

## Interview Transcript: Ronnie Vails and Michael Klindt

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Michael [00:00:00]

This is the Springfield History Museum Illumination Project. Michael K Media hosting today, and I have the pleasure of sitting down and talking to Ronny Vales, a true Springfield, Oregon, legend. It's an honor. How you doing, sir?

Ronnie [00:00:18]

Fine Thank you. Thank you.

Michael [00:00:18]

All right...

Ronnie [00:00:19]

Blessed.

Michael [00:00:20]

All right. So let's kick it off with um, If you just don't mind telling me, your Springfield, Oregon origin story. Like, what brought you to Springfield, Oregon?

Ronnie [00:00:31]

I'm originally from... Born and raised in Harlem, New York. Come from a family of 11. Did everything New Yorker's do. Meet tons of people, many nationalities. I seen every kind of person in the world before I was 20, 'cause that's New York and um, I love the city. I felt that it was move along because I got caught up in the dollars. A good athlete. I got caught up in the... In the dope game. Yeah, everyone wants to take a break... But then, you know, get caught, get caught up. And I had to get out of Dodge. I figured there's some things I need to do besides trying to get away from this, 'cause aint going nowhere. New York was flooded with it because that was the goal. You know, Don't... Don't repair the tenements. We'll renovate them later and then they can't afford to move back in them. We'll take over Harlem. It was all a systematic deal. And I came out to California. I had a sister who moved out here. She was studying to be im the medical... Nurse practitioner. So, she welcomed me 'cause she knew what I was trying to

do. And, I got out there in California for about, three or four years, and then I did that a... I was a hippie, too, you know? Thumb out, traveled around at the mercy of nice people. Eventually came past the state of Oregon. I was pretty much running around the United States, started to head to Canada to end my trip, settle down, get a job, get a place to live. I passed through Oregon and I said, man, this is God's country, I like it. You know? I, I didn't want to be near the big cities. I wanted a small... I wanted real town and country. 'Cause Eugene's just a town. It's no city. Town... You walk three blocks you (sic) in the country. So this was ideal. I said, I'm coming back here to live. And that's what I did. I was married at the time, me and my wife decided to settle down here. So this was in 1971. A lot's changed since then. But what I enjoyed about it was the small city. I came here was 79,000, if that much. The city limits were no farther than Garfield Street believe that. Garfield was the city limits. So Eugene to me and Springfield were sister cities. They consist... I, I called this... This where I was living, consists of rednecks and hippies surrounded by cowboys. 'Cause once you got outside the city limit, you had mostly... People had ranches, cattle, horses, whatever... Farm animals. So that was on the outskirts of the city. So we had it all right here within 25 mile radius. So... And some of the most beautiful country. We had mountains. We had fishin' and we had clean air. So it was ideal. And I said, boy if I could make in New York City, I definitely could do this. And uh, I fell in love with it. Yea I fell in love with it. I became... I said I didn't know exactly how long it was gone last, because when I got here, there was no black people. And one of the reasons why I decided to stop in Eugene, because they had the university. So I wasn't gonna to end up in no one-horse town and find myself up the creek were a Philadelphia lawyer couldn't of helped me. I could have been in some small town where I wouldn't even seen a lawyer. I said, Nah, nah, I'm smarter than that. I said, I gonna come to Eugene 'cause they got the university. So there I found a collection, I found little herds of black people. And I came, I seen some sisters you know, try to throw a rope around them (imitates lassoing). But they be like, "ohhh ahh..." You know (laughing)? "Look at you! You a cowboy? You like those white girls don't ya?" I'd like you too honey. And they go "Nuh uh!" You know? And I remember all of this (imitates women ducking and dodging him). And I said, that's what I was trying to get away from. So just said, I'll stick with what's available. And it end up most of my intimate life has been with white women, and uh nothin' against black woman... That was my first choice. But uh... That way we can uh, come from the same area. But um, I made the best of what I... I mean, life is... Tomorrow's promised to no one, so I'm not waitin'. And yeah, Eugene became my home. But now, when it comes to Springfield, I figured okay, rent was almost 75% cheaper for the same thang. And I figured make some sense out of it. I can get a duplex, two car parking garage for half the price cause it's (Eugene), its set up for university. These kids who come in got endless money. So I moved to Springfield. In Springfield yes, most of my surroundings were the rednecks but there were respectable folks, and uh, they identified with good people, and I felt I was good enough to call myself good people. And I got along just fine. You know. I lived out, as far out as Thurston. Matter fact I was off of 29th and Main. But I was actually 29th and F. So once you got down Main you got to 20... 59th street, excuse me, 59th Street, you head north to F Street and there was all orchards. They had just put this brand new duplex. So I was living in a brand new place and they would just... You know, people buying land and there goes country! Let's build a parking lot, you know? So that was my deal with Springfield.

