

ERAN HOWELL

Interview: by Merna DeBolt 1977

Transcribed by Rich Curran

(Merna DeBolt interviewed Eran and Gloria Howell about the Corliss engine that is on display at the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center in Stevenson. Merna will use this information for her *Museum Musings* books.)

Merna: (inaudible) it would be possible to get the Corliss engine?

Eran: Well, that was in, ah, 1975, it was set for the Bicentennial, wasn't it?

Merna: OK. Bicentennial?

Eran: So, about a year or so before that, we, ah, started working on it.

Merna: OK. When did the mill burn down?

Eran: I think around 1949, but I'm not positive.

Merna: And it had sat up until the eaerly 70's. The Birkenfelds, tell me about how they decided to give it to the county, or whatever it was they did. Did somebody approach them?

Eran: Huh, huh. Ivan Donaldson. And, I'm not sure if it is donated. I think it is on a permanent loan, or something like that. You need to talk to Sharon (Tiffany) or somebody that would know more about that.

Merna: So, when you went up to look at it for the first time, what did you think?

Eran: Well, . . .

Merna: Was it possible to move, did you think it was possible?

Eran: Oh, yeah. Anything is possible, if you've got enough time and money.

Merna: And Ivan took you up there because he thought you were the guy to move it, huh?

Eran: Well, actually, I'm the one that took him up there. But I don't want that to

come out that way.

Merna: Alright.

Eran: So, don't . . .

Merna: So, don't say nothing. Alright.

Eran: But actually, the way that really went, was Bryan Snell wanted to, to have something for the Bicentennial. You know, a county project of some sort. This is how I remember it, anyway. And, we had an old fire truck, 1928 GMC, fire truck laying around, and, he wanted to restore that for the bicentennial.

Merna: Where was that?

Eran: Well, I think it was either at our place, or Dan Lillegard's place. It belonged to me. It was an antique. So, I said, "Why don't you go look at that Corliss engine," and we went from there.

Merna: Did he pretty excited when he saw that, huh?

Eran: Ivan Donaldson did.

Merna: Ivan Donaldson, did. OK. Alright, ha, was it in pieces?

Eran: No, it was in original condition. Some of the building had collapsed around it.

Merna: Was it rusty?

Eran: Oh, yeah.

Merna: But all the parts was there?

Eran: Well, everything was there but the, but the rope had been robbed, quite a bit of the rope.

Merna: It had been robbed, you say?

Eran: Yeah. About half of the rope was left there.

Merna: OK. Now, what did you do first? To me, I wouldn't know where to start. Where did you start?

Eran: Well, somebody, Ivan Donaldson evidently, contacted the Birkenfelds, and,

ah, you know, got permission to get it, and I don't know who decided to locate it over here in the park.

Merna: That was its first location. I liked what Gloria (Eran's wife) said that Ivan wanted to hook it up to a carousel. I thought that was . . .

Eran: Yeah, That was his dream.

Gloria: That was his original dream.

Merna: Did it run when you had it in the park?

Eran: No.

Merna: It was just standing there.

Eran: It was a static display, I guess you would say.

Merna: OK. Did you put more rope on it in the park?

Eran: Ah, we put what rope that was with it, in the park.

Merna: Just what you had. OK. Now, where did you start to dis . . . how would you start to dismantle and transport?

Eran: Well, we, ah, we just took the, ah, well, the bearing caps, we took those off and removed the big wheel, part of it.

Merna: Who helped you?

Eran: There was quite a lot of people. I should make a list of the of the original.

Merna: OK. Give me the few you can think of tonight, and then call me and give me who you didn't give me tonight.

Eran: You know, there was, ah, oh, I imagine 20 to 30 people.

Merna: Really?

Eran: Oh, yeah.

Merna: That's a lot of names to try to remember.

Eran: At that time, ah, L-P (Louisiana-Pacific) owned the mill, they donated the low boy.

Merna: Is that the mill is where the interpretive center is now?

Eran: Yeah. They, ah, they had bought Rudy (Hegewald) out at that time.

Merna: And they gave you a low-boy. I can't imagine you going down the highway with that. How did that . . .?

Eran: They, ah, had cop car ahead and behind, and ah, you know, come down the middle of the road, no problem, you know.

Merna: Did you take up more than your share of the road?

Eran: Oh, yeah, you had to go right down the middle of the road.

Merna: I imagine, yeah. And how fast could you go.

Eran: I don't know, I wasn't on that part of it. George Acker was there, he probably could tell you about that part.

