John Mullen

Founder of Ugly John's Custom Boats

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: John Mullen, also known as Ugly John, was born in Turley, Oklahoma. He is a boat dealer, marina operator, and former championship boat racer.

He raced boats from 1974 to 1986 and began selling boats to help fund his racing career. John's first sale was recorded on a brown paper sack while he sat on a milk crate in his garage in Turley. The garage originally had a dirt floor, but as sales grew, he added a concrete floor and electricity before eventually moving into a 1,200-square-foot building.

The business later expanded into Ugly John's Custom Boats, selling recreational boats, performance boats, and yachts while operating multiple marina locations. When asked how he overcame challenges from the economy and Mother Nature, he said, "I didn't know I couldn't do it."

Listen to John tell you why he is known as Ugly John, how he almost became a Yellow Pages salesman, and the ups and downs of the boating business on the podcast and website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 7:42
Piano Player

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling. Today's date is November 21, 2013. So John, would you state your full name, please?

John Mullen (JM): John Michael Mullen.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age.

JM: February 25, 1947. I'm 39.

JE: (Laughing) So you're 39. You refuse to say, give us your age.

JM: Well, the arithmetic would calculate to 66.

JE: 66 years old. And where are we recording this interview?

JM: At my car building where I have all my toys and old muscle cars at the museum that I have in Catoosa, Oklahoma. I'm sorry.

JE: We'll get into that, but speaking of names, we need to talk about ugly. “Ugly John.” How did that come about?

JM: That came about with some really good friends of mine just out of high school. My dad died, so I did not go to college. I stayed home and worked in the family business, and every night went racing someplace. And very close friends I met during that time, Marshall and Vicky Farr from Tulsa—actually, Turley, that's where I grew up, was in Turley.

We would go someplace every night and race cars. They had a hot rod car. I had one. My hair is long, wavy and curly, and I used to comb it straight back and Vicky always thought I was good looking. And one night they came by to get me in their '66 Chevelle and I had gotten a haircut, a flat-top boogie, flat on top, long on the sides, combing in a ducktail, and I came out and got in the car and I can still see the look on her face as she scootered over to sit on the console.

She said, "Oh, John, you're ugly." And Marshall said, "Ugly John," and it stuck. And I learned in the college when I did finally get to go to school, in the retailing courses, etc., to name your business something people will remember and they won't forget.

And Ugly John's has absolutely nothing to do with boats until you find out it does, and it's worked real well. We've had a lot of fun with it over the years, but that's—there's a lot of stories on how I got my name, but that's the real story.

JE: And you knew you could live with it because you knew you weren't ugly.

JM: Women will come up to me or girls, and they'll come up and they'll say, "Well, you're not that ugly." (Laughing)

JE: (Laughing) All right. Where were you born?

JM: Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Let's talk about your mother. Mother's name, maiden name, where she grew up—

JM: Howard, and she was born in Weber's Falls, Oklahoma.

JE: You said Howard.

JM: Yes, my mother's maiden name was Howard.

JE: OK. Her first name—

JM: Sue Sadie Howard was her full name.

JE: So she grew up --

JM: -- in the Tulsa area.Yeah, they, I think they came to Tulsa. I don't know how old she was, but she married my dad when she was 17, so they didn't stay down there very long.

JE: What was she like? Her personality?

JM: Oh, she was very calm, tiny little lady, meek. Until she got riled up and then she'd get the switch, she'd line me out.

JE: Yeah. Your dad's name?

JM: Harvey Everett Mullen. He was born in Kirksville, Missouri. In 1898, as a matter of fact, and oh, he was a roughneck, I think, in Texas before he came to Tulsa. And evidently came to Tulsa.

They got married when he was 25, so—and he was an auto mechanic. He had an auto shop and then went to work for a little delivery company here in town, Evans Transfer Service, and worked there until 1957 and Mr. Evans died and Daddy bought the company from his widow.

So I kind of grew up—that's all I've ever done has been self-employed or worked for my family. No, we had, I think, 7 delivery trucks and did local deliveries in Tulsa.

JE: So it was a delivery business?

JM: Yes.

JE: What was the name of it?

JM: Evans Transfer Service.

JE: So the idea of working for yourself was implanted from as a child.

JM: It was. I didn't have a job working for anybody else until I did go to college and I worked for a lumber yard, which was I really wanted to do. I've never worked for anybody else—

JE: Brothers and sisters?

JM: One brother 4 years older than me.

JE: And what's his name?

JM: Al, Al Mullen, Alfred Mullen. He lives in Skiatook.

JE: What was the first house you might remember living in as a child?

JM: The only one I ever lived in was in Turley. My dad built it in the, I suppose in the '30s. I don't know, a long—and it's the only one I ever lived in, in fact, after I got out of college and Daddy was gone.

Mom moved to Skiatook to take care of her older brother, and my wife and I, Velma and I lived in that house until we bought our house at Keystone Lake -- 6020 North Rockford behind Cherokee School.

I went to Cherokee school kindergarten through 9th grade and then McLain through high school.

JE: So that was elementary was in Turley?

JM: Yes.

JE: And then you came into Tulsa.

JM: Junior high was in Turley also at Cherokee school—

JE: —but then high school—

JM: —was at McLain. It was just a couple of miles south on Peoria. It was in North Tulsa also.

JE: Your high school days, were you active in organizations or what was your—

JM: Oh, I was in the band. I had it when I was 5 years old. I'll back up a little bit. My mom got me taking piano lessons and ... or 4 years old, I guess, and when I was 5, I played in a baby artist concert. I played Ave Maria.

I'll never forget I was 5 years old and is in front of 200 or 300 people and the only thing I was afraid of was they told me I had to bow when I got through. And I was so embarrassed and so timid about it. I am a pretty shy guy. Then I stayed with my music. I played violin. Wish I would have learned to fiddle, but I played the violin. And I played cornet, trombone, and all the brass instruments, and I got to high school and was messing with hot rod cars, etc. And my dad had several strokes.

So, my senior year, like an idiot, I was offered a full scholarship to any college I wanted to go to with my music. I didn't want to be a sissy band boy, so I said, "No, I'm gonna take auto mechanics," and I quit the band.

And I had to get a privilege pass, as it turned out, to go help Dad because he was sick and I would work, go to school half a day, and then I'd ride the bus to town and go work the other half a day.

JE: So do you ever look back on that decision?

JM: Yep, a lot.

JE: Really? Even though you became so successful, well, you might have gone.

JM: In fact, I started last year. I bought another piano. I missed the piano. I could sit down. I could play anything by ear and I—I have forgotten my left hand and so I've started trying to take a few lessons when I have time.

JE: So not right now you can play by ear.

JM: No, if I could remember the left hand. I just lost it, I guess, playing the brass instruments so long after the piano because I quit taking piano lessons after Daddy had his first stroke in '58, I think.

JE: I didn't know that about you.

JM: Nobody does.

JE: That's great. That's great that you're telling us, right. If you take piano, you could be entertaining all these people.

Chapter 3 – 6:52
Trucking Business

John Erling (JE): So in high school then you graduated from McLain?

John Mullen (JM): Yes.

JE: In what year?

JM: In 1965.

JE: Then what happens to you?

JM: Dad died in September of '65. Shouldn't tell this on myself. I thought I wanted to go to college. All my buddies were going to school, so I went to Tahlequah and had to take the ACT test, and they were all there, so we stayed out till 6 o'clock in the morning and the ACT test was at 7 o'clock.

So I didn't do very well on the ACT, and I shouldn't have anyway. I shouldn't have been trying to go to school because of my family situation, so I did not go to school.

And I stayed out and worked a couple of years. I got married the next spring, I believe it was—it's kind of vague and foggy, but one of my high school sweethearts, we got married and lasted 3.5 months. I was 19 years old. It was just, we were kids, so got that annulled, decided I wanted to go to school. So I went back to my high school principal who used to catch me skipping school all the time, and I was always in his office for something when I was in school.

And he wrote me a really nice letter to Dean Battles at Northeastern State College about how good a kid I was and all that that he should let me in school.

So I took the letter to him and he said, "Well, that's a very nice letter, son." He said, "But you don't need that. It's a state-supported school after you've been out 6 months, we have to let you in." So I kind of showed my dirty laundry and didn't really have to, but I started school Tahlequah 2 years later because by this time I got a new girlfriend. The only reason I went to school and quit—it is because of her and I want to be around her and all that, so I did.

JE: We're talking about Northeastern State—

JM: Northeastern, yeah, and Tahlequah. It's funny why you do a lot of things you do. I did OK and I made it through in 4 years business administration, economics.

Everybody wanted to know what I was gonna do. I said, "I want to be an educated truck driver," because I've got this family trucking business.

Went to Northeastern, graduated when I was supposed to, which surprised everybody. I was always the black sheep in my family. My aunts, all of them told my cousins if they didn't straighten out, they were going to grow up to be just like their cousin John.

JE: (Laughing) How about the girl you wanted to be around, whatever happened to that?

JM: Lasted the school year, and we broke that off.

JE: Alright. Didn't know if that led to a marriage or what, but you've got a degree.

JM: I did.

JE: Then what do you do?

JM: Came back and worked in the trucking business, the delivery business, helped build that up. I was pretty good at selling.

My brother is the hardest working guy I've ever known as far as he worked, and we needed a salesman, we needed more business. And I always wanted a semi truck. Let me back up a little bit.

While I was in college, I always wanted to drive big trucks. So I needed money and I was working at a lumberyard. I think I've told you that earlier. I went to work for $1.05 an hour, and I didn't want anybody to know I could drive big trucks, didn't want anybody to know I could run equipment. I just wanted to have a job working for someone else because I've never done it, and the owner's son found out.

I moved a semi for him up there one day and he said, "Well, I didn't know you could drive trucks," and I said, "Well, I don't want to." Anyway, so they had me start running equipment, backhoes and things like that because I could do it. I always had a knack for it.

