

Oral History Interview

with

ROSSER EDWARDS, SR.

October 18, 2013
Portola Valley, Cal.

By Michael R. Adamson

Adamson: We're at the home of Ross Edwards in Portola Valley. It's the eighteenth of October. Let's start with your background, going back to your civil engineering and construction management education in particular. So tell me about your education at Purdue and how it prepared you for the quote, unquote, "real world."

Edwards: I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and all my buddies were going to Ohio State, so I figured that for me to amount to anything except what I was in high school, I needed to get out of Columbus. So I looked around and it looked like Purdue fit my desires for civil engineering, and I always wanted to be in construction, so enrolled in Purdue in 1956 and got my bachelor's degree in civil engineering in 1960.

Then I met my wife, Gloria, at Purdue, and she had two more years in the School of Pharmacy, so I decided to stay on and get a master's degree in construction management and structures. So I finished that degree in January 1962 and left for California.

Adamson: Out of graduation?

Edwards: Yes. And went to work for Charlie after I graduated, in the Building Division in Los Angeles. I actually had desired to build bridges in Alaska and applied to four or five companies doing construction in Alaska and never got an offer. So from building bridges in Alaska to building buildings in Los Angeles was a step that I didn't anticipate, but it worked out pretty well.

Adamson: So you explained why you stayed on at Purdue. Was it unusual at this point for civil engineering undergraduates to get a master's degree?

Edwards: Well, it probably was unusual, I guess. For guys that wanted to really work in the industry, it was probably unusual at that time. Most guys, I think, went out and tried to find jobs unless you were going to be going on and teaching or that type of a job, and then maybe you needed an advanced degree. So basically I hung around because my wife was there.

Adamson: So when did you meet Charlie Pankow for the first time?

Edwards: Let's see. I think after I graduated maybe I went—I can't remember. I had my master's degree when I went out there. He flew me out to Los Angeles to interview, and I think it was right before I graduated with a master's degree.

Adamson: So what were your first impressions when you did meet him?

Edwards: Well, you know, Charlie's a charismatic guy, so you pretty much immediately like him. I guess he always had that little sly smile, so you never knew exactly what he was thinking. But I liked the concept of what he was doing, even though I didn't understand it all at that time. But he seemed like he was a mover and shaker and stuff was happening.

Adamson: So when you joined Kiewit or responded to the job post or recruiting ad, was it for the Building Division, or did you know you were going to end up in Los Angeles with Kiewit, or was it more of a—

Edwards: No, I think I did. I think that Dave Boyd was working for them then.

Adamson: Oh, he was already there?

Edwards: Yes. So it would be in the Building Division.

Adamson: And you knew Dave from Purdue?

Edwards: Yes. Dave and I met at Purdue when we were, like, sophomores, I think.

Adamson: So you were the same age. So you're in Los Angeles, or, Arcadia. So talk about Charlie as the leader of the Building Division.

Edwards: I think as you're a young engineer, you don't really pay much attention to the hierarchy of the structure. You're kind of doing your thing and trying to advance. First, he stuck me in estimating, which I didn't really like that much, in the office, and finally I got a chance to go out on a job on the Shorecliff Tower out in Santa Monica as the project engineer.

So I don't remember very much, except Charlie always had that acoustical tile in the back of his store. So he [when] had conversations nobody could—shut the door, and the whole thing was like an acoustical cave, so you could never hear what he was saying. I was kind of in the office next to his, estimating, and I never was privy to any of his conversations. I just remember that.

Adamson: Was Russ [Osterman] in the office estimating with you or was he doing something else at that point?

Edwards: No, I think Russ was there. It's a long time ago, so I can't remember the exact location of everybody, but I did know that they would assign me these jobs, take off doors, take off this and that, and sometimes Charlie would come in and he'd say, "What are you working on?"

I'd say, "I'm working on this job," taking off the sheetrock or the doors.

He'd, "Oh, we decided not to bid that thing two weeks ago." [laughs] I mean, sometimes we'd be working two weeks on a job that they decided not to bid. Nobody told me. I mean, that was kind of the way Charlie operated a lot, I thought. He was really hands-off on what was going on in the office.

Adamson: So as I understand it, you and Dave at the time were the only newly minted college graduates hired into, at least, the Building Division. Everyone else had basically grown up in the field.

Edwards: Yes.

Adamson: In general, how did you fit in with this group? How did they treat you as—

Edwards: Well, I think at first it was difficult. It was Alan Murk and that type of guy, Ralph Tice, had grown up through the ranks as carpenters, carpenter foremen, and then as superintendents, project managers. So I think that was pretty tough, but then as they could see, I think, that Dave and I were pretty quick learners and didn't try to push, that they realized that we could be a valuable asset. Pretty soon we assimilated in, had a few beers with these guys after work, and you were part of the team.

Adamson: Did you have a sense of—well, they didn't call it design-build—but what Charlie was doing in that direction when you arrived? How closely linked to what Charlie called later “automating the jobsite” to design-build was it when you arrived? How was the package?

Edwards: Well, I think the first job that I noticed the innovation was the San Mateo Bridge. That was a hard-bid job back in the days when they actually did hard-bid work,

and he was determined to be able to precast these hollow piles in a new way without an inside form and thus really save cost. I was assigned, before we bid the job, to build a model—Harold Henderson and myself were in the office—to build a prototype of slipforming the inside core of these concrete piles, and that proved to be a fabulous thing. They made a lot of money on that bridge from those piles, using steel core that they tugged along through the prestressed bed.¹

Then later Dave Boyd was on the job actually doing it, and so that was kind of my first look at Charlie's entrepreneurial spirit of innovation. And, of course, the slipforming of walls and so forth came right along with that. I'm sure there was some slipforming done ahead of when I was there, but I was on the Shorecliff building, and we slipformed all those walls and [used] other methods. So that was exciting. That was exciting for me to see how this could be done way different than most contractors.

Adamson: When did you first hear the term "design-build"?