Merna: Oh, OK. I'll talk to him, too. OK. You took the wheel down, and, then what?

Eran: Well, then we took the base apart. It was in three pieces.

Merna: In three pieces.

Eran: Yeah.

Merna: How tall was that smokestack originally?

Eran: I don't know.

Merna: It's about tall as the Interpretive Center.

Eran: Yeah.

Merna: Would you say 20 feet?

Eran: Well, it's still, as far as I know, it's still standing.

Merna: Oh, it's still standing.

Eran: The original smokestack is still up there.

Merna: Oh, OK. I didn't realize that.

Eran: Now, I don't know if you want to write about that. that boiler there that's there, is not the original, it just for looks.

Merna: Where did it come from?

Eran: That came from Portland, I think, that boiler that's there.

Merna: Now, the boiler, it that . . . ?

Eran: That's round . . . they put the smokestack on.

Merna: Where did you find it in Portland?

Eran: Callahan (Ed).

Merna: Callahan found it.

Eran: Yeah.

Merna: OK. You took it all apart, and you brought it down to the park.

Eran: Huh, huh. In the meantime, the foundation had been built, concrete foundation.

Merna: OK. Tell me about the concrete. I still can't get in my head. I was explaining to come people one day when they come to the Interpretive Center, and I don't know if I said concrete or cement. I think I said concrete. "These concrete walls represent the basalt walls of the Columbia River Gorge." And the man explained to me that there was a difference between concrete and cement, and I didn't it. Tell me again.

Eran: Well, cement, well concrete is made out cement and rocks and sand. If you want to be real technical, it's concrete. A lot of people say cement, but they mean the same thing.

Merna: This man was kinda (inaudible).

Eran: Yeah, he was probably a contractor.

Merna: Yeah, and after he told me I couldn't remember (laughter). Ok. Now, where are we. Oh, yeah, you made this foundation and brought it down . . .

Eran: And assembled it, and, ah, Ober Logging and Krohn Logging were instrumental, and L-P, were all instrumental in moving the stuff, the

machinery.

Merna: That's good.

Eran: Most of the, most of the work on the foundation was volunteer. Later on they built the roof over it. I think the county probably paid for that, or did most of that. It started out as an all-volunteer project but it didn't, I don't think it ended up that way, all together.

Merna: I'm glad to get those logging companies, that's good.

Eran: I'll make a list of all the guys that I can remember, that worked on that.

Merna: OK. Was that a fun project, did they really enjoyed what they were doing?

Eran: I think for the most part, yes.

Merna: This may be off the record, but who was your best helpers, who were the ones that helped you with advice, and helped you the most?

Eran: Well, Hans Strauss. He was a . . . on the carpenter work. When they built the forms, he was one of the main . . .

Merna: OK. How long did it stay in the park, from 1976 to when? Or was it 1975?

Eran: When was the bicentennial?

Merna: 1976.

Gloria: 1975.

Eran: 1975 is when they moved it. When did this (interpretive center) start?

Merna: Well, I don't know when they started building it, it's been done 2½ years, now.

Eran: We moved, it, you know, just before they put the roof on.

Merna: So, they started building it, then you put that in there, and they put the roof on.

Eran: Yeah. They still had, ah, the walls were still down on that one side, and . . .

Merna: You couldn't have done it if it was complete.

Eran: No.

Merna: Whose idea was it to move it to the Interpretive Center?

Eran: Probably, Ivan Donaldson. No, Ivan Donaldson was opposed to that.

Merna: Oh, really.

Eran: He was gone by then. And I think he would really appreciate it now. He would love it now, but to start with I don't think he liked the idea. But he was gone before they got started on it.

Merna: Huh, huh. OK. Now, when you got it in the Interpretive Center, who were the men who helped you make it run, because it didn't run in the park yet, it just sat there. When you got it into the Interpretive Center, you got it running, and you used electric motors instead of . . .

Eran: Well, I'll have to make a list, and I know I will forget a lot of 'em. But, it was Hans Strauss, and, ah, Don Yarnell, Elan, Al, Sam White . . .

Gloria: Dan Lillegard . . .

Merna: Which Lillegard, Dan?

Gloria: Allen.

Eran; Yeh, Allen.

Merna: Allen who?

Eran: Tiffany.

Merna: Tiffany.

Eran: What's that, ah, Alan Bailey from Carson. Ed Callahan.

Gloria: Ray Lee worked on that, too.

Eran: Yeah, Ray Lee.

Merna: Ray Lee. You named someone I thought you said White, there. Did you say a White?

Eran: Yeah, Sam White.

Merna: Sam White.