I needed some money and the lumberyard I worked for, I went to him and I said, "I can get you some trash barrels, some 55-gallon drums up here" and for—I don't know what I charged him for them, $2 a piece, I don't know.

But there was a place out on West 21st Street in Tulsa—it was one of our customers in the trucking company—where you could buy used 55-gallon drums. I sold him, I don't know how many hundred, 2 or 3 or 400 or 500, I don't know, used 55-gallon drums and what that did for me, it made me some money. I think I paid 50 cents a piece for them and sold them for $1.05 a piece or something, I don't know.

But I had to deliver them, so I went to Empire Truck Rental and rented a semi, which I had never driven a big diesel semi before -- I mean really driven one. And I'll never forget, I got up in it and it had like a 40-foot trailer. Which didn't bother me, but I thought, well, I'd heard there's air brakes and switches you have to throw to make it.

Well, I released the air brakes just on gas and it started rolling, so hell, I had to go. I had to start driving. It's rolling down the hill. I taught myself to drive semi trucks and I sold this lumber yard all those drums. I thought, well, that's a pretty good idea.

So I went to the lumberyard in town and I said, "Hey, I just sold LD Stevens out there all these barrels. You probably ought to have some." She said “Okay,” so I sold him a couple of semi loads. I got to rent another semi.

Well, and I thought, well, I might as well have some too out of my house. Some might want some. So I took the pick of the litter and took them to my house and set myself up in business out there, so that's kind of the way I went to school. I did odd jobs. I worked for one of my landlords for $1.25 an hour building a couple of cabins for him on the Illinois River, me and him. High school buddy lived out on the river for a couple of years.

JE: Well, obviously you had the worker bee instinct in you.

JM: I did.

JE: You just—nobody told you you had to. You just did it.

JM: That's—I learned that from my dad. My dad worked hard.

JE: But even if you didn't have it in you instinctively and watched somebody else, it still wouldn't have worked. As I've observed, you kind of have to be born with it, and your brother was too, obviously. You also discovered you were a salesman back then, apparently. I don't know if it dawned on you or not, but...

JM: Oh, it was doing things I liked. I liked the trucking business and I liked big trucks, so I remember I went to Yuba Heat Transfer. It was a big heat exchanger company here in town and got them as a client for our trucking business, and that we would rent trucks from Empire Truck Rental until we got a little business going and we'd buy one. We used to furnish a semi truck and a driver for $12 an hour.

JE: Back in what years? When would that have been?

JM: Oh, early 1970s—1971, 1972, 1973.

Chapter 4 – 11:56
$40,000

John Erling (JE): OK, so how do we get to boats? Did you always have an interest in boats, or lead us to that.

John Mullen (JM): When I was 15, 16 years old, I guess, my aunts and uncles had cabins at Tenkiller Lake up on Chicken Creek.

And my brother bought an acre of ground from them and we started building an old cabin. Daddy was still alive and we started building a cabin there, and there was a guy up there named Bob Blankenship. He's still there. He had drag boats. He had inboard speedboats, and I used to sit on the bank and watch him race around out on Tenkiller Lake. "I'm gonna have one of those someday. I'm gonna have one."

And when I was at Northeastern, a group of us, when school was out in May, we would go to Fort Gibson Lake and camp out for a week just to unwind from school or whatever—party. That's what we told our parents, you had to unwind. And there was a group of guys that had drag boats there, and I got a ride in one.

And scared me to death. I mean, "Lord, let me out of this. I'll never do this again," but within a couple of weeks, I bought one. I found one here in town. It was an old Taylor V-drive boat. Pretty boat, really wasn't a fast boat. Everybody thinks they're fast because they have big engines, so I bought that, and I was out of school now, out of college.

Used it for that year and it would go to Fort Gibson up to Rocky Point, and found out what the really fast boats were, what kind of hull I needed to go fast and do good, and I wanted to be the fastest, etc. So I bought one from a guy in Wichita, Kansas. He was the Hondo boat distributor, and the Hondo was the best race boat, drag boat built, and it was built in Sylmar, California.

So I borrowed an engine from Marshall Farr, the one that named me Ugly John, and put it in it and it was fast. And then I blew that engine up and built one, and all of a sudden I went from having the slowest boat there to the fastest. Well, of course, you want faster, faster, faster, so I raced that at 1 or 2 races and won with it. So I thought, "Well, I better get me a faster boat."

JE: And where were you racing?

JM: I raced in Oklahoma City and Austin, Texas with that boat. I think I made 2 or 3 races that year, as I recall.

So I sold that boat to a guy in Tulsa, and I went to—no, wait a minute, let me back up. Tell you how I got in the boat business. I blew that engine up and I didn't have the money to fix it.

So I met this banker that I had met in college—people say I met him in a bar, I really didn't—named Clark Ritchie. He ended up being the principal or superintendent of Jay schools, but anyway, he was working at a bank in Muskogee.

And my boat was blown up and didn't have the money to fix it, and the distributor in Wichita had another boat. He said, "I'll sell it to you for $4,200." I said, "I won't have any money." He said, "Well, we'll go get you a 90-day note," and I said, "Well, what's that?"

And anyway, he explained 90-day notes to me, so Clark Ritchie, I stumbled into him. He loaned me $4,200 on a 90-day note to buy this boat with, so I bought the other boat and piddled with it and played with it and raced it until I got mine fixed.

So I sold that boat for $4,700. I made $500 on it. I sold it to a guy here in town. And I thought, "Wow, I'll do that again." So I bought another boat for $4,000—I didn't pay the note off like I'm supposed to, I went and bought another boat for $4,000—and I sold it for $4,200. So I thought, "Man, maybe I can do this and make a living," because I was in partners with my brother and it was tough being in partners with family.

Family businesses are tough, so I went to California and bought another boat. And while I was out there, I thought, "I'm going to go in business." I found another boat that had been traded in on a new race boat, and I welded a trailer hitch on the back of one boat trailer and hooked the other boat behind it and pulled them home, one behind the other one.

And the extra boat I brought home is the one that I sold in that old garage in Turley where we lived—dirt floor, no electric, no lights, no doors, and I sat on a milk crate, and the guy wanted a receipt, and I wrote that boat up on a brown paper sack and sold it to a guy in Fort Smith. And that's the boat I was telling you about I got back that I found in California two years ago.

JE: What kind of boat was it?

JM: A Hondo—no, that was a Howard boat. I'm sorry. I went out and got a Hondo, and the guy had traded a Howard boat in on a Hondo. So I bought the Howard. It was a race boat, a flat-bottom boat.

JE: All right. What was the name of the person who bought the boat?

JM: I can't remember. I wish I could. I really wish I could remember.

JE: And what year was it?

JM: Maybe '74.

JE: So you look upon that boat as the boat that kind of launched your—

JM: Yeah, it is, yeah. And it's always a good story about—and it was a true story, sitting on a dirt floor on a milk crate and writing it up on a brown paper bag.

JE: Yeah. And you never saw the man again.

JM: Oh yeah, I saw him around. I mean, and the fact the boat floated around Fort Smith and Tenkiller forever and went back to California 3 or 4 years ago, and I stumbled onto it out there and went out and bought it—bought it back. And didn't tell the guy I bought it from. He's an old friend of mine. He used to be a Hondo distributor also. I didn't tell him that it was the first boat I sold when I went in business until he had the money, and then he said, "I could have got 3 times." I said, "Yeah, you sure could have." (Laughing)

JE: (Laughing) All right, so you sold your first boat and sitting on that milk crate, and then you're thinking, "I can continue this."

JM: Yeah, and I went and sat down and talked to my brother and said, "Look, we're fighting all the time, we're not getting along. I think I can make it in the boat business. I'm gonna try it." So that's what we did.

JE: So he stayed with the trucking business?

JM: Yes.

JE: And then what's your next move to create your boat business?

JM: I got to where I was making laps back and forth to California once or twice a month. It took off pretty good for me because I was pretty good at racing. And in fact, that boat that went to California and drug back, I never lost a race in it, set a record that was never broken.

JE: What's the record? What does that mean?

JM: Oh, it was a speed record. I went faster than anybody had in that particular class.

JE: You can't remember how fast?

JM: Oh, it was 101. Yeah, the record's hanging on the wall over there someplace.

JE: OK, 101 MPH. Nobody had ever done that.

JM: Well, in that class with that particular engine. Yeah, there was boats going right at 200, but there was classes, and this was a 350 Chevrolet with one carburetor.

JE: What's your next step then?

JM: I got up to—I think we had 14 or 16 boats in the yard there at Turley on North Rockford. And I would go over to the lumberyard and borrow their forklift in Turley and drive it home, which was half a mile.

And I had built a rack on my crew cab Dually truck and I would haul one boat and trailer on top, and then I made some racks that I would buy another boat trailer and I could stack 3 boats on it and haul them back from California and sell them and go back, make laps back and forth.

JE: Let me just ask you though, these are racing boats?

JM: Yes, they're racing boats.

JE: And there was enough interest in products around—I mean, clients around here that were interested in that?

JM: I sold more boats in Tulsa, Oklahoma, more drag boats in Tulsa, Oklahoma than any other city in the United States per capita, and sold almost as many as they did in the Los Angeles area where it originated.

The other Hondo distributor, his office was in the factory and it was Rick Lee. He's the guy that had my old boat that I went and got back from. He's still in the boat business. And I was selling out of my yard in Turley.

The Hondo distributor in Wichita that sold me my first few boats became very good friends. And the factory called me one day and said, "We want you to be the distributor. We're going to take it away from Bob Morgan."

And I said, "No, I don't wanna do that. He's making $200 a boat." That's all it was.

And they said, "Well, we're gonna get somebody because you're buying every boat and selling every boat that he gets and that we can make, so you got to be either yes or no, you want to do it."