Edwards: Oh, I don't know, Michael. I can't recall when I heard that term.

Adamson: Were you using it when—by the time you started at Webcor?

Edwards: Oh, yes, oh, absolutely.

Adamson: I never really pinned down the term timing-wise in the sixties.

¹ E. R. Foley and J. Philip Murphy, "World's Longest Orthotropic Section Feature of San Mateo-Hayward Bridge," *Civil Engineering* 38 (April 1968): 54–8.

Edwards: Of course, other contractors probably use that same term. We'd work with owners and architects, and that term "design-build," that's been around. That's been around probably before Charlie started using it, I think.

Adamson: So now that we know Shorecliff Tower was your first project out of the office, I can skip to my questions about that. There was an article that I read in *Southwest Building and Contractor* that characterized the construction of Shorecliff Tower as "a story of problems, experimentations, and success with a different use of slipforming."² For you, what stands out in constructing Shorecliff Tower?

Edwards: I guess the risk that we had with the height of the slipform above the decks always made me nervous. There was a lot of unsupported walls.

Adamson: Because it was an apartment building—

Edwards: Yes. Let me show you this. [shows photos of the project from an album] Then we had some other issues on the job that always were problematic. I think if we'd had an earthquake, that slipform would have been in the street.

I don't know if you want to shut that off. I'm looking for this thing.

[pages through album]

² "A Story of Problems, Experimentations, and Success," *Southwest Builder & Contractor*, 26 April 1963, 8.

Edwards: Let's get started again. In this tower, thirteen-story tower, a slipform would be three and a half floors above a deck, and so really basically all the bracing you have is the walls of the slipform. So that's green concrete. That dark color is green concrete about four hours old, and this thing's slipping at about twelve inches an hour. So now you've got all this weight up here and no bracing on basically these walls. So it always made me a little nervous. And we did put these shores in.

So then we had to put the floors in, and we'd have to drill holes for the bars to get through these walls, and sometimes that would blow out part of the wall. It was not a good thing, but it all tied together. There were so many walls that you could probably screw up and not be in danger of collapse. We tried various methods of getting these bars in the wall, because this form had to go by the bars. You can't have the bars sticking out. The form would hit the bars. So you'd have to put in what we called Z-bars, and we'd put them in the wall, and then you'd bend them back out when you got past. A lot of times they'd break off and bend back out, and they'd be brittle and they'd break off, and you'd have to drill through it, or put cans in the walls to get the bars through. There were some issues. [laughs] There were some issues with that type of construction.

Adamson: I bet. Several of the people I interviewed talked about learning on the job.

What did you learn from Harold Henderson in your years with Pankow and Kiewit?

Edwards: Well, you learn the work ethic with him for sure. He put in a lot of hours. He was a good manager. He allowed people to experiment and use new ideas and supported

them. I don't think they chewed us out too bad if we screwed up. He pointed it out, of course. But for being a superintendent without any college education, he was pretty knowledgeable on basic structures. So I learned quite a bit.

Adamson: Now it's my understanding that he died during the Clementina Towers project in San Francisco, so it must have been '69?³

Edwards: Yes. In fact, I took over that.

Adamson: You took over that project?

Edwards: I took over that project, yes.

Adamson: What did he die from?

Edwards: Heart attack.

Adamson: He had a heart attack?

Edwards: Yes.

Adamson: I didn't know that.

³ On the construction of the twin 13-story towers, see, "Yerba Buena Turnkey Apartment House Project Goes Up Fast With Slipforming," *Western Construction* (January 1971): 33-4.

Edwards: Yes. Yes, he had high blood pressure and he smoked and didn't really take care of himself very good. He used to eat a lot of tomatoes with heavy pepper and then he'd just sweat like—I remember at lunch he'd just sweat like crazy. [laughs] I said, “Harold, why do you do that?”

“Oh, I love this pepper.” [laughs]

Adamson: From my interview with Red Metcalf, the next project I know you worked on was the Valley Music Center [Theater], but between Shorecliff Tower and that project, did you work on anything else?

Edwards: Let's see. Now we're getting a little out of sequence, because Valley Music was Kiewit.

Adamson: Right. I know. I was just jumping forward with Harold. So we go back to Shorecliff Tower and just filling in your projects at Kiewit before Pankow.

Edwards: That was the mass exodus right after it, Shorecliff Tower, basically. Everybody left and I said, “It looks like to me there's more opportunity here for me at Kiewit. I want to stay with the Building Division in Kiewit,” and there was, because I got the opportunity at age twenty-six to be the project manager on the Valley Music Center [Theater]. That was another innovative project, even though it had been done before in San Diego. Charlie had done another theater, but not this big, in San Diego,

with an earth form, mounding the earth and then putting a concrete skin coat on the earth and then pouring the dome, prestressed ring dome on the earth and excavating the earth and forming this theater. It was 200-and-some-beam diameter. That was really a good job for me. I learned a lot. And Red Metcalf was there.⁴

Adamson: So I'm going to go through the sequence of everyone leaving, but while we're on the Music Center, so if everyone's leaving and you thought there was opportunity at Kiewit, how did you end up at Pankow?

Edwards: Well, as I remember, Bill Keller became the head of the Building Division in Los Angeles, and I think what happened, in my opinion, at that time—again, I wasn't an officer or anything—but Bill got basically no support from Omaha. They had a bad job in the Music Center⁵ under Charlie's regime, and so I think the decree came down from probably Omaha or someplace to close down that Los Angeles Building Division.

So right after they built that Music Center, Bill Keller left and went with Christie Company, and so then I followed Bill over there to the Christie Company, thinking that would be a small company and I could advance faster. So I did one job with them. I built a medical building in Pasadena. Then there was a bunch of little jobs, and neither Bill nor I could get along with Christie's operation, so then he left, formed his own

⁴ "Music Theater Dome Formed on Earth," *Southwest Builder & Contractor*, 24 April 1964, 44–9.

