

An Oral History of Fred Schwamb

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

Interviewed: November 13, 2013

Published: 2014

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Born in Syracuse, New York in 1931, Fred Schwamb moved in 1936 to Reno, where his father, Martin Schwamb, founded Martin Iron Works in 1939. Fred worked with his father from boyhood, first at the shop's original location on Morrill Avenue, just south of East Fourth Street, and then at its current location at 530 East Fourth Street. He later founded his own steel fabrication business just across the street from the original site of Martin Iron Works.

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FRED SCHWAMB

November 13, 2013

Alicia Barber, Interviewer

Born in Syracuse, New York in 1931, Fred Schwamb moved in 1936 to Reno, where his father, Martin Schwamb, founded Martin Iron Works in 1939. Fred worked with his father from boyhood, first at the shop's original location on Morrill Avenue, just south of East Fourth Street, and then at its current location at 530 East Fourth Street. He later founded his own steel fabrication business just across the street from the original site of Martin Iron Works.

Barber: We're here in Reno, and the date is November 13, 2013. We're going to be talking about Martin Iron Works today and your experience with the family business and what you remember about other places on Fourth Street, too, but I wanted to go back first and ask how long ago your family arrived in Nevada.

Schwamb: 1936.

Barber: Who arrived here in that year?

Schwamb: That would be my mother and my father. Turned out later on in life that I found out it was my adoptive father. My mother ran off with [my sister] Betty's father, I should say, and came to Reno. I always thought it was my dad, but found out he adopted me, see, here in Reno. Back in 1936, we were the ten most wanted. [laughs]

Barber: So what had happened?

Schwamb: My birth father was looking for us. He finally realized where we were. But I never met him until I was a junior in high school.

Barber: Where did he live? Where was your mother coming from, when she came to Reno?

Schwamb: Syracuse, New York. That's where I was born.

Barber: What year were you born?

Schwamb: 1931.

Barber: So you were quite young, arriving here.

Schwamb: Five years old.

Barber: Do you remember anything about that journey?

Schwamb: Not really. We had those old cars. Well, you see how old they were in that picture there [from the early years of Martin Iron Works]. Dad started that business in '39.

Barber: Martin Iron Works. Did your mother arrive here with your adoptive father or did they meet here?

Schwamb: No, they skipped Syracuse together. They just took off.

Barber: Tell me their names.

Schwamb: Martin Schwamb and Doris Schwamb. That's Betty's and my mother.

Barber: Did they get married in Reno?

Schwamb: Yeah. The one that married them—I'm trying to think—he was a judge here in town. I can't remember his name, but I'd known him real well years ago because we were in some of the same groups together. The judge played football, I think for Cal, the University of California. Judge Beemer, that's what it was.

Barber: Had your mother's family lived in New York for a long time? Is that where they were from?

Schwamb: They came over in the twenties. I don't know the exact date, but they immigrated over.

Barber: Where did they come from? What was her heritage?

Schwamb: Dunzk, Germany at that time. Now it's called Gdansk, Poland, but it was Dunzk, Germany back then.

Barber: What was her maiden name?

Schwamb: Oh, gosh, let's see. You might want to ask my sister. Silvesky, but don't ask me how you spell it, though. It's either s-k-i or s-k-y. I still don't know. Silvesky was her last name. Their father, my grandfather, came over first and he was working. They were German but they were still from Gdansk, which was a mixture of Polish and German and everything else. But they always called them—I don't want to say it. "G.D. Polack." So you can imagine.

He changed his last name to Bremer and my uncle also changed his name, at the same time. When they came over, he changed his name to Bremer, and so then my grandmother, when they came over, her name was Bremer then, too. The three sisters, our mother and her two sisters, kept the name Silvesky because they were going to get married anyway, so the name would change.

Barber: At least everyone changed their name to the same name, or it would have been very confusing. Your father, Martin, then—your adoptive father—where was he born?

Schwamb: Frankfurt, Germany. We had two half sisters. He had two daughters. One of them has passed away and the other one is not too well. She lives over in the Sparks or Spanish Springs area with her daughter.

Barber: They had moved here, too, then, to Reno?

Schwamb: Just the youngest daughter, the one who lives over there. They had moved to Reno when Martin Iron Works moved to where it is now, see.

Barber: So a little later, then.

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: How old were you when you found out that Martin was your adoptive father and not your biological father?

Schwamb: Well, I was over in my last year in Billingshurst, so what would that make me? I got out of high school in '49, so I was around fifteen or sixteen years old. I was sitting on that wall that's still there and we were doing track. A fellow comes by and asks if Fred Schwamb was sitting there anywhere, and they all pointed to where I was at. You know, I had never seen him before, and he says, "Well, I'm your father." That's the shock I got. I had a hard time getting over that.

Barber: Do you know what had led up to that, how he happened to come by that day?

Schwamb: No, he just wanted to see his son. He had given me a watch and I still have the watch, but it doesn't work anymore. It's inscribed on the back, "Father, 1945." That's when he had given it. I think he sent it here to the house, not this house, because when I was in Billingshurst, we lived over on La Rue between Gordon and Nixon back there.

Barber: Right now, we're in a house on Humboldt. Is this the family house?

Schwamb: Yeah, yeah. We moved here when I went to high school. We moved down here right across the street from Billingshurst. That's when Billingshurst was still going on, still over there. Betty was quite young when we moved down here.

Barber: She's younger than you.

Schwamb: Thirteen years.

Barber: Where did you go to grade school?

Schwamb: Right up the street here, Mt. Rose.

Barber: At the historic Mt. Rose.

Schwamb: I haven't been back there since I got out.

Barber: Well, it's still lovely inside. Did you go to kindergarten there?

Schwamb: I went to kindergarten over at Southside Elementary School or that brick building that sits on the corner. That's where I went to kindergarten.

Barber: We call that the Southside School Annex now. There was another school, right, another Southside School?

Schwamb: No, that's the only one I know of from that time, Southside, and when I got to high school it became Husky Haven, the same brick building. It's on the corner of Ryland or Liberty.

Barber: At Liberty, right. What was Husky Haven?

Schwamb: It was just a group where you could play ping-pong and stuff like that, a place to go after Reno High School, the old Reno High School.

Barber: Do you remember being inside the Southside school, what the classrooms were like?

Schwamb: I don't remember that at all. When we moved over to La Rue, up on the hill between Gordon and Nixon, I went to first grade at Mt. Rose.

Barber: Did you go through Mt. Rose for all of the grades?

Schwamb: Yes.

Barber: What do you remember about going to school there?

Schwamb: You know, everybody was pretty much friends. I had friends that lived right across the street. In fact, they were the first people that we met when we came to Reno, the Neuenswandens. They lived right on the corner of Taylor, at Taylor and Arlington. Well, the house is not there anymore. It's just an empty lot. Somebody leveled the house and did nothing with the lot. They were friends. I see Al once in a while, and Roy, his

brother, was in the same class I was. Al was older and he was always interesting. He was a pitcher in high school. I played baseball in high school. Their father was the distributor or whatever for Hoover, and he just did it out of his backyard there, I guess, or the garage.

Barber: Did he go door to door?

Schwamb: That's what the father would do, yeah. Al was in the army, I was in the air force, and his brother was a naval aviator. His brother retired from the navy and is still living in Pensacola, Florida. But anyway, we all met here, and the folks had a German party here after the Korean War. So Al and Roy and I, we all went downtown to the Golden Hotel, and Rosemary Clooney was there playing. We were sitting in there having a few drinks while she was singing, and she sang a song and I don't remember which one it was, but she had never recorded it. She sang it down there. Al comes back and he was quite a piano player. You would never know with this guy, but he had an ear for music and he sat down on that piano right there [points], well, one like it, and picked out that song on the piano. He was pretty good at that piano, and Roy played.