And I said, "Well, you need to call Morgan and tell him." So they did and it caused some hard feelings for a couple of years, but I got him a Baja dealership later on and he was the largest Baja dealer in the world. Everything was good. I was still selling out of my yard.

A gentleman named Billy Emery had the Billy's drugstores in Tulsa, in North Tulsa, and I'd been going into his drugstore since I was a little kid sitting at the soda fountain drinking cherry Coke, etc. I went in one day to cash a check, I suppose, I don't know, and he said, "John"—I mean, these are exact words—he said, "John, I've been watching you," and he said, "I think you're going to make something out of the boat business."

And I said, "Well, I'm gonna try to, Billy. I'm trying." He said—well, he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do if you're interested."

He said, "I got a little extra money." He said, "I'd loan you some money for 30% of the profit to buy boats with." He said, "I've got about 40,000 that I don't need," and he said, "I've also got a building down here on North Peoria that I'll rent to you. You need to get out of your yard."

And I said, "Well, I don't know if I can afford it or not. What are you talking about, Billy?" He said, "Well, I'll loan you the money for 30% of the profit. You don't have to pay me any interest. When you sell a boat, you pay me 30% of the profit, take the money and reinvest it and buy another boat."

And I said, "OK, what about the building?"

He said, "Well, it's down next to the water office." He said, "There's about half acre or acre of ground with it, it's fenced." He said, "I'll rent it to you for $130 a month for the first year, but the second year I'm gonna have to have more money."

I thought, "Uh-huh, here's the hook." I said, "Well, OK. How much is it gonna be after 1 year?"

He said, "Well, I'm gonna have to have 135." So I said, "You're on."

I need to back up—my garage at Turley, I operated out of a couple of times. It had the dirt floor, it had no walls, no doors. My brother-in-law, Leroy Smith, was a carpenter, cement finisher, and all this, and when I'd sell a boat, he had helped me and we poured a floor in it. The old building leaned over and we pushed it over and nailed it to the house with another board and got it straight, put a door in it, put electric in it, and so all of a sudden I had a boat shop.

Then I operated out of that, I guess, a year or two, and then I went over to—I think I got the building in downtown Turley in 1976, I think is when Billy made me that offer. And it was great having a little bit of working capital, but what that really did is it gave me the confidence in myself to have someone like him—and he owned the bank—I mean, I just, I thought, "Wow, maybe I can do this."

I was just racing. I wanted to make the next race. I didn't care. I'd make a little money on a boat. I didn't know anything about—I wouldn't take trade-ins. And then when Ron Shirley, he was a Pontiac dealer in Stillwater, he worked for Ernie Miller. He lined me out on taking trade-ins. Gosh, I got to trading for anything: jewelry, cars, parts, anything. And I've traded for all sorts of things. I've traded for land. I've traded for houses. I've traded for everything. I've traded for airplanes—I've never traded for anything that eats and breathes, but...

JE: So that relationship then with the banker...

JM: He was a director, one of the owners of the bank. He was in the drugstore business. He was a pharmacist. That really sent a message to me that maybe you can do something besides race boats.

JE: And then that relationship and that business partnership, how long did that last?

JM: Oh gosh, and at a later time then he got me a loan at the bank after that, and he's old and retired now, but I wrote him a letter 3 or 4 years ago thanking him and telling him what he really did for me, not just getting me loans or loaning me money, but what he really did for me.

JE: Making you feel good about yourself and gave you confidence to move on.

JM: He had confidence in me, so all of a sudden I got confidence in me.

JE: There's a great lesson there, I'll tell you.

Chapter 5 – 16:40
Laverne's Marriage Parlor

John Erling (JE): OK, so then this is all about drag boats.

John Mullen (JM): Drag boats. I didn't do outboards. I didn't do any of that. I left out one real important event in my life and I believe it was 1974, I married my wife, Velma.

JE: And you know it was '74. If you say, "I believe it was '74," it's going to upset—

JM: I'm pretty sure it was '74. Well, up until a few years ago, we never could remember our anniversary date because she has a twin sister. Leroy, my brother-in-law, he told me one time—I used to go see him in Tahlequah. I met Leroy in college, and he was married to Thelma, Velma's twin sister. He told me one time, he said, "Look, I see you looking at my wife." He said, "If you'll leave my wife alone," he said, "there's another one just exactly like her." (Laughing)

And I said, "What are you talking about?" "No," he said, "she got a twin sister. I'll fix you up with her." I said, "All right." So he did. She was in school working on her master's in public health in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Saint Paul.

JE: Was that where she was from?

JM: No, her and her whole family, they were raised in Eufaula, Oklahoma in an Indian boarding school. Her mom died, I think she was 9 years old, 9 or 10 years old. Her mom died and there were 8 kids.

JE: So she was raised in that boarding school?

JM: Yes, and that's—John, that's really what gave me the incentive to do something. I wanted her to have things. I mean, her and her sister went to Tahlequah in whatever, the late '60s, wearing button-up shoes, and she still talks about having 50 cents.

That was a big deal to go to the dairy diner and get a hamburger on Sunday, and they just never had anything. Nothing. So I met her on this blind date. She hopped right in the car and got in the back seat immediately, wouldn't even sit in the front seat with me, and she had heard all these stories about me—girlfriends, etc.—from her twin sister, which wasn't really any big help. Well anyway, we hit it off and I was making laps back and forth to Minnesota, seeing her on weekends.

Oh, sometime I guess in February or March, talked her into coming back here. So I went up to Tahlequah to talk to her twin sister, tell her, I said, "Well, Thelma and I are going to get married."

"What?!"

I said, "We're gonna get married.

She's gonna move back here and we're going to get married."

"She's not going to marry you!" And she ran in and got on the phone, called her sister and says, "You're not marrying him. He's wild, he's this, he'll never marry you. Don't quit school, don't come back here, he won't marry you."

So we did it anyway. I went up and got her. I flew up there. She had a '69 Chevelle and we rented a U-Haul trailer and went up and got them, brought them back, and been here, I don't know, 2 or 3 or 4 weeks, and Velma—we weren't married yet—and Thelma called one morning early, 7 o'clock.

And Velma answered the phone and I said, "Who's calling? Who's that?" She said, "Thelma." I said, "What does she want?" "She wants to know when we're getting married," and that made me mad. I said, "Damn it, tell her today. We're getting married today. That's what we're going to do. We're getting married today."

So that's what we did. They drove down from Muskogee and my uncle was a preacher and we loaded him up. We drove to Laverne's Marriage Parlor in Miami, Oklahoma. And we got married that day and came back to Shangri-La and spent the night there, and then I was at Rocky Point with the drag boat guys Sunday morning.

JE: And today you've been married how many years?

JM: What would that be? 40, 39, I guess. 39 or 40 years.

JE: And so that kind of matches as many years as you've been in the boat business. You've been primarily selling drag boats. How do you then get into the recreational boat business? And let me just stop you here. Is there more that we should talk about racing? You had a race boat called Bad Medicine. Is that a story to talk about?

JM: Yes, it is. The first, the orange boat I showed you the picture of a minute ago that I went to California and brought back with one boat behind the other one, I named it Bad Medicine because my wife is Indian. I wanted an Indian name. She's full-blood Indian.

JE: What is she? What tribe?

JM: 7/8 Creek and 1/8 Seminole. So we were messing around—medicine man, medicine man. We didn't want something—well anyway, it came to me one night: Bad Medicine. So I named the boat that went 101 miles an hour and I never got beat in, I named it Bad Medicine. So I did so well and thought I was so good in that boat that I sold that boat to the same guy I'd sold the one to for $4,700 that I didn't pay off at the bank.

And I bought a new Bad Medicine boat and it was in the top fuel category. It had like—I went from probably 400 horsepower to 2,000 horsepower and I thought I was King Kong. I thought I could drive anything because I've never got beat.

And boy, did it teach me a lesson. It ended up being the fastest boat in the country, but it took a while to learn to drive that. I had a guy out of California that came in and drove it for me some.

And we set records with that thing. It never got beat if it didn't break. And then I went to California that year. This was in 1975. I went to the Nationals finals in Long Beach, California at Long Beach Stadium.

And Jeremy was just a baby, so I decided he probably would need to have a daddy when he grew up, so I was going to let this other guy drive the boat. And this boat I had was the most dangerous boat on the water.

That particular class was—it was the funny cars of drag boats. And I let him make some practice laps with it the day before, and he torched the block. He ran it too long. You know, he was trying to learn to drive it and he ran it too long, and I had to tear it down that night and rebuild the engine basically.

And I had to be entered at the races by noon the next day. So I had hauled it out there on a semi truck that I had bought to haul boats back and forth with. I just piled everything in the back of a borrowed pickup truck and pulled it out to the races and had the engine stacked up in the back. I got out there and these guys that were the tech guys that were checking us in the races said—I said, "Hey, I need to get entered. You know, it's got a little bit of time."

And they said, "What class are you going to run?" And I said, "Blown fuel flat." And they, "Ha ha ha, yeah, you're going—right, you're gonna run blown fuel flat. Tell you what, son, we're not going to take your money because you're not gonna have that thing ready for a week."

Well, within two hours, made it in time, got the thing together, and this new driver went out and I told him, I said, "Don't make a full pass. Don't run the full quarter mile, go about a third of the way down before you hit it just to try to get used to the boat." And he did, and he ran 155 miles an hour with a two-thirds track pass, which was 10 miles an hour faster than any of the other guys were doing full track.

They changed their mind about this kid from Turley. So Steve Carbone, which was a famous dragster guy, racer in drag cars, was here in town and he had helped me with the boat. He said, "You ought to let him make a full pass in that thing."

JE: What does that mean, a full pass?

JM: Run the full track instead of—I didn't want him going the full quarter of a mile because the boats are so volatile. I want him to get a little bit of seat time, which he had about six seconds is what he had basically. We put him in it and I said, "All right, go out there," and I'll never forget that he wrecked the boat. He tore it to pieces.