Michael [00:06:41]

And what year was that that you decided to, to make that move?

Ronnie [00:06:45]

I'd say about 1974. '73, '74, I decided to, you know, do Springfield. And I was frankly, you know, as stakes change and for professional reasons, I kind of went back and forth. I even left the neighborhood. You know went as far as the Bay Area for work that I knew how to do and knew was waitin' for me. But this, I considered this home, so in between shopping and doing what I had to do, sometimes you just say I, I need to go home. I always came back to Eugene and uh, I uh... Most of the people I met, you know... I was rather confusing because a lot of white folks, professional and non... Especially men... I guess, you know, they see a black face, I suppose (unintelligible) be-bopin. What am I doing with big buckle (professional bull riding award buckle), am I a drugstore cowboy? And you know, they, they, they... You meet them and you can see a whole bunch of things going through they mind. So, as I saw fit I would, you know, drop dime on various times to say yeah, this is where I'm coming from and da, da da. They go, "Oh alright! Do you know so-and-so?" Yes I know so... (imitates look of surprise) "Wow! You know so and so and so?" Yeah. "Do you know so and so?" Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's on so and so stock, he got some mean bulls out there. He said, "Yeah, they get loose that one time...", and then we start to identify. They say, "Were you from?" I'm from New York. "What are you doing here?" I says, well... "I was waitin' for you to come see me and you never arrived." I said, I'm gone come out and hunt you down and uh... You know in a complimentary manner. And uh, so that's how I came here, because when people say, "I could see why you here." No, you can't see why I'm here. Have you ever been to New York? All you see is what's on TV. So New Yorks wonderful place. It's got everything. From rats as big as dogs to diamonds as big as dogs. You got it all. That's all a matter of what you can afford.

Michael [00:08:59]

Because you were a you were telling me a little earlier before the interview that, I mean, you were doing cowboy stuff even back when you were in New York, right?

Ronnie [00:09:07]

Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I got out here after my cycling commitment. I just realized, being in a foreign country and doing a sport this not well published, it would have been hard to trans (transfer) unless I had professional backing. And back then, very few Americans was racing off in Europe. So I figured, by the time I mess around with this, I'll be old and broke and not even able to, to compete. So I decide to... I've always like living life on the edge. If it had adrenaline, I'm an adrenaline junkie. So... I saw bull riding, I says - I gots to do that! Look at that. That's a rollercoaster with its own brain. It could be on this side of the street tomorrow. It have an attitude the next day. This what I want to do. So I got involved in it. And I actually went to school, because at my age, again, I started it late. Most people put on bulls at an early age because they father wanted to ride... Want them to ride through the father. You know how some fathers build they kids to do their thing, and not let them do their thing. So you know, no I

didn't puts noose in my mouth and I they get picked up by the nap and stuffed on a bull and get knocked around. I figured I'm going to avoid the school of hard Knox and let a champion who knows what he's doing teach me how to ride these things. And in the end, if he said, "You got it or you better do something else for a living." I realized during my time in school, I had the talent. I was ridin' some really rough stuff. And I says, I can do this now. I can do it for a living. And my teacher, who was a 74 world champion, Gary Leffew, he was down in Santa Maria, California, said, "You got it. You got it.", so - and down the road I actually competed against him a few times, met some of the people who put Oregon on the map. Westerners like... Cowboys like Larry Mayhand and five-time all-around cowboy right out of Brooks Oregon. Little... little, little spot there just north of Salem, on I-5. He was from that town. I read all about 'em. You know, he joined the school where I was at. That's where I met him. And down the road some where I was competing against him and actually traveling with him. So, I had a lot of honors. Even though I didn't get rich. I drove the car of my choice and lived the way I wanted to. And I mostly... Mostly paid my taxes.

Michael [00:11:55]

Did you ever get to win against your teacher or any of these guys you looked up to?

Ronnie [00:12:00]