They were taught by Rassuchine. I don't know if you ever heard of his name, but his son, Rassuchine's son, and Al were in the same grade in high school. This fellow's son, Rassuchine, was the pharmacist over at Renown for a long time. I think he left there now. He lives up there by our oldest daughter, our daughter now up on Pleasant View, I think, up there just past the Sparks Family Hospital or Renown or whatever you want to call that hospital up there, or the Nevada Medical Center, lives around the corner from that.

Barber: So he gave music lessons to kids through town?

Schwamb: Well, the grandfather did, across the street. He was a tough old bird.
[laughs]

Barber: Did you ever take music lessons?

Schwamb: I did way late in life until my wife came down sick, and I haven't touched the piano now for over two years. I was taking lessons then. She just died last July. Well, I had ended up with a piano that Betty's daughter had, and it was out here in the garage. It was a baby grand. Oh, boy, was it in bad shape. The piano itself was fine, but everything else, the keys were all dirty and black. They drug this sucker out. I've got it over in my house now and now I can't get rid of it. It doesn't belong to me. [laughs]

Barber: How great to play. I'm very sorry about your wife. I didn't realize that was so recent.

Schwamb: Yeah, she passed away last Fourth of July, of all days.

Barber: So tell me what it was like to grow up in Reno. What kind of things would kids do for fun? Did it feel like a small, safe town?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, you could walk downtown. That's the only way when we were small kids, and nobody bothered us. The police all knew who we all were. In fact, one of them lived right over here on Taylor Street, a couple doors down from the Neuschwanders. I can't even think of his name now. I lose track of names, but anyway. They all knew us.

When I went to high school, I rode my bicycle until I got my first car, and that was a Model-A Ford. Boy, I was living then. [laughs] Paid \$200 for that Ford and sold it two or three years later for \$225, and I thought I was making a killing, boy, 25 bucks. [laughs]

Barber: What year did you graduate from high school?

Schwamb: Forty-nine.

Barber: Tell me what high school kids did in the forties.

Schwamb: Well, I was under the arm of a tough German, and I had to learn my trade. That thing there, I built that one over there at the old shop.

Barber: Oh, it's beautiful—what do you call that?

Schwamb: It's for a fireplace.

Barber: For holding firewood.

Schwamb: All hand-hammered and everything. I did that when I was sixteen years old, something like that. I made that for Betty later on in life. I made my mother a coffee table and also an end table and then a candleholder similar to that one there that's sitting on the table, except it's an eight-sided one. My daughter has that.

Barber: So you were learning the trade starting at what age?

Schwamb: When I was in Billinghamurst there, I was catching rivets when I was fifteen years old.

Barber: Catching rivets, what does that mean?

Schwamb: Well, at one time way back when, everything was riveted. All the seal was riveted. We did a lot of work around town here and connections were all riveted in the shop. They'd heat this rivet up, about a three-quarter rivet about yea long in the furnace down there in the shop, and then they'd throw it at you and you'd have to catch it in a bucket.

Barber: Why did they throw them?

Schwamb: That's the only way they could get it to you is by throwing it. Otherwise, it would cool off too fast and they had to run over there. [laughs]

Barber: So this was the job of kids, to stand there with a bucket and have rivets thrown at you?

Schwamb: That was me, and I had to be careful because I was way underage for the state. Otherwise, if I got injured or something like that, the state would have come down on my dad real bad.

Barber: Let's talk about the shop then. He had the shop for as long as you can remember? Did he start it as soon as you moved here?

Schwamb: 1939, he started that building there.

Barber: We're talking about the old Martin Iron Works building on Morrill.

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: And was that the kind of work he had done previously on the East Coast?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, he learned his trade over in Germany.

Barber: Did he ever tell you about that or how he learned it?

Schwamb: You could tell that he knew it on the forging. I worked on the forge with him, and he'd have me heating up this thing when I was a kid. Eventually I learned how to do that, and sharpening picks. They don't do that much anymore. They don't use picks much anymore. They use backhoes or whatever you want to call it.

Barber: What was the pick used for?

Schwamb: Digging holes, and a crowbar. You learn how to sharpen them and temper them. It's a temper seal in the forge.

Barber: Tell me your early memories of that first shop and who was working there. What were they doing?

Schwamb: Well, we would do a lot of work during wartime when World War II broke out. My dad, being German, had a real strong German accent, you know, and he went up to Herlong to get some work. The purchasing agent talked to him and heard the German accent. Back then, boy, people were a little jumpy, you know. So the purchasing agent asked him, he says, "Well, how did you get here?" And he said some little old dirt road, and got in there and there were no guards on it. So he says, "Well, if you leave, you better go back the same way you came because the guards at that gate, they might—." [laughs] So he had to go back the same way he came to get here.

We did a lot of those igloos up there for the ammunition storage. We made the screens, hundreds of them, ventilation screens. I used to putter around out there, and we made bolts. One time Dad—I think it was Dinwiddie Construction was working up there at Herlong, and they called them “she bolts,” for forms. Now they’ve got snap ties, whatever they use now, but back then it was “she bolts.” It’s got an inside thread and an outside thread, and it’s sort of tapered so that when you knock it out.... He saw these things laying there and he asked them, he said, “Can I take a few of these with me and see what I can do with them?” They were twisted up and bent up and everything else. Back then you couldn’t get nothing. You couldn’t buy any more bolts.

So Dad brought them back, about a half a dozen of them, and he worked on the anvil there and straightened them out. We had an old lathe, a little lathe from Sears, Roebuck he bought, and he trimmed them down a little bit to polish them up and things like that, sent them back to them.

A week later, we had three truckloads sitting there, old dump-truck loads, the old ones, not those big ones you see running around now. They used to have short beds on them, lined up. They dumped them all out, and there were three truckloads of them. So they dumped them right there. Well, we were busy then. [laughs] I learned how to straighten that stuff out and I worked on the anvil, too.

Barber: You worked on those at the time?

Schwamb: I worked on the forge. I remember all the rest of my buddies, they were all going playing sports. I finally got around to playing hardball, baseball at Reno High School. Then I played softball at Mt. Rose. Betty’s got those pictures of me and Don Carano.

Barber: So was this a paid job? Were you paid to work there when you were growing up?

Schwamb: A couple bucks a week was about all you were making. That was a lot of money for me. [laughs] Kept me out of trouble anyway.

Barber: Were you a pretty well-behaved kid anyway?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, I learned real quick. My dad—I’ve never told this much to anybody, but one time I sort of told him a story, lied to him and he knew different. Boy, he says, “Well, you’re too big to get spanked,” and he let me have it, knocked me clean up there clean across the room. I learned my lesson real quick.

We had a hard-nosed principal up at Mt. Rose. She kept us in line, too, Mamie Towles and all the people she had there. They named the school after her, for crying out loud. All of us guys, when we were up there in school, we turned out real great because she kept us in line. If you caused any problems with her, when you got in trouble, you had to go see Mamie Towles. She’d just say, “Grab your ankles,” and, boy, would she let you have one. [laughs] And then she’d send a note home to your parents and then you’d get it again when you got home.

Barber: I would have bet you'd learn pretty quickly after that. Did your dad have other people working for him at that time?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Barber: Several? How many, do you think?

Schwamb: Well, we had maybe a half a dozen working there. Bill Granata, well, he passed away quite a few years ago, but he started working there, learning his trade, but then he ended up in the navy. Well, his family moved to Carson City, but anyway, he ended up in the navy. When he came out of the navy, he worked there and he eventually ended up becoming president of the company. I always liked Bill because we both came up through the same school. He was older than I am, but he came through the same way.