The announcer said, "OK, ladies and gentlemen, here it comes all the way from Turley, Oklahoma, the fastest blown fuel flat-bottom in the world." And damn, there it goes. He just—the guy—the boats have two pedals in them, trim pedals, and you have to man up and get on the up pedal to raise that boat out of the water and let it fly.

And if you don't, the front of the boat sucks down, spits the back out. I've got pictures of the wreck over there on my wall. Wrecked my boat. In fact, Lloyd Stevens had formed his race team with Carbone, and he wanted to buy the boat before the wreck. But anyway, so yeah, and then I built another Bad Medicine.

JE: The driver, did he—

JM: He was OK, yeah. We had parachute jackets. We had life jackets with parachutes on them, and it worked. The idea of that was to hook the ripcord to the boat, and if you got thrown out of the seat, then the parachute hopefully opened and pulled you away from the wreckage, and it worked. A lot of times it didn't work. Had a good friend of mine get killed in one of my boats, and—

JE: Let's go back then to how you get into the recreational boat business.

JM: In 1978, I think it was, I moved my drag boat business over to 46th Place and Memorial.

Bill Meisner and—I can't remember, Ed, somebody—had built a building over there. Ron Shirley worked for Ernie Miller at that time and called me. We were friends. I was operating out of Turley and he called me and said, "They're putting up a building over here next door to Ernie's. You need to come over here and look at it."

I said, "I can't afford that." Anyway, it was $1,300 a month. I went over and rented it and doing my drag boat business and jet boat business over there.

In the fall of '79 and 1980, interest rates were 23 or 24%. I had gotten a loan at Boulder Bank—Dewey helped, loaned me money. He believed in me, loaned me some money to buy boats with, jet boats and all that.

Things really went in the tank on the type boats I was selling, the hot rod boats, because the clientele were all young and for the most part didn't have money or didn't have credit. And, you know, we made a living at it.

So I had to get out of there. I couldn't afford it, and the old Keystone Yamaha out on Keystone Lake where my highway store is now had burned. I went out and bought that. I assumed a note—the people that owned the land and financed it for Joe Jack Godwin that owned it—and I assumed a note that he had with the landowners out there for $60 a month. And what I got was about one acre of ground, a burned building, and 3 or 400 melted motorcycles on the ground, this molten metal.

I had called Meisner and Ed and them to see if they'd let me out of the lease, said, "I can't stay here." The bank wouldn't loan me any more money. They said, "You're gonna go broke. This is a bad business. You're crazy, boats are bad. Nobody's ever gonna want another boat."

They said, "I'll tell you what. You put air conditioning in this building, didn't you?" I said, "Yeah," because I'd asked him if I'd get my $1,000 security depository back. He said “I’ll tell you what: How much did you spend on the air conditioning?”

I said, “$10,000."

He said, "We'll give you $10,000 back for the air, and we'll give you $1,000 security deposit back." That was huge. So I got $11,000 now. And another friend of mine through the boating world, Richard Morgan, Accent Builders here in town, got me a metal building from a company in Oklahoma City.

They delivered that metal building out there to me and I had an old forklift, an old '52 model Clark forklift that was only good on concrete—you couldn’t drive it on dirt.

So I had six 2x12s 12 feet long that I would lay down in front of it and drive it 12 or 14 feet and get off and get the 2x12s and put in front of it. And that's the way I maneuvered out there for a year or so with that old forklift, but I unloaded the building. The building was $11,700. I had $11,000. I wrote him a check. And the bank called me a few days later and said, "We got a check down here for $11,700 and you've only got $11,000 and we're sending the check back." I said, "Don't send the check back. I'll be down there in an hour with the money." Well, hell, I didn't know where I was gonna get the money, but I did. I don't know if I borrowed it—what I did, I went down and I got the check covered. So now I got a building.

JE: Where? What location?

JM: Keystone Lake, right on Highway 64 there where my store is.

So now I've got a building and I have no idea—they don't give you any instructions, it's just all laying there on the ground. I was fumbling around with it trying to erect the thing and a guy stopped by and said, "You're building this? Who's building this building?"

I said, "Well, I am." I had moved an old trailer house out that Velma and I had had at Tenkiller Lake and it was my office. That was my whole boat store and all the boats I'd had in Tulsa when I moved out were in my neighbors' garages at Keystone Lake, in my yard and their yards. I had 15, 20 boats scattered out throughout the neighborhood.

This guy Jamie Gifford says, "Well, I don't live too far from here and I know how to put these things up. I'll go to work for you." So he did. And he and I built that building, the whole—I mean, the entire thing. I've never—I mean, he saved me on that thing.

I had the red iron up and all that, but it blew down one night. I got up in the middle of a storm and went up there and put 20 or 30 come-alongs on it to chain it up, it was about to blow over. We got the building up, like I told you.

The bank, I had asked them about loaning me money to build the building, said, "No, no, you're gonna go out of business. You're gonna go broke, it's bad. We want out, we want you to pay the loan off." They never really called the loan, but it wasn't pretty.

And so, I got the building up. Didn't have offices in it yet, but the building was up, it was done, and I was sitting in the mobile home at the end of it there where my office was. The guy from the bank shows up, him and another guy, said, "Hey, John, how are you doing?"

And they're my buddies now. They said, "We've got a deal for you."

I said, "What's that?" I knew what it was. They said, "Well, we're gonna take this building as collateral and we're going to release all these boats. And then you can just sell the boats and don't have to worry about paying them off and all that stuff when you sell them."

I said, "Well, I told you I'm gonna pay you every penny I owe you, and you're going to get your money for the boats."

"Well, we're going to take this building. You can release the boats."

I said, "You're not getting the building. It's paid for. I tried to get you guys to loan me the money to build the building. You told me I was going to go broke, that wouldn't last 6 months."

And they said, "Well, we're going to force it."

I said, "Really?" I said, "What are you gonna do?" I said, "You're gonna take the boats, you're going to repossess the boats and then sell them, and then you're going to sue me for the deficiency balance?"

"Yes sir, that's what we're going to do."

I said, "OK. And then you're gonna take my building."

"That's right, we'll have this. We're going to get the building one way or the other."

I said, "Well, tell you what. Why don't you kiss my ass?" I said, "You're not getting my building. It's in my wife's name and she's not signed on one piece of paper down there at your bank."

And they looked like they just ate a turd. It was good. It was great. And I did pay them off and it didn't take long after I got the building up and got going again, I paid them off and everybody got their money. But that's similar to the little trials and tribulations of early days of Ugly John's.

JE: But you didn't do any business with them anymore.

JM: No, no, I didn't. But you know, not mad at anybody. They were doing what they had to do. Somebody was telling them that I wasn't going to make it and I was going to go broke, and—

Chapter 6 – 12:03
Thunder Bay Marina

John Mullen (JM): So then when I was out there on the highway at the lake, then I took on Celebrity boats, one like you bought. I took that family boat line on. And—

John Erling (JE): What year would that have been?

JM: About 1982, 1981, 1982.

JE: All right, because I was trying to figure out when I got interested because I had brought an interest in boats from Minnesota. And then when I get down here in '76, somewhere along the line, there must have been in the early '80s, you asked me to advertise for you on KRMG.

JM: I think it was in the late '70s because I can remember your salespeople coming by my store at 46th and Memorial. And I think you did some for me while I was there. And then when I got out there, that's when I started letting you use, loaning you the boats.

JE: You did.

JM: The little Cimarron jet boat, I think was the first one you used, and a little 16-footer.

JE: And then that led to, of course, I had to buy a boat and you made it easy for me to do that, and I'm very grateful to you because you got me launched in the lake business and we're still at Grand Lake and have a property there and boat and all that kind of thing, so it all started with you.

JM: Well, that's good. The real reason I wanted you to buy a boat was because you kept tearing all of them up that I was loaning. (Laughing)

JE: (Laughing) OK, then I was confused because I thought you said you really built that building in '82.

JM: No, I started the building in 19—I moved out there in the winter of '79 and 1980, and I built the building in that winter and spring. I got the building up.

JE: So then you took on the Celebrity boat line then. OK, tell us about that. Your first boats in delivery and why—why Celebrity?

JM: Somebody told me about it, I suppose. I really don't know. I stumbled into it. It was a new growing aggressive company. And I only bought a boat or two. I think we flew up—I had a little airplane—I think we flew up to Benton, Illinois to the factory, I think, and bought a couple of little boats, but my heart was still with the race boats.

I mean, that's what I did. I raced, and I thought, "Well, I'll sell these family boats because I'm out on the lake, people are going—" I had people telling me, "Oh, you're gonna have to do outboards, you're gonna have to do this, you're gonna have to do that," and I've never been an outboard guy. I mean, we handle them now, but just didn't understand them. I like race boats. I like performance.

We did the Celebrity boats and got to selling some of those. I guess it was in '85 or '86, maybe '85 or '86. I bought some property in Grove and built a building there, had my Celebrity boats there, and then I took on Fountain Power Boats.

Oh, I had Baja boats as well. That was a big performance boat, the bigger boats, the offshore type boats. Still had the Celebrities, and it just kind of evolved from there.

I got into the big boat business. The name of the company is Ugly John's Custom Boats. That's because I used to build the race boats and customize them or whatever. I don't know how the name came, but anyway, the custom boats part.

And in '87 or '88, I bought Westport Marina. I put the store in at Grand Lake, and then the next year I bought Westport Marina. Had another bank that liked to loan money, so Cimarron Federal, as a matter of fact, savings and loan got into that business.

So I bought Westport Marina, built a restaurant, did all that, and I was talking to my buddy Ron Shirley again. He was there, had a houseboat, and he said—I said, "I'm gonna buy some used houseboats, I think, and fix them up." And he said, "Well, yeah, Ugly John's Custom Boats, you're customizing them."

