

# **Elmer Long Bottle Tree Ranch, CA**

Transcribed by Jennifer Sawayda

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DAVID DUNAWAY:

Maybe we could start by your telling me where and when you were born.

ELMER LONG:

Oh, boy. Born in Riverdale, Maryland, 1946. We didn't live there long. It was right after the war of course. Let's see. Mom and Dad went to college back there – Gallaudet College for the Deaf – and I think Mom had a year on Dad. He lost his hearing at age 18, and he was an Honor Roll student, so he lost a year – that ain't much, when you think about it – going from losing your hearing at age 18 and he went straight to college a year later.

Anyway, he lost a year or so.

DD

I understand that he and you went out West in the beginning of the 1950s?

EL

My earliest recollection – and we weren't camping at that time – it was just me and him; I don't know where my mom was. They weren't separated or nothing, but she had problems, so she wasn't with us for a while.

I remember one trip we were on. We slept on a car. It's an old '37 Chevy. I still remember it like it was yesterday. As soon as you got towards '53, '54, then we started heading out. Boron area, Lancaster on the 14. They didn't have freeways in those days.

DD

What was 66 like back then, in the Fifties?

EL

Oh, boy. You know, I didn't come here until 1970. I traveled in the late Sixties. I got out of the service in '68, so I had a year or two when I'd come up on weekends. A friend of mine, his mother lived up here. And that's how I got stuck up here, really. I came up to pal around for him, and I just put in a job application, and they hired me [snap] – unbelievable. Stayed here 31 years; got married myself, had three boys, got stuck. So the experience I can tell you is my experience on the highway. When I came here, 66 is dead. They weren't through killing it yet – that was 1970. And then in '85 they decommissioned it.

DD So the first time that you would have been on 66 was in those early trips out to the desert.

EL Yup. I can still remember some of the trips, but I can't recall what highway it was. I can tell you it was a two-lane road, just like this one – but that's about all.

DD There was a lot of traffic on 66 in those days. No?

EL Not the one we were on. You know, in those days, people didn't like to travel 66. You're out in the middle of the desert. The vehicles weren't equipped with air-conditioning like they are nowadays, so when you went tripping across the desert, you were almost like them people in the *Grapes of Wrath* movie: it's hot, and it's miserable. And it really was.

They didn't have the comforts in a vehicle like they do now.

DD So after the military, you ended up moving out here, you got that job. Now, you said 66 in those days was kind of slow.

EL It was slow. It was dead. Not a cop out here, no police, there was a bar every half mile on the highway; there was old people that hadn't had a license in years, lived down here in these ranches, and they could actually come straight across the desert, right across the highway to the bar, get drunk, drive right across the road, and go back down to the ranches where they lived. It was the funniest thing you ever seen. They had nicknames – I can't remember them all – one in particular, an old man, they called him Wild Bill, and boy, he was good to have a couple.

It was everywhere. I thought it was funny as hell. I was only 23.

DD So they didn't use the road at all?

EL No. Heck, no. But there was no police out here; there was nothing. No fire department, no police, no law and order – there was nothing.

- DD But now, in the late Sixties and early Seventies, Route 66 was not yet bypassed, I don't think; so people would have been driving down it, wouldn't they?
- EL The freeway was basically done except for a few places by '59 or '60. I still remember traveling – like the Cajon Pass, they still had 66 there and they had earthmovers up there on top and they were doing the job – but large parts of the freeway were already in. This may have been done – I can't recall – but I'd say it was.
- DD That's why there was no traffic outside.
- EL Yeah. 'cause they, where it was easy, built freeway fast; and where it was difficult, going through the pass, they were a little slower.
- DD So you wouldn't remember when the freeway bypassed around here. It was before you got here?
- EL Oh, yeah. By '60 or thereabouts.
- DD So who would travel down here? Were there Route 66 tourists back in 1970?
- EL There was probably Route 66 tourists in the Fifties. There were other places that people would stop off and visit. You have to look closely. But just between here and Victorville, like I said, there's old bars, cafes, but they've been converted into homes. But look closely, and you'll see a logo around there somewhere or some kind of an icon that points out it used to be a business. In the old days, this was it – people lived here, there was businesses, little grocery stores – there was a community. They had schools, they had everything.
- DD And then – have you heard any tales from any of your neighbors who lived along 66 about what happened when the bypass occurred?
- EL Just from my experience , it died. There's a restaurant in the town of Oro Grande, and it's classic 66 restaurant, but there was no tourism then, in 1970. The place was still in the process of dying. And the owner, he actually ripped out all the old Route 66 stuff. There