Barber: He worked at the company for a long time, didn't he?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Barber: So what else was around the area there where the original Iron Works was? Were there other very active businesses in the neighborhood?

Schwamb: Sierra Machinery was right across the street. I eventually moved into part of the building there with my own business when I had my own steel business, right across the street from where I learned mine. And then the City of Reno built that train trench and they took my building right out. They moved the north Reno route right through my building, so that made me retire. I was getting too old then to start all over again, so I retired.

Barber: What was your business called?

Schwamb: Far West Steel Fabricators.

Barber: So when you say across the street, across which street?

Schwamb: Morrill Avenue, right across the street from that building. And Eveleth Lumber was next door to us to the north. They had that lot there and then their office building right there.

Barber: Do you remember that always being a very busy place?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, as a lumberyard, yeah. There weren't that many of them around, so they were quite busy there.

Barber: And then much earlier, there were things in the area that aren't there now, like Ben Akert's family's market, and there was a drugstore.

Schwamb: Ben graduated from Reno High School the same time I did.

Barber: We interviewed him for this project, too.

Schwamb: Did you?

Barber: Yes.

Schwamb: He'd probably know quite a bit there.

Barber: Did he grow up working in his parents' market the way you grew up working for your dad?

Schwamb: I would say so, but I didn't know Ben back then that much till we got to high school and were in the same class. He went to a different junior high, I think. But we all pretty much turned out pretty good. Don Carano was in our class, before they had the Eldorado. Now he makes and sells wine.

Barber: So did it always seem to you that you would go into that trade?

Schwamb: Not really. When I was over in Billingshurst, my favorite was woodwork, and George Gadda, Sr., he was the instructor. When we got out of Mt. Rose and went over to Billingshurst, we had to take wood shop. They don't have that anymore. First thing in seventh grade, we all got in his room. There were all these benches all throughout the place. He says, "My name is Mr. Gadda and I eat raw bear meat." Man, those kids were just— [laughs] But he was pretty sharp. He kept us all in line. I liked him. He was my favorite teacher in school.

I did a lot of woodwork, turning on the lathe and stuff like that, and I made a lamp. I don't know whatever happened to the lamp. Put all this figured gumwood together, glued it together, and then they had a show. I made Betty a rocking horse before she was born when I was over there.

Barber: You were pretty young.

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: So you always liked working with your hands?

Schwamb: Uh-huh.

Barber: You liked building things?

Schwamb: Always did, but now I can't do much anymore. My hands are—got that neuropathy. My hands tingle. When you weigh 240 pounds and you drop down to 175 in about six weeks, I thought that was the end of the world for me.

Barber: That happened to you?

Schwamb: Yeah, weighed 240 pounds.

Barber: Wow. What was the reason for dropping all the weight so quickly?

Schwamb: Neuropathy. It ended up in my knees. My knees feel like I got a ten-pound weight on them, each knee, and my hands still tingle. The rest of me is in pretty good shape, though. [laughs]

Barber: The building that the business was originally in, was it constructed by your dad or was it there before, do you know?

Schwamb: No, he had it built, but the structural steel—my dad became friends with Herrick Iron Works in Oakland, California at that time. They built the trusses and everything for that building, but Dad put it up, and then we did work for Herrick then. They did work up here, at Eagle Picher down the canyon down there, I don't know if you know where Eagle Picher's plant is.

Barber: No.

Schwamb: About 15 miles east of Reno along I-80. They did work there because there were no places that they could do that, and Dad erected it for them and that's how they got together.

In fact, I worked for them. My last summer going into high school, I worked for Herrick Iron Works in Oakland, but I worked in their office. They set me up. Gale Herrick was the owner, president of the company, and he set me up at the YMCA. I got \$30 a week working for him down there and it cost me \$10 at the "Y" to live there, and so I couldn't afford to ride the bus, so I'd walk to work. It was about twenty blocks. I'd walk through the black section at that time. It was all the blacks and they never bothered me. I'd just walk through, and the guys would say, "How you getting home?"

"I'm walking home."

"You're walking home?" They knew where I was walking through. I never was bothered and I didn't know much about blacks then. Only had one girl at Reno High School that was African American and she graduated with us, but that was about it.

Barber: What area would you say that was then, that was the black part of town?

Schwamb: Well, the shop was at 18th and Campbell, and the "Y" was on Broadway. Really I'm not too familiar with that area, but that area between the two there. Probably still is, if it's not all demolished. I don't know.

Barber: So you were working in the shop through high school?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, I worked in the shop for a long time.

Barber: Did they ever add on to the building that you remember?

Schwamb: When Dad moved out of there and moved over to Fourth Street, Sierra Machinery rented his old building and they added a metal building on the back, on the east end of it.

Barber: Is that still there?

Schwamb: Yeah. Yeah, they left the building there. But we used to work out there—outside, not in that building. That part of the building I never worked in because it was built afterwards, but we used to do a lot of our work out in the backyard there, and that's when we used to walk over to the Reno Brewery there and see Gus. He was the beer man. I guess you'd call him beer master or beer meister or whatever you want to call him. "Gus, can we have a shot of beer?" All of us were over there because we'd work up a sweat outside there.

"Okay, guys, grab a little cup." He'd take it right out of the vat there for us, and we'd have a sip and we'd go back to work. Do that now, you'd get fired. [laughs]

Barber: So was that in the Reno Brewery building that's still there now, the bottling plant, or the one that was demolished?

Schwamb: The one on the corner was their warehouse and the brewery was next door. You ought to talk to Ray Dohr, because his family was involved with the brewery. I think he's still in Reno here.

Barber: So when you would go to get your little sips, was that in the main brewery building?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, he'd give us a little cup of beer, and we'd go back to work. Sweat it all real quick, you know. [laughs]

Barber: So would you take a lunch and just eat lunch at work, or would you eat in the area somewhere?

Schwamb: No, mostly I ate over at the—it's not there anymore. They tore the building down. I think it was called the Riviera Hotel. It was on the corner—god, I can't even think of the street now, but it was right on Fourth on the corner, and it had a restaurant in the back. But back in those days, the older guys that worked in the shop, they'd drink their lunch and then they'd go back to work. Not me. I'd go out of the bar back then. [laughs] But a lot of the guys that worked there were iron workers. They worked in the shop and then they went out in the field and put it up because there was nothing else for them to do. So that's how they would do it then. That's in the old building there.

Barber: There were a lot of places along Fourth Street that were hotels and restaurants and bars.

Schwamb: Yeah, back then. At one time before they built the El Rancho Motel there—I don't know what they call it now; I haven't been down there for quite a while, anyway, there used to be a rendering plant—

Barber: Nevada Packing, I think, right?

Schwamb: Yeah, and they used to bring their bones next to this building over on the rail siding, in an open train, open gondola, or whatever you want to call it, and they'd just dump them there. Boy, after a while, that place would smell.

Barber: They would dump them there just for junk?

Schwamb: Well, no, just so they'd haul them away by the railcar.

Barber: So they would just be waiting there—

Schwamb: Yeah, not in an enclosure. Oh, god, it used to smell. Also we were getting rats in this building, and they'd be running over the top of the office. We had a Frenchman working for us. He said, "Oh, I know how to get rid of those rats," and he built traps over the office of this old building there and he'd get them suckers. [laughs]

Barber: So would a lot of different companies come down Morrill to access the railroad and put things on the cars there on Morrill Street?

Schwamb: Yeah, they would put it there—there was a siding there. There was a wooden—what would you call it— a wooden dock, really, a pretty good-sized one. They'd park those railcars right there and then they'd drive up there and they'd dump them inside the railcar.