So I bought an old 50-foot Gibson used boat, put a new interior in it, put some mirrors and some brass in it, sold it, doubled my money on it. I thought, "Boy, I'll do this again."

So I bought another used one, same thing. So all of a sudden, Gibson Houseboats wanted to talk to me about being a dealer for their new boats. So we did that. The problem with their boats is their 1988 models looked like their 1968 models. They didn't change anything.

So I told them, I said, "I want to buy a bare boat. I don't want anything on the outside. I don't want anything on the inside."

"Won't do it."

They didn't want to sell it to me. I said, "Oh no, you can't do this. You'll ruin the boat," and blah, blah.

I said, "Well, that's what I want to do." So I finally talked them into selling me the boat, and I'll never forget their representative came to the Tulsa Boat Show that year and looked at the boat and his eyes got big and said, "My God, that's the most beautiful Gibson houseboat I've ever seen. How did you do that?"

And he went inside and he was just blown away with the interior. "How'd you do this? How'd you do that? Where'd you get blah, blah?" I said, "It's called planned obsolescence. That's why car bodies change every couple of years." I said, "These people with these old boats have no reason to trade in on a new boat because their 15-year-old boat looks like your brand new ones."

JE: Because of the used houseboats, didn't you go into Arkansas, take that business into Arkansas?

JM: Well, we were selling boats over there. I didn't have a location there. Must have been 19—it was after I had Thunder Bay at Grand Lake. I built the store in Grove, then I bought the marina the next year, and then I believe 2 years later is when I bought Thunder Bay Marine. It used to be Duck Creek.

JE: All right. Well, maybe we should jump into that then. So at this point then, before you buy—you go to Grand Lake, you have Westport, the highway store, you have the Grove store, and you have the lake store in Keystone, the marina on Keystone. You have those three business places, so then you decide you need to be on Grand Lake.

JM: Yeah. Yes, I needed a marina there, and I went up—actually, I had talked to Carlos Langston about buying Port Carlos, but he wanted, God, a lot, millions of dollars for it.

So I was delivering a Fountain boat to Mike McNamara. He lived up on Duck Creek right by Thunder Bay or his cabin was there. And I delivered him his new Fountain boat and I said, "I'm gonna go look at a marina."

And he said, "Well, you ought to buy this one right down here."

I said, "Where?"

He said, "Right there." "So, there's no marina there."

He said, "Well, hell, you just drove past it. It's been down there for 30 years" or whatever.

So I drove back by it and lo and behold, there were some docks down there. And so on the way out, on the way over to Carlos—I was going over to talk to Carlos—I got the phone number for Duck Creek Landing off their sign there at the highway. And I drove over to Carlos and he wasn't there.

So I helped myself to his office and his telephone and I called Duck Creek and got a hold of old Dale Fowler and told him who I was. I was kind of looking for a marina. Would he be interested in selling his marina?

He's a gruff old guy. "I would, but it'd be a hell of a lot of money." And I said, "Well, save each one of us some time." I said, "If it's somewhere reasonable, I'll drive back over there. If not, I'll thank you and won't bother you again."

"Well, my God, I'll have to have such and such," and it was so cheap, damn near had a wreck getting back over there.

So I went over and basically made a deal with him that day. I didn't know where I was gonna get the money, but went over and agreed on a price, and I'll never forget he was showing me around the property and we were walking down the road there between the shop building and the docks and I said, "What's all this over here?" There was like 30 dry storage units over.

He said, "Well, dry storage. What the hell do you think they are?"

I said, "Whose are they?"

"Well, remember they're mine. They go with the place."

And I'm thinking, "Wow, it's getting better and better and better."

So anyway, I bought the marina and a house there that I needed for expansion. And then I got an option to buy his house that they lived in on the point. So anyway, I bought it and started building docks. It was just a sleepy old marina with a bunch of old junky wooden boats in it and junky old docks, and just rolled our sleeves up and went to work.

JE: So, are you taking out loans to do this?

JM: Oh yeah.

JE: And so what bank then? Who's been helping you?

JM: An old banker from Cleveland, Oklahoma that I had done some business with, Lloyd Lamb, had gone to Grand Lake and was working at the Ketchum bank, First State Bank of Ketchum or something.

And I said, "Hey, I want to buy this marina. Will you finance?"

He said, "Yeah." He said, "But I'm gonna call another bank and participate with them, see if they'll take part of it," and that was Oklahoma State Bank in Vinita.

As it turned out, they did the whole thing, and I still bank with them. It's the greatest bank I've ever dealt with, and I really mean that. They're just good people. They are good people and they've worked with me, and they've just been my bank. They're pretty conservative, but they've sure worked with me.

JE: You probably have stretched them at times, haven't you?

JM: Oh, I don't know.

JE: How did you name it Thunder Bay Marina?

JM: Well, my buddy Bob Morgan that used to be the Hondo distributor that I told you that I got him the Baja dealership, he bought a marina at Lake of the Ozarks and it was called Big Thunder.

But actually, Steve Hayes, a chiropractor here in town, was a customer. I'd sold him a Fountain and a big Scarab before I got the marina up there.

I said, "I got to name this thing something besides Duck Creek Landing Marina."

And he said, "Boy, all these thundering boats you got here—Thunder Bay." And Steve's actually the one that came up with the Thunder Bay name. And it worked. We coined a phrase soon thereafter. All these older people, like when I bought the marina, the slip rent was next to nothing. I mean, it is nothing.

And I raised it, I don't know, 50 cents or $1 or something and some of these old guys that had these old wooden boats that didn't even run, they were, "Oh, we're gonna get out of here. All these damn big boats he's bringing up here and all this noise and all that," and Tim Kirk was standing there one day.

He says, "If it's too loud, you're too old." So that's on most of our shirts, has been over the years. But the real reason they were leaving, they don't want to pay the extra slip rent, but all the thundering boats is where the name came from.

JE: Then there is a Thunder Bay up in Canada, I think. I don't know if you knew that or not when you were naming it, but --

JM: No, I didn't. One of our customers years later brought me some beer from Thunder Bay, bottle of beer that had Thunder Bay on it.

JE: So how today here in November 2013, how many slips—that you built that to how many slips now?

JM: Well, it was 100—it's a small marina. It was 130-some slips before the snow. I can't remember exactly how many slips, but we sold boats out of those slips. It should have been focusing more on rental. The marina I bought in Arkansas is 300-and-some slips.

JE: OK, we'll get to that here.

Chapter 7 – 7:30
Yellow Page Salesman

John Erling (JE): So it all sounds pretty easy in a way. I know you did a lot of hard work, but were there times when maybe you didn't know you were going to make it financially, even prior to Thunder Bay?

John Mullen (JM): Oh, good Lord, yes.

JE: Were there ups and downs for you and wondered, "Should I even get out of the business?"

JM: Velma and I had moved to Keystone. We bought that house. That was the first house I ever bought, and we just sold it a couple of years ago. It's the only house we ever had.

But it would have been 1980, I guess, 1981, we were at that store and she worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I wasn't making any money. It was awful. Had bought that old big house out there at Keystone Lake and had an old used couch that my brother-in-law reupholstered in his class at Northeastern for $35.

I bought the couch and chair for $25 from Marshall and Vicky years ago before that, and he reupholstered in the class and that's what we had in the house out there.

But I had some friends that were Yellow Page salesmen for the telephone company, and they made good money. We decided that I needed to be a Yellow Page salesman. So I went downtown and took the test, passed the test, whatever—putting square pegs in round holes or whatever it was—and so I was to go to Saint Louis, I believe it was.

Had my airplane ticket all bought, borrowed a tie from my neighbor, and he tied it. And got up to go. I was gonna be a Yellow Page salesman and not focus on the boat business. I was gonna go to work for Southwestern Bell.

JE: And let me emphasize again here, so the boat business was—you had the store—

JM: Yeah, had the store there at Keystone.

JE: —on Keystone, but you hadn't bought the marina yet—

JM: No, I just had the store.

JE: —just had the store, and you didn't know if you were going to make it or not.

JM: Yeah, exactly. I just got through all the deal with the bank wanting the building and all that kind of thing, and it might have been a year into it, but these guys were making a lot of money as far as employment goes.

So I got up, got my tie, he tied it for me. And I drove to Tulsa to catch the airplane, only I turned right instead of left and I went to a bar. I didn't go. I didn't get on that airplane.

I thought, "I'm not—I can do this. I'm not gonna go work for somebody else. I'm gonna make the boat business." So when my wife got home that night, I was there.

She said, "That was a quick trip." I said, "Yeah." I said, "I'm not gonna do that. I can make this thing work."

She said, "I didn't think you would anyway." So anyway, that's—yeah, there was—there's been a lot of times. It's been—I mean, the last—oh, there's been—I've been through 7 or 8 of these—or it's not 7 or 8, it's about every 7 or 8 years, the boat business goes up and down.

And the marine business really took it hard the last few years. I mean, it's been bad.

JE: Let me jump in. You said a marina in Arkansas.

JM: Yeah, I bought that marina in 1998.

JE: And what lake?

JM: Beaver Lake. We had started—my oldest son Chris had sold—after Sam Walton died, Sam wouldn't let his employees buy big things, no Mercedes, no big boats, can't be flashy. He drove an old 1972 Ford pickup or whatever it was around.

And after he passed away, Lou Skelton, which is one of his directors—he was way high up on the food chain at Walmart—bought a 52 ft Harbor Master from my son Chris and put it at Rocky Branch Marina on Beaver Lake.

And I think the next one to buy something, Dean Sanders, who was the CEO of Sam's, came to the boat show and bought a 53 ft Bluewater. I remember his wife wanted to know how long Lou Skelton's boat was. It was 52 ft, and she said, "Well, how long is this boat?"

