

Ed Malzahn

His wisdom and guidance nurtured Ditch Witch into a competitor in the global marketplace.

Chapter 1 - 0:47

Introduction

Announcer: It all started in a blacksmith's shop in Perry, Oklahoma. It was in the late 1940s when Ed Malzahn observed workmen digging trenches by hand. At the same time, he noticed equipment used for major utility lines, which could not be used for smaller residential service lines. Ed's idea of building a compact trenching machine replacing pick and shovel work was born in 1948. Today, more than half of the world's trenching machines are known as Ditch Witch. *FORTUNE* magazine has twice honored the trencher as one of the best products manufactured in the United States. Ditch Witch continues to be manufactured in Perry, Oklahoma. Listen now to the inventor of Ditch Witch Ed Malzahn tell his story on VoicesofOklahoma.com

Chapter 2 - 6:16

Cherokee Strip

John Erling: Today's date is April 14, 2011. My name is John Erling. Ed, would you state your full name please?

Ed Malzahn: My legal name is Gus Edwin George Malzahn, but rarely do I sign it that way. Usually I just sign it as Edwin. Some places maybe Gus Edwin Malzahn with George being left out. However, to some in the family, my nickname is George.

JE: Who were you named after?

EM: Gus was my uncle's name-my father's brother. George was my mother's father. I certainly wasn't privy to the conversation that took place in naming me, but there must have been some sort of compromise because both of those individuals were still alive at the time. Where they got Edwin, if it was revealed to me I don't recall it. I've been called Edwin all of my life.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

EM: I was born July 3, 1921. That would make me 89 and I will be 90 on July 3rd.

JE: Where were you born?

EM: Here in Perry, Oklahoma about a mile and half from here.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

EM: At the home of Ditch Witch on West Fir Avenue within the city limits of Perry.

JE: We're in your nice corner office here with all of these windows.

EM: We've enlarged the office several times. I have reserved the corner office with these huge windows so I can see traffic going by on Fir Avenue. Everything that leaves here and comes here, comes and goes by Fir Avenue, so that gives me a good window on activity, including employees who come to work late. (Laughter)

EM: The point being, employees know that...so... (Laughter)

JE: So they drive by and they think Ed's watching us right now.

EM: Yeah, Ed may be in the front window.

JE: Let's go back to your grandfather, your grandfather's name and the story of where he came from.

EM: My grandfather came from Germany. He and my grandmother somehow escaped the activity in Germany. The family story was that they were married aboard a ship on the way to the United States.

JE: What year was it that they came over here?

EM: Before the turn of the century.

JE: And his name was?

EM: Carl Frederick Malzahn. I didn't know him and it never really was discussed in the family much. Family history just was not an activity in our family at all. We lived in the current day. I grew up in the difficult Depression time, so those remembrances were long in the background and were not ever a part of any family recollection.

JE: Where did he settle then in the United States?

EM: Initially, he and another group of Germans as I understood it settled in Maple Lake, Minnesota. My father was born there along with most of the rest of his brothers and sisters. I don't really remember how long they stayed there, but it was some time to the point my father who was as I recall the third or fourth out of seven children, was six or seven years old. They moved to Oklahoma for various reasons. From family discussions and recollections about it, it was because of the climate and maybe opportunity. This area of the country was overflowing with stories of opportunity and free land and activity. The family story is that my grandmother thought Minnesota was too cold in the wintertime.

JE: Was your grandfather a blacksmith?

EM: My grandfather was a blacksmith. Somehow or another he learned it in Germany so he had that trade that he continued here in the United States.

JE: So he would have moved to Oklahoma in 1902?

EM: Yes, that's my recollection.

JE: Do you know why your grandfather settled in this area?

EM: When I asked the question my father would say, "Granddad just put a finger on the map and said, 'How about here?'" That's the most I ever got out of him. At that time, the second layer of ownership of at least some of the lands that were given in the Cherokee Strip Run were happening and so land was fairly cheap. He actually came and bought a farm. A farm was where he wanted to raise the kids, but blacksmithing was his means of making a living. He never was a farmer although he owned a farm.

JE: He set up his blacksmith shop right in Perry?

EM: That's right. His farm was about seven miles south of here, and believe it or not they walked from town to home.

JE: On a daily basis?

EM: The story was he would stay here and work during the week and walk home on the weekends.

JE: And he had two sons?

EM: Yes and four daughters.

JE: The sons' names were?

EM: Gus was one and then my father was Charles.

JE: Charles was your father's name and then your mother's name was?

EM: It was Bertha.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

EM: I had a sister who is younger than I.

JE: Is she still living?

EM: No. She passed away 10 or 12 years ago—she was the dean of women at Central State University.

JE: What was her name?

EM: Virginia Lamb.

JE: What are your earliest recollections about being around a blacksmith's shop?

EM: I probably was 6 or 7 or something of that sort. I had a cousin, the son of my Uncle Gus who was 3 or 4 years older than me. So I was allowed to at least spend some time with him in the shop area and we would tinker around some. He would do the tinkering and I would do the watching.

JE: Were you naturally really intrigued with it?

EM: I was intrigued but I didn't have any skills. Whatever skills I had came to light by the time I was 10 or 11. I began to enjoy particularly woodworking because that was something

I could whittle with and work with and my folks trusted me enough with that and actually bought me a few shop tools to where I could make things at that time.

JE: Your recollection of your first elementary school, it was here in Perry, obviously.

EM: The school system was already pretty well developed. They were adequate buildings at the time. Even from kindergarten, I remember I had nice classrooms and nice teachers. Class size was 20 or 25 students and sometimes we would have two or three classes to a grade.

JE: Do you think you were a good student and interested in the subject matter?

EM: I'd probably like to brag about it, but I was probably an average student. I probably had an interest in physical things more than I did literature and spelling and that sort of thing. But mathematics and physical things, I loved the science classes and that sort of thing by the time I got to junior high or high school. Those were things I could ace, so I liked those. Math was fairly easy for me. Literature and book reports were the sort of things that I would have to be disciplined to do.

Chapter 3 - 4:52

The Depression

John Erling: In 1931 you were 10 years old and we think about the Dust Bowl Days generally from about 1930 to 1936 maybe longer in some areas. Do you have any recollection of that?

Ed Malzahn: Oh sure. In addition to it being the Dust Bowl, those were Depression times as far as certainly this part of the country was concerned. I can recall welfare lines and people lining up to get something to eat and to take home and have. I can recall about our own family laying out the change on the table to see what we've got for the week. Even though my father had a blacksmith shop that didn't mean everybody paid for what they had done, or had done what they needed to have done. Those were tough times. In addition to being Dust Bowl days, when you would hang a wet towel over the window to get a little humidity through the room or to keep the dust out...

JE: Clouds of dust?

EM: Yes, you could see them coming over the horizon. Here would be a cloud of dust yes and so it meant come in the house kids and let's close the windows. It was hot and stuffy and tiresome. Well, we could open it a little bit, but we'd have to hang a wet towel across the window.

JE: Your father then continued the blacksmith shop from his father in Perry with the Depression and Dust Bowl it was tough to maybe eek out a living?