Barber: Did the train come pretty frequently?

Schwamb: Well, just the cars, not too often. It'd take them a while to fill them cars up. They'd get maybe a couple, two or three of those cars.

Barber: So they'd fill them up and have them stay there until—

Schwamb: and then they'd rot. [laughs]

Barber: So you weren't very unhappy when they closed.

Schwamb: No, no. Well, finally my dad got after them because they just couldn't stand it anymore. Yeah, he got after them.

Barber: What was the reason for moving into the new property? Was that property already there, the building where Martin Iron Works is now?

Schwamb: Well, part of it was. It used to be an A-frame-type building. What it was, it was Wagner Tank and Casing during World War II, and they brought the building in from someplace and put it up there.

Barber: Which part of the building are you talking about, the really large—

Schwamb: The one that's on Fourth Street, not the one that used to be the lumberyard back in there.

Barber: But I know there's a brick building and then there's the large building where the whole setup is, right?

Schwamb: The main building that faces north and south. Later on, Piero [Bullentini], who owns it now, bought that other building where there used to be a lumberyard. They bought that building.

Barber: So it was a tank company?

Schwamb: Wagner Tank. They made oil tanks for the war service, and a lot of these guys that worked for us afterwards worked there because they were too old for the service, so they worked there. When that closed down, they came over and worked for us. That building was empty. What it was is that the ground had sloped from street level to about four feet in the back or five feet toward the tracks. So when Dad got it, he filled that all up, because the building was level, but the ground sloped and it was all dirt. I wouldn't dare venture what's underneath in that dirt there now. Everything could have been working in there. But then he had it paved out and then sort of leveled the floor off, at least enough to work on it.

Well, it was quite interesting. One time after my dad had bought the building, and he got it from the bank or the bank offered it, I think, for \$80,000 and he was wondering how to pay for that, you know, but eventually it was worth it. One time when I was at the university, they threw a party in there, you know, big beer busts back in there. I knew some of these guys. "What are you doing here? Dad owns this building." And here they had a big party going on. These gals were down there. [laughs] Then eventually they left and finally we moved everything over.

Barber: Did they clean up after themselves?

Schwamb: Well, if not, it got all buried in the dirt and all that fill in there.

But anyway, then we had that fire. I can't remember what year that was. Burned the whole roof off.

Barber: So it was an A-frame and that burned.

Schwamb: Yeah, the whole roof burned off. Oh, man, that was the worst thing in the world that could have happened to us because we had a bunch of work. It was in February, but I don't remember the year anymore.

But anyway, we had the Golden Hotel and we had the first unit out at Tracy for the Tracy power plant. There was another job. We had three jobs and we were shut down for two weeks. Fortunately, the one crane we had, it still worked once we got the power back on. But we were open air in there for a long time till the following winter before we got it all closed in. It was a rough go.

Barber: Did he want to move over to the current building because business was going so well and they needed more room, or what was the reason?

Schwamb: Well, there weren't that many steel companies. Reno Iron Works and Martin Iron Works were the only two. Then H&N [phonetic] Steel came along. McCauley Iron Works. Tom McCauley, the father, he was around. My dad had worked for him when he first came here, for Tom McCauley. But then those were the only ones there, nothing large enough to handle the projects, really, that were going on here, and to keep the other steel companies out, that's the only thing you could do is move up.

Barber: Because it seems like the capacity would have increased a great deal in the new building.

Schwamb: Oh, yeah. The bigger you get, the more you've got to have.

Barber: Did a lot more people start working there too?

Schwamb: In the new building, yeah, yeah. We had quite a few more there.

Barber: So tell me what happened after you graduated from high school. Then what did you do?

Schwamb: Then I just kicked around a little bit. I still worked for my dad, and then I mentioned I went to school down in L.A. I went to a business college down there.

Barber: Why did you choose L.A.?

Schwamb: It was the Woodbury Business College, and figured I didn't have enough time for anything. But anyway, no, I had a couple years in the service during the Korean War.

Barber: Was that immediately after high school?

Schwamb: Well, pretty much so, about a couple years after high school. But I kicked around a little bit.

Barber: And then you decided to come back to Reno after L.A.? Was that always the plan?

Schwamb: No, I stayed down there. See, I had a big argument with my dad. He and my mother got divorced and we weren't getting along too well. But I was working down

there. After I got out of school down there, I went to work for a steel company down there, made metal buildings. I spent about five years, well, not working for them, but about three or four years with them.

But anyway, Bill Granata came down one time and he wanted me to come back up. He asked me to come back up. My dad never asked me to come back, but Bill did. We were always good friends, Bill and I, because we went through the same school, learned the same trade the same way. So I came back up and made amends with the old man. [laughs]

Barber: And then worked for him?

Schwamb: Let's see. I didn't work in the shop then, but I worked in the office, estimating.

Barber: Can you explain to me in the current building, in the setup, what happens in what part of the building or what the operation was like?

Schwamb: Well, when you face the building from Fourth Street, the brick front or masonry front was the office part of the shop, in other words, and our office was upstairs. We had a detailing office. The detailers had the upper windows for a while, and then eventually they switched things around and that became the accounting office. My office was in the back, further back, where it was a little bit more quiet.

Barber: What kind of detailing work was that? What did they do?

Schwamb: Well, when you get a job and it's out for bid, you've got the structural steel showing on it, and you take the little component out of that and you draw it so somebody else can make it, dimensions and everything, and then you hope that it's going to all fit when you put it together.

Barber: The people who did that, did they have an engineering background or drafting?

Schwamb: More drafting than anything. We had a fellow up there, John Pope, and he was a good draftsman. He was in the merchant marine during the war. But anyway, he came out of that little town on the outside of Fernley. His dad worked for the railroad there. He was a good draftsman. He had a good mind for mathematics. He was half Seminole and half white. The Seminoles were out of Florida. He was married and his wife was a full Blackfoot. She was a very nice lady. He was good with drafting, but he'd always draft the stuff that was really easy and then all the garbage he did on 8½-by-11 sheets. But he was good, though. He was one of the better ones. He was fast.

But anyway, when the time came for him to retire or leave, his two kids—he had a boy and a daughter—they both joined the army. He had a home on the Callahan Ranch area up there that he built himself. He put the foundation in with rocks he got out of the ditch up there, whatever creek that is up there, and he built the house himself, but then he decided he wanted to sell it. He was sort of a character, but like I say, he was good.

He decided he was going to go to L.A. and take his wife down there with him, L.A. or San Diego, one of the two. Anyway, he went and built a sailboat down there and he sailed that sucker to Hawaii with a sextant, they call it. That's taking the shots from the sun or whatever it is, no communication. They sailed that baby to Hawaii over there and sold it.

Then he came back again and he built another one. As he was building these things, he became more of a hippie-looking-type guy. [laughs] He had silver-gray hair anyway. Then he built another one and he sailed that one down to Panama and sold that one there. Then he came back up. He was getting really strange, but his mind was still there. He'd come in and visit us all the time.

One time I'm looking at the *San Francisco Examiner*, and it said they followed these three boats, powerboats, from Mexico on up here, to the Bay Area. Well, about ten miles out, they transferred over. They were hauling marijuana, and one boat was linked with a John Pope. I wondered if that was the same John Pope we knew. [laughs]

Sure enough, when they pulled him on the layover there, they arrested them all. But fortunately, the boat that he was on, where his wife was on—she didn't know this was going on. She didn't know they were hauling marijuana. They arrested them all. Oh, she got mad. She has 300 acres up in the Dakotas for the Blackfoot, and she said, "That's it," and she went back there. Like I say, she was a real nice lady, but she couldn't hack that.