was a big round, as you walked in, and you could sit down and eat your breakfast at the bar, and it was round and went the whole width of the building. It was beautiful. I could sit here and I could talk to any one of these people and vice versa. It was beautiful. He tore that whole thing out and put in a straight line where everybody sits in a row – which was ridiculous. But he put emphasis on the bar that was in the back, and he made money on drinks. But you couldn't blame him. There was no money to be made on tourism in those days. Nobody was coming through here.

DD When do you reckon – when did you start to notice people who were coming through as tourists to see 66?

EL Personally, just about the time I put up my first pipe – one of the first pipes I put up out there was at the corner of the property, and I don't think a half hour went by before someone stopped to take a picture.

DD About when would that be?

EL Eight years ago. Back in 2000.

DD This house – did you build it?

EL No. This house was built in 1950 by a retired master sergeant, Marine Corps. And it's built out of surplus lumber. The beams – you can't see them very good, that one's hidden, there's another in the corner – those are Bailey bridge beams, they crossed the Rhine with it in World War Two. He retired military, then he got a job civil service at the supply base in Barstow, Marines, and he bought all the stuff to build this house there. Not all of it, but a great deal of it.

DD How did it come into your family?

EL I was taking a welding class at the time, and he was the instructor. He had retired from the base, and he went to the college, and he was teaching welding, and I got into his class. Two semesters of welding, and then I helped him for a semester as an aide. I was buying property at the time, left and right – I was buying houses, and I did, I bought up quite a few – seven or eight of them. He knew it, and he had this one that he wanted to peddle

off, and I got it from him for a reasonable price. That's how I got it.

DD It's many years after that – when did you move in?

EL Oh, boy. What year was that, Linda?

LINDA Travis was born in '74. Got here by '75. He was a year old.

EL We left when he was a year old. I don't know. '74, '75, area.

DD When did you begin putting up your pipes? Not until 2000?

EL Not until 2000, right. I've collected stuff forever. Some of this stuff I've had since I was a kid.

DD So you didn't see tourists coming through in the '80s and '90s that much?

EL No. I was busy working. I'm not doing anything anymore. I don't work, I retired. But in those days, I was working 12-hour shifts; and I had houses, rental houses, so when I say I was working a 12-hour shift, I also had to go to a rental and put in more time there. It was the only way to get it done. Most of my time was working, period, one way or the other.

DD What became of your houses?

EL I sold 'em all.

DD Any on 66?

EL No. I should have bought them on 66, but I didn't. I sold 'em and put the boy through school – the oldest one. He's helping the youngest one go through school now. That was the deal: I help you, you help him. No deal otherwise.

DD Pretty cool.

EL It's the only way to fly.