EM: Well, prior to that during the 1920s and early 1930s this area was privileged to have at least some oil development, some oil activity. So in addition to the agricultural activity, there was oil development. That too was pressed for financial difficulties but there was activity. So underlying the farming support that my father sought and gave, they did develop a service business to the oil industry. They were hard-pressed too. They didn't pay their bills. So even though you would do the work for them it didn't mean that you necessarily got paid this Friday or at the end of the month sometimes. You had to go with your hand out and say, "Please pay your three-month old bill." That was the 1930s.

JE: Was that when the blacksmith shop transitioned into a machine shop?

EM: The blacksmith shop transitioned into a machine shop during the '20s because there were the early developments of the oil fields in this area.

JE: While there were many families who obviously left this area and went to California, did you sense that?

EM: I did not. Those were stories. I do not recall any mass migration of people in Perry, although there may have been. At that age of my life it wasn't that impressive, you know you live in kind of a little world of your own and a friend of yours might move away but you don't ask or question why. If you did, you forgot it quickly.

JE: So there was that oil business going and that sustained the people. There was an influx too of people coming in, the roughnecks and all to...

EM: Oh yes, there was an influx in population. There were so-called oil booms, which meant one guy got a discovery well and everybody around thought I'm not going to let him get it all. So there would be sporadic activities and there have been a number of those in this county. Still it's conversation in the coffee shop. Hey have you heard, so and so leased his property to somebody, well, what did he get? That's stuff that's going on today. It's a reenactment really because some of that has been passed over during the years and we have different technology now. We are not necessarily looking for the oil flow into the tank, we don't mind going down and getting it.

JE: We think way back then about the gushers and we see the pictures about that. You father had land. Did he have a discovery on his land? My grandfather did. He had a discovery of what later became known as the Lucine Field. That would have been in the early '30s, 1932 or 1933 somewhere in that neighborhood, really when it was tough times. Oil, as I recall, was a dollar or two a barrel, even that was great at the time. It was something that you had that you didn't have before. That would have been the southwest part of the county on my mother's father's farm. That part of the county gave some stimulus to the farmers that were having a very difficult time down in there and found themselves with some royalty money. They were going about the county buying a better piece of land than the one that the oil was discovered on. That land down there was marginal as far as

farming was concerned. I reminisce a bit about the half a dozen or more of those farmers down there. All of the ones we knew, immediately headed to some of the bottom areas of a creek someplace and bought a farm that in their minds they thought they would never own, but they had some oil money and they bought it. They began to be competitive. My grandfather got very mad at a very good friend of his because he bought a piece of land that he wanted. (Laughter) And so there was some animosity that developed.

JE: Were you ever eyewitness to those gushers?

EM: I wouldn't say gushers. I never saw one go over the rig. But I've watched them open the valve and let it flow a little bit so we could see what was happening. I wasn't witness to it but certainly I was there before and after.

Chapter 4 - 6:30

Woodworking

John Erling: Perry had a population then of what?

Ed Malzahn: Whenever it was they began to take the first serious census, which would have been in the late 1930s sometime, the city had a benchmark of 5,000 people. I think if you had less than that you were a town. Perry wanted to be a city. So, jokingly we said they went to the cemetery and looked on tombstones to make sure he was alive or dead after the first of the year somehow in order to have 5,000. I don't think we've bragged about Perry having a population much different than that over the last 50 years.

JE: In 1931 you were 10, what would have been a form of entertainment? Was radio a big thing in your life?

EM: No, it was coming around I was a teenager. My grandfather had a radio since he had money. We didn't have a radio at home. At that time, he lived on a farm and it was battery operated. It just ran on a 6-volt battery. He didn't have electricity. That was a big thing.

JE: So what did you do for entertainment as a young boy in Perry?

EM: Young boys don't need much imagination to have entertainment. Of course, I liked to make things. I made what would today be called a skateboard, but I made it out of a skate. I took my skate apart and nailed it on a 2 x 4 and made a skateboard.

JE: This was in the early 1930s? (Laughter)

EM: Yeah. I used the sidewalk out in front of the house, which had bumps in it. I would fall and skin my knees.

JE: And if you had only patented that back then. (Laughter)

EM: Yeah. I was a teenager before I got my first bicycle. I wasn't large for my age but somehow my folks bought me a 24" bicycle. About that time 27" bicycles came along and I was terribly embarrassed by driving a girls bicycle. But I had to do that as long as I rode a bicycle. I think I quit about my sophomore or junior year in high school. I quit riding a bicycle because I was embarrassed to have to ride a 24" one.

JE: About your father, was he anxious to teach you?

EM: I think my father taught me by leaving me alone and making things available to me, I can't recall. He must have shown me because somehow I learned how to be a blacksmith and certainly to run a lathe and to weld. Somehow I learned those things, but I don't really recall him leaning over my shoulder but he must have. At that age you know, I thought I was doing it all myself, instant knowledge. But yeah, he taught me to be a blacksmith and to be able to heat treat metal to make a chisel. Actually one of my first activities was to start the forge fire in the morning. That was one of the first things that I can recall that he taught me. Something a blacksmith has to do every morning is to start the forge fire. I got to learn how to do that and that was a big mark as far as I was concerned very early. Then, it wasn't long until I was somehow learning to forge a piece of metal. He bought me some woodworking tools that we put in the basement. We made a jigsaw out of an old saw machine. I took a saw machine and took a needle out of it and put a jigsaw blade in there. I turned it upside down and managed to make a jigsaw out of it. That was the sort of thing that somehow I had the wherewithal that if something was lying there I would make use of it and do it. I did have a woodworking lathe in the basement of our house. I learned how to work wood about the same time as metal, but the wood I could do without help and assistance. It was something I could do myself, so woodworking was my first skilled activity I guess. Not too long after that came welding and machine shop.

JE: So that would have been about ages?

EM: I was about 9 or 10 years old when I was woodworking. It was before I was a Boy Scout. By the time I got to be a Boy Scout I could do all of the woodworking stuff.

JE: People in your family must have said, wow this guy is going to invent something.

EM: No, not at all just get out of our road (way). (Laughter) Leave me alone Ed. (Laughter)

JE: Out of elementary you were into junior high school and high school here in Perry.

EM: Yes.

JE: Do you recall some of your high school days and what you were interested in?

EM: I enjoyed the science classes and chemistry. At that point in time they had chemistry lab and you got to deal with a lot of chemicals in the lab. I learned how to may hydrogen sulfide on the sly. I liked those kinds of things, math and manual training. I loved manual training because I could ace it. I tried athletics and I never was that good that I made the

teams, although I had a uniform. I did do band all through high school but I never got any further than fourth chair.

JE: What did you play?

EM: Trumpet. My difficulty was I got children of my own and I got to bragging to my children about how good I was, trying to encourage them to do the same. By that time, I had sold my trumpet much earlier because I needed the money. Some guys out here found that trumpet and gave it back to me in front of a large crowd in an auditorium and asked me to play it. (Laughter) To my salvation they had put a valve in backwards so there was no way to play it. I would blow and nothing would come out, so I blamed it on the valve but thank goodness it was in that way. I have tried to play it since and it doesn't sound good at all. (Laughter) So humming is okay, and I have sung in a choir, but instrument playing is way down on my list of skills, if at all.