So then we had to write letters. Dad wrote letters to whoever we had to write them to for his character reference and stuff like that. If they needed a job, we'd put him back on. But he came here, and his daughter had gotten out of the service by then, so she became his responsibility. Eventually I think he went to Hawaii. We never saw him anymore. So he was sort of a character. [laughs]

Barber: That's quite a story.

Schwamb: They had five tons of marijuana in them two boats, a lot of marijuana back then.

Barber: I almost hesitate to ask about anybody else who worked there, but was he the most colorful?

Schwamb: They were all good guys. So many guys working there.

Barber: And before you had been working there, because you obviously had had business experience and training, had someone else been doing the accounting and that kind of work before you came back to do it?

Schwamb: They had a lady there, Chris Schnitter, and she was the bookkeeper back then in those days. She was pretty sharp. She was a hard-nosed gal. She was a tall, slender gal, about as tall as you are. But she was good at the books and she took care of them.

Barber: Then did your dad continue to be really hands-on? Was he working in the shop?

Schwamb: He did once in a while, but he was mainly getting the work. That was the main thing. When we moved over to the other building, he pretty much left it up to Bill Granata back in those days. So I worked in the shop for a long time before I went to L.A.

Now you can see the railings next door on that little apartment house that our sister and I own, next door here, I made all those myself, but I made those when that contractor was a friend of mine at that time. He's passed away now. But anyway, I said, "Well, Gene, you've got to make it by the dimensions because I'm building the rails." That was when he was digging the footings. You wait till they measure them, the people that measure. I said, "Well, Gene, you've got to follow dimensions," and I kept at him.
[laughs]

Barber: Did you make things in the shop?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah. I worked a long time in the shop there.

Barber: Did you make personal projects too?

Schwamb: I did all the rails for my own house. Then when I got married and we had this place on Daniel Webster right off of Plumb, and I did all the railings on the face of the wall. It's the third house off the corner, I'm still living there. I bought a house that was already built by some people, and they had a masonry wall that ran the full length of the property—I don't know if you're familiar with that little park on Daniel Webster. There's just a little small park in there. It's right across the street from that. I hand-forged all these scrolls. If you look at it, it's all hand-riveted, over 100 of them, 150 of them, something like that. It's all painted white. It needs a paint job. I'll have that redone next summer.

Barber: Tell me—you just mentioned getting married—how you met your wife and when you got married.

Schwamb: Well, the shop foreman of Martin Iron Works introduced me to her because he was living right down the street from her. I married a woman that had four daughters and we had one of our own, and then the oldest daughter, well, did herself in. It was too bad. I don't know. She was married and had two children, and her husband was a real nice guy. He was with the power company here for a long time. Then he went to PG&E down in Fremont and worked there till he retired. But she ended up committing suicide. But that's the way it goes sometimes.

Barber: I'm sorry.

Schwamb: We still have four daughters. I've got one that's married to George who has Reno Forklift Storage Systems and another one that's retired with her husband, lives in Arkansas, and the other daughter is an RN at Renown. Her husband is a building contractor, houses and stuff like that, remodeling, and he is a good one, too.

Barber: What was your wife's name when you met her?

Schwamb: Betty. [laughter]

Barber: What year did you get married?

Schwamb: We were married for forty-five years. Well, I think I took it out of my—I have to carry it in my wallet. We got married a day before Mother’s Day, but they keep changing that date and I could never remember. [laughs]

Barber: It’s true. Doesn’t make it easy. After you married, did you move into that house right away?

Schwamb: Yeah, we picked it up right away. When I got married, I had a few bucks in my pocket. I barnstormed around, but I got tired of that pretty fast. I managed to have a few bucks.

Barber: So how long did you work for Martin Iron Works?

Schwamb: Till 1978, then I left. That’s when the whole downtown went wild with buildings and everything and casinos, and I left and I’ve never been downtown since, at night. I’ve never gone back. Well, I had to go when I had my own business once in a while for business during the daytime, but I never went downtown. In fact, I still haven’t.

Barber: Why did you leave the business at that point? Was it because you were starting your own business?

Schwamb: Well, I got in another argument. My dad had already died, and I had a problem with one of the members of the board. He was married to my half sister. He became a real problem, and everybody thought I was nuts for what he was doing, and so I had the whole board against me. Well, I went to work for Reno Iron after that.

I don’t want to mention any names. And then when I had my own business, we were doing Wells Avenue, and Bill had to come by my place of business to get home, so he’d stop by occasionally and we’d talk for couple hours at night. That’s why I would get home at eight o’clock at night, I was talking with Bill.

Then he come by one time and he says, “Well, Fred—.” They had a problem with the same person, but the problem when I had it was only about \$5,000. When he had it, it had come up to about, well, six figures.

I said, “Bill, you’re lucky if you find it. I left the water over the dam.”

He says, “Well, the attorney says, ‘Fred was right and you’re all wrong.’ Is it too late?”

I says, “No, that’s the way it goes sometimes.”

So I had mine for about eighteen and a half years, my own business, till the city come along. [laughs]

Barber: At least it was gratifying to hear that eventually, I would imagine.

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, yeah. Like I say, we were pretty close friends.

Barber: Where did you locate your business?

Schwamb: Right across the street from this one.

Barber: Across the street from the original Martin Iron Works building on Morrill?

Schwamb: Yeah. That building is still there, part of it is. The office part is still there. In fact, the fellow that started with me, he took the other half. Reno Forklift used to be in half the building and I was in the other half, but my shop was separate.

Barber: A separate building but on the same property?

Schwamb: Yeah. That's the one that the city ran the north Reno route through. They moved it about 100 feet north, which went right smack through. I said, "I'm too old to get started all over again." I was about seventy-two years old then.

Barber: Did they offer you money to buy the property? That's how it happened?

Schwamb: The first time, they didn't offer quite enough, so my daughter, who's pretty sharp, Pat, she and George got this other attorney involved. I can't think of his name, but he was young. He wrote, I think, two letters or three letters or something like that. He got us a few bucks more, quite a bit more because he got 40 percent of it. [laughs]

Barber: So that was your retirement offer, then?

Schwamb: Yeah, really. Yeah, that was it.

Barber: What kind of work did you do out of your shop there primarily?

Schwamb: Same type, structural steel.

Barber: For commercial buildings largely?

Schwamb: Yeah, not the real large ones. One of the largest ones we did is the one that's across the street from the old Porsche Building. On Liberty Street, there's that three-story, four-story building there. We did that one. That was about the largest I ever got into.

Barber: Did you go back to working with your hands?

Schwamb: I did all the forge work until we shut her down. See, in the old shop we had a coal forge.

Barber: Can you explain what that is?

Schwamb: It's run by coal, coal and air, and then we converted that and then we got that over to the original place, where, in fact, I think they've still got the forge. The EPA back then started the—when you run a coal forge, you can smell that coal all over. I mean, it just hangs. It doesn't just go up in the air. It just hangs and you'd smell it. He came into our place—I don't know who it was, but from the EPA, and says, "If we catch you again using that forge, it's a \$500 fine. If we catch you the second time, it's a \$1,000 fine, and if we catch you the third time, it's a \$10,000 fine."

That's when we shut the forge down and went into gas. I had a gas forge. I bought it. They had an auction at the new Reno High School because they closed all the industrial arts classes down and they auctioned it off. I got the forge for, I think it was, \$350. But I never did like a gas forge. It never quite got the steel out of it. A coal forge, you could get it white hot, but on a gas forge you can leave it in there all day long and it'll never burn the steel up. But it was enough to do.

