

IRONWORKER MEMOIR

ALEX MORRISON

Driving in the pitch black of the night somewhere in the woods of western Washington, my goal is to rendezvous at a lone hardware store @ 4:30 in the am, it takes 2 hours from where I live to get there. All the stores are closed, and even in a populated area, I can leave my brights on for almost the entirety of the way considering the hour of my travels. I am heading to a new job today, but that is nothing new since I started ironworking about a year earlier from this night I have gone to dozens of different job sites, I sometimes will only see a place I built for one day and never return but in memory. Tonight is different for tonight I drive to a bridge that near a person will ever drive upon or lay eyes upon either. I hasten to nowhere, and my destination is about as obscure as it is beautiful for it rests in the mountains of Pacific north-west. It's a bridge about the length of a football field, but just wide enough to slip two trucks by each other just barely touching, but it goes over a crystal clear river raging below. The water plays a beautiful white noise as I work above it. Before I arrive at the bridge, I have to meet up with my crew, a motley team of workers, brutish and strong as they are kind. I am meeting with a blacked out suburban packed with three workers carpooling together that live within miles of each other; I am the outlier who lives in a remote area when it comes to ironworking. They arrive and begin to circle my car like in a rodeo, never stopping as I sit in the single light parking lot waiting for guidance to the elusive bridge.

It is 2008 during the economic recession I am making \$21.06 an hour, but regular gas is around \$4 a gallon, and I fill up on premium. Jobs are scarce, and NPR has a morning report that I listen to on the way to work, and each morning I have been listening to a sad trumpet indicating a falling stock market and weak jobs reports and economic outlook. I am driving 15K a year @ 22.5MPG, and oil changes are a \$100 a pop. I burn through a pair of \$40 pants a month through use. Shirts are provided by the company, but I still burn through all that is given to me. 2013 I started buying \$230 boots, but before that, I bought the cheapest boots I could find @

Fred Meyers usually around \$40-60 which would last anywhere from 3-6 months usually four months though. I cut my arms on a daily basis and bleed so often that when I get a blood draw, I have so many coagulates and clot factor in my blood that I can't give enough blood for simple tests since I clot so fast. I burn anywhere from 4-8k calories a day in a typical 8 hour work day.

The bridge seems long, and my co-workers are all bent over with back pain that we all have from being hunched over for the majority of our days making pattern ties to stitch the rebar together in a mesmerizing pattern of repetition. The clock is not even passed two hours, and the heat is so intense that the sweat can't cool me off, but the river gives me a sense of calm. The union states to provide us with a 10-minute break every three hours and lunch after five, but when you are far from home you just want to get the day over with, but instead, decide to take a short break at one in the afternoon for a quick refresh, instead of a full lunch. The speed of ties and working fast is always the key to maximizing profit, its called increasing productivity. We come upon our first break, but some feel that we haven't been productive enough and needed to make up for it, the mood is tense. Little mistakes that need to be corrected seemingly take forever to repair but the yelling increases with the lack of desired responsiveness to the yelling.

I was told when I first started to quit ironwork because it would turn me mean and cold. I have found out that it may have made me a little mean and bitter, but it usually is confined in the workplace — the reaction and responses that I need to get the job done typically require a gruff and rough hand. When I am in charge of a group of guys who traditionally don't have more than a high school diploma, and many have been through the prison system and have multiple felonies usually including a DUI. Alcoholism is rampant in ironwork. I have to force people to do things physically they would probably not enjoy or don't want to do. laziness is subjective but I have to push people to get productivity, and it depends on my ability to organize and coordinate their work, so they are productive all the time. I have made grown men cry, fired people just as they arrived and yelled them off the job with expletives.

Every day is different and the same if that makes sense. I would go to new locations almost all the time when I started ironwork, and each site is specific to its hazards and responsibilities. I'd have to sit through a 15-minute safety run through but can last up to a multi-day safety meet up that usually is @ 2-hour session at a time l, depending on the size and scope of the job. A urinalysis

is required to make sure ironworkers are not on drugs, one a year needed for the union of which they pay \$40 a time to incentivize them to do it, but on DOT jobs or government jobs, they require random UA and periodic ones as well.

Death is a common denominator for everyone, but ironworking is particularly hazardous. It is not necessarily the deaths occurring on the job; it is the personality of ironworkers that tend to take risks. On the job, they are more calculated by other people as well as themselves, but when they leave they take risks, so you have a lot of fatalities when ironworkers go on vacation. When I first heard of an ironworker that died in the Seattle area, it was a 20 something which was crushed by a caisson, a large steel cage that makes up the pillar that holds up things like a bridge on I-5. Through hearsay, I heard they were performing CPR, but his brains were coming out of his skull, he died on site while building a parking garage for Microsoft. Carpal tunnel, a repetitive hand injury is quite common, and back injuries and broken bones, and now and then a finger get smashed, crushed, and/or de-skinned, but cuts are the majority of injuries we see. I have had near misses as they call it in the industry. I could have died, but luck would have it I didn't. A giant formwork that weighed nearly two tons rolled off one of the two rails it resided on, and one fell off and if the other did the form would have crushed another guy with ease and me. A ram that pulls steel strands to 25,000 psi flew off a cable, and this 100lbs steel device almost took my head off and would have killed me instantly, but I was just to the left of it.

The construction industry is predominantly male, and I have only worked with maybe five ironworker women, but other trades tend to have a higher female to male ratio. Rebar my specialty is very physical, and I tend to see more female ironworkers doing structural work which usually has less physical demands, like welding. I have little to say, but I haven't found them to be less capable, they probably would like not to be the only female in the company.

I have had one significant injury in 11 years since I started ironwork, I burnt my skin off my left forearm near my articulating pointy near my elbow on the inside. It scabbed and pussied up due to the burn severity. One time I had to call 911 due to one of my guys falling through some decking, luckily he only cracked a rib or two, but it was scary watching someone disappear in front of your eyes and seeing someone laying in agony on the ground crying for help.

I have seen some cool shit. PT cables that dance through a maze of rebar that is blue and green juxtaposed against the grey-ness of the rebar and a black deck. Seeing a radius of the lattice curve around to see some fantastic dizzy look of symmetry. Picking up and moving a couple of tons of rebar by and placing it in such a manner that provides structure to a building and will never be seen by the public of done right a sad reality of the hard work that gets covered up.

Rain and wetness is part of the deal as well as heat and wind. I have felt the need for three pairs of gloves because of the sheer wind chill that rips the heat from your body. The type of work forbids waterproof clothing due to the sharp objects that shred those types of clothes, so you have to adapt to being wet for 8-10 hours a day, with the little shelter since you are always at the top of the building. Working the structure from the ground up always exposes you to the elements, unlike electricians and plumbers who work on our already finished product sheltering them. There is the sheer height of doing a high rise which gives you pause for how the fast and powerful wind is the higher you go without other objects abating the wind. It is not uncommon for unsecured materials to fly off buildings during heavy winds. Winters are horrible, and summers cause many people to pass out and experience heat stroke.

There are many types of ironworkers but size matters when it comes to ironwork, and I can segregate into three groups, people