Yes. Yes. I outscored 'em a few times. Yes. They may have got seventh place and I got fourth, fifth. I wasn't takin' too many firsts because, you know, the judges back then... And they had to get rid of all that because the fact is it's too much money in the game now. We get ABC, CBS... We got primetime TV with this cowboy stuff. You don't want to end up, say on a news show saying, look at this rider and look at that rider. Which is the better, rider? That rider. Well, why didn't he win anything? So they had to get rid of all the old judges because they were (unintelligible) people who lived in the town. These wanna be, once was, really wasn't nothin'. He gave him a pencil and pad, and he's gonna... He's gonna... He's gonna see what he want to see. He ain't gone look at the rider. He gone say, "Oh that's my friend, that's so and so's son. I'll make sure he gets some money. Who's this nigga? Ahh, I'll let him place. He should have won but I can't do that. People gone be like nigger lover!" Da da da. So I had to deal with that for at least a year and a half, till I started making a name for myself. Till they started getting real, real judges. They make 'em go to school like... Like... Like empires go to school for baseball. You call the shots like you see 'em. You don't want to be lying and it bein' obvious because we'll get, we'll get our sponsorship dropped and all that stuff. So, it's changed a lot. I only wish I had that much jam back then. I would have been quite wealthy (laughs). But I did what I had to do. I knew what was... I was in for. If I scored when I shoulda' won, I accept my place. Cause' then they see me next year, they might say we owe him. So, I stayed to the part where they felt they owed me. And a few times I saw it worked for me, you know, they say, awe he jacked him last time. They gave me a place where I felt I wasn't going to get that high a score, but they say pay back. You know, you're a real cowboy. You know it would just thing. And often I had chandeliers (earrings) in my ears, the cowboys used to say, "What's this was this?" (waves hands at ears) They said like, "What are you?" I says, I'm a bull rider. "Well, what's this?" I says, jewelry, you know... Do I love you that way? Naw, I don't think so. I wear jewelry 'cause I want to. You know, that's a man. Okay. So that's what it is. Why you wanna get your's done? I know place you can

go. You know... So basically, I guess flacked about that, but good professional announcers dealt with that. We had some people they often tell jokes in the rodeo between rides to make the crowd laugh and sometimes I was the butt some of these jokes. Like... Like Kool-Aid jokes and so forth. Where the, the announcer wouldn't even ask them again, they just move on to the next one. Throw it aside. And he often introduced me and said, "Ladies and gentleman here's a cowboy, he's New York City. He's a little different in the attire, but he's a true... True cowboy. He has earrings that you can't miss. He claims it helps him to keep balance. And it adds a little flair to his riding, but he is a (unintelligible) so and so from New York City. He's rode everything from trains, cabs. Now he's on bull number so and so. Let's give him a big hand", and boom, boom, boom. If I ride my bull, if I don't ride my bull... I get a nice applause. Sometime get a mouthful of dirt. That's what you get. You know, but your entry fee got to be paid. And we didn't have a sponsor, we paid our own way. We paid for our own gas. And it was a lot of time on a road. But being a bull rider, I carried the least amount of equipment. All, I needed was some... I didn't even need cowboy boots. I need some spurs, they fit better on cowboy boots. And after all, you got to be in uniform. You know, they want you to look like a proud cowboy, so... That was easy to get... So called outfit. A good bull rope. And back then you get a good bull rope, professional bull rope for 40 bucks and some good spurs for under \$100. And if you could afford chaps, cool. If you can't, you still can get on. And if you can ride, you can ride. They can see if you could ride. Eventually down the road, you can get all that extra equipment as you see fit. But basically, it was the cheapest way to get in the cowboy game - because if you a roper... Well, you got expense of a horse, a trailer, the truck, and food for the horse, gas, travel with 'em. You got to win money. Whereas I... The expense of it, I would survive. You know so, most of your ropers probably got something else in the bag, or they come from money. But mostly a bull riders who basically didn't have much, but they could afford bull riding equipment, and end up being down the road, bein' able to afford anything they want. So that's me, is a cowboy in the northwest out of New York City. Yeah.

Michael [00:17:44]

So with that, after hearing your origin story, looking back, what are some of your most impactful memories of being in Springfield, Oregon?

Ronnie [00:17:55]

Well, it weren't always good. I wouldn't live in Springfield now because you got the driving while black thing. That's... That's a certainty. Shame... But at one time when I saw officers, they looked at me strange, but they had no real reason to be down on me. They just figured... Maybe want to see what one (black person) looked like up close. So if that's driving while Black, cool. But they didn't search my car... They didn't, probably even asked for more than my driver's license. They were just curious. And at times you can get in a conversation with 'em and they'd say, "Hey, I'll just write you out a warning this time." You know? "Watch it." It was a friendly thing. It was a thing.... Okay officer I messed up... Now I'm afraid that may be last account of my life, especially if I demand respect. That's getting hostile. And it's dangerous. But when I did find out... A lot of the officers in Springfield, like in Eugene, these folks had fathers in the game that were officers. They became officers. I knew they father and things like that. But I found now a lot of your officers from Springfield are coming in from South of the Mason-Dixon. Believe me. I

checked with some of the ads and stuff. Good future... New York Police... Eugene... (corrects himself) Springfield Police, you know, and they advertising a lot from that area where you can do what you want with people of color. Come on up here. There's a few around we need to keep 'em. They getting too... Too thick. We need to keep 'em down. And so a lot of... There used to be more black people in Eugene Springfield. They were quite more, but a lot of them grew up said I aint gone raised my kids in this - I've been through too much. And I don't even go to... You know you would never get Eugene [Springfield] unless I'm warranted - like in your case (for the interview). You know? I came. If my wife was off, I would have her drive me - 'cause I... I didn't want to be late... Because I've been through some stuff. So, it's sad.