JE: You graduated from high school in what year?

EM: 1938.

JE: You had a movie theater here?

EM: Yes.

JE: Do you recall going to that and any movies you saw and movie stars?

EM: Yeah. The theater had an upstairs, the opera house. I recall being in there and seeing a silent movie where the lady played the piano down in front. When the horses ran fast she would play the piano faster. Then the early movies, the first...

JE: Talkies I guess they called them.

EM: Yes, right. They were in a place downstairs from that. That was built later after that opera house, which was called the annex. They made it into a theater. They took what was once a grocery store or something and made a theater out of it. It was a great step up from the gal playing the piano to where you had voice coming from the screen.

JE: That was right across the street from your courthouse here.

EM: Yes, it was right on the square. At that time a lot of towns that were surveyed by the Corps of Engineers in the Cherokee Strip were built on the same plan to where there would be a government square in the middle of the community. The Corps of Engineers laid those out for Enid and what would later be Newkirk and Ponca City and the rest of them. They have sort of disappeared along the line. But certainly Enid and Perry are characteristic as are some other towns in the Cherokee Strip of the Corps of Engineers putting government offices in that so-called government acre.

Chapter 5 - 6:02**Pearl Harbor**

John Erling: In high school, you were probably very active working in your father's business?

Ed Malzahn: I wouldn't think of it as being active or working in the business. It would be something I would have to do, like clean up. I overhauled an automobile in my dad's shop, a Ford Model-A touring car. I took the engine out and laid it on the floor and pulled it all apart and put it all back together and made it run. But to do any work for customers, dad had hired people to do that sort of thing.

JE: So you graduated from high school and then where do you go?

EM: My folks wanted to do the best they could for me, so they sent me to a military academy. I had visions all through high school that I wanted to be a military person. I wanted to be in the Corps of Engineers. At that point in history the Corps of Engineers were the ones who were building bridges and there were new things coming on in aviation. There was real engineering activity in the period of the 1930s, as far as I was concerned, in the military. I had a *Popular Mechanics* magazine, which was the magazine of the time. I would see those things and I envisioned that I could have a career with the Corps of Engineers. I liked the Boy Scouts. I liked that kind of discipline. They enrolled me in a military school and they really had to dig in their pocket to do that.

JE: Where was that school?

EM: Wentworth Military Academy in Lexington, Missouri. I went my freshman year of college there. The sales pitch they give to get enrollees there was that you could go two years there and you can come out and be enlisted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army. I thought, well, that's a career path. So I went one year and did okay. I went to enroll for my second year and I was discussing what my plans were with my counselor and he said, "Son, you'll never make it. You flunked a physical when you got here." I said, "What?" I had gone a whole year without having passed the physical. So, I said to heck with this. It was expensive. My folks had gone in a hole to send me there. So I came back and went to OSU then.

JE: So, did they kind of lead you astray on this?

EM: I don't know. I don't want to point any fingers at all. It was a good experience. I have no fault about it at all except it was a major career change as far as I was concerned. I look back with good memories,

JE: So then you decided to go to...

EM: OSU because it was right next door here. I can't recall whether I picked it out as a second alternative. It just seemed like a good choice at the time because it was convenient and I could bring my laundry home on the weekend. I didn't do that but in my mind I thought,

that's great. Or I could come home and get some food replenishment for the week. I lived in the dorm though, so I had food and shelter.

JE: It was called Oklahoma A&M at the time

EM: Yes.

JE: That would have been 1939? Did you know then that you wanted to be an engineer?

EM: Sure. That to me was a no-brainer. Engineering was it. I had already made that career choice. When I went to military school I wanted to work with the Corps of Engineers.

JE: Let's talk about December 7, 1941. Do you remember the day when they announced the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

EM: Yes. There was a group of us in the dorm and we all ran to a radio to follow the news report. If I recall it seems like it was a Sunday afternoon.

JE: You would have been 20 years old at that time. Do you remember in the days following that, did students drop out of school to join the military?

EM: I think more people were worried about it than I was because I knew I was 4F. I had been rejected, so I wasn't about to run and enlist. I was living in Cordell Hall then, which is the hall that backs up to the west of the stadium. I had a choice room, where we could sit in my room and see the football games. We didn't have to buy a ticket. We could watch it from my room.

JE: During those years there was rationing. Did you experience any of that?

EM: Oh sure. I was in school at the time certainly. At that point in time none of us had a car, so it didn't make a difference as far as fuel and that sort of thing. I don't recall it hurting me particularly, but I do remember certainly the shortages of things and certainly gasoline. There was a point in time during the war, dad had an old car that I cabbaged onto (took possession of) but I couldn't get any gas to drive it. But I did get it to Stillwater and left it parked because I didn't have a gas ticket. If I could get enough gas to come home, why dad had to give me some gas from some of his trucks. So I would get at least I could get half a tank from him once in awhile.

JE: You were very much in the midst of your schooling and you were at Oklahoma A&M. What kind of life did you have there?

EM: OSU campus became militarized in those couple of years. There were large military groups on campus, including the Navy WAVES. As a college boy I particularly recognized that.

JE: Why were they there?

EM: A lot of young women were going to school. They had military training classes for most of the branches of the military on campus at that time. I remember the WAVES particularly because by that time I had joined a fraternity because it was a good place to eat. The cafeteria had gotten to be pretty bad I thought at the time. I had a friend who was a fraternity brother and he said, "Why don't you come over? We've got good eats over at

our house and it isn't going to cost you much more than living in a dorm." So I did. I was in there maybe a semester and a half or so and then the military took over our fraternity house and put WAVES in there, (laughter) girls in our fraternity house. So I moved out into an apartment.

JE: The famous basketball coach Henry Iba, was he there yet?

EM: I wasn't a big athletic fan at that time, but yes, that was going on but those were low-key on campus. The athletics took a back seat—all of the sports did at that point in time. Other than exercise as far as military was concerned you didn't see a lot of athletics on campus in my recollection. It may have been there but it certainly didn't stick with me.

Chapter 6 - 5:36

OSU

John Erling: In your senior year you also did some teaching?

Ed Malzahn: Yes, OSU had taken contracts for training employees for the Douglas Aircraft plants in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. They taught a number of classes mainly to do with aircraft maintenance, building, support and that sort of thing. Part of the engineering curriculum was shop courses and most engineers had to take a shop course or two just to keep them connected to who their ultimate customers might be at some point in time. So OSU had a small foundry on campus with a machine shop and a pattern-making shop and a welding shop all in one building. It was situated where the new engineering building is. The machine shop had a pretty good outlay of machine tools. Of course, I took those kinds of courses. Some of them were elective and some were required. I took as many of those elective courses as I could, because I could ace them. I even took one course called metallurgy, which was a glorified blacksmithing shop class. I could ace all of those courses so I took them. But by the time I got to my senior year, a lot of activity on campus had taken the war effort. I don't know now whether they asked me or whether I looked for it, but we made a connection. They needed instructors for those shops and so I was contacted to teach machine shop. I applied for the job and got an opening from midnight 'til 8 o'clock in the morning. I thought that fit just right. I was a senior and that fit right in with my schoolwork. There was no time for studying but at least it fit as far as I was concerned. I began to teach very simple things about how to use a file and how to square a block with a micrometer and that sort of thing. I would ultimately graduate them up to where they could run a machine or tool of some kind. That was an adult, good paying job.