And I said, "It's 53 ft."

And she said, "OK."

And that's kind of the way, and I sold a lot of boats and the people that owned this marina wouldn't build new slips to accommodate these boats. So I was paying for the slips so I'd have someplace to put the boats to sell the boats. And when we'd sell a boat, they'd do a reverse amortization with me, and then they'd buy the slip from me when they got the renter and all this.

And I built that marina up. I don't know how many slips I had. I sold all the Walmart executives new houseboats. I sold a bunch of them. And it dawned on me one day—they had offered to sell me this marina and priced it to me and I, like an idiot, didn't buy it. So a year or so—how long, it was 2 down the road—I paid them a million dollars more for it because of all the slips I had built and sold boats to put in it. So that's how that marina came about.

JE: But that was just another—should we say luck or good timing. You were up there before you knew that Sam Walton was going to die, and it just happened that he did, and then that released everybody, they can spend their money.

JM: Yeah, and I became friends with all the Walmart executives, and boy, the stories—that's the story in that business, the way it was built. But anyway, yeah, it was—I was lucky. I mean, not that he passed, but it's just that when he did, everybody relaxed and started enjoying their money because they all had a lot of money.

JE: You wonder if some of those people bought things and kept them on the sly and Sam never knew about it.

JM: Story goes, somebody bought a Mercedes, and he ended up putting the Mercedes guy out of business. They were spending their money, and he'd tell them this is not who they are. One of the—I know that I used to go on trips with all these guys. One of their purchasing agents got a bass boat given to him from somebody, I don't know who it was, some company. And Sam got wind of it and made him bring it to work there in Bentonville, and on the parking lot had everybody come out and watch him chop it to pieces with an ax.

JE: Wow.

JM: And that's a true story. That is a true story, yeah.

JE: And what was about the Mercedes dealership again?

JM: Oh, he didn't want people buying them and everybody was buying them and the guy, I guess spent a lot of money getting this dealership in and all of a sudden he didn't have any customers. All the people with money couldn't buy cars from him. I heard that, but I'll tell you what he did do. He made close buyers out of all those people, boy, they were tough.

JE: Hard to deal with.

JM: Yeah, well, they're all great guys.

JE: Nice people, but they drive a bargain.

JM: Yeah.

JE: Yeah, of course you're the same way, aren't you?

JM: Oh... Really, I suppose I've really made what little I've made buying, not selling—just how you buy it.

JE: Right. (Laughing)

Chapter 8 – 7:50
Japanese Market

John Erling (JE): Along about 1980, you were introduced to the Japanese market. How did that come about?

John Mullen (JM): I had my store in Grove, Oklahoma. I think it was 1980 or 1981, I don't know.

My pontoon boat representative, Roy Avis, was at a meeting someplace in Las Vegas or somewhere and got wind of somebody wanting to buy some

Wellcraft boats, which I was a Wellcraft dealer, to send to Japan.

And I thought it was a fluke. He said, "Well, here, call this guy." Well, as it turns out, it wasn't. He had a customer in Japan that wanted Wellcrafts. He was selling them Lexus and Rolls-Royces and all kinds of things from here. They were a gray market dealer. There was a Wellcraft dealer over there. There was a Carver dealer over there already.

And these guys—and they weren't, I guess, a licensed Lexus dealer or any of that, but it was a big deal in Japan to buy a car from the United States and they'd ship them over here and then they'd ship them right back. I don't know, it's a status deal or something.

Anyway, these guys wanted to get in the boat business, so I helped them out. We were bringing the Wellcrafts in here. I had to buy them here because Wellcraft had a dealer over there, so I had to bring them to Tulsa. And I bought a couple of semi trucks and I'd bring them through here at Westport Marina and I would do whatever they had to do that was called homologizing the boats and send them over there, and it worked really well.

For a while, this guy lived in California that got me into this thing, was kind of my partner in it, and the Japanese would wire the money after my products that I had my money and were on the ship on the way over there, and I got really uncomfortable with that.

So I called Jay, my partner out there, and said, "Hey, we need to do something." So the girl at the shipping company, the exporting company—I think she was single, not really attractive, and Jay took her a dozen roses, and I don't know if he ever took her to lunch or something, I don't know, but anyway, talked her into—she would send us a bill of lading saying they were on the ships.

The minute we left Tulsa, it took us like 28 hours to get the trucks out there. So by the time my trucks got to California and got unloaded in the shipyard, we'd have the money and they'd put them on the boat and everything was good, and that worked for a long time.

But I was never comfortable with the Japanese because of the gray market situation. That's why we did it that way. Well, lo and behold, the last load of boats I sent out there, and I got stuck with a couple of big Wellcrafts and a Fountain that they never paid for, but I sent a load of boats out there and she sent them the paperwork and the money didn't come, the money didn't come, the money didn't come.

Anyway, she said, "Man, what's going on?" I said, "I don't know, but don't load those boats. I don't have my money."

So the Japanese were calling me and it was like at midnight at night, and there was these big arguments and cuss fights through a translator, and that's when I found out that profanity is a universal language.

My wife and kids, one night I was screaming at the translator and his name was Ron Fax, and I'll never forget, he said, "You really want me to say that?"

I said, "Yes, I want you to say it." And he'd be talking in Japanese and then hit him with the universal language and it had come right back.

But those boats finally, they sent me the money for those boats and we loaded them and sent them over, but I got stuck with, I don't know, $800,000 to $900,000 worth of boats they didn't take, which we sold them, and they still to this day owe me $55,000 for extra stuff we did.

But we did real well on the Japanese market. In fact, I went to Tokyo and worked the boat show, but I called you once from over there on your radio show.

JE: OK.

JM: I remember it. It was really different. The prices were in yen, so they were about 3 ft long. But they wouldn't bargain. They said, "You lose face. No, you can't do that."

I said, "If you guys will just—you're never going to sell these boats unless you lower the price. You're going to have to deal with these folks."

"Oh, no, no, no, lose face, lose face. We don't—Japanese don't do that."

I said, "OK." So anyway, I suppose they're still in business doing cars and doing everything they do. It was really a tremendous facility that they had.

JE: I'm gonna have you talk about that again. They couldn't—they didn't bargain to lose face, or they—

JM: They wouldn't come down on their price. They said you lose face --

JE: -- if you come down on your price?

JM: If you come down, if you don't hold your price, you lose face. I said, "You lose money too." They did on the boats, but we sent a 42 or 48 ft San Remo Wellcraft over there. I'll never forget, and they had me come over to help show them how to put the boats together. I said, "Now, is there gonna be help over there? Is there gonna be tools?"

"Oh yeah."

And this is when Makita tools were coming out and I thought, "Boy, this is gonna be great in the land of Makita, just be wonderful."

And I went over there to help put this big boat together, show them how to do it, and they couldn't believe the president of the company in the United States was coming over to do this labor and all that.

But I got over there and they had a little box—had an old crescent wrench and a pair of pliers and a hammer, a claw hammer, and I said, "Where's the tools?"

"Well, that's it."

And they had a translator that couldn't speak any better English than I could Japanese, but we got through it. I got a kick out of them.

I gave them all nicknames and they'd answer to me, "Hi, hi, yeah," all that, and you'd raise a seat up and there'd be one under a seat working, but I put most of that boat together with a pocket knife I had that had a screwdriver on it.

It was awful. It was just awful. But we got it together, and then another time we sent a boat over there that's supposed to have a lower station in it—flybridge and a lower drive station in the salon area. And we didn't check it before it got there.

Well, they unwrapping, and it don't have a steering wheel in the bottom. That was a big deal. And he said, "Don't worry about it," because when we set this up, they said, "We've got 50-some dealers under us that's gonna distribute all this stuff."

And they did. My partner said it's because this guy was affiliated with the Japanese mafia—whether he was or not, I don't know, his four fingers were cut off. And on this boat that didn't have the lower station in it, he called one of his dealers and said, "Come on up and look at your new boat. You're gonna buy this. Oh, you don't have the money? Well, I'm gonna loan you the money, so come on, get it." And that's what they did, and that's how they did it. So that's all good.

JE: How many years do you think you were in the Japanese market?

JM: 2 years.

JE: But it was lucrative for you.

JM: It was; it was very lucrative. It was really a shot in the arm that we needed, even having to keep those couple of boats. In fact, the blue Fountain that I kept, Lou Aloisio here in town—it's the name of his restaurant, it's Italian restaurant—bought that boat from me. I figured you might know him.

JE: But you know...

Chapter 9 – 10:30
Mother Nature

John Erling (JE): The market can come and go and up and down for many products, boats. But you've also had your challenges from good old Mother Nature, and we can talk about several of them, but I don't know, was it in '89 tornado that destroyed the Catoosa area? Somewhere in that time period?

John Mullen (JM): When I bought Thunder Bay was—the first year for that was 1990, and I got a phone call that the tornado had gone through Westport, had hit my hangar. I had some old cars and my airplane in there.

I was very lucky it missed my house, but it tore everything. It was like an F4, I think an F4, it was big. Just, it was awful. Anyway, I was at Grand Lake and Brad Alcorn, guy that worked with me, called and said—I had an old cell phone up on the dashboard of my truck and it rang and the first thing he said was, "Slow down. Velma and Jeremy are OK."

And I got out there and I've never seen anything like it. The tornado destroyed the hangar and most everything else out there.

JE: And cars, I suppose.

JM: Oh yeah, ruined all my cars and tore the airplane in half and all that. And then the next year, there was a 100-mile-an-hour straight wind that destroyed Westport Marina in '90—I think it's '91, it was. I messed around with that and I had—marinas were a high-risk insurance, so I had Lloyd's of London insurance and they didn't want to pay. So we had to sue 26 insurance companies in England to get my money. And that took about a year, but we finally did, and I got the marina rebuilt. And then four years later in '95, we had a microburst.