I made that table one weekend, I think it was on a Fourth of July weekend, for my sister, this one here. She bought the glass top and I made the table for her, and she had it painted.

Barber: It's beautiful.

Schwamb: And I made that little candleholder for her.

Barber: I was going to ask why you would continue to use a coal forge if it was against the law or against regulations. But it was just because it worked better?

Schwamb: Well, yeah, you get better heat. I'm surprised I don't have lung cancer from breathing that stuff all the time, but back in those days you never gave it a thought. Well, I don't think I've got lung cancer. I'm still alive. [laughs]

I enjoyed working more on the coal forge. In fact, I'd brought a coal forge with me from L.A. I bought one for fifty bucks down there. When I moved up, I had a Mercury, a two-door Mercury, and I had that forge in there and all my stuff. I left L.A. in the early morning hours and I got out of there a ways and I went and had breakfast on the way up. It was daylight. The old Highway Patrol looked me over to make sure I could see out the back window on the mirror. I had all my stuff in that one little Mercury.

Barber: So it's small enough to fit in the back seat of a car, a forge?

Schwamb: The one I had. In fact, I've got it in my yard right now. I use it just as an ornament.

Barber: And would the Iron Works have several of those or only one at a time?

Schwamb: You would usually only have one. My dad got the forge that's in that building right now. He got that out of Virginia City with all the tools from a blacksmith's shop up there someplace.

Barber: So that technology didn't change for a long time.

Schwamb: No, it still doesn't, really.

So I started my business and I asked the guy, because I was going to put a coal forge in there. I called the people up where we used to buy our coal from. He says, "Oh, Fred," he says, "if you want to buy a railcar full of coal, I'll get it for you, but otherwise, forget it." Back then, the EPA came down on everybody, especially with the coal, because unless you want to build a \$100,000 thing to clean the air, you just couldn't do it.

Barber: Did the coal just come from a local supplier somewhere?

Schwamb: The supplier, I think he was down in Stockton.

Barber: So would the coal arrive on the train?

Schwamb: We would get it in bag loads. We'd buy maybe ten or fifteen bags at a time. A 100-pound bag, it's quite a bit of coal, but still it goes pretty fast when you're working on the forge all the time.

Barber: Would they just come on a truck?

Schwamb: Yeah, they'd ship it up on a truck for us. It was fun working then, back in those days. We had a lot of fun then. In fact, I burned my hand here when I was still pretty young. I had a glove on, working on the coal forge in the old shop, that one there. The coal went in there and burned a hole in my hand. Before I could stick my hand in the water, which was right next to where you're working, I had a hole burned in there about a quarter-inch-round right down to the bone. I never did go to a doctor. My hand swelled up and I'd stick it in Epsom salts. I didn't dare go to a doctor. The state would want to get after my dad.

Barber: Because you were too young at that point?

Schwamb: Yeah, working in the shop. See, I could work there so long as I didn't work with any of the machinery or nothing. I could sweep the floor and stuff like that, but that's all I could do. But if they found out I was doing that, they'd have really gone after my dad. That would ruin my career [laughs].

Barber: What did you do immediately? You just wrapped it up and went home?

Schwamb: No, I didn't go home. For years you could feel the hole right there, but it's closed over now. It happens so fast you just don't know it, see.

Barber: So you'd be working on the forge and there's always a big pot of water?

Schwamb: A big barrel, a wood barrel of water you had right there always right next to you, because you had to use it for tempering and stuff like that.

But I enjoyed working on the forge. Had a lot of fun.

Barber: Are those still skills that people use today, or has it just changed considerably with technology?

Schwamb: I think most of it's changed to gas now, mostly gas forges, because you just can't get the coal anymore.

Barber: But do they still have to do the same kind of work, even though it's a different kind of forge?

Schwamb: No. Gas forge, it depends. Right now you can buy most all that stuff. There's outfits that—I don't know where they get it from, but I've got a catalog at home about that thick, and you can just buy everything now and just put it together.

Barber: Can I ask you a little bit more about other places along Fourth Street?

Schwamb: Yeah, sure.

Barber: You were talking about when all the growth happened, when everything started building in the late seventies, and that's about when the interstate went in, too, which would have changed Fourth Street a lot.

Schwamb: A lot, yes.

Barber: So can you talk about some of the places where you would go, especially before that time? Just describe some of those places.

Schwamb: Well, the I-80 ran through most of the residential areas, the old Reno up there. I remember the state had a house for sale right there because they'd buy up more property than what they needed, and what they didn't need, they'd sell. There was a house there. They wanted, I think, \$45,000 for it, and I tried to get one daughter to buy it. Not my youngest one, but another one, and they didn't want to buy it. It was a real neat house and it's still sitting up there. Every time you go down the freeway, you can see that house sitting there. It was right there on, I think, Evans Ave and the freeway right there.

Barber: Right above Sixth, right up there by the freeway?

Schwamb: They called it the Billinghamst house. Now, that's not the same one that's the Billinghamst School over there. A different Billinghamst, I think. It had the old doors. The lights switches were all push-button, black and white. You could walk in this house and on the right side was, like, a living room. On the left side was a big dining room or a library, whatever you call it, and then it had the stairway going up, a circular stair. Well, that was sort of a neat old place, I thought. If I needed a house, I would have bought it.

Barber: Now we're looking at some photos from the Fourth Street building. This is a photo of the front of the shop and this is before the fire.

Schwamb: It was in February, I remember, because then it rained for about two weeks straight after with the roof burned off.

Barber: And this is in the fifties sometime?

Dodson: No, it's later, the sixties. I was about sixteen, '64?

Schwamb: I wouldn't want to take a shot at the time.

Barber: Well, we'll figure that out, because it sounds like it was a substantial fire, you were saying. How did it start?

Schwamb: Well, there's a door here that led out into the shop, right back here where my thumb is, right in that area there, and there was a water fountain right there. They say that a cigarette was thrown down there and it started it, but the way that building was, it was just like a torch, and just took the whole roof off the main shop there.

Barber: What time of day was that?

Schwamb: Night. I was working there late when that happened, but I wasn't there. A salesman was there, a deck [phonetic] salesman. We took off around six-thirty, seven o'clock, and we'd go to this bar. A couple friends of mine, the Lazich [phonetic] brothers had this place out on Kietzke. What the hell was the name of that? I don't know what the name of that bar was anymore. We walk in, and "Fred, your plant burned down."

"What do you mean, your plant burned down? I just left there." And sure enough, I went back and it was all over with. Whoa, what a mess.

Barber: We're looking at the photo of the table where Fred is looking straight at the photo, just so we can identify this later.

Schwamb: I'd be looking north, theoretically north. This was on the first floor.

Barber: So everything burned.

Schwamb: Well, destroyed. The tables and stuff like that, the fire department—and that painting, they saved that painting too. They covered it over real quick. They got into that office area.

Barber: This is the landscape painting. Do you know anything about that painting?

Schwamb: I've got it hanging in my house.

Barber: Where did it come from?

Schwamb: Hans Meyer-Kassel was the painter and what it was, he was German. A painter never gets rich until he dies. He was an artist.

Dodson: He's actually quite well known.

Schwamb: Yeah, he painted that one up there [points to the wall]. All these pictures that are hanging around here, most of them.

Dodson: Yeah, tell her about this [points to a portrait of a boy]. This one is Fred.

Barber: So this artist was local?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah. Back then when that was done, he had his office—at either Harolds Club or the Nevada Club—upstairs on the second floor, before they changed everything around. They had an apartment up there and they lived right there.

Barber: And he was German?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah.