My schoolwork suffered some. Some of my courses I just barely passed. Mary, my future wife was in school at the same grade level and was having difficulty financing school. The shingle was hung out that they needed people to go to work in these plants and so she put her application in and wound up in my machine class one night. Almost all of my class trainees were adult men who were 4F or housewives who were trying to do their part and here this young lady showed up in my class one night and I said, "How lucky can I be?" (Laughter) And so that was it.

JE: And you gave her straight A's?

EM: No, I flunked her. If I couldn't get them out in three months at the most while then they just weren't for that kind of activity. If I passed them they would go to Oklahoma City or Tulsa to work. I didn't want her to go there and with the gas rationing that would pretty much cut our romance in two and so I flunked her. It came up again in six weeks or so and so I flunked her again and so they called her in and fired her. (Laughter) They said, "You're not going to make it." Anyway, by that time we were already committed to one another.

JE: When did you get married?

EM: We got married in June.

JE: Then you graduated about that same time?

EM: Yes, because of that senior year and as much work as I did, I lacked three hours to graduate. So I took a summer course to graduate in August.

JE: So you got married and how many children did you have?

EM: Three—a boy and two girls. The oldest, my son Don, went to OSU and got his doctorate in engineering. I thought, boy, I've got a good candidate for heir but he said, "I'd like to teach for awhile. I like the campus." He went to work for Wichita State University teaching engineering. He's old enough to retire there now, but he likes teaching engineering, so he is staying. I have a daughter Pam who is Tiffany's mother. She and her husband live on the ranch that Tiffany was raised on northeast of town here about four miles. They have a very large Angus cattle operation. Then I have a daughter, Lisa, who lives in New Mexico in a town called Truth or Consequences. Have you ever heard of that?

JE: Yes.

EM: She lives in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico and has a horse operation there and raises riding horses. Her three children all live in Phoenix. They are all getting started in business.

JE: How many grandchildren do you have?

EM: Nine. Tiffany has twins a year old and then my son Don that teaches at Wichita State has three daughters. The last one is graduating college this year and is going to graduate school.

JE: You graduated and you were married, then did you join your father in the business?

EM: Actually I graduated and went down to Douglas Aircraft and said, "Here I am." You see, I was already kind of sub-employed by them—although I was being paid by the government,

it was through a contract with them. I went down for an engineering job and they said, “These planes have been designed and we need somebody to make them.” So they stuck me in the machine shop because I had the skill. A few months of that I said, “To heck with this. My dad needs me back home.” So I came home.

JE: And that was the Charles Machine Works?

EM: Dad, by that time he had opened a machine shop, which was successful—it was good. It was not a major one, but it was a good successful shop. By that time he had taken on some war contracts to make things for the Navy. The contracts were really more than he could handle, so he asked me to come home and help him. So I quit Douglas Aircraft and came home to work for him.

JE: That was a good piece of business for him then?

EM: Well, oilfield was still a big part of his business. Doing government/military work, particularly for the Navy was really beyond his shop’s capability and his capability. He had stretched himself a little far. Some of those were tough deals that we had to work out of. He had committed himself to activities that we weren’t prepared to do.

JE: How did you work out of that?

EM: Oh, we got it worked out. It was just more than he could handle.

JE: So it was a good thing you were there to help.

Chapter 7 - 2:55

Inventing

John Erling: Then somewhere along the line, you got into the invention business.

Ed Malzahn: Dad’s principal activity was oilfield support, but that’s very sporadic. You had quite a bit of time in the shop in which you looked for something to do. That was the opportunity to me to say why don’t we make something that we can work on in our spare time. So we made a number of products and one of them happened to be a trenching machine.

JE: Let’s talk then about the first thing that you created.

EM: I can’t say it was the first, because there were three or four activities going on at the same time, but the big one was a portable oil field derrick. A derrick like they use now, about three or four of them. It was too big of an investment. We had to make them outside because they wouldn’t fit in the shop. The Geronimo was one that just sort of happened really just because of an observation. The need to escape from the top of a derrick was as prevalent then as it is now if there is something that happens on the derrick floor.

The way that it was done back then was just to make sure that there was a wire line attached up there at the work station at about 60' elevation off the floor. You would tie it to something outside with a wire line and you just threw you leg across it and you would slide down. You would use your glove then to retard your descent, which was not particularly safe. So I made a slide with a little break on it and a set of wheels made out of aluminum brass that would not spark. The reason to get down from there quickly was that there was a danger below and it might be escaping gas. That invention became the Geronimo and that was my first marketable product as I recall it.

JE: Did you sell many of those?

EM: Yeah. The problem is you only sell one per drilling derrick. Unless they run over it with a truck or lose it they don't need another one because it moves with the rig. The number of drilling rigs at that point in time was about 1,500 in the Unites States. It has not changed much now. In the United States and Canada now, I read the reports--there are only about 1,600 or 1,700 drilling rigs at any one point in time. So, none of them need more than one Geronimo. The market was a good market, but it was a limited market. It became more of a nuisance than a marketable product as far as we were concerned. I eventually sold it. It did not fit markets that we were developing later. It took different distribution and different marketing and advertising, so I just sold it.

JE: Why did you call it Geronimo?

EM: At that point, that was still during WWII or shortly thereafter and paratroopers, as it was relayed to me, would have to holler some loud sound when they would jump out of an aircraft to get their ears unstopped. One of the things they hollered was "Geronimo!" from the legendary Indian Geronimo that apparently jumped off a wall or something, so the name just stuck.

JE: I think every kid, or boys in particular every time they jumped they would yell, "Geronimo!" I'm sure the whole nation did that.

EM: Yeah.

Chapter 8 - 6:09

Ditch Witch

John Erling: Tell us about Bud Marshall.

Ed Malzahn: Bud Marshall was a local plumber. One of the difficulties in Perry, Oklahoma in putting in a water line is that you need to bury it 18 to 24 inches deep to keep it from

freezing in the wintertime. The summertime is when you put those in. That's sharpshooter and pickaxe time around here. So it would take a man at a dollar and a half or two dollars an hour to dig a trench from the house to the alley. So I thought there ought to be a better way, besides it was hard work. The local plumber said, "Ed, why don't you make a machine?" So I made a machine for him. I had in mind, if Bud Marshall needs one, maybe somebody else does. He never bought it. He always wanted to borrow one I was making some improvements on to improve my product. But I never did sell him one. He quit plumbing before I ever sold him one.

JE: (Laughter) Tell us about this machine.