JE: You had to lose clients in the Westport Marina as a result of that, so business was gone. And in the meantime you're waiting for insurance money to come in. Those had to be dark days for you.

JM: They were, they really were. Some of that stuff you just block it out of your mind. I don't know how I did. I can't tell you how I did it. I really can't. You talk about robbing Peter to pay Paul—there was a lot of that. There was a lot.

JE: You were shifting papers pretty fast there then to make that happen, but then you built it back within a year.

JM: Probably took—well, it took a year to get money out of the insurance company, and then it probably took another year to rebuild the marina. Somewhere in there. Somewhere in that time frame. Phoenix Federal, who had the loan on the marina, went belly up and that's another story.

'91, the marina blew away and then we got it going, built new docks. It was nice. In '95, we had a microburst that hit the marina, total, destroyed it again. Didn't take as long to get the insurance company to pay that time because it's a different insurance company, but they were—we were at the restaurant there and they were talking about not paying and this and that, and I looked at them, I said, "You know, it's still fresh on my mind how to get money out of you guys."

And the adjuster looked at me and said, "Yeah, you know how to do it, don't you?"

I said, "I sure do." And I said, "This thing's destroyed and you owe me the money. Y'all need to write a check."

He called him and said, "We don't want to mess with him." I was standing when he did. He said, "It's legitimate. It's done. It's gone. We need to pay him."

And they paid me. Got it built back, took another year or so to do that. And then in '99 it happened again, blew away again.

JE: Westport?

JM: Westport—and got it built back. It was blown away every four years whether it needed to or not. Well, it waited five years. The next time it was in '04 when it got all torn up again. Yeah, I've had my—

JE: Did it make you want to quit, give it up?

JM: Well, you can't. I mean, yeah, but what do you do with it? You gotta clean it up, in the lease with the corps, and you gotta get all the stuff out of there. Yeah, you can't quit.

JE: So while that marina is not generating any income for you, where's your income coming from?

JM: Selling boats.

JE: At your other locations and at that point, right?

JM: Right.

JE: How many times have you ever said, "Why did I ever get into this?"

JM: Oh, I don't know, a lot. There's sometimes I've thought about that, but it's been my passion. I love it. I obviously wouldn't still fight it, so...

JE: So then we've talked about Thunder Bay Marina. Talk to us about—you became the area Carver dealer.

JM: That was in '91, I think. Carver had gone—I touched on that earlier. Carver had gone through bankruptcy. And I decided I needed some sort of a cruiser up there because people at Grand Lake didn't want houseboats. They weren't cool, you know, they want a big yacht.

Houseboats were for Keystone Lake and not real boaters, etc. So I thought, well, I've been selling these Blue Waters and houseboats with flybridges, and Carver had a flybridge, so I called them.

I said, "Hey, I think I can sell some of your boats if I can just get some down here." And there was a joke over the years I was a Carver dealer about how that relationship started. And Dave O'Connell was the vice president in charge of all that at that time, and they were struggling getting going again.

Anyway, I bought a 36-foot or 34-foot Carver aft cabin, brought it to Tulsa, put it in a show, sold it at Grand Lake. And I'll think of the lawyer's name in a minute that I sold it to, but anyway, that's how it started. And then a couple of years later I was in the top 10. I was always in the top 10 with Carver, and two years running, I was the largest Carver dealer in the world, which, no biggie—

JE: No, that is—that is big. I mean, that was bigger than, I suppose, California, Miami, Chicago?

JM: Every dealer. They had 78 dealers throughout the continent and then the world. They had dealers in Japan and Russia and Europe, everywhere.

JE: And so out of this little property you were selling out of Grand Lake, you were the largest selling dealer in the world.

JM: We averaged 30—I think it's 32 or 36 new Carvers a year at Grand Lake for 10 years.

JE: All right, so the Carver people have got to say, "Why? How?" And I ask you that: why did that happen?

JM: I don't know. I didn't know any better. I didn't know I couldn't do it. That's what people have said: "How did you do this, what you'done?" I said, "I didn't—nobody told me. I didn't know I couldn't."

They told me I couldn't, but I sold boats. I tried to inventory boats and I learned early on, you can't sell out of an empty wagon, you've got to have an inventory. I tried when I first started out in Turley in my dirt floor selling off of a brochure and it didn't work, so I started getting boats in and learned you got to have stuff to sell it. So I got boats in.

In fact, Carver put me on their dealer council, on their board. I'll never forget I was in there with a New York dealer and Chicago dealer and all these big guys, you know, these big guns, and here I am, Ugly John from Oklahoma in here. And they're all asking me, "How do you do that? How'd you do it?"

I said, "Do what?" And my inventory turn was 7 turns, which is unheard of. Average in the marine industry is 2.5 turns on inventory. Mine was 7 on Carvers.

JE: Explain that.

JM: Well, if you have a million dollars worth of inventory, you sold—you bought $7 million worth. I mean, you sold $7 million. That's a turn, and you want to turn your inventory obviously as many times as you can. And I was turning the big Carvers. I had a 7 and they didn't know—they wanted me to tell everybody else how to do it and I said, "Why would I want to tell them how to do it? I wanna do it."

But I'll never forget the New York dealer said, "Well, I couldn't sell one of those things" that I was selling. They were all selling diesel boats, the big boats, and I was putting gas engines in them. It saved $40,000 a boat, putting gasoline engines in them. And we were on a lake, they weren't going anywhere.

They said, "Well, I couldn't sell one of those."

And I said, "You'right, you couldn't. With that attitude, you sure couldn't." I just tried to keep something for people to trade up to, and sometimes if somebody had a boat they'd had a while and I thought they need a new one, I'd go get their boat out of their slip and hide it and put a new one in there. And normally I'd sell them the boat.

JE: What was the price range of these boats and how big were they?

JM: When I first started with Carver, I think the 33-foot aft cabin was probably the most popular and the 44-footer—there was the little one and the big one. 44 was the biggest one they had. I was selling for like $130,000, $135,000, and now that boat is $400,000. It's just gone crazy, and the 44s were, oh, probably $175,000, I suppose.

JE: I bought a Carver from you.

JM: You did.

JE: But also the markets around Grand Lake, people had money at that time, didn't they? And so you were living in the middle of a pretty prosperous community.

JM: You know, that's exactly right, but I don't know that I've ever sold all the years I've been in business over maybe 5 or 6 boats that people actually paid cash for. The financing was so easy on these things that they were doing 20, 25-year financing with not much down and really low interest rates, and that helped a lot, but people were hungry for the recreation.

JE: Do you still have Carver today?

JM: No, Carver went belly up a couple of years ago in '09 or ‘10, and they've reorganized, but they're not what they used to be at all. They've only got 2 boats and the parent company really screwed a lot of people in that bankruptcy. It was a bad deal.

Chapter 10 – 8:30
Risk Taker

John Erling (JE): You had expansion to Texoma.

John Mullen (JM): We did. Carver—the Carver dealer down there got in trouble on Texoma. When would that have been, '96, '97?

They asked me if I'd go down there and do that market, and I said yes, so I put a facility in—just a sales facility. I did not own the marina at the Catfish Bay Marina on the Oklahoma side of Texoma.

Built new docks down there. It had an airport, which is really convenient for me, so I fly, so I could fly in there. And we did real well down there. We doubled the size of our facility down there.

Then the powers that be at Carver decided I needed to be in Texas on the Texas side of that lake. I said, "I don't need to be on the Texas side of that lake. This is a destination point. They come over here, they're on my turf. We sell them new boats. We're selling more boats than anybody you've got, and you need to leave me alone and let me stay here."

"Well, we're going to put a dealer in Texas if you don't go over there."

JE: What was their thinking? Why did they need to?

JM: I don't know. Because this guy, the president of Carver, they just were smarter than everybody because he was the president of Carver. He knew how to build boats, but didn't know a damn thing about selling them.

So they came down and the national sales manager said, "Man, you need to do this thing because they're gonna put somebody in here," and he kind of got me off in the corner.

I said, "It's not gonna work. It's working great. You guys can't build boats fast enough for me."

Anyway, long story short, they made me move and I moved over to Grandpappy Point Marina and I also had to put a store—I put a highway store in Lewisville.

I said, "You can't sell Carvers off the road. They have to be floating in a slip." Anyway, I did all that and that lasted a couple of years and I was losing a lot of money every month and I finally just folded my tent and came home. It didn't work. I told them it wouldn't work, and why they wanted to fix something that wasn't broke—I mean, my deal was really soaring at that time.

JE: And if they'd left you alone—

JM: —still'd been there. Still would have been there. Absolutely would have still been there.

JE: Wow. When did you get your pilot's license? How old were you?

JM: Well, I think I was 30, maybe. I was in '77. Yeah, we bought the house in Westport in '77 and moved out there and it had an airstrip. And I told Velma, I said, "I'm gonna get an airplane now and learn to fly since we've got an airport here at the house."

Just joking, but one of our neighbors had a plane and took me up. And I bought an airplane and actually flew for a year, didn't get my license. Bought a brand new Cessna from over in Cleveland. They were the Cessna dealer over at Cleveland Airport. I found out that this Piper Comanche, this used one they had, was a lot faster—I had to be fast.

So I sold the Cessna and bought this Comanche, and it was a complex airplane. And I flew it a year, didn't get my license. And I had insurance, and the insurance company called like, I don't know, a day or a week before and said, "Your insurance is going to be due in a week or tomorrow" or something.

I said, "Yeah."

They said, "You got your license?"

"No."

"We're not going to renew your insurance unless you get your license." And I had passed my written test a year or two earlier. So I went over to Oklahoma City and took my checkride and got my license.

JE: Well, why didn't you get your license sooner than that?

JM: I don't know. I was just flying, and I don't know if I thought I couldn't do it, but my instructor was kind of always a good guy, just never there, and he would have some guy that worked for him fly with me.