Barber: He was born in Germany?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah. But you go to Genoa, where he finally ended up in, and you talk to the people there, they didn't know who he was. And one time I went into the art place across the street from where he lived, and they didn't even know he existed.

Barber: How did he come to do your portrait? Because this is a portrait of you as a boy.

Schwamb: I was about nine years old?

Dodson: I don't know, Fred.

Schwamb: Well, it was done in 1940 and I was born in '31, so I'd be about nine years old.

Dodson: Yeah, it says 1940.

Barber: Betty Dodson has joined us, we'll just say for the record here. [laughs] Fred's sister.

Dodson: Because I think this is fascinating.

Barber: It's a wonderful portrait. Was this because the German community was very close here?

Schwamb: Pretty much so, yeah. They're not really, like you say, close, but everybody was friends. There were always German parties and stuff like that.

Barber: You mentioned a German party before. That just means a bunch of Germans were invited to a party?

Schwamb: Well, yeah. [laughs]

Barber: What would happen at a German party?

Schwamb: Well, my mother would have it here mostly, and once in a while they'd be at somebody else's house, not very often. I mean just good days, and they were always very friendly.

Barber: Would they make traditional German food?

Schwamb: Pretty much so, yeah.

Barber: What do you remember eating that was German?

Schwamb: I don't remember back there, but my mother always cooked bratwurst, or bockwurst, they call it now. I keep telling them at the Gold 'N Silver you're supposed to cook that with red cabbage and not sauerkraut. [laughs] In fact, I just had it a couple days ago.

Barber: Were there any places in town that were German restaurants?

Dodson: Not at that time. Were there, Fred?

Schwamb: Well, there was the Stein.

Barber: Where was that?

Schwamb: That was on Center Street next to the telephone building.

Barber: The Stein, what do you remember about that place?

Schwamb: It was a good hangout down there. It was right next to the telephone company. In fact, I haven't seen their boy for quite a while. He's been pretty ill. His mother had it there, and you'd go in there and you could have dinner. They didn't serve you. You had buffet style all the time, and it was pretty good. Sort of a friendly place.

The City Hall at that time used to be right across the street on Center Street, not the one up where the parking garage is now [the Cal Neva parking garage on First and Center]. It was a little different town back then. Like I said, I haven't been downtown since 1978, '79.

Barber: So when Martin Iron Works was at the Fourth Street location, would you walk downtown from there or would you just drive if you had to go downtown?

Schwamb: Sometimes to go to lunch we'd walk out the back door and walk down the tracks to a little restaurant that was across the street from Harolds Club down there. It was called the Nomad, on the other side of the alley, and you could go in there and have a tremendous beef sandwich and a bowl of soup. We'd go there. But we'd walk, not all the time, but we'd walk there occasionally, a couple times a month or more, rather than driving down.

Barber: Let's go back and just finish about the fire. Because with the fire, if it completely burned that building, did it have to be completely rebuilt or was anything salvaged?

Schwamb: We pretty much operated with an open roof after that. We changed the wall that was next to Commercial Hardware at that time, and we got away with a lot of stuff because the fellow in the building department there was a close friend. He let us get away with a bunch of stuff. Back in those days, you know.

Barber: So once it was rebuilt, is that what's still there today?

Schwamb: Uh-huh, in that one building. They had the other building, which was a lumberyard at that time. Not Eveleth Lumber. I can't think of the name of that lumber company that was next door there for a long time.

Barber: So what are some of the other places? I did want to ask you about the Copenhagen Bar, just because you mentioned it, because it was originally located near where Coney Island Bar is now. It was right next door?

Schwamb: Well, only two buildings were there. It's probably about where the gas station is now. I think that's where the Copenhagen probably ended up. It was, at one time, the Standard station. I think it was right around in there. We'd go there. In high school we'd go there. "Okay," Bear would say, "you guys get in the back and you conduct yourself as gentlemen back there. You don't cause no problem," and he'd let us have a beer and we'd go in the back. [laughs]

Barber: What was in the back? Was it just tables and chairs?

Schwamb: Well, there was a bar there and it had a dividing wall on the bar, so you couldn't see in the back. So he put us in the back there, and we'd conduct ourselves as we should. Back in those days, people didn't bother you so much unless you caused problems, so we didn't.

Barber: Did they serve food there?

Schwamb: Back in those days, I don't think so.

Barber: Did you ever go to Coney Island, too?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah, especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But I don't go there by myself because I'm afraid I'm going to run into somebody who would want to buy me a drink. I don't drink anymore. [laughs] I gave that up a long time ago. So I haven't been back there again.

Barber: Did you know the Gallettis at all?

Schwamb: I don't know the family that runs it now, but I knew the other ones. Their parents I knew, or recognized. Then we'd end up going to Louis' Basque Corner all the time, and Louis and his wife were running that.

Barber: We interviewed them also, and I'm so glad we got to speak to Lorraine before she passed away. What do you remember about going to Louis'?

Schwamb: Pretty much eating their tripe. I liked their tripe. I ran into Louis one time at Raley's over here on Mayberry, "I miss your tripe, Louis."

He says, "Well, why don't you just come there. I got a whole gallon of it in my car." He had a big gallon over there. [laughs]

They had good tripe. My mother would make tripe, but, oh, god, it was bland, no seasoning at all and it was terrible.

Barber: What were the other businesses that Martin Iron Works did business with that were in that area? Were there any kind of partnerships with other companies?

Schwamb: Not that I know, no. PDM is the only one. They were over in Sparks. It was the Sparks warehouse, but they were mainly out of California.

Dodson: Didn't Martin Iron work a lot with Walker Boudwin?

Schwamb: Well, a general contractor, yeah.

Dodson: Yeah, there were general contractors they would have worked with. PDM was a steel company.

Schwamb: It was a steel warehouse company. We would buy our products from them. But Dad mainly bought, for the larger projects, from the mill. We'd buy it directly from the mill back then, and then they had the railroad spur. Even at the old shop, the one on Morrill Ave, I'd buy from the mill on large buildings, but back then, PDM wasn't even in town. There was no warehouse in town.

Barber: So you'd buy the material from the mill. What kind of materials?

Schwamb: The beams and columns.

Dodson: Where was the mill at that time, Fred?

Schwamb: Back east.

Dodson: Was that Bethlehem?

Schwamb: Yeah, Bethlehem and U.S. Steel.

Barber: The material would come straight from there?

Schwamb: From them, yeah, on railcars.

Barber: When your father passed away, was that pretty sudden? How old was he, about?

Schwamb: Seventy-two.

Dodson: Yeah, seventy-two. No, he was older. He was seventy-four. I was surprised. I always thought he was seventy-two.

Schwamb: But he had strokes quite a bit. He'd feel real good, and after a while, you'd realize when he's going to have another stroke because he'd get [unclear], and, boy, he was sharp. And then he'd get another stroke and he'd be knocked down, and it would take him several months to come back up.

There's a shrine and I was in control of the shrine, and we were up at a convention up in Seattle. She [Betty] calls me up, "Dad's dying. He's in the hospital."

My wife and I, we left the next morning at four o'clock in the morning and drove all the way from Seattle to the hospital here at eight-thirty at night, straight through. He looked the same to me as he always does. [laughs] And I missed my trip, the boat trip [unclear].

Dodson: I felt so bad about that. I thought he was dying.

Schwamb: Looked the same.

Dodson: He was at home, pretty much bedridden until the end then. It was pretty bad for, what, two, three years, I would say.

Schwamb: Pauline had nurses around the clock, three eight-hour shifts there.

Barber: So someone else had taken over the business before that for a little while?

Schwamb: Well, Bill was president of the company then.

Barber: Bill Granata?