EM: In retrospect, I may have copied it off of the cistern, which had a water well that brought the water up out of your cistern with a chain and it had some little buckets on it. It was called a cistern pump. I said, "If it works there it ought to work here." In fact, the first time I tried something like that I discovered that making those buckets out of tin doesn't work. You have to make them out of iron and you have to put teeth on them. Regular buckets would not work. The first time I tried to use it, I knew I had to make better buckets, but the chain itself would not work.

JE: Explain a cistern.

EM: That's pretty typical around Perry, Oklahoma. Well water is not very dependable around here. In the early days, most houses had a system of draining the water off the roof through a drain into a hole you dug in the ground that was plastered up like a well. But they were usually anywhere from six to 10 feet in diameter and maybe 10 to 15 feet deep. Some of them were that large. They would be plastered up inside and you put your rain water in there and you had a cistern pump which was a chain with a series of little buckets on it that would go down into the water and elevate it at the top and dump. There are still some areas where you can tell that's where a cistern was. I don't know of there are any cisterns in town anymore. I came across a household the other day where I remembered where one was and it's filled in. It's evident that's where it was because there is still a circle.

JE: But that concept of a chain and these cups, you believe that you applied that then to trench digging?

EM: Yes, sure. It made sense to me to use a chain and cups, although, I wouldn't take full credit for it. There were very large trenching machines that had something similar to it. A chain with some teeth or cups on it, not exactly like that. They would sort of drag the material out of the ground on a dragging (horizontal) elevation as opposed to a vertical elevation.

JE: This machine would probably be used for the process of installing residential utilities?

EM: Strictly. In my area I didn't perceive needing to go over two or two and a half feet deep

and at that point in time, four inches wide was plenty wide. It wasn't long before that was not wide enough, so I made go six inches with the same size of machine.

JE: Did this take some time to perfect this machine?

EM: It took probably a year and a half or two years of afternoons where I didn't have anything to do so I worked on that. Then it got to be, I didn't have time for these other things because I was working on this trencher. (Laughter) After a while I realized this may make some sense and I got to work on it.

JE: Your father was in on this with you?

EM: I may have recruited another shop worker if he didn't have anything to do for a while-to do something for him. But, by that time my dad's health began to fail a little bit. I was not only working on the trencher but I was managing the shop itself.

JE: You finally applied for a patent I suppose?

EM: Yes, I applied for a patent. I guess it was an ego thing. I was naïve as to what patents really were. I guess pride or whatever else stimulates people to apply for patents. Expectations of, man I've got something by the tail here that I don't know how I am going to handle, and as a manner of protection, you apply for a patent. Every inventor, he may think he has some of that, but in retrospect, it's not that big of a deal.

JE: But did you think when you perfected that machine that you had something there that the nation was going to be interested in?

EM: I guess, really I retrospect, maybe so. One of my first ads was in Popular Mechanics magazine, which I was a lifetime subscriber to, even when I was 8 years old Popular Mechanics magazine was my magazine. I found you could put a one-inch ad in there for \$8. I was limited. I knew that I could not sell it to my neighbors, but I thought that maybe I could sell it to somebody that has more money or something. So I ran a one-inch ad in Popular Mechanics magazine.

JE: And what was the price tag for the machine?

EM: Oh, probably \$800 by that time. The engine was probably the most expensive thing, at that point it was about one third of the cost.

JE: What did you name this machine?

EM: First one was called "Ed's Ditcher." By the time I got it to Popular Mechanics magazine I had already named it Ditch Witch because when I tried to put it behind my car and haul it around towns around here I needed some literature. I thought I needed to give the people some literature. But when I ran the ad in Popular Mechanics magazine I thought for sure I would need literature. So, by that time I had already given it a name.

JE: Why did you call it Ditch Witch?

EM: Well, I guess it was the inspiration of an advertising guy who made me a piece of literature. I went to him because they had made me a piece of literature for Geronimo. I went to

him with the idea that I needed a piece of literature because I was going to run this ad in Popular Mechanics magazine, so I needed something. We spent all afternoon. He said, "What do you call it?" I said, "Ed's Ditcher." He said, "That won't work." I said, "How about Gopher or Mole or something like that and we'll put an animal on it for a logo."

JE: He was an advertising man in Tulsa?

EM: Yes, a man by the name of Lewis Brandenburg

JE: And so he came up with the idea of Ditch Witch?

EM: I guess so. He ran it by me and I said, "Okay." Then he came up with the logo—the witch sitting on a shovel and that was it.

JE: So you didn't agonize too much over this?

EM: No. Literature was down on my list. It was one of those necessities—you've got to have it.

JE: So this machine then was first introduced in about 1949 or the late forties?

EM: I worked on it a couple years there in between times, so I don't know. We introduced literature—it probably came along about that time.

JE: Right.

Chapter 9 - 4:37

Dealerships

John Erling: You took out an ad in this national magazine. Did the orders start flowing in right away?

Ed Malzahn: No. My problem was I would get orders from a guy in Kentucky or a guy in California, but I felt that I couldn't just send him a machine. I had to go demonstrate it. They were selling for \$800 or \$900 a piece, so how much demonstrating could I do? I did a few of those and I thought maybe if I demonstrate this one I will make a few more sales here. I made a few of those trips and I decided that's not the way to market this just by nationally advertising it and letting them call me and me sending them a machine. I just didn't think that was going to work. So I began to develop the idea of having a dealer who would take responsibility for that and take enough interest in it. That didn't happen overnight or through any inspiration, it just sort of happened.

JE: So the idea of establishing dealers to market this, that came over a period of time then?

EM: Yes. One of the things that I guess came along in that period of time is that I decided I was not smart enough for all of this marketing. That was way down on my list of things I really enjoyed doing. I was inspired to go get some help. I hired some very, very unique

people in this organization. They were the ones that made this organization. A marketing person, an engineer, a bookkeeper and an accountant—I seemed to collect all of those within a year and a half and they stuck with this organization through the formative years. They were full of inspiration and ideas. I became more of a guardian. I was very fortunate to have half a dozen people who took risk. In retrospect, some of them were reckless, but they went out and did things that I didn't even think of.

JE: Were they people you knew from school? Or did you just?

EM: No. I don't recollect any specific ones like that. One of them I ran an ad for. The marketing guy I ran an ad for. They were all my age, so we related well. I give them credit, those half a dozen people. Each of them had their own abilities and skills. We had one guy who was just a shop person. He ran the shop for a while. We joked because he had a little notebook pad. That was our computer system. He ran the whole shop out of his notebook pad. Those kinds of people are people that are unique.

JE: So this was all still happening in downtown Perry?

EM: Yes, in that period of time, yes.

JE: Who was buying your machines?

EM: Landscapers, plumbers and electricians—all of those people who need to put things under the ground and at that point in time below the frost dam. That got to be a challenge the farther north we went, but we were able to meet it with bigger and better equipment.

JE: At some point here you knew we've got something here.

EM: I wouldn't put it exactly that way. I am sure we felt that way, but I don't know that we ever sat down and said "a-ha" we've got something here. Although, I think there were those in the organization who may have felt that way, certainly marketing people.

JE: But the thing that made it for you is you created this network of dealers?