- DD Do you think of yourself as an artist?
- EL I never did. But I've always done crazy things. Linda, would you get that picture of your kitchen? It's in there somewhere.
- I do things that other people wouldn't dream of doing, and it's just that way. The whole cabinet was waterlogged and shot, and I threw everything out the back door, so we didn't have a sink. I got a hair – two sawhorses, and I just set the whole counter on top of it. It's still that way today, except I cut it off here and there and put a four-by-four here, and then I covered it with a blanket. To heck with it.
- My shower's set up weird. All the drains in this house go outside to water trees. Not one of them goes into the septic. I turned the bathtub around to do that in the bathroom. My bathroom shower, I've got two gate valves hooked up to hot and cold, and they come in with elbows to a riser, and the water's pre-adjusted to the temperature I like. All I have to do is turn one valve on and I go in and it's done. Those valves, they get shot every so many years – no problem. I got a complete new setup; all I have to do is disconnect two washing machine hoses, pull it out, put another one in – it's a done deal. None of this forty-dollar-an-hour plumbing business or leaky gaskets.
- DD What do you use for gas?
- EL Don't have gas. I jerked it out. Just electricity, and I've got a wood stove. I've got solar panels, two sets of them, but I don't use them. I did use them for two years – it was fun – but I got tired of it. They're just sitting there now; battery's died.
- DD I still want to bring you back to your first trips around the Mojave when you got out of the service, and what the Mojave was like then. Can you bring yourself back to that time?
- EL I can go back further than that. And again, this was before freeways. We used to travel – and this is getting off 66, though – we used the 14, which went through Palmdale, came through the Los Angeles Forest there

into Palmdale, and then 14 heads north and you go through Lancaster to Mojave. Ah, shoot, we'd take a darn watermelon, sit it on the seat between us and take a pocket knife and cut squares out of it. It'd be a 115 outside, and that'd be the best tasting watermelon I ever had.

- DD As you drove, you'd cut –
- EL As we drove, yup. My dad didn't have a lot of money in those days. You'd see these people stopping in restaurants, getting hamburgers and Cokes – we drank water. That was it. There wasn't nothing to spare.
- DD Were there a lot of places to stop in the Mojave in those days?
- EL There was .We didn't stop there.
- DD How about the tourist camps? Places where you'd camp out or something?
- EL We didn't go into camps. We went out on our own. I still don't do that.
- DD Were there more animals in the Mojave then?
- EL I don't think so. There's just as many now as there always was. Some places have been shot out, people have killed everything, but if you really look around everywhere –
- DD What do you have around here?
- EL Linda, do you have that picture of the hawk, did I download it? I take pictures of animals when I can. I don't have them all in one spot, but – there's roadrunners here, skunks, raccoons, wildcats – unfortunately I had to kill one, one time, he was killing my birds back there – twenty, thirty a night, I had 350 – I won't say how I did it, it was sneaky, and I killed him. And his mate. He had tufted ears. His face was banded from the end of his nose, to the end of the tail he had rings.



I just shot that yesterday – that's a sparrowhawk. I shoot 'em when I can.

DD What do you get besides hawks?

EL I've seen eagles. I was out front working one day and I saw a couple of talons high in the air, and they did a cartwheel almost to the earth. Eagles, plain and simple.

DD And that's what you saw then, and it's pretty much the same now.

EL Yeah. We've had turkey vultures coming through here, going back north. One day last week, I saw a few in the morning, and a few in the afternoon, so it won't be long – they'll be coming through in flocks of a hundred or more.

DD Why did you decide to stay out here on 66? In those days, it was pretty lonely.

EL Well, I hooked up with her, probably about a year after I moved here, and it took a year to hogtie her, so that was two years. I had a pretty good job, and most people in the area didn't have jobs that good.

DD Where were you working?

EL Cement factory in Oro Grande. In those days, that was a darn good job. Good security. Come what may, we got married, and we had another child, and another child, and another child – I just raised my family, that's all. Like I said, I bought a bunch of real estate, and I worked. That's why I stayed. Now, I'm kinda stuck. Kids are gone. I'm not going anywhere, I like this place too much. And it would cost too much to go somewhere else. It's ridiculous, what they – I wouldn't pay four or five hundred thousand dollars for a stupid house. No way. *People* magazine, many many many years ago, they used to have interesting stories, now it's all about movie stars – they showed a picture of this man, probably in his seventies, and he was in a cave. He had dug a cave straight down, and he had a trapdoor, and he lived in there. They had a picture of him, holding the door open, looking up, and his face was dirty: just the happiest man as could be. Somebody had left him a

mansion. He moved in, and the darned thing burned him after a while, and left him just the land. What'd he do? He dug a hole. That's real happiness. That's how I feel about houses. No way.