Eran: Now, there is a lot more than that. Eugene Esch, ah, Bob Pullman, Ray Hamilton . . .

Merna: You know, we really should have a list of these people and have it somewhere by the Corliss. Or, at least in the files upstairs, I think.

Eran: I would like to see them put a plaque on there with, if we can find all them for both times.

Merna: I think you're right.

Eran: Then do away with that one

Merna: (Laughter).

Eran: Because I won't be able to tell anybody to come to that place now, because they will think . . .

Merna: OK. We will try to get a complete list.

Eran: I will try to make a list of the two different jobs.

Merna: OK.

Gloria: We've got pictures of both of those jobs. Why, I have picture of that over there that Ivan took.

Eran: But, we never did get the people's names, and some of them are going to get forgotten, and that's too bad.

Merna: That's too bad, yeah.

Eran: And I think Don Fechtner was involved, Bill Peterson.

Merna: I'll ask Don. And Bill Peterson OK. When did you guys do this, on weekends, after work, or . . .?

Eran: Mostly on weekends, I think and evenings.

Merna: Can you tell me of any problems that were really hard to solve, to get the engine running?

Eran: Well, there were quite a few problems. Ah, quite a few problems, relocating

it so that it would run, ah. originally the thing was 30 or 40 feet longer than it is now. That rope, I mean, the, ah, well, the head pulley and the tail pulley. To get it in the building they had to shorten it.

Merna: Well, I think Sharon (Tiffany) said that the contractor was really opposed to even having it in there. They thought it was going to present too much of a problem. Is that true?

Eran: Yeah. I think it is. Ah, but nobody wanted to, ah, see it run.

Merna: Really, they wanted it to sit there?

Eran: Well, it was too much of a risk, and liability, and so forth.

Merna: Well, it's true what Gloria says, when the old-timers come in there and see a Corliss. and then see it run, they just stand there with an unusual expression on their face.

Eran: What they've got to do someday, is like a. ah, like a slot machine, or a nickelodeon, or whatever, only have it for \$1.00, so you could put four quarters in it, and then push a button and it turns. (Merna laughter.) And you could make ah, several \$1,000s a year.

Merna: Why sure you can. Coin operated (laughter.) A coin-operated Corliss. I like that.

Eran: There are some safety things that would have to be done, you know, before you could do that.

Merna: What would be the safety things to be done?

Eran: Well, you need some more guards upstairs around the wheel, and different places, to make sure nobody get hurt. The way it is now, see, if you want to see it run, you get ahold of Rob (Peterson) and he's looking around to make sure nobody's crawled in anywhere.

Merna: Yeah, near a wheel.

Eran: Yeah.

Merna: OK. Where did you get the rope?

Eran: The rope, ah, the rope was, ah, bought from . . . Callahan (Ed) would have the exact information on that.

Merna: Callahan found the rope?

Eran: Well, he called around and somebody had . . . this rope is real special. You still can get it made, in fact, they had to get some of it made, I think. But, there was a cable company in Portland that had, ah, still had spool of it, left over from, you know . . .

Merna: The olden days.

Eran: The rope, ah, is four stands, special . . . it's made for power transmissions.

Merna: How many months did you work relocating it, do you know?

Eran: Well, I don't know. Several months, I guess, before it was finished. And, ah, what we did, was, we set it inside the building, so they could finish the building, and at a later date we leveled it up and bolted it together, grouted the foundation, and got everything running. One of the main guys on that, Mike mentioned, was Don Yarnell.

Merna: I had a feeling he was really into that. What was his expertise? What was his background?

Eran: Oh, he is a logger, construction, construction man, mechanic, you name it.

Merna: Jack of trades, huh?

Eran: Yeah, he is about 85 years old now. He is the only one in the area that can splice that rope.

Merna: I want to put that down.

Eran: I guess, if he dies, well, somebody will have to learn.

Man: A cable slicer couldn't slice it?

Eran: Oh, a good could, could figure it out. But, ah, it's a, it's different, four, four stands with a core, and it takes a little doing to do it. I think I could do it if I had to. But, Don does it real easy.

Merna: His talents are going to missed, aren't they?

Eran: Yeah.

Merna: OK. Tell me about when you turned the key and it ran for the first time in the Interpretive Center?

Eran: Well, we had the, ah, I don't know where we come up with the idea what we got there, I don't remember now.

Gloria: According to Callahan, you said, that that thing has to run. So you thought you could do it by getting an electric motor.