EM: That was the inspiration of that particular group. The first dealer we had was in Oklahoma City. He was the brother of the person who was our bookkeeper and accountant at that time. He was a guy who was in construction and he was tired of construction work. So he set up a parts department in his garage at his house and had his wife take care of the parts. He was our first dealer. We had others who said, "I want to be your dealer." But they weren't service-minded and they weren't demonstration minded. They said, "I will put one on the floor with your money and if anyone wants to come buy it, I will sell it and then give you your cut." We had those kinds of things to deal with.

JE: The name Ditch Witch soon, or over a period of 10 years became known nationwide.

EM: Since we were the first one to sell that kind of machine to answer that particular market, the name just stuck. I don't know if it was any particular foresight, but it took.

JE: It paved the way for the compact trenching industry.

EM: Yes, to make utility equipment to do—just the market we aimed for, which was urban and

particularly house to the alley, yard work and that sort of thing, no one was doing that. There were certainly big machines to put in sewers and waterlines down the alley and between cities and that sort of thing. They were big ones. Some of our first activities were to downsize or copy what they were doing, but that didn't work. So we had to kind of launch out on our own and develop some things of our own that fit what we wanted to do. But we certainly were the first ones to make a machine to go in somebody's yard. We didn't aim for the large contractor deals. We were aiming for the man who was trying to replace the guy with the shovel.

Chapter 10 - 5:26

Directional Drilling

John Erling: The name Pete Bronner, what does that name mean to your company?

Ed Malzahn: Pete was one of those individuals that just showed up as a welder. Had he been born a generation later, he would have been an excellent engineer. But he was born in a generation in which engineering was done on the shop floor. He was the head of our so-called tooling department. You could tell him what your problem was and if it had to do with mechanical stuff or something he could do in the shop, Pete could do it for you. It's unfortunate that he died at a relatively early age and did not get to complete his lifetime career. But he made a big contribution to some of the early day automation before we had robots. Before robot welding and that sort of thing, Pete had made us robot welders. We did robot welding here long before robots were used on shop floors.

JE: You might explain then to the listener what robot welding is.

EM: Robot welding is to do a job that a hand welder would do. You put a part within the range of the robot, and the robot does what you might have tediously done by hand. It can repeat the same activity over and over and over again, which we were doing by hand at the time. Finally, we had gotten to the point where we could only find women who would do that particular welding activity. It was so tedious and repetitive that a man after a week of it would say, "To heck with this" and would go do something else. So Pete built us some robot machines that would do that.

JE: The concept of horizontal directional drilling, talk to us about that.

EM: To get underneath the driveway or sidewalks when we were trenching somebody's yard, you had to get from one side to the other side. We needed to make a hole from one side to the other, so we developed what is called a Roto® Witch. We did it dry and sometimes

with some lubrication, but it was very, sort of non-guided. You guided it by aiming correctly. There wasn't much guidance to it. Sometimes it came out on the other side of its own choosing. The longer the distance we would go the more hazardous that would be. We thought there ought to be a way that we could control that somehow. We began to develop what's called slant nose technology. That means if we know how it's orientated, if it happens to be going off a little bit and we stop it, and it has that slant face on it, and we push it a bit, it will straighten itself up. So we developed that technology. It was the birthmark for directional drilling in horizontal drilling as we know it in our industry. Now, that's differentiated from horizontal drilling has the oil industry knows it today. We've developed that to some extent considerably further and built on that basic concept to where it's gotten to be a highly technical, sophisticated directional drilling that we do today.

JE: But nobody in the United States was dealing in this procedure, you were the ones here in Perry, Oklahoma?

EM: Yes. I mean it's so simple that most anybody would say "I could've thought of that" or "Why didn't we do that?" But no one was doing it at least commercially.

JE: So that was a machine then that you developed for doing that?

EM: It was a method of using the machine. We already had a tool to drill or push-but they may go in a random direction. Of course another part of that was the development of electronics to determine just where you are in the process, to tell you where the tool is. You know, it's two or three or four feet underground, and we needed to know which way it's headed and just where is it. That became a whole other system of electronically knowing specifically and directly where that tool is and where it's headed.

JE: So your business is moving along and something good that came to America was cable television and that was good for your business?

EM: Yes. The wiring of America for cable television, that installation in the late 1980s wired America for fiber optics once most of the major ones had gotten started. That was a big stimulus to this company because they needed the very products we make.

JE: As successful as the business is today, were there times or years where you may have wondered if you were going to be able to sustain this?

EM: There were times when you really had to bite your lip and cut back. We had some layoffs and that sort of thing. A big part of what we do is connected to housing. I don't care whether you're talking about cable television or you are talking about sewage or plumbing or whatever, it's connected to the housing industry. There's a certain amount of reconstruction and renovation and that sort of thing but new construction has been a catalyst and it has really helped our business.

JE: You also developed the all-terrain systems for digging into rock?

EM: That's a particular system that's very specific in helping directional drilling and very

difficult drilling situations. Directional drilling at this point in time—you gained direction by the shape of your tool. You have a specific tool that you put on the front of your pipe and it's slanted to go in one direction. If you stop rotating and push on the device it will go off in another direction. If you rotate it at a place where it's going off, it will go off in all directions, which makes a straight hole. That technique has been around a long time. But now, that has some problems in regard to difficult drilling through rock or something of that kind. You can't change your direction by just pushing on it because of the slant face on your drill-bit. You have to keep moving. You have to keep rotating. We have developed a tool that lets you rotate and still go off in a particular direction.

Chapter 11 - 3:32

Orange

John Erling: Here at 89 years old, do you still come up with ideas?

Ed Malzahn: Yes. Sometimes I see something that they may be working on and I tell them, hey good idea, get with it, that's really maybe better than what you think it is. I've spent some time in product development, more time asking what are you doing as opposed to telling you what you ought to do. (Laughter)

JE: The color orange, how did you settle on the color orange for your product?

EM: That's an often-asked question because not a lot of construction equipment is orange. I knew it ought to be yellow, because construction equipment at that point in time was yellow. I thought this was construction equipment. But I was painting some other products. They were orange and so when I went to paint a trenching machine that I was proud enough to paint, orange was what was in the can so I just painted it orange. It looked okay to me and so I just left it that way. I didn't want to fool with two paint colors.

JE: (Laughter) Today, everything is calculated and developed and studied and agonized and some of this just fell into place.

EM: We like to take credit for a lot of things but to be honest about a lot of things somehow there was good fortune smiling on us.

JE: Yes. You operated in downtown Perry for many years, that we are sitting out here on a nice campus in a huge building. When did this begin to develop here?

EM: We moved out here in 1960. This was a dirt road down here. (Motioning) In fact, employees would get stuck if it rained. They would get stuck coming to work and I would have to pull them out so they could get to work. In my mind I knew when I started out

here that I-35 was to be built and that ultimately this probably would be at least a paved road by then. It became a main connection point later.

JE: How many acres did you buy?

EM: I bought 80 acres to start with. We had to do a lot of testing and we needed some test ground. I didn't want them digging it out of the front yard and so we bought another 80 acres behind us and we just kept adding on. We're situated on what was originally a school land section. We had to buy another 80 acres. My friend Henry Bellmon helped us. No special deal, but he told me whom to see in order to buy another 80 acres. That's where our product development building and our training building and our electronic building are located, is on that 80 acres.