DD Have you seen changes in 66, or has it been pretty much the same?

EL Yeah. Lot more traffic now in this particular area, because of the resort out here. A lot of tourists, but that's because of what I've got in front here. They wouldn't have stopped here if it hadn't been for that. And I'm all over the Internet – I can't get away from that. Changes. Yeah.

People have changed. They're not as friendly. I don't get too many unfriendly people coming here – it's kind of varnished – but when you get out in the real world here, they're not as friendly as they used to be. They're not as close. It's no longer the community it used to be. And I'm not in circulation any more, so I don't meet people anyway. I've got people that come from San Francisco that I hardly know, and I know them better than most people around here. I don't know my neighbors over here at all. I've been across the street only once, and that's because they invited me. I've always been a loner.

LINDA You used to know everybody.

EL That was different. That was a lot different.

LINDA You used to know all the families, all the kids –

EL And then they all grew up. I came here, and I met a group of guys, through my friend who was living here, and he met them through his mother. It was a bunch of boys and girls who graduated the same year. I was able – and I had four years of military under my belt and two years of civilian life – that's a six-year head start on high school grads – but I was fortunate to get in on the ground floor and meet these guys just as they graduated, and I was able to follow them in their lives until they moved on. There's a few still here.

DD This corridor between Victorville and Helendale, and then on into Barstow, has there been a lot of development along there, along 66?

EL Yeah. In the last five or ten years. It's building up – people are snatching up this property. You go over toward Glenwood, that little town you pass through, is still kind of dead; but if you look closely, they're doing a lot of building, and you can see all the building there. There were no houses or mobile homes in this area at all when I bought this place. There was an old rock building next door made of river stone; it burned down, and they put in a mobile home over there. There was nothing here. Absolutely nothing. And now you look across through the night and there's lights everywhere and brand-new houses.

DD Does that mean it's a different kind of person living out in this part of the world?

EL Yeah. Because they're coming up from over the hill – they're coming from Los Angeles, Downey, Rialto – they're getting out of the city. And they are a different breed.

DD Are they bringing the problems of the city?

EL Yeah. You go to Hesperia and Apple Valley, and Adelanto, those places are already built up; and they've got all the problems that they have down in Los Angeles. They got gangs, they got everything. There were two people murdered here in Oro Grande two weeks ago – four o'clock in the morning, or something like that. Somebody heard gunshots, called the police; another person went out there and saw two dead bodies. It's that way.

DD That's hard to believe.

EL Happens quite often. They find dead bodies of people they dump off in some places.

DD Has Barstow changed a great deal?

EL Barstow's moved. The old part of Barstow is still there, and if you look closely that's just like a whiskey row.

They cleaned it up, and the authorities are pretty rough on the transients. You know, it's a jumping-off point. When a bum lands in Barstow, he might have a long wait before he can get out of that town. There's nothing further on. But Barstow's moved. They've got another place alongside the freeway that Barstow's building up. That's where all your stores are. People don't use the old town of Barstow any more, like they used to. So they've moved.

DD There's still a fair amount of business on 66 – liquor stores, restaurants – are there more tourists in Barstow?

EL Passing through, yeah. That museum there in Barstow gets a lot of – I think they've got four museums there. The one you were at today, and that's where Debra works – there's another one, and I just bumped into it here last weekend – fantastic! I don't know the name of it.

DD By the freeway there?

EL Yeah. It was fantastic.

DD That's the Mojave River Valley Museum.