⁵ The Music Center for the Performing Arts, a complex in downtown Los Angeles that included the Memorial Pavilion, the (Mark Taper) Forum, and the Center Theater (later, the Ahmanson Theatre), constructed atop an underground parking structure. Construction on the pavilion, later renamed the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, began in March 1962. Charles Pankow, Inc., was incorporated on 17 May 1963. The pavilion was dedicated on 27 September 1964 (Ray Hebert, "Music Center Work Will Start Today," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 1962, II:1; "Los Angeles Hoists Flag of Culture," *Business Week*, 21 November 1964, 32.) Many years later, the Frank Gehry–designed Walt Disney Concert Hall was added to the complex. It opened on 24 October 2003.

company. And at that same time, Charlie called me and wanted to know if I was available to move to the Northern California [*sic*]. So then I went to Northern California and started at the Borel complex [with Charles Pankow, Inc.].

Adamson: What was your start month or day at Pankow, or year?

Edwards: It was probably 1967.

Adamson: We're going to hold that thought and go back to—well, in case of Red Metcalf, he stayed on with Kiewit and went into the heavy [construction] side. Did that ever occur you at that point?

Edwards: No, it never occurred to me to do that.

Adamson: So then I'm going to go back to everyone leaving Pankow, just to get your sense of what was going on. Alan Murk, in particular, pointed to Charlie's and others' frustration. He called it its "stepchild status" within the Kiewit organization. Was that something that you were aware of or that you felt?

Edwards: Well, I think we all felt—yes. When those guys were leaving, I think they all felt that the L.A. Building Division was not a favorite child. [laughs] I mean, certainly after that Music Center, that was not a good experience.

Adamson: The L.A. Music Center?

Edwards: Yes. And Seattle had done a lot of the estimating. There was a lot of finger-pointing between whose fault it was there was so much money lost, and so there was turmoil, I'm sure, at the higher levels. Of course, I was down here. So I could see why Charlie would leave. It was definitely a good time to leave.

Lloyd Loetterle. Let's see. What happened to Lloyd Loetterle? Did he come and go with Charlie? He went with Charlie, too, right?

Adamson: He went with Charlie. He was one of the four founders in the photograph I had, and he was on this slipform on the Turk and Eddy [project in San Francisco].⁶

Edwards: Turk and Eddy. Dave Boyd was on that job from the start.

Adamson: Right. Then a year later, he was gone and nobody really knows why. Doug Craker pointed to maybe differences in opinion on what kind of jobs. He suggested that some people were more interested in just—if we can have a job, even if it's not slipforming and concrete, we should do it. But those are all conjectures that I was—all I know is he went with Charlie and was gone in a year or so, '64.

⁶ "Turk and Eddy," as it is known within the Pankow company, refers to two of the streets that form the block in the Western Addition in which the twin 15-story Central Towers project was built. On its construction, see, "Slipforms Mold All Bearing Walls for Apartment Towers," *Construction Methods and Equipment* (August 1964).

Edwards: Bill Wilson called them “Slipform” Charlie and his sidekick Russ. Did you ever hear that? [laughs]

Adamson: No. That’s good. I could have used that in the book.

So at what point were you aware, if at all, of Charlie’s interest in stepping out with his own company or aware that this was actually happening?

Edwards: I just think it happened really quickly. As I remember, it was just the talk that they were going, and pretty soon they were gone. You know, he never recruited me very hard to go with him, that I remember. I don’t think that I got recruited very diligently to leave.

Adamson: Interesting. Because Red Metcalf tells the story of Lloyd [Loetterle] and a couple other guys showing up at his house down in Del Mar saying, “We’ve got a job for you.”

But both he and Alan Murk pointed to people in Kiewit [who] were saying, “You’ll have a job at Kiewit long after Charlie goes bankrupt, so you should stay here.”

So that was the counterpressure that I heard from a couple of people.

So you mentioned when Charlie asked about joining the company. So this was later on than I thought it might have been. So your response was just you’re ready to go.

Edwards: Right.

Adamson: Was the Valley Music Center [Theater] then, that you know of, the last project completed by this Building Division? Did it disband after that?

Edwards: I'm sure they probably had more, but I don't know. Bill Keller would know, but there probably wasn't very many after that.

Adamson: So what was similar and what was different about working for Charlie at Kiewit and working for him at his own company, or was there any difference?

Edwards: Well, as I started working with Charlie, I was never in the main office, so I never came back to—I mean, I was in the Altadena office, but I don't think I ever spent any time there. So that was kind of different for me, being out in the field, having a field office, basically, and I think that there was less interchange, less supervision from the office, possibly. Charlie was spread out, pretty much spread out by then.

When Harold [Henderson] died, on those projects in San Francisco, I'm trying to remember if I told Charlie I was leaving then or not. The chronological order is not good. Shortly after, then I got shipped back to New York.

Adamson: Shortly after?

Edwards: Shortly after I came with Charlie, I was on the Borel project for a while. I'm trying to remember all this sequence of the—let me check this here.

Adamson: When you got to the Borel project, was—

Edwards: This was one of my first. [shows documents from binder] I built this shopping center at Borel for Pankow in '67, August '67.

Adamson: Borel Square.

Edwards: Yes, Borel Square. Did the structure for, I see in here, \$2.50 or something like that. [laughs] Long's and Lucky's and all these stores.⁷ That was '67. Right after that—I'm trying to think—then I went to New York, so I think they probably went to New York in '68, maybe.

Adamson: What project was that?

Edwards: That was a Penney's department store and auto center in Bay Shore, Long Island, for Winmar. So I was the project manager, superintendent of the whole thing. Here, one guy back there. [laughs]

Adamson: Wow.

⁷ "Borel Shopping Center Expected to Become a Peninsula Focal Point," *San Mateo Times*, 19 October 1967, 11A.

Edwards: We had just kind of a “quasi-partner” in Howell Construction in Babylon, New York, and he helped procure subs for us, but he never supplied any manpower. And so basically I was by myself, and Russ [Osterman] would come back about every month.