Michael [00:20:27]

There's a... I feel like there's sort of this perspective that in Springfield especially in terms of like race relations specifically, there's kind of this, oh yeah, it started off bad back in the days you couldn't even live here. And then it's just kind of gone up and now we're here. It sounds like that's not really your experience, like it's had ups and downs.

Ronnie [00:20:53]

Yes.

Michael [00:20:54]

And that we may not be at the peak of everything. Being at its best.

Ronnie [00:20:58]

No. I think in my experiences, I saw it getting better. I saw a lot of curiosity. And to a point where you were familiar, they knew who you were. But now you could be carrying a box of laundry, and they say... And pull... Well... "Where... What are you doing?". I'm going to the laundry mat. "Well, someone who look just like you... Someone said they got a TV stolen can I see..." This would happen usually at night with no one... I can't contest in front of an old lady get some... Some... Some witnesses. So I had to be very careful... Very careful. And in your earlier days I can speak my mind and have an argument with like - no, I didn't think I was. I think you were... You just was having a donut, couldn't see straight. Speak my mind. It might not of changed the outcome, but I wouldn't of gotten jacked. You know? Now I saw the buildup of a lot of people moving to Springfield, blacks, because the rent. And other people too because of the rent. If you didn't have to go to school, You could... You could work anywhere, but have better living in Springfield. A lot more real estate per dollar anyway. You know? Apartments whatever. Housing was way cheaper. But as far as the blacks goes.... The (incomprehensible) a lot of these old police that I cut my teeth through. They retired. They gone. And they kids wanted to get out. They don't want to become a policeman. If they did, they might want to go to another city. But all the police that are here at Springfield, are not from Springfield. They're not even close to Springfield. They didn't even come out of the small town like Springfield. They come out of the town where they had they way - and they felt, you know, they... They question black people because they wander what they doing here, period. Well, I'm sure the natives said the same thing to them. And they cry about this is their country, but remember someone was here before to help them survive. Then they took everything. You know? Trail of Tears,

(incomprehensible) all that stuff. And you got it here extremist goin, "This is my country." Showin' the flag, "Don't tread on my..." You treaded on a lot of people that didn't look like you, and not you saying don't tread on da da da... Anyway I wouldn't recommend anyone... Any blacks to go into Springfield. And it's not much of a black per... Population in Eugene but like I say, you have the university so you going to get some and you're going to get people that see what in real life before... Before Springfield, that wasn't the case, but I wasn't getting jacked. Now they head hunting and they lookin'... I se... I can see it in they eyes and everything about 'em. Even the way they wear, they... They... You know... (incomprehensible) cops had crew cuts now cops got bald heads. If you would... If you did see from (incomprehensible) you would think they was skin heads. Seriously. And I'll be the first defend this neighborhood because I lived here for 50 years. But I don't go into Springfield as much as I like to. I go around Springfield till it lets me off a 56<sup>th</sup> and then head east to Bend - wherever I gotta to go. I don't go down Main street. I don't need it. It's sad, but it is what it is. And it frightens me. And whenever I got business in this part of town, the wife I said, "I'll" drive because she knows what I go through. And it is what it is.

Michael [00:25:11]

All right. So it sounds like one of the biggest things that needs to happen for Springfield, Oregon, to better accommodate black folk will be police reform. Do you have any other ideas around what would need to happen in Springfield to be more a place that black folks might have more confidence in calling home?

Ronnie [00:25:40]

Yes. Whenever there's black people involved in activity. And they... And they... And they... They... Let's say they bring somethin' to the table. Recognize them. Get 'em on the TV. Talk about them. Talk about how appreciate (sic) you are of him, not just for a moment but how people like that you would love if he was a next door neighbor because he's not only good at what he does and he's got all these accolades at school. He's good people. You know when you find... There's a lot that's doin' some great stuff but give 'em... Especially in Springfield, give them some kudos. Please. You know? Just let them be recognized and make it clear... That Springfield aint got that kind of money to be paying out lawsuits. You know? Rather you... You snuff somebody or not you're going to be payin' out some big money, you tryin' to improve that little one-horse town. So let's not get yourself... Because you don't gotta pay for it, the city's gonna to pay for it. You need to go to jail. But see a lot of them are not bein' held accountable for their behavior. Even though city's payin' for it. These politicians or these councils of the city, mayors of the city need to make clear that you are working for the people. It's no such thing a bla... You know there shouldn't be no driving while Black issues. You know? It's like, it's unnecessary. You could be doing some other things. Yeah. They just need to give those who are in the city, who are part of Springfield activity, some... Some... Some kudos. They need to truly recognize them and make it clear to the neighborhood, you know? 'Cause Eugene don't seem to have any problems. You know, they talk about their boys and what they do for the team and so forth. But a lot of... Just make 'em feel more welcome in Springfield. You got some really ga... Gainful policemen that's makin' it real... It's not... It's not... Making Eugene (Springfield) look welcolming. You know, I don't recommend Eug... Springfield for that reason. It's not... And when