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: We were talking a little bit about Piero Bullentini, who now owns the business. When did he start working there and what kind of work was he doing?

Schwamb: Well, he was doing the same thing there. His brother has B&C Cabinet. His brother's an excellent cabinet builder and he moved his business to Carson City from Reno here. He still has a cabinet shop there. I don't know when Piero started, though.

Barber: But he worked with your father for a while?

Schwamb: Yeah, he was there when I came back from L.A.

Dodson: He was in the shop, wasn't he?

Schwamb: Working in the shop.

Barber: Then why did Bill sell the business to him? Is that what happened?

Schwamb: No, I sold out, and then Bill, he didn't sell out; he died. He died during the period of time they were going through this business with that same fellow, and Piero took over the same thing, and finally told him, you need to turn your stock in, or I'm going to have you thrown in jail. Piero's a very honest man and so was Bill. We all pretty much were, straight.

But it was fun working in the shop. I enjoyed it. If you look at the railings I did next door here, all the railings on the apartment house next door here, I did those. I made those weekends and at nights.

Dodson: And that fireplace thing and my table.

Barber: He was describing all the things that he had made, that are just lovely.

Schwamb: After I left the business, I really don't know much about what Martin Iron Works did, anymore. They became a competitor. [laughs]

Barber: How was that to be a competitor with the company that your father had owned? You had your own business and you had a good niche, too.

Schwamb: Well, I went to Reno Iron Works for a little over six years. They had a fellow who was there. He was a consultant, very sharp. He came out of World War II. He worked for a steel company down in Arizona. And the owner said—and he was single yet—said to him, “How would you like to go to college?” The owner put him through college and he came out a mechanical engineer. He was sharp with numbers.

And then he came back to work there, and by that period of time, he had a wife and a couple kids. The owner says, “How would you like to go to Harvard?”

“I can’t afford Harvard.” He said “Who’s going to pay for it?”

He said, “I’m going to send you,” and he went to Harvard and he majored in business. He has a mechanical engineering degree and he majored in business with a—what do you call it? Well, he took a business course, but he majored in accounting and, boy, was he sharp. In one year I learned an awful lot from that man, just a different way of thinking.

Over the years, I had about a pile of paperwork like this, stuff that I’d written down, and I’d save it, put it in the drawer and save it up. I eventually went through it all and I made a folder, a big binder of everything that I could think of, sort of in order, and I had structural here, miscellaneous items there, all these things. So that way it helped me because then I had to hire a takeoff guy to do it, so that way I could train him in the way to think. You had to think completely different than what they do. I don’t know how they do it at Martin now—it used to be so much a pound. Well, it wasn’t that way at Reno with Willard Reed [phonetic] when he was consulting. He thought completely different and he had a better way. I always thought his way was much better than the other way because you always knew what your bottom dollar is going to be. They may do that there now. I don’t know. It’s hard to say.

Barber: Is that the system you used when you started your own business, then?

Schwamb: Oh, yeah. I still think the same.

Dodson: You might want to teach that to James, my son.

Schwamb: Your boy does far more than that, though, don’t he?

Dodson: Yeah.

Barber: So I wonder, when you look back and you think about your dad and his business and how long he ran it, why do you think it was successful for so long?

Schwamb: Well, first of all, he had people that came up through the ranks. We had one fellow he hired from Webb Brown’s office, Tom Meredith, who was a structural engineer over in the old building over there, and then Tom came to work there and he’d work a half a day in the shop and half a day in the office. That’s how he learned, and then eventually he started his own place, Meredith Steel. His wife was a schoolteacher at Reno High School. Tom was sharp. He had his problems, but we didn’t worry about his problems because they weren’t ours. [laughs]

Barber: So your dad hired good people.

Schwamb: We hired good people there, yeah, really good people there.

Barber: How would you describe Martin himself as a businessman and a worker?

Schwamb: Well, both ways, he was pretty sharp. He was partners with somebody in Syracuse. I don't know who that was.

Dodson: Wasn't he an engineer or—

Schwamb: I don't think he was, no.

Dodson: I always thought he had a degree.

Schwamb: Back then you could take the AISC manual. American Institute of Steel Construction, they had a manual, and you could pretty much design your own steel from it. You always added 20 or 30 percent to the weight. When you do a steel business, it's always by weight, because you pay so much for the material and then your labor is so much, and it works out pretty well, and your overhead is so much. But I wouldn't want to go back to it anymore. When I closed mine down, I sort of freelanced for a couple years there and I did work for the fellow that bought all my equipment out. I freelanced a little bit and did work for them.

Barber: So when you left your business, well, your building got demolished, right?
[laughs]

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: You didn't retire immediately then?

Schwamb: No.

Barber: You continued to work freelance.

Schwamb: I worked a couple, two or three years, did work for him, yeah. Just making takeoffs is all I did. I didn't work physically anymore.

Barber: What does making takeoffs mean?

Schwamb: Making estimates from the drawings. More so for Reno Iron than I did for Val because Val, who has the machinery now, is pretty sharp, quite sharp. He comes from a long background, too, of working in the steel business. He's a Mormon boy, but you don't hold that against him. [laughs] He is a pretty nice guy. He's a nice guy.

Barber: So when did you retire finally and stop working, or you still do this and that?

Schwamb: When they ran that train through the building, that's when I stopped, sold the equipment to him. That's when the business got so bad around town that nobody was doing any work.

Dodson: About 2008?

Barber: Pretty recently?

Schwamb: I've got to count on my fingers. Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

Barber: Four or five years ago?

Schwamb: Before that, even, I think, yeah.

Dodson: Well, because 2008 was when everything just fell apart.

Schwamb: Yeah, but it was slow before that.

Dodson: Was it?

Schwamb: Yeah, yeah. But it was fun working. I've always worked, and like I say, all my buddies, they were all chasing girls, and I had no time to chase girls. [laughs]

Barber: You were just in the shop. That's a lot, yeah.

Schwamb: In high school, I'd have to work at night or after school and weekends, Saturdays, sometimes Sundays. I remember one time living here, I had my bedroom down in the basement. Dad come down, "Fred, we've got to go to work."

"What do you mean, go to work? It's three o'clock in the morning."

"No, we've got to go get a car out of a hole." A friend of his who was a general contractor, a house builder, called him up and needed help. I guess his son was going to the university. I don't want to say who it is, because he's still around town here.

[laughs] But anyway, they were whooping and hollering and they come downstairs.

That was when Sierra was two-way. They had a big hole right there in front of the army store. That's where the old surplus store used to be on Sierra Street, Sierra and 3rd Street, right there. They had a big hole right in front of the thing and they had, like, a pile of dirt. And they came down Sierra Street and said, "Well, let's jump that hole with our car."

Dodson: Oh, my god.

Schwamb: The car didn't quite make it and it was hanging by both bumpers, like you see in that commercial where that gal is on that boat and the car rolls back. About the same thing, except the car that went over the top of that hill had both bumpers up. Oh, god. Nice car too. I was in high school then, or out of high school. I'm not sure where I was, pretty close, though.

They were down there at three o'clock in the morning and they had to get the crane, and Dad was the only one that had the crane, that little old crane. And they get down there and they had to pick that car up, put it back. Fortunately, it still could run.

Barber: I wonder how he got involved. Because he had the crane? So that would happen from time to time?

Schwamb: Yeah, because nobody else could pick that sucker out of that hole. It was hanging on there. Wish I'd had pictures of that baby.

Barber: Just a good community man, to go to the rescue of people.

Schwamb: Yeah.

Barber: Well, that's great. Then we're going to look at photos a little bit, but I just want to thank you so much for talking to me. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you.