One story I recall as a new engineer, a new superintendent, you know, pretty young, twenty-seven, maybe, twenty-eight years old at that time, and we’re bidding out the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing for the store. So I solicit all these bids, and Russ says, “When you get all the bids, I want to come back.”

So I got all the bids, and I said, “Well, do you want to talk to the low bidder?”

“No,” he says, “I want them all in the room at the same time. You got four sprinkler bids. I want all four of them to be in the office at nine-thirty.”

So all four of these guys would be in the office and then we’d bring one guy in, you know, from the waiting room into the office and talk to him and go over the scope of the work and so forth, and he might be fifty, sixty thousand [dollars] out. Russ would never say anything. He’d just say to them, “Go back, see if you can sharpen your number. Give me a call back today, this afternoon.”

So without telling anybody who’s low, anybody else’s price, by the afternoon, they all called back with cuts. Even the low guy would call back with a cut because they were all so nervous and so competitive among their own little groups. That was an interesting way to get bids. Russ had a pretty cool way of getting good numbers.

Adamson: Is that right?

Edwards: Yes.

Adamson: Wow.

Edwards: So, anyway, I was back there through the winter building that thing, and it was a brick façade and steel structure. It was not a typical slipform deal. So I finished that and then came back to California, and then he [Charlie's] shipped me again out to Rochester, New York, to do a McCurdy's Department Store in Rochester, New York. So I kind of commuted on that and never moved back there, commuted back and forth like every week and built that project. Then back to California again and back to Borel, the Borel complex.

Adamson: Which was still going on?

Edwards: Which was still going on, yes. We'd finished Borel 1 and we then did Borel 2 and 3, and I think with Pankow up to 5, I think. There was five office buildings and a garage.⁸

Adamson: Was Dave on those projects more or less continuously?

Edwards: Dave Boyd?

Adamson: Yes.

⁸ On the construction of the Borel office buildings, see, Michael R. Adamson, *A Better Way to Build: A History of the Pankow Companies* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2013). The discussion in the book erroneously states that David Boyd was project engineer on these structures.

Edwards: No, Dave was never on the Borel projects.

Adamson: None of them?

Edwards: None of them.

Adamson: When you joined Pankow and got sent to do the Borel Square, who from Pankow was there on the office building?

Edwards: Oh, Harold. Harold was on that. I'm trying to think of who else was. I think it was basically Harold and then, you know, when he died, then I was there doing the rest of those Borel projects.

Adamson: So then how did your relationship with Bill Wilson and Dave develop to the point where you decided you were going to form your own company?

Edwards: Well, I was doing all this work, and Bill and I had a pretty good relationship going. We realized that we were really doing the entire project. He was the developer. I was the builder. There was very little of value that Charlie was bringing. You know, we hardly ever saw Charlie. And, "Why don't we think about doing our own company?"

I think before that, though, before I even decided to make this move, I went up to San Francisco and met with Charlie. I told him I wanted to be the manager of the

Northern California division, and we had quite a talk. Then he said, “Ross, I think you’re overestimating yourself.”

Adamson: Wow.

Edwards: “You’re overestimating yourself.” [laughs]

Well, that was kind of a blow, and I said, “Well, maybe. Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not.”

So I left that office with the idea that, if possible, I was going to try to start my own company, and the logical guys were Bill Wilson, Miller Ream, and Dave.⁹ We’d have two developing guys and two construction guys. So that was kind of the straw—that Charlie didn’t want to recognize that my ability was beyond a project manager.

Adamson: So how did you introduce Dave to Bill and Miller Ream if he wasn’t working on Borel?

Edwards: That was kind of a difficult task to sell, to sell them that Dave was a good guy, but I think that Bill trusted me enough to know that this would work. Dave then came out and had a conversation before we started the company. Those guys got a chance to meet him, and mainly we were just conversing by phone, figuring out—he was in Toledo

⁹ William Wilson III, Miller Ream, and Gilbert Bovet organized the Borel Development Company to develop the easternmost portion of the Borel Estate, in present-day San Mateo, that was divided among the grandchildren of Antoine Borel, a leading financier in nineteenth century San Francisco. Wilson, a Pasadena native who held a bachelor’s degree in engineering from Stanford University, was a prolific developer of Bay Area commercial real estate. In all, he was responsible for developing more than 10 million square feet of property over three decades. He died of cancer in May 2013 (Carolyn Said, “William Wilson III, Key Developer, Dies,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 May 2013).

or in California. Of course, he doesn't know these guys and there's a bigger leap of faith for him to leave Charlie.

Adamson: Of course I'll ask Dave about that, but did he have his moment with Charlie, too, or were you just convincing him that it was a good deal?

Edwards: In my opinion, I don't think he ever had that kind of a shutdown from Charlie. I really had a way better relationship with Russ. Russ and I had a really good working relationship. I really admired Russ.

Adamson: Since I was unable to interview Russ, because of his health, for the project, could you elaborate?

Edwards: Is Russ still alive now?

Adamson: He is, and I did meet with him, just informally, but he was not in—I don't know if it's Alzheimer's.

Edwards: He has some dementia?

Adamson: Yes. So his legal estate person—I talked to him, but not for the record, and so he did recall some stories from way back, but he couldn't really put it all together, so I've been asking people who worked with him or for him if they—

Edwards: One thing about Charlie—this is may be a diversion a little bit—when you're on these projects out of town, like in New York, and I was in New Jersey doing another job, as I remember, a warehouse or something I did in New Jersey, Charlie would come back. I mean, he would say, "I want to take you and your wife out to dinner," so we'd have really a nice evening with Charlie and sometimes meet his mom and dad there, got to meet Charlie's dad and his mom and have dinner.

But when you're back in California, nothing like that ever happened. He'd never even go to lunch with you. So it was interesting that he did have, you know, I think, a heart for family, even though he'd ship guys all over the country. You never had a home base with Charlie. I think that was one of the reasons that Dave and I wanted to start our own company and not be moved around the country. Our kids were getting older and it was tougher to move.