it comes to policing, if you have to deal with the police. Well, let's say I wouldn't be mistaken if I said it's last time you would interact with anything. And that's a terrible thing to say. But if it's true, you got to know, and if you don't what the hell are you doing in Springfield? If that what you want your city to be about, so be it. But yet and still you see what the blacks can do for the university? They... They, they functioning. They... A lot of these... Let's say, people who are more simple and didn't get the education, they're envious of people who did. Yes, the logging business aint what it used to be. You could have gone back to school. You own your house, da da da. Which a lot of these people don't even... Don't even have. You have property, so why you trippin' on them? If you're not that well-educated, don't blame it on them. And if you don't listen to that kind of music don't blame it on them. It's a... Accept change, you know? Make your city a great city, it's in a great part United States. Don't throw that away. It's in a very great part of the United States. Like I said, I came through here. I called it God's country. So I came back and made it home. So... And it wasn't because I was getting jacked around by public service.

Michael [00:30:03]

So you mean... You mentioned, you know, simple, simple people away from... From a more simple time. In particular you mentioned when like logging and things were, were thriving. Like even working here at Springfield High School and you know it's called the Millers and most of us work in or going to school in this building don't really relate with that 'cause it's in a different time. Can you like take us back to that time of like what it was like in this area when it was... When there was millers, when there was like a logging town?

Ronnie [00:30:38]

Well... First is uh.... I remember, I was living out in Marcola, it's just outside town. I eventually get out the city. Found a little place over there just out of Dodge. And it was north of Springfield there. It's a... It's a town called Marcola. I was just... Just aside Marcola. Lived out on Parson Creek Road. It was a popular road because they had a nudist colony up the street. But people often stop in front of my home and say, "Do you know where, ba, ba, ba?", I say the nudist colony? They go, "Yeah." I said, follow me, I'll take you to it. And, and it was... You know, I enjoyed being that helpful. The people had definitely seen no Black folk, but they were asking a black folk where to find it. And so this was back in the days where Springfield was so an adventure and to go further... I had a motorcycle accident. I ended up in Springfield Hospital. Just on Mckenzie Willamette. They put me in this room and there was another man in there at first. And lo and behold, he said, "Be just my luck if I get a black person, it'll be..." An oh he did. He got me. And we became the best of friends, because I said the same things he said. I suffered from the same thing he suffered from. We from misfortune just like you. And I got to know him and come to find out he knew I was living out in Marcola and never went to Marcola bar. They had a nice bar I would love to frequent. But I didn't want no part of it, I was afraid. Because I had people drive by my place and yell out, "Nigger. Nigger this..." And when they drive back I say honky as they went back and they would turn around and I say, okay, come on in and have a beer. Next thing you know, they my friends, you know, because they didn't want to be confronted. They want to see what I would do. So I welcomed them. I called them out on their stuff. But certain places, you can't take that chance and like wantin' to go to the