Eran: Well, it's an electric motor driven. It's got, got a, oh, a special clutch that they don't use in sawmills or anything. I don't know where we came up with that idea, but, it works good, after some trial and error, you know. It works real good.

Merna: You mean, you did have some problems?

Eran: Yeah. To start with. It jerked too hard to start with, it was tearing the motor out of the floor.

Merna: How did you solve that?

Eran: Well, the, the clutch mechanism, we adjusted it, and it turned out real good.

Merna: OK. Well, it's a real treasure to have it there, and I think when everybody sees it run, I always wish the man who put it there could see the faces of the people who appreciate it when they come through the Interpretive Center, because that is really the star of the show down there.

Eran: Yeah. I am really serious about putting the money in there, to, to raise money, you know. You can imagine that everybody who came in there and wanted to see it run, a quarter isn't enough, maybe.

Gloria: You could put in 50¢.

Eran: Well, you put in four quarters, or whatever, and if it runs for 30 seconds, or a minute. Gosh, I've got to see that some more, so . . .

Merna: Yeah. Is that a possibility, that you could do, can you guys do that?

Eran: I don't know. I don't think it would be too hard.

Man: But, you would put a quarter in there, and there would be thirty people watching.

Eran: Well, that's true.

Gloria: That is true.

Merna: Something to think about, anyway. You would be surprised though, the people, on their way out, will put something in that donation jar, because they really enjoyed what they've seen, and they really appreciate what they've seen.

Eran: Another thing. Willard Clucas, Willy Clucas, do you know him?

Merna: Yes.

Eran: Well, he was one of the helpers, originally. We talked about making a scale model of the Corliss and a sawmill that runs, just like up there, so people would know what it really did. You can see the big machine, but you don't what it really did. Originally, the boiler house was here, about 100 feet away, and there was a big shaft that went across the ground, oh, about, I don't know, five or six inches in diameter. That went over to the mill building, and all the saw, conveyers, and everything, was run by two belts, in the whole sawmill, from this Corliss engine.

Merna: And it was powered by the (inaudible).

Eran: Right. So, maybe some day we will, Willy and I will get together . . .

Merna: It would be wonderful if you could make a scale model. Oh, that would be wonderful, because kids now days don't know . . . they know it is a big machine and when you tell them it powered a sawmill, they say, "Oh." But they don't really get the whole picture.

Eran: Well, most people don't. I mean, even men, they visualize a modern mill where everything's got motors, so it is a big difference than it was then.

Merna: Now another thing that they tell me, as I listen to Rob (Peterson) spew his whole speal, is that the Birkenfeld mill manufactured cants that was used in the aircraft carriers in World War II as decks for the planes to land on. Have you heard that?

Eran: Huh, huh.

Merna: Now, did they also work from this Corliss engine mill, like Birkenfeld's mill, I'm not sure what mill made the framing for the cement in Bonneville Dam. Was it Birkenfeld's?

Eran: Could have been. Well, before he owned it. He didn't buy it until the late '30s, or '40s, I think, I don't know.

Merna: OK, the Bonneville dam went in in the early '30s?

Eran: I think they originally started it in about 1932 or 1933, I think.

Merna: Do you know who owned the mill before Birkenfelds?

Eran: Ah, Chauncey Price, I think.

Merna: Chauncey Price.

Eran: J. C. Price. Chauncey, everybody called him. Let's see, who would know better about that? Somebody like Barbara Acker would probably know. A lot of old-timers from Carson would know that.

Merna: I'll have to ask them.

Eran: Maybe, ah, your neighbor there?

Merna: Don (inaudible).

Eran: Don.

Merna: He might know, yeah. Now, tell me. If I wanted to save wood from that mill, lumber from that mill, that helped build Bonneville dam, how do I say, if it is framing, or, I, I can see the picture, it is a wood frame . . .

Man: The forms for the cement.

Eran: The forms for the cement. Is that the way you would word it?

Eran: And scaffolding.

Merna: Sometimes I can see what I want to say, but can't find the words. (chuckle). Well, OK. Well, this has been helpful. I really appreciate it. It looks like I might have enough material to make two articles out of it, a two-part article, I don't know. It's a lot of information.

Eran: Well, I will sure try to find all these names, and . . .

Merna: And, I'll talk to Sharon (Tiffany) about getting some place to display them. They should be honored. And it is the way with those women who picked the asparagus there at Peyrollaz'. I think all their names should be listed by those asparagus boxes. Because I think that more people realize that this is THEIR Interpretive Center, that this is THEIR story, and THEIR history, then there won't be so much . . . I don't know . . . negative it is not good. They don't know what they . . .