Adamson: So Dave was out of town as much as you were?

Edwards: Yes. I can't remember where else he was, but, yes, they would move him around. Colorado, he was in Colorado Springs, and that was back in the Kiewit days; they built the Air Defense Command building [Headquarters]. And Toledo and I don't know where else he was, but I'm sure he was moving around.¹⁰

¹⁰ Edward adds that Dave Boyd also worked on the Evergreen Building, an office tower constructed for Winmar in Renton, Washington.

Adamson: That's good. I don't have either one of you working anywhere else for Charles Pankow, Inc., other than for the Borel projects, so that's good to know that you were out of town so much.

Edwards: One good story about Charlie was when he moved me back to New York to build that Penney's store was about the time that Purdue had a really good football team with Bob Griese, who was the quarterback. And of course, I'm a big football fan. So I said, "Charlie, if you move me back to New York and they get to the Rose Bowl, you know I want to go to the Rose Bowl."

He said, "Okay. If they go to the Rose Bowl, I'll send you two first-class airplane tickets and tickets to the game." And sure enough, they were in the Rose Bowl, and in the mail comes these two first-class tickets, and he said, "On one condition, you've got to come into Altadena when you're here and do some work."

So I said, "No problem." So he did come through on that promise. It was something I'll never forget.

Adamson: That's great. So then you had to approach Charlie again and tell him you were leaving?

Edwards: Leaving, yes.

Adamson: Did you and Dave go in together? You approached him separately?

Edwards: I can't remember if I did that in person or if I just gave him a letter. I kind of think we just did it by letter, but I'm not entirely—I found a copy of my letter. I don't think we came in in person on that thing.

Adamson: Did Charlie have a response when you actually did leave?

Edwards: I think he expressed that we were making a big mistake and should reconsider. I'm a little bit vague on that, because we weren't going to reconsider, so I don't think we wanted to spend a lot of time talking about it. We'd made up our minds.

Adamson: So talk about how—I mean, I think you alluded to it, but how all four of you, Bill and Miller, you and Dave, just how it all came together. I have Webcor being incorporated on January 19, 1971?

Edwards: That's correct.

Adamson: And so by that time, you had a business plan or you just had a project?

Edwards: We started the company with \$20,000. [laughs] That was our capital. And basically had no jobs. Bill was able to give us the tenant work for IBM, was our first, was the tenant improvement work in one of the Borel buildings for IBM, and so that was kind of our only job. We had one other guy and one other employee and an office

manager [who] had worked for us with Pankow, and we had a two-room office and got started.

Then I think the first real job was San Jose—office plaza on North First Street, was a six-story, 84,000-square-foot building, slipform, precast panels, precast beams, the whole system, and that job went really well, that job went very smooth. And then that developed other projects, with Bill and Miller primarily, and then we started getting projects from outside developers. But basically the same model that Charlie—we didn't bid anything. We didn't hard-bid. We did negotiated work with developers.

Adamson: So I had an item from the *San Mateo Times* from February of 1970 that had announced plans for a thirteen-story office building at Howard and Spear Street in San Francisco that was supposed to be completed by Pankow.¹¹ Pankow never did that building. I assume it was built, or maybe it wasn't even built.

Edwards: We built that, yes.

Adamson: You did build that?

Edwards: Yes.

Adamson: But that wasn't your first project.

¹¹ "New Office Plans Told," *San Mateo Times*, 13 February 1970, 4.

Edwards: That was not our first project. That was probably the announcement and then, of course, the time lapse of getting it through the City and getting it designed and financed, that project probably came a couple years after we started.

Adamson: A couple years later?

Edwards: Yes, so probably '73 or somewhere in there.

Adamson: So talk more about ramping up with people who were not Bill or Miller Ream. How many employees did you have by the end of the first decade? How many projects were you doing a year?

Edwards: We were probably doing—at the end of the first year, I don't think we did more than that one project. I mean, that was probably it. Then we started working for Joe Pell, that's a friend of Bill's, and doing buildings in San Francisco.¹² We probably were doing six major projects a year, five to six, in that range.

We didn't really take too many people from Pankow's operation. We took a few, but as I remember, it was not a mass raid. We hired young engineers and followed that model, and some of the key guys in the lower—in the carpenter foremen range, we got from Pankow. But I think a big year for us at that time was 60, 70 million.

Adamson: In contracts?

¹² Born in Poland as Yosel Epelbaum, Joseph Pell was the only member of his family to survive the Nazi invasion of September 1939. He tells his story in *Taking Risks: Jewish Youth in the Soviet Partisans and His Unlikely Life in California* (Muskegon, MI: RDR Books, 2004).

Edwards: Right. That built a lot of buildings in those days. [laughs] Now it builds two buildings.

Adamson: People like Dean Stephan have mentioned Winmar as, from the late sixties, carrying Pankow through some lean times in the seventies. Was that ever the case with Bill Wilson and Miller that they had enough work to carry you through?

Edwards: Absolutely. I mean, they were our main client for many years.

Adamson: They always did well?

Edwards: They always, yes, on almost all the projects. The key project for us was probably the Oracle campus in Redwood City, 3 million square feet of office building with garages and business center and auditorium. That was a major—it lasted over eight years.

Adamson: Wow.

Edwards: Of continuous building. By then we'd actually branched into other stuff besides just the concrete frames. We were doing steel buildings and still doing a lot of precast, but not as much as had been done.

Then we did the Peninsula Office Park in San Mateo, and that was all concrete. We'd gone into the—Charlie had started doing that, too—got more of the perimeter moment frame rather than the slipform. So these were precast panels that were built in a perimeter moment frame. So we did all those buildings, ten buildings or so up there.

Adamson: What was your first project outside of the Bay Area?

Edwards: We did an office building in San Diego for Ron Wheatcroft. He was a developer from—went to University of California, was a friend of Bill's.¹³ A lot of our clients were friends of Bill, were introduced to us from Bill Wilson, Stanford crowd and then some of the University of California guys who went into development. So we did buildings in San Diego and we did buildings in Phoenix and Tucson. Then we built a building and a pretty large complex in Reno for Valley Bank.