neighborhood bar, or go into town. I'd of loved to go there. But I found out about this gentleman that was in hospital with, he was the bar fightin' king of Marcola. That's all he was about, is bar fightin'. And he kicked everyone's butt. So, the plan was when he got through with some work, we gonna go out to Marcola and have some beers. Thing is, I was available early and so was his wife. So me and his wife walked in the bar. Everything went silent. Totally silent. They didn't know what to think. And here I am with the bar fight and king's wife. There's no bar fightin' king over my shoulders saying, "Yeah, he's my friend", they just like "What the hell's going on?" So you know, we got a seat. We started, we ordered and no... Everything starting to buzz but no one's really getting comfortable, they just don't understand what's going on yet. And lo and behold who comes to the door? The bar fightin' king. And people saw who walked through the door. The first thing I did say, what took you so long, nigga? It just came out like that. But he smiled. He laughed. He looked at me like, I'm not one of those. And we just sat down, had a beer, and then the place started living again. You started hearing noise. Hearin' bops and people, beer glasses, people drinking and talking. But we set it up that way. We figured we go ahead and they weren't going to mess with me, you know, because I had the king. Lo and behold, they didn't know I was hooked up with the king. I walked in with his wife and we just we put this one on them. And it was the greatest time we had. And when I would go to the bar in the future, "Yeah. What you drink? Yeah, I know what you like... Da da da" I was getting' treated, I was getting served and being treated like a normal man. I even won a few raffles. You get a ticket when you buy groceries at this one-horse store... One-horse town store. And I finally won, you know? Which I forgot what I won, but, you know, I was been treated fair. And I loved livin' out there in the sticks because I could hear the crickets. I could hear the frogs. I could hear myself breathe. It was quite... And you look up at the stars, and you could see how many stars they were just walking inside your house. Somthin' you don't get, even in the small town, 'cause the lights of the town would reflect against the sky and it just... It would just mask the stars, you couldn't see it really good. So yeah, that was one of my experiences with a real Redneck at Springfield. I became a family member of theirs in time. And it was just how it started... Wouldn't he be lucky if a nigga moved in the next bed. It surely was. It was me and we became quite (sic) friends. We were... You know, he was my ace boon coon. Let's put it that way (laughs). So that was one of the experiences I had in living in Springfield. And I can say it was really an adventure, you know, because it don't have to be any other way, you know? I uh... Yeah, the neighbors loved me where I was. I got stuck a few times going up for firewood. And they grabbed they tractors and come pull me out just... Just for asking. And yeah, Springfield can be a sweet place to live in. But I didn't have to live in the city. And when I did, it was a safe place. I seen many cops come by my neighborhood. I'm out on my porch mowing my lawn or whatever, and I get a friendly hello. Some lady who had horses used to come by my house and park her horse right in front of my duplex. And we just be inside jivin' and carrin' on. Yeah, of course the police is going to come by to see, "What's this horse?" And see it's in front of my house and everything's good, you know? But, those are only memories... Only memories... Now, things have changed. Things have changed. The policemen are not the same as the ones I met back in the day. And I went for a job at warehouse, they were the only one that paid decent. The minimum wage was like \$3. They paid \$7. What a difference. So, I went to Weyerhaeuser like everyone else do on the day where they do the applications. So its about 50 of us in this... In this... This room. And a man come said, "We're hiring and da de da.... Don't get discouraged.

You fill out these applications and we'll be looking at them. That's all I got to say. We'll be looking at them." So everyone got up, so did I – walkin' out the door. He said, "Sir, let me talk to you." I knew I was working the next day, because maybe I was the reason why he got a \$15,000 tax break. Who knows? Whatever the reason is, I got the job. And, he just said, "You can work tonight if you want to." So that's the part I liked about being different. Some diversity. They wanted it they... Springfield, they biggest payin company in state of Oregon wanted me to work! And... I even had my pickens. One job I got I felt it was like a little dangerous 'cause I decided to go out in the woods and be a choker. It was a lot of activity, stayed healthy. But these guys could drop a tree on a fly, and... I was trying to get to know these guys, doin' lunch, try to sit with them. But no one was talking to me and I figured I could be that fly that the tree dropped on many people killed in the woods and it's a real accident 'cause it's rough. The [incomprehensible] break and just cut you in half. I said... I went to the boss, said, I don't wanna work on the woods no more. I don't feel safe. He go, "Okay, has this job here" (sic), And I says, okay, I'll check it out. I was doing it and I had clean the machine off, then I had to put this... The red tag on the thing so you run the machine. But every time I'm under there cleanin' I would see these shoes right near where you start the machine. So I said, what is he doing there? He better not touch that the machine, I'm a dead man. He's just standing there. So I'm looking at those shoes to remember. So eventually come lunch I remembered the shoes. And I remember him... The way he looked at me. I told the boss, every time we go clean the machines those same shoes that come around with the button. You know? I might of forgot to the button on. So he said, that one of my machines is not operating, and just start it up. But this guy didn't talk to me in the lunchroom. I could even befriend him. But this was the shoes that was hanging out front of the machine. He understood. He said, "We ain't gone do that one." So I end up getting something I did, like, which I felt more safer. I felt more in charge, and I stayed with them as long as I wanted to work with them. And I was treated real good. Great insurance. Well-paid. Paid better than most because they was the highest paying job. And I was living out of Marcola, so it was perfect for me. I just came towards Springfield and I didn't have to go into town I had... It was right out of town. It... You know, East Springfield where the mill was. So yeah, that was a good experience. And that was nice being black because everyone else had to scram, I was the only black person there. And I was working that evening.