EL I'd never been in there. It was fascinating. Mammoth bones.

DD What do you think the future of this part of 66 is going to be?

EL I think it'll be swallowed up. I think that eventually there'll be neighborhoods, there'll be tract housing – it'll be just like any other town. Unfortunately. I see that coming. There's developers right now trying to buy up all the land.

DD But there's no water here I thought.

EL There's water underground. I hit water at 51 feet right here. You go a mile up, and you'll hit water at about 200, but they go down to close to three. There's water here – there's water everywhere. All you gotta do is drill.

DD And how will this affect what's left of Route 66?

EL It's just going to be – even Victorville – Helendale is trying to incorporate out there. They've already tried once, and they want the bucks. Victorville is grabbing land like crazy, and they're winning. They've got everything under their control right up to the edge of that development, Silver Lakes, I'm sure. If they ever become a town, you're going to see a snarling fight for annexation. I've already seen it with Victorville, Hesperia, Apple Valley, Adelanto – boy, they fight tooth and nail for the control of the area.

DD That Silver Lakes development, just out of curiosity, how did that come about? It seems like a strange place to...

EL It was a thing called Dart Industries. That company had in mind to do just what is going on now. That used to all be farms. Eighteen hundred farms. You could drive through there, you could see coyotes at any time of the day run through those fields. Rabbits, coyotes – we used to go rabbit-hunting at night there in those fields. It was fantastic. But Dart came in, and they started buying up the land, and moving the earth – but they failed, financially. And then Silver Lakes took over and they finished the job, so it's just a little private place of nothing but houses and lakes and all that.

DD You can't even really see the lakes from there, can you?

EL You can, if you go over there.

DD Not from the highway.

EL No. Go up there in the hills, you can see them. I've seen them a lot – we used to camp up there. I could see the whole river.

DD And those are Los Angelenos?

EL Yeah. They come from everywhere. They say it's a retirement community, but there's an awful lot of people in there that still work for a living. There's a lot of rental housing in there. I see this whole area as building up someday, and it'll be over. It'll just be over.

They tore down old Pop's filling station over here, the old rock buildings, old dilapidated place – they just pushed it over.

DD Is there a local preservation movement here?

EL No. The county sent the owner a letter saying this is dangerous, so he just called contractors and they pushed it over, and it was gone. I heard the equipment beepers going off all day, but it didn't dawn on me something was going on. There was a lot more. On this side of the highway, there was some other rock buildings, and this ready batch plant, they bought all that land – they're digging a quarry hole that goes down I don't know how far, but they pushed it all over. I don't know how they can get away with it. They keep removing the earth and going down deeper and deeper, but they tore down some interesting buildings. Friend of mine owned the whole thing at one time. He sold it. I don't think anyone would ever tear this down. Probably burn down some day.

DD Being all wood like this.

EL Yeah. Everything's shot.

DD The tourists that come here – do you notice that a lot of them are foreign tourists?

EL Yeah. I get 'em from all over the world.

DD Why do you suppose that they are coming to see Route 66?

EL Route 66 has been well publicized. It represents the beginning of a nation, really, coming across through the Midwest. An awful lot of things happened here. It's how they opened up this nation, really, coming to the West Coast; other than the railroad, the only way to get through was Route 66. It was big. People, they put everything on the line, set up a business there. You go out there to Essex or some of them places that are dead now, you got people that put maybe \$20,000 into a place so many years ago – but when the freeway went through, it killed them. They were just out. They lost. No business now.

DD And many of them left.

EL Many of them left. Some of them stayed. They had no choice. They didn't have any money, they had to stay. Essex was the last place in California to have television. Might have been the United States. Think about it.

DD I want to make sure that it's okay that I can transcribe and deposit this interview in an archive.

EL Sure.

DD And use it in my writing and broadcasting on Route 66.

EL Okay. Gosh. I don't think I helped you at all, really.

DD No, no. Very useful.