Adamson: So at least in terms of the earliest *ENR* contract volumes I could find for Webcor go back to the late seventies, eighties. The size of Webcor from those numbers seemed to be very fairly stable through those years? Again, was this part of a business plan to stay a certain size?

¹³ Born in Pasadena in May 1936, Wheatcroft was a star football player at the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in business, graduating in 1958. In January 1959, he joined Coldwell Banker in Los Angeles. In 1970, he formed Lion Property with partners Doug Allred and Don Sammis. The firm became a leading developer in San Diego county, accounting for 2,013 residential units and some 1 million square feet of commercial space. Later, he founded the Wheatcroft Company. He died in June 2005 (Jack Williams, "Ron Wheatcroft, 69; Real Estate Developer, Humanitarian," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 29 June 2005).

Edwards: No, I think the market, not wanting to get into hard-bid, and I think Charlie pretty much followed that same path. In your book, you point out that he didn't really try to go after a lot of jobs. Jobs would come to him. Of course, Charlie always wanted to make 10 percent. You don't make 10 percent anymore in this business, no matter how innovative you are, but you can still make a decent profit with these systems, and the structured systems, you can make more profit. So that was kind of our model, too, not to chase these jobs that we had to beat heads against ten other contractors.

Adamson: So you always saw yourself as a design-builder?

Edwards: Yes.

Adamson: Did you ever at some point do construction management as its—

Edwards: Well, later on, we did construction management. When Dave and I were starting to transition out, we hired Andy Ball to be the president and CEO, and then he got us into some construction management, but we never wanted to do construction management.

Adamson: So the early nineties recession hit Pankow fairly hard, and coming out of that, led by Rik Kunnath, they got into tenant improvements and some other things that Charlie really either didn't think about or wasn't too keen on. What was Webcor's response to those times?

Edwards: Well, I think we tried to do the same thing that most contractors did, was try to start doing interior work. We really didn't have a heart for it, I think, and so it became a stepchild to Webcor also, similar to Pankow. But there were companies that really specialized in that, and so we had a difficult time getting outside tenant improvement work. We could get tenant improvement work from our developers, but to try to be a tenant improvement contractor never proved to be something that we wanted to do. I think you really needed to have a separate company to do that.

Adamson: So your merger with Andy Ball's company was a result of that?

Edwards: No. That was a big misnomer, too, in the paper. It was never a merger.

[laughs] It was an absorption.

Adamson: Absorption of his company?

Edwards: He had a little company called A.J. Ball, which had four or five losing jobs, some of them on the East Coast, and so we absorbed his company into Webcor. Andy was a hell of a good salesman, really, tremendous salesman, and that was his strong point was helping to secure work, and he got us a lot of work.

Adamson: How big was Webcor at this point when you—

Edwards: I think his idea—to finish that thought—

Adamson: Sorry.

Edwards: His idea was volume, as much as you have volume, you're going to make money, and our philosophy was never that. It was never that way, volume for volume's sake, because you can lose more money with volume, and you build up your overhead, tremendous overhead. He started to build our overhead up to a point where it's unsustainable. About the time then Dave and I left, Obayashi came in, bought 70 percent of Webcor—bought the company, basically. Then they subsequently fired Andy in the last two years.

Adamson: Is that right? So the increase in volume is sales, not the result of just bigger projects like Oracle?

Edwards: No, Oracle was a fabulous project. That was controlled growth there. But getting into some of these other projects, going down and building—I started building a lot of condos in Los Angeles, and we really had no base of operation in Los Angeles and lost a lot of money building condos in Southern California under Andy's regime, and Dave and I were pretty much phasing out by then. We really didn't control it very well, didn't control it at all. [laughs]

Adamson: So we're talking about the nineties?

Edwards: Probably, yes, the late nineties. That's a diversion from Charlie, from Pankow, so I don't know how much you want to get into that.

Adamson: Well, before we got to the end game here, everyone at Pankow talks about a "Pankow Way". Was there a "Webcor Way"? Talk about the culture at Webcor and how it carried on from Charlie's company.

[interruption]

Adamson: So let me ask you, before you left, were they talking about a "Pankow Way," or is this something that you think came later? Because everyone talked about the "Pankow Way" in their interviews.

Edwards: Well, I guess the "Pankow Way" would be the slipform, these structural systems that he liked to use. I think that was the talk about that. The "Webcor Way," I think, was somewhat similar, only I think that we prided ourselves—Dave and I sold that each project, you'd have a principal at the design meetings. That was the key thing that we would sell, is that you wouldn't get some new guy out of college at your design meetings, because that was where all the savings were made, as you know as an architect, is in the design of the building, try to get it as sleek as possible. I think the "Webcor Way" was that we would always, either Dave or myself, and later maybe another couple of key guys with a lot of experience would go to these design meetings and we'd be able

to attend them all and then stay involved. One of us would be a sponsor on maybe six jobs, so we would still stay involved with the projects and even be involved in the estimating. Dave and I estimated jobs long after we started the company, and we still would do the estimating.

So I think we had a much more hands-on approach than Charlie and then as you get too big, then, of course, you can't do that anymore and you start losing control. So I think that's one of the reasons I think we tried to stay a certain size, and maybe not on purpose, but that's what happened.

Then I think another thing that we did different from Charlie is that there was a lot of complaint from Charlie that he only paid attention to the guys, that the families were never paid attention to. So we would have annual meetings and we'd include the wives in our annual meetings. We'd go to Las Vegas or we'd go to some of these nice places for our meetings, San Diego or Santa Barbara, and the wives would always been included in these meetings, and we'd go all the way down through foremen, labor foremen, and their wives. So it was a big deal. We'd have picnics throughout the year, Christmas parties, picnics, and not just the guys, but the wives would be involved. So I think that was one of the big differences between what we saw happen at Pankow and what we tried to instill at Webcor.