Michael [00:41:23]

'Cause I, you know, especially in the process of this project and trying to find people to talk to and you discover there's not that many people to talk to. And so one thing that I wonder, I'm like, why? Why aren't there like more black folks out here with more history? And it sounds like and talking to you that the reason that you were here, the reason that you found success here was because... Like you were, you had wit, you would get tested...

Ronnie [00:42:00]

Yes

Michael [00:42:00]

And they could have maybe ran you out –

Ronnie [00:42:03]

Yes

Michael [00:42:04]

But because of your personality and your you stood your ground.

Ronnie [00:42:05]

Yes.

Michael [00:42:06]

They were like, okay, you're okay with us?

Ronnie [00:42:08]

Yes.

Michael [00:42:09]

You did enough of the same things...

Ronnie [00:42:10]

Yes.

Michael [00:42:11]

Like, you know, horses and bull riding...

Ronnie [00:42:13]

Right.

Michael [00:42:14]

And stuff that you found... You were relatable with people.

Ronnie [00:42:16]

Yes. Absolutely.

Michael [00:42:17]

But it sounds like if that wasn't the case, then maybe the beauty you were attracted to wouldn't...

Ronnie [00:42:24]

Wouldn't be worth it.

Michael [00:42:25]

Have been available to you.

Ronnie [00:42:26]

Exactly. True. And there's a lot of brothers that were here during the time I was. And they did live in Springfield, but... They didn't want to... They didn't want to relate. They didn't want to try to identify... They... Hey brother, you black, you gonna have to like, let them know you one of them. You can't be pretended you are on the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> street. Lookin' at (incomprehensible). Yea they wasn't holdin' their crotch back in those days. But still you had that.... I mean I got swag, I got my bop goin' on. But I know when to bop and not to bop. And I know when to yahoo and yahoo! But I figured, hey, it worked good for me because I did what they did... Is because I wanted to do what they did. I asked them for help. I said, I want be a bull rider. You know, this what I do. So I would be around bull riders. So I was around cowboys all the time. Most of these cowboys, Moms. I called they mom, I call they mothers Mom. They call me son. And if I needed them, they put me to work. 'Cause a lot of them owned things. You know, that's... They own the concrete company. So I never worried about working. If I was bull ridin', I worked for him and his sons, you know, and they had my back. You know? Anyone give me some flack, I had to do was show I'm family. They mess with me... Same thing with the bar fight king. I can't remember his name, but I had the man, you know, and I just had to be fortunate because I took the shots that I had. The doors that open and worked it. And I told a lot of brothers, you know, it's a chance to do something else. You aint no... You can play the Temptations and all that, but they get some good country music too. Maybe if you was sitting there at the job listen to country music somebody wanna talk to you, and say, "I didn't know you listen to country music" Well what am I supposed to listen to? "I thought you listened to that Jive." Well it aint jive, it's singin', but it ain't your kind of singing. That's the relationship right there. There's something that open up. And I knew that if I can make it in New York City, I could make it any place else. I just had to use that wit and a little bit of stamina, because you got to take some chances. But if you're not a fool, you won't take too. Too many bad ones. And I saw what I had to work with. I didn't come off like that. I was very humble. And then I realized if I could start to own my own shit, and I found what they liked about me was because I owned my own shit. They did like because I'm black. They like me because I brought all the P-Funk. I brought George Clinton, these cowboys, that's all they want to hear. Make my funk the p-funk (dances in chair). You see these all these buckles and these cowboy boots a knockin'. And they... They knew all the words. You know? Just... Flash Light... They were down. They say, "Hey, you bring your stuff." I said, yeah, "Put it in quick, quick." They got the boom box goin' and they all said, "Make my funk the p-funk!" And all you saw was cowboy hats goin' up and down. And cowgirls, they hats goin' up and down... They jamin' to P-funk. Pumpin' and caryin' on. They loved it. And they say... You know, they wanted some... And I... Just like I wanted some of theirs. to sell that, you know, just like a what? And I says, hey, let me bring something to the table here. You like that? "Yeah." They... They off into it. So yeah, it's... It works. Everyone got something to the table. It's like salad, beans, pulled pork. You know you can't just have just one thing. It's makes it all good when you jam it up together. It's... It's the cause... You know, it's what we call it... When you drink some... You know, I used to go to this restaurant and I say, what kind of soup you got, and they say, "nigga soup". I knew exactly what they was talking about, they got a little left overs whatever it was... Whatever it was, it was good. The people, they bought it. You know got them some chicken in a bowl a nigga soup. And I have my white friend, and I said that gone ask you want soup or salad – tell them you want soup. And you know...tell them what kind of soup. So they said, "What can I get for you?" She said, "I want

