of the company, there were all kinds of legendary stories about him starting out with nothing but a wheel barrow and cleaning the ashes out of wood burning stores and along Front Street in McHenry. So, the system was pretty locked in, but the union was the wedge that began to change things, I think that's an important piece of it as well.