JE: How many employees do you have here today?

EM: 1,000 plus.

JE: How many engineers?

EM: I wouldn't even guess. We don't wear tags. We may have people who are doing engineering who are not engineering graduates. If you've got the ability and the skill, that's where you'll wind up. You don't wear your degree around here. Or, you don't wear a tie. You don't wear a coat unless it's cold.

JE: You have a real family feel to the company and you have run it that way for years haven't you?

EM: Sure, it is family.

JE: These people have come here to embrace Perry-

EM: They didn't come here to embrace Perry. They grew up here.

JE: So there's a good work ethic?

EM: You bet. I don't know compared to what, but I think for us, yes, yes. We have good attendance. I feel compassion. This is a town of only about 5,000. Only half of the people have a Perry address. The other half commute from Covington, 20 miles west or here, Pawnee which is 27 miles east or here, or Stillwater. Many of them commute at least a 30-minute drive. We have a few people who commute from Edmond because of their spouse's employment or something. I look at the list every once in awhile. Occasionally we'll have somebody commute from as far away as Fairfax. Several commute from Enid as highly employed as Enid is—we still have people commute from Enid.

Chapter 12 - 2:09**Global**

John Erling: So as your dealers were set up all across the United States, you also went global. Talk to us about dealing with other countries. What was the first country you ventured into?

Ed Malzahn: I wouldn't classify it as ventured into as opposed to they found us. I don't know if we specifically targeted export. I know that certainly one of the longest relationships we've had is with Australia, although we've had good relationships in most of Europe. But most of our efforts have been put into the U.S. and Canada and to some extent next on the level would be certainly Europe. We do have a marketing office in Spain, to cover Europe, which is relatively new. It's only about five or six years old. However, we've always had a cyclical market in Europe. It's either good, or not at all. The last year though has been excellent.

JE: Saudi Arabia?

EM: Yes, we sell in Saudi Arabia. We have a representative in Lebanon who covers a lot of that area. It's cash on the head business and we thank them for it. It's a marvel to me the stuff that will go Air Freight. I think, that dang piece of iron you are going to send Air Freight? That's like a pickup load.

JE: So everything comes right out of here in Perry to the world?

EM: From here to a dealer organization, yes. The logistics of Air Freight have become good to excellent.

JE: Obviously, you're the biggest industry in Perry.

EM: Obviously.

JE: The biggest tax revenue comes from this company?

EM: I don't know. That's an argument for a day when it comes to add more taxes. OG&E has got a big plant sitting up here in the northeast part of the county that probably outdoes us substantially, but not employee-wise.

JE: A lot of changes have come about in the town of Perry, but the population remains about the same.

EM: Living it every day, it's hard for me to benchmark any changes. Of course we get new schools and of course we change school superintendents and of course we have a council that argues sometimes. But we have an excellent support system, as far as utilities are concerned, that is municipal. As far as I am concerned they do a fine job of supporting us and doing whatever we need to have done.

JE: The state has been good to you in recognizing you?

EM: Yes. Sure. One of our early Ditch Witches is down there at the museum.

JE: In Oklahoma City?

EM: Yes.

Chapter 13 - 3:27

Governor Henry Bellmon

John Erling: You referred to Henry Bellmon. I have interviewed him for this website. How did he become your friend?

Ed Malzahn: Henry and I got introduced through a Sunday school class. I remember another fellow and I made our first call on Henry and asked him and his wife to come to Sunday school with us and that's how it started. The girls were small then. It was right for their family and right for all of us, so we were young families growing up together. So we have known each other ever since our kids were in grade school.

JE: Did you talk politics with him?

EM: I don't know if I ever talked politics with Henry because I don't know a whole lot about politics. I'm like everyone else, I'm fed by what the media feeds me and so I don't know if that's good judgment. Henry and I went on many family trips together. I don't know if we ever discussed politics. Oh, we did argue about the Panama Canal. Actually, it was a discussion. Argue is the wrong word. He finally shut me up by giving me a book to read. (Laughter) So other than that, we went on a lot of fishing trips and camping trips and had a good family relationship together.

JE: That must have been interesting that this man who became your friend because you were neighbors was recruited by the Republican Party to run for governor?

EM: Yes, he was teaching our Sunday school class at the time and he asked me to substitute. He said, "It will only be for a couple of months." They talked him into running and I don't know whom he was running against but he thought that they would get elected. I said, "Okay." Well, I substituted for the next 60 years, or 50 years. (Laughter)

JE: He ultimately went on to become a Senator and then he came home again. He was always kind of known as being blunt. He was not afraid to make a decision. This is the way it is. You knew him as that kind of a person?

EM: He was always that way. I don't care whether we were camping or fishing or on a trip, sure, Henry was of a pretty single mind.

JE: Did you work on his campaign or help on his campaign at all?

EM: No. Other than wear a button and my wife would wear a dress and we would go to a few events. But no, I never publicly went around and campaigned for him.

JE: You did get involved in politics here in Perry?

EM: (Chuckle) Oh yeah, that story. That's an old story. Of course, as a young man back in town after college and feeling like I was somewhat successful in a business, at least which kept our bills paid. The local dignitaries were looking for someone to run against an incumbent whom they thought shouldn't have the office. So they talked me into running. So I did. As an engineer I laid it out precisely. I printed out literature and I worked the streets. The hardest thing I had to do was ask for a vote. When it came to be election time, my wife didn't even vote for me. (Laughter) I got beat 4-to-1 by an old guy who was 60 years old, he had won that office 4 times and he was a lawyer besides that. That sort of did it for me in politics right then. I said, "Never again." (Laughter)

JE: But you were involved in projects in the Perry community? Did you buy a building downtown?

EM: Most of my activities in Perry were just things that no one else would do and had to be done. That building downtown is the sort of thing—it was an excellent building and in a few more years it would have been unrecoverable. I looked at it long enough inside and I thought I guess it's up to me. So I took it on and I made a retirement home out of it. Perry did not have a retirement home. So I took that facility and made apartments for retirement. The funny thing about that building was it did not have an elevator. I got well acquainted with the restrictions that were put on installing elevators in buildings that were already built.

Chapter 14 - 1:55

Timothy McVeigh

John Erling: We're in Noble County, in Perry, and the Courthouse became infamous on April 19th, 1995. Tell us about that.

Ed Malzahn: Okay. Perry is one of those towns of the Cherokee Strip that was blessed with having a square in the middle of the town. It was a block square that was so-called the government acre. So we have a very attractive looking courthouse. It was built back in the early 1920s. It was the place where McVeigh was recognized. He had been arrested on I-35, which is just a mile out of town. As I understand it, he was stopped for having a misplaced or missing license tag. He was stopped for that and then the

highway patrolman thought he might be carrying a weapon of some kind. The highway patrolman arrested him and brought him to town and put him in jail, which is at the top of the Courthouse. He was being booked there when he was somehow recognized to maybe have been a part of the Murray Federal Building bombing. There was immediate both military and police activity in Perry, Oklahoma. The Perry Square was filled with curious people by the time they brought McVeigh out of the jail and put him in a patrol car. They brought him out here. We have a landing strip by the plant where we keep corporate aircraft. The National Guard uses it occasionally for contact maneuvering. They were well acquainted with it so the National Guard came in and police cars and everything else whizzed by here through our strip and unloaded McVeigh and put him in a helicopter and hauled him to Oklahoma City, because as I understand it, they thought it might be too hazardous to haul him down there in a police caravan down through Oklahoma City.