chicken and what you have sides?" (waitress) "I have soup - salad" "What kind of soup you got?" "Nigga soup" She cracked up because she was the whitest white, and she thought.... The waitress said, "Nigga soup!" She says, "I'll have a bowl of that." (laughs). And so, in time down the road we would come in there she says, "Yea, I'll have some two-piece chicken and some nigga soup." You know? And they say, "Comin' right up!" (laughs) This was on Division... Divisadero in San Francisco. There was this chicken place, that was... It was called... (shakes head) Yea.. Jesus, I'm getting old. Things is just goin' away. But you know I had a bout with the Covid, and I found a lot of the stuff... I was good with memories, they gone... And maybe it's the long stuff, or maybe it's the stuff that's forever, you know? Because it does damage, you know? We got hit with the worst pandemic in the world because what they had back in the plague, the Black Plague, they didn't have doctors, they didn't have... And they had to use... Immune.... Whoever lives was strong. But here we had all the things... We was being taken down because we had had a lying president. Wanted to save face. "Oh, it's just the flu". And they told him. "This was dangerous. We got ta' yell." And he goes, "Don't worry about it." When he got sick, he couldn't even talk. He stood up on the balcony like he was Mussolini. And he couldn't even talk. He's was goin' (makes choking sounds). You know, 'cause he left the hospital early, the doctors lied, and so Oba... The next person came they fired that doctor right away. Said, "You lied to the public. You said the president was good. You know he wasn't good. You just lied." Of course, he got the concoctions no one can afford to get. You have to be the president to get. And he still left early and got up there and started saying, "I'm fine." He lookeded (sic) bad. I don't know if you saw him that time, did you? He was tryin' to talk and he was (makes choking sounds). Kinda wished he would drop dead right then. We wouldn't be doin' his clean up. Anyway. Hey, I love the Northwest. You know, I've been to every little town, because I'm a cowboy. There's rodeos there and I've gone there. But you know, I. get groupies too – but I got to be cool. You know? Because again the best Philadelphia lawyer couldn't of saved me, so I can't mess. Now, when I got the groupies when I was at the Cal Palace, it's cool because I'm in the city and it's nothin' new to be walkin' around with someone who is a different color. Matter fact I started datin' Linda Blair, you know, the Exorcist? The one turned her head around. The first Exorcist? Yeah, she was my girlfriend. I met her at the Cal Palace and we started dating and so for... Yeah. And I think I turned her out because after she got Rick James. She...she aint go back the other way she went to Rick James (laughs).

Michael [00:50:01]

When you were with here did her head ever spin around?

Ronnie [00:50:03]

No, I used to tell her, I said, spin that head for us! 'Specially when we doin' the monkey. I said, turn that head for me. Yeah, I get faster. Spin that head. She go, "I'm about to get up here in a minute and leave." You know? And I introduced her to my sister when I... We went to my sister's house I says, you know, that the Blair, you know... Like she's supposed to know right? You know... The one that spins her head around. She hated that. She goes, "Oh!" (Points) "You?" "Oh, yes... Glad to meet you." She realized that... The little girl that spun her head around. But she was a good gal and just a professional actor and liked a cowboy. She was really a cowgirl.

Michael [00:50:52]

All right. So, you know, really what we're trying to do with this project is, you know, capture history, tell history, make sure that the story is preserved. So on that note, I know we all think like, man, if I could be in history, this is what I would not leave them with. So is there like a final thought or a story or something that you feel like needs to be captured in history?

Ronnie [00:51:21]

Yes. At the being captured by the beauty of state of Oregon. I never thought it would be like this. I had my doubts because it was way different than I was. But I figured this is what I really was looking for. The piece... I was even saying Ore GONE. I didn't say it like the white people said it. That was... That was somethin' special, saying it wrong. Willam... Willamette street, I didn't say all that right. But eventually I got to say it right and I became a real Oregonian. I knew I was coming around. And the people I met and the people that met me have accepted me and I felt safer as I get more into the beauty of this vicinity had to offer, like Fall Creek, like Dexter Lake, this hot springs up at Blue River. It was such a great state to live in. And I often proudly brag about it when I was in New York, or at family reunions. Let there be a place for people like me here in this neck of the woods. You have a love for it, maybe you don't have it anymore, but people come here for a reason. Let them have some of it. You know, they may be different than you. It's all right. You know, may be the best thing that ever happened to you. And that's all I got to say. It's home for me now. And I probably have my ashes scattered around this neck of the woods when it's over, you know, at New York and Oregon.

Michael [00:53:20]

All right. And once again, Springfield History Museum Illumination Project we're shedding light on people with roots in this area. And you just got to hear from an amazing storyteller, a real cowboy. Michael K Media, bringing it to you on this very fine occasion. It was an honor to speak with you, Ronnie Vales, and wish you well. But until next time.