But I'll never forget I went over to get my license and this old FAA designee said, "Well, what'd you fly over here in, son?"

I said, "A Comanche."

He said, "A Comanche?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "A 180?"

I said, "No, it's a 260."

"You flew over here in a 260 Comanche to get your license to take a checkride?"

I thought, "Oh hell, what did I do?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He stood there a minute, looked at me, he said, "That's a lot of airplane for a student."

I said, "Yes, sir, but I've been flying it for a year."

And he said, "Well, come on, let's go see how good you can fly it." And that guy spent an extra hour with me that day and taught me so much stuff that—it was a deal, just natural step, but it was a good checkride. I got my license and I came home feeling good about it. So...

JE: But the use of airplanes was helpful in your business.

JM: Yeah, in '90, after I bought Thunder Bay, I was using the airplane flying around to different lakes and soliciting and selling and calling on people, but I guess it was in '95 or '96, I bought my first twin-engine airplane.

Didn't have an instrument rating or a multi-engine rating. Guy that worked for me helped me buy the airplane. Cary Friedman, I don't know if you remember him or not. He worked for me. He runs Bell Aviation in Carolina now.

But anyway, I bought a Cessna 421 and started taking people to the factory to look at boats—to Carver, to Bluewater, to wherever the factories were. And we were also using the plane to bring people into the marina to look at boats or flying our technicians out to Florida or wherever we had sold big boats to service the boats.

And out of all the trips, I paid for that 421 in a couple of months by deals that business people that could take off a day, but they couldn't go 2 or 3 days and they weren't going to come up and look at boats. I'd come into Tulsa, pick them up, we'd take off to the factory, go up there, sell them a boat and have them home in time for supper or the opener bid, and some of them had restaurants and they had to be back at 5:00.

I'll never forget. And I only missed one deal out of all those trips I made in the airplane. And then the internet came along and got real popular and kind of spoiled my deal. (Laughing)

JE: (Laughing) It's interesting as you look back how groundwork was laid for you. You made decisions and you had no idea how it was gonna benefit you.

JM: Yeah, I shot from the hip an awful lot.

JE: You're a risk taker, to say the least. I suppose that way you would describe yourself?

JM: Right. Yeah.

JE: And you've been out there hanging sometimes, many times.

JM: I've said, knowing what I know now, I probably wouldn't do it again, but like I said, I didn't know I couldn't do it.

So many people—I didn't have a textbook. I didn't have a rule book. Car dealerships, they're a sophisticated organization and everybody thinks that we've got all these holdbacks like cars do.

We don't, there's no holdbacks. There's no secrets. You just—and people think that the factories furnish these boats for us. Well, hell, everybody'd be a boat dealer if that was the case! You have to buy the boats. You got to pay for them before they leave and you got to get them in here. Now we're buying boats out of France.

JE: Another tough time for you, I think it was, was it 2009, the recession. And you had tough times then in the marina industry?

JM: Yeah, it took its toll on the marine industry. It was awful. That's when Carver—we handled Carver, Marquis, Four Winns, and Larson boats. They were all Jenmar companies. And Jenmar filed bankruptcy in, I think it was '09, I can't remember, it's been a blur.

And we had, oh, I don't know, $15 to $18 million worth of inventory and no manufacturer. And then two weeks later, Baja, Fountain, and Donzi filed bankruptcy, and we had all three of those lines. And it was a struggle.

I mean, it was really a struggle because our competitors helped us out a lot. They say, "Oh, you don't want to buy anything from Ugly John's. They don't have a warranty. Their manufacturers are gone."

But we got rid of them. We sold a lot of boats for less than we paid for them, but we got through it and still here, we're gonna stay here.

JE: (Laughing)

JM: Just stubborn, I guess.

Chapter 11 – 8:08
Advice to the Young

John Erling (JE): In 2009, many of us who live at Grand Lake remember the infamous ice storm, and what did that do to your marina?

John Mullen (JM): Well, it didn't do a lot of damage. The people getting the ice off the roofs did more damage with axes, chopping holes through the roofs to—you got to get up there and get the ice off. Lost some slip renters over it. They got scared, obviously.

But then in 2011 when we had the 23-inch snowstorm overnight, the first night of the boat show. That destroyed, completely destroyed the marina.

We lost 90% of our slip renters, obviously, and had—I don't know, we had 8 or 10 sunken boats in the marina, big boats.

We're in the big boat business and that's what we had. A lot of the people, it was the recession, everybody was having a hard time and a lot of people were so glad to get that insurance check. They didn't want another boat. They just wanted out.

JE: You could be given to dark days and depression and all that. Do you count yourself a positive, always upbeat, or yes, it does get you down?

JM: No, it gets me down sometimes. It does. You gotta be a cheerleader, but sometimes it's tough to come in and smile and say, "This is all good," when your marina is laying there and there's—I guess I'm just lucky I get all the short straws.

JE: But through it all, you're sitting here still a very successful boat dealer.

JM: Yeah, we—for whatever it's worth, we were the largest boat dealer in the state, I guess, for a while, which that doesn't get you anything. That and a couple of dollars will get you a cup of coffee, but I'm proud of what little I've done, my accomplishments and—I don't know. Maybe I should have got out a long time ago, but it's been fun and it's just something I liked.

JE: Let's talk just a little bit here about a passion you have. You've had a passion for boats, but you had a passion for cars. And we're sitting in this—what I want to call, it is a museum in Catoosa. We're actually recording as if we were in a soda fountain bar back in the '50s. And so we have this huge building with how many cars am I looking at out here?

JM: Probably 60, I suppose. I don't know, 60, 65. I don't know. I haven't counted them.

JE: And you've been collecting these cars over many years. And you had them here and there and one thing led to another and you bought this building and now you have these beautiful cars. Tell us about some of them, because earlier we walked through and you knew exactly how many miles a car had and many of them not restored, but in original condition. So a little bit about what you have here.

JM: I've always been performance-minded like racing. I've raced cars, boats, everything you can race. I just got to make a little money and wanted a car like I had when I was a kid, my first car, and then I wanted one like I couldn't have when I was a kid, and one thing led to another.

They're all old muscle cars, meaning performance cars, big engines, and most of them are 4-speeds or 3-speeds. I don't like them if they don't have a clutch. I'm not crazy about automatics. But the majority of them are unrestored original low mileage cars.

I've got cars in here from the '60s that has 3,000 miles on them or 4,000 original miles with original paint, original convertible tops, etc.

JE: So this is a good way for you to come away from it all too, isn't it?

JM: I come down here. I sit right here on the stool a lot of time to just look. I don't know, I just enjoy it. The soda fountain, everything in here works. I can make you a Cherry Coke or chocolate malt or whatever. Everything runs, everything drives.

JE: And many, many artifacts you have around here. It's like it's a Route 66 place. As a matter of fact, some of these artifacts would belong there.

JM: And that's the whole theme is Route 66, '60s. The cars are all '50s and '60s model cars. There's a couple of older—I've got a '32 Ford. Most of them are '50s anyway.

JE: Well, with the business and the cars and all and the restoration of automobiles, you've had a good time. You're having fun, aren't you?

JM: Yes, I'm having fun and we deal in airplanes. We got a few airplanes. We buy and sell a few airplanes.

JE: What's your advice to students who are interested in business or they're in college and going out in the world? What would be your advice to them?

JM: I'm living proof that you can do anything if you set your mind, if you want to bad enough. I hear people say, "You can't do it." If they like it, if it's a dream, they need to do it. They need to pursue it because there's always another day. If it doesn't work, you can do something else. But I still believe in just hard work. You got to roll your sleeves up and deal with things. You just have to do it. There's not many things that a human can't do if they want it bad enough. So my advice is if they see something they want to do and they like it, and it's a passion, they'll more than likely succeed at it.

JE: Yeah, very good. Well, thank you for sharing this story with us. It's very interesting, lots of the ups and downs. A lot of people wouldn't have wanted to have done it, but you've lost sleepless nights, I'm sure.

JM: A lot of ‘em.

JE: A lot of sleepless nights. Let me just say this about Chris. I've dealt with him before, and he's really good, and I've told you that, but he was talking about you one day and he says, "I've known a lot of people in business," he says, "but I've never known anybody who's more driven than my father is." And what an example you have set to him and to Jeremy.

JM: Well, that's good to hear because they haven't told me that. (Laughing)

JE: Yeah, well, there you have it. Now you know.

JM: Yeah, now I know. I know—those boys, like I said, when Chris was—when it was time for him to get out of OSU, I couldn't wait because I had just had it with employees and salespeople. It's tough to get good people when you're remote. If you're in town, it's a lot easier, and being in the seasonal business, you have to make hay while the sun shines. You have to do it during season. We've got 3 months, 3 or 4 months to make our year's earnings.

JE: But the whole thing that drives this, and I'm interested in other people in business—you're a natural-born salesman. And you're nodding your head now because you know that now. You didn't know it until all of a sudden early on you made a boat deal and then another one, and then you realized, "Well, maybe I have a knack for selling boats." You're just a naturally born salesman.

JM: It was something I loved. I wanted to—like I said, when I started, I just wanted to make the next race and I had to sell a boat to do that. Ron Shirley came out to my store there in Turley after the druggist put me in the little 1,200-square-foot store.

And I told you my brother-in-law Leroy helped me put a floor in the old garage at home. When I got to the store in Turley, I had to call Leroy again, and we took a chainsaw and cut the back out of the building and put an old sliding barn door in it.

And my wife and I painted the floors and the walls, and I traded a guy that did acoustical stuff some boat parts for his race boat to do my ceiling, and we just did a lot of bartering and a lot of work. My wife and I did the highway in this building here.

We're the ones that put the—I mean, and me, I did all the stainless work in here. We just work.

JE: All right.

JM: OK, John, thank you very much. I'm flattered that you invited me.

JE: Absolutely. Yeah.