Adamson: Yes, Charlie never really instituted what anyone would call a managerial organization structure in his company. Ultimately, he had the last word on everything.

So in 1994, how big was Webcor in terms of employees, and was there a hierarchical structure, an "org chart" at that point, or was it still small enough to—

Edwards: We had an org chart, but basically it was an executive committee of five guys, five to six people, and we had a board of directors, but I wouldn't say it was highly organized. Even when Andy was there, I don't think it was a strong organizational structure, and he was doing 600 million a year or something and still didn't have—it was basically two or three guys running the whole thing. But I think when Dave and I were still actively involved up till in the mid-nineties, we probably had 100 full-time employees, plus the union employees, so it was a pretty good-sized organization.

Adamson: So what did you and Dave, or Webcor the company, do to promote design-build or the way you were doing things? Did Webcor play any role in the DBIA [Design-Build Institute of America], for instance?

Edwards: Well, I don't think so, no. We were involved with AGC [Associated General Contractors] for a while and we tried to get involved somewhat in the Design-Build Institute, but it didn't seem like they offered us much. It didn't like seem like the organization was that strong, and it didn't offer much. I think we were ahead of the curve on what they were doing. [laughs] They were embroiled in policy. We're trying to get deals and build them, you know.

Adamson: Right. There was an *ENR* article recently that—in fact, it was the one announcing the sale of Webcor 70 percent to Obayashi—had said that Webcor did not do public-sector work, and it struck me that that was a commonality with Charlie.¹⁴

Edwards: Well, now they're doing Transit Authority Building and a San Francisco hospital. [laughs]

Adamson: Right. And for Pankow, explained by Rik Kunnath, they got into public-sector work and hospitals and the tenant improvements mostly as a response to recession.

Edwards: Exactly.

Adamson: I'm just wondering if Webcor's gone that direction in the last fifteen, ten years.

Edwards: I think that was the result of size, that the machine got so big that they had to branch out and get these large jobs to keep that machine going. Their overhead got up to 34 million. Well, 34 million, if you're making 3 percent, which is pretty good these days, you've got to do a billion dollars of work every year to keep that, not even to do anything but pay salaries. So you can't get enough negotiated work to feed that horse. So I think that's where Andy went off and he's got to get into this bigger stuff, and that's when Webcor started to tackle the transit facility and some of the bigger jobs in San Francisco.

¹⁴ "Webcor Builders Plans to Sell 70% to Obayashi Corp.," *ENR*, 27 November 2006, 15.

Adamson: So there was an article in *Construction Today*, which I'm not sure who even publishes that, but it indicated that you and Dave retired in 2000.¹⁵ Is that true?

Edwards: That's correct, yes.

Adamson: So talk about that 1994—or talk about the transition point to retiring.

Edwards: Well, we decided instead of trying to sell the company, we'd try to transition, because our key employees owned stock, and so we had probably fifty stockholders. So we wanted to try to transition the company to this younger group, and Andy Ball being one of the main principals, my son being another one, and some other people. So we devised this plan where every year there would be a split of the profits between the old company, and we formed a new company, Webcor Construction Company. So it's Webcor Builders Incorporated on one side, and Webcor Construction Company is the new company, and every year we'd split the profits a little. It was more in their favor over this ten-year period maybe from 1990 to 2000.

So that's basically what happened in the year 2000 and roughly we'd come to the point where I think we were at 30 percent and the new company was at 70 percent, so that was how we transitioned it out. Then we got completely bought out subsequent to that. Then Obayashi came into the picture, which complicated it, and Webcor was

¹⁵ Brain Salgado, "Webcor Builders—San Francisco General Hospital," *Construction Today*, <http://www.construction-today.com/index.php/sections/institutional/657-webcor-builders--san-francisco-general-hospital>.

running out of cash, so they couldn't bond these big projects, so they had to reach out and get Obayashi.

Adamson: So was this outcome a response to current conditions, or if you go back to the—once Webcor's up and running, say, in the eighties, and you look out at retirement, how did you envision succeeding?

Edwards: I think at that time everything was going well. Typically when the economy starts to turn down, then you start to—and we had a couple of losing years, and you start to figure out, you know, what are you going to do? So then that's when Bill Wilson pushed to get a new president in and try to figure out a transition plan, so he basically found Andy Ball, and so we started this transition plan. Basically, work was very scarce, you know, in the nineties. Didn't ramp up, really, until after that.

Adamson: So Bill and Miller were involved through 2000?

Edwards: No, they weren't involved through 2000. They were involved probably—they probably got out around '93, somewhere in there, to '95, in that range someplace.

Adamson: But you still did projects for—

Edwards: Yes. You're not sure when that article in the paper about Webcor merging with Andy Ball. What was that?¹⁶

Adamson: What year was that? '94?

Edwards: Okay. So right around then is when Bill got out, Bill Miller.

Adamson: Is Miller Ream still around?

Edwards: He's still alive. I haven't seen him recently.

Adamson: I forget what the specific article was, but Andy Ball mentioned hiring graduates from Purdue, Cal Poly, and Stanford, and it struck me that that was where Pankow got most of their people as well.¹⁷ Did you ever find yourselves competing for the same person at Purdue, for instance?

Edwards: Not really. It didn't seem like we had much conflict on that. We didn't recruit as heavily at Purdue as Charlie did. The problem with Purdue graduates, we found, was that they weren't really equipped for the West Coast, the Bay Area housing prices. They grew up in the Midwest. So we didn't find them to stay that well. They weren't long

¹⁶ The article, "Webcor Builders: Millennium Contractor," *California Construction* (May 2000): 36, references the "merger," which was concluded in 1994. According to Ball, the "merger [was] a great one, where two companies combined their respective strengths, and in doing so, created a stronger company." See, also, Margaret Young, "Wired at Webcor," *Business Week*, 20 November 2000, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2000-11-19/wired-at-webcor>.