JE: There's a very famous picture of him coming out in his orange jumpsuit.

EM: That's when he was coming out of the Noble County Courthouse. The jail is on the third floor and the only way they bring them out-there is one entrance where they exit with a prisoner. It's that exit and everybody in town knows it. It's a very easy area to populate. That afternoon, I wasn't there. I was here in my office.

Chapter 15 - 3:47

Ditch Witch Family

John Erling: Since your son and your daughters are not interested in the business-

Ed Malzahn: I wouldn't say they weren't interested. They just don't want to work for their dad I guess.

JE: You do you have somebody in the family who wanted to come on and work for you. Tell us about that.

EM: I don't know if she ever wanted to come on, but it happened that way. It's my granddaughter, Tiffany. Someplace along the line after getting her degree in art she decided that she enjoyed the business part have art as much as she did the art itself. So she went back to school and got an MBA. Someplace in the there, website design and that sort of thing crept into it. At that point in time we were struggling with becoming acquainted with computer marketing. We brought her in to do some website stuff, minor stuff for us, and she just stayed. Pretty soon though the business part of her actually took

over the website design and I don't know how it happened, osmosis I guess. Ultimately, she gravitated to the top.

JE: Her name is Tiffany Sewell-Howard. She wasn't an engineer like you were, so what does she bring to the table?

EM: An MBA and the appreciation I think for design. She knows what looks good and what doesn't. She was raised on a farm where you do manual work and you raise cattle. She was a state Angus Queen at one time and showed Angus cattle. Being a part of the public in that work activity was part of her basic makeup. I think there is a strain of art in our family. I think I could have done some of it. Just as an engineer, I think about engineering design and maybe some of that was passed on. But I never sat down to paint art really. My son did-excellent. And then Tiffany is an excellent artist.

JE: She is in her early 40s and will take this on into the next several decades.

EM: That's the plan. It will be different. She's a different kind of manager than I am. This company is different. This company does not fit my style of management. I still fit in it. It still feels comfortable, but the introduction of computer activity-I don't have a computer at home. I let this one (motioning) do my job here. There isn't anything I want to know at home that can't wait till tomorrow to find out. I find satisfaction in what I do. I don't have to be modern all the time.

JE: It's got to make you feel good though that it's in good hands?

EM: Oh sure.

JE: You know, Oklahoma is proud beyond Perry to say that Ditch Witch comes from Perry, Oklahoma.

EM: Well it should (be proud) because there are 1,000 people out there in the plant. For a big part of those people out there, this is a lifetime job. There are many, many people who have never worked anyplace else than here. Now their kids are working here and their grandkids. That's what it's all about.

JE: I'm sure there was a time when your thinking switched and you thought, we have new product and we have to get it out, but you also knew you had to keep this going because you have all of these families that are depending on you.

EM: The one thing that gets sort of hidden I have to keep reminding myself about is that we have about as many people employed in the dealerships collectively as we have here. We have a secondary responsibility there because many or most of them are family-owned and they are passing them on from generation to generation. That business to them is just as important as this business is to me here.

JE: I noticed when I walked in that several people who didn't know me all looked up and said, "Hello! How are you?" I mean I could tell-I go in and out of businesses a lot and you can almost tell very quickly the culture that's taking place in the business.

EM: We're family. She's (motioning) got as much in this business as I have. As investments are concerned, her time and her effort and her reality and her continuation are as important to her, as it is to me.

JE: You are talking about Jeri weren't you?

EM: Yes.

JE: Yes. You are talking about Jeri Lamberton because she's your public relations/advertising manager and she's been sitting in on the interview with us.

EM: Yes.

Chapter 16 - 2:55

Museum

John Erling: Are you able to reflect on what you've accomplished and what you've done when you drive up the driveway and you drive past that little lake and so forth? Do you ever think, wow, this happened and my grandfather was actually in on it and my father?

Ed Malzahn: No. I think, did they get the grass mowed today? (Laughter) It worried the heck out of me that in between the two streets there last week got grass up like that (motioning). It worried the heck out of me. Our guys got out there and mowed it and I didn't have to tell them. My philosophy is I don't own or manage anything I can't stand on my front porch and see.

JE: Except that building in downtown Perry. (Laughter)

EM: Except downtown Perry, yep. But I'm downtown almost every day so I see it every day. I don't have a cabin. I would love to use your cabin. (Laughter) Henry Bellmon and I, we visited a lot of people's cabins and places. (Laughter)

JE: You've got a wonderful legacy out here. Do you have any thoughts on how you would like to be remembered?

EM: Nope. I just hope they can hold it together. I think it's a good thing.

JE: When we went through the museum today you showed us a picture of anvil shooting. Tell us what anvil shooting is.

EM: A lot of anvils in the early days had a hole in the bottom of them about the size of your fist. You fill that with black powder and then set one anvil on top of the other and then ignite that black powder to see how high it would shoot the top anvil. That seemed to be some kind of a mark of manhood was how high you could shoot the anvil. The picture I showed you this afternoon is one in which they ignited the fuse with a hot iron. They

would heat it up on the forge inside. They would get a piece of hot iron rod maybe 10 or 15 feet long and heat it up inside and bring it out and stick it in the black powder and run to see how high the anvil would go in the air. (Laughter) If you get on the Internet, you can still see under anvil shooting I think or something of that sort, that it's still a practice that some people do. They are probably a little more sophisticated about it now than we were then. That seemed to be a fun thing to do particularly when it was a celebration time or the Fourth of July or something else. Everybody would gather around and we would see what kind of noise we could make.

JE: We should say you have a museum on the same location of your father's-

EM: It's a collection of some of our models of Ditch Witch trenchers, the early ones.

JE: And it's on the same location-

EM: It's on the same location as my father's shop was, that I grew up in until I was about 12 years old or so.

JE: First of all, I have got to thank you for lunch at the Come Back Café. That was fond and enjoyable.

EM: That's a Perry tradition.

JE: I thank you for taking time for this because now people can listen to your story. Students can listen. Those that want to be in business can hear how this business got started because of you. We thank you Mr. Ditch Witch. Can I call you that?

EM: (Laughter) Some do, but I don't answer sometimes.

JE: (Laughter) Thank you Ed. That was very nice of you.

EM: Thank you.

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Conclusion

Announcer: Now you know the story of the idea that became a reality in a blacksmith shop in Perry, Oklahoma, the Ditch Witch story-as told by the inventor, Ed Malzahn. The employees and dealers of Ditch Witch are proud of this company and they say thank you for listening to their founder. We would like to thank our founding sponsors and the foundations that fund this Oklahoma oral history project, VoicesofOklahoma.com