¹⁷ Salgado, "Webcor Builders."

lasting. Better to get guys from out here. Cal Poly was really good, San Luis Obispo, and Chico. I never found the Stanford engineers to be great. Purdue engineers were good, but they never stayed with us.

Adamson: So this is a more general question, professional question, and this goes to right about the time you started Webcor, and, of course, the GSA, General Services Administrator, would have been talking about public projects. But in 1973 Arthur Sampson stated that the construction industry was the worst-managed industry in America, and today you still hear the same thing.¹⁸ I'm just wondering, in your career, did you see improvements or would you even agree with that statement?

Edwards: Worst-managed business? No, I would not agree with that at all. I think the construction industry is a lot different than manufacturing industry or a software company. You're not going to have the same type of management. That doesn't mean that it's the worst-managed industry. I don't agree to that.

Adamson: So one of the things as at least Charlie Pankow—the approach of negotiated work is never have a change order unless the owner changes the scope of the project. Was that something—

Edwards: That was what he proposed.

¹⁸ “Change: The Building Team Is Getting Together for a Change,” *Building Design & Construction* 14 (December 1973): 34.

Adamson: That's what he proposed.

Edwards: That's what he espoused. That was really not true. I think that we tried to absorb as many change orders as possible, because you're in on the early design process, but contingencies were built into the projects for unforeseen conditions, and I think there were far less change orders. But the idea that you never had change orders was a misnomer. We always had change orders.

Adamson: There were several interviewees from the Pankow group that characterized Pankow as a medium-sized, niche company that punched above its belt, that they did projects that would normally be associated with larger construction firms. Was that anything you saw Webcor doing, punching above its belt?

Edwards: I never heard that term. I don't know what that would connotate. Were they saying that he would step out higher than what his expertise was?

Adamson: Able to do projects bigger than you would normally associate with that size of a company.

Edwards: I don't know. I think that Pankow and Webcor did these projects way more efficiently than other companies would do it.

Adamson: On the flip side, the size company of Pankow and Webcor, whether from design-build or construction methods, what impact on the industry do you think both of those companies have had?

Edwards: I think they've had some impact, not probably as much as it should have because I think basically now that there's—back in those days, you didn't want to share your technology that much with—I mean, you owned the innovations, you owned the technology, even though it was not patented. I mean, I'm sure Charlie tried to patent some stuff. But to help the industry, I mean, you have to be very unselfish, and this is your bread and butter you've got. You can't be sharing all these ideas with everybody and then they beat you at your own game.

So I think that stifled the industry at a whole, but you're trying to make money for your company. So to keep this inside knowledge of these innovations was natural for both companies, and so maybe the industry didn't benefit as much as maybe they should have. I don't know how you weigh that. It's like a chip maker not wanting to share his chip design. Now with his foundation, he's helping the industry, I think, with that, and there's no personal gain.

Adamson: So tell me something about your career, starting Webcor and your career that I haven't asked you about that I should know about.

Edwards: Well, I think the one thing that's come out of my career is my, I guess, God-given talent for building and that I've now parlayed that. I've tried to help in a nonprofit

way [to] use my—I now work with the Concordia College system. There’s ten universities throughout the country. They’re Lutheran universities and colleges. So I do pro bono consulting for a number of these colleges when they need new buildings or renovations, and I’m now working with Concordia College in Selma, Alabama, and it’s a basically an historical black college with lots of problems. In fact, I’m going down there next week to help them with trying to renovate and we’re trying to do a new campus in Selma, Alabama.

I have one paid consultant job with Pollack Financial. It’s a developer working on a project in Palo Alto, office building. And my son now has his own construction company that he formed after leaving Webcor. That’s six years ago.¹⁹

Adamson: What’s that called?

Edwards: It’s called Build Group, in San Francisco, and he’s probably going to do 250 million this year.

Adamson: That’s great.

Edwards: So he’s been very successful and actually competes with Webcor. He has a concrete company, Pacific Structures, also, does concrete structures. So he competes with Webcor and a bunch of the other Bay Area companies on concrete structures, which

¹⁹ See, for instance, J. K. Dineen, “Execs Quit Webcor for New Venture,” *San Francisco Business Times*, 3 June 2007, <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/stories/2007/06/04/story1.html?page=all>.

is interesting, and using some of the techniques developed by Pankow and Webcor. So it's a third generation.

Adamson: I don't imagine your relationship with Purdue has approached Charlie's involvement.

Edwards: No.

Adamson: But you still are involved with their civil engineering or construction management programs?

Edwards: Not very much. We helped with that new concrete lab. Webcor, I think we put in 300,000 for the Webcor wall, as we call it—it's a big testing wall—a number of years ago. Then Dave's been more involved with Purdue than I have. I've taken my charity dollars to other areas, more of a Christian perspective.

Adamson: Well, since this is the Charles Pankow Legacy Project, I'm going to close with two questions. Overall, in your estimation, what impact did Charlie Pankow have on the building industry?

Edwards: I think that Charlie has been a tremendous influence, in the Bay Area especially, I think is where he's made his impact in helping develop the concept of design-build, not just the structural part, but the overall team approach. Even though you

may not be the architect and you may not be the engineer, but the team approach to building was really advanced by Charlie and I think by Webcor a lot, carried on.

I would like to see more projects then, because I think they could save so much more money than they do now. You're fighting bureaucracy, though, and architects want control, agencies want control. They don't want to have a partner.

In my life, Charlie was very instrumental in my career, and I'm indebted to him.

Adamson: Great. So you've talked in several questions about his impact. So just to close, just elaborate, summarize the impact that he had on your career.

Edwards: I think that Charlie allowed innovation and new ideas and would support you, and I think that's spurred my innovation and my entrepreneurship to do the same for the people who work for me, and I think that's a healthy thing, to give people, allow them to explore, succeed, and fail. That's how new things happen. I think both companies benefited, and I think my son's company been benefited also by what Charlie did. So I would say the guy was a good builder, very good.

Adamson: I thank you for taking the time. This has been very interesting.

Edwards: Good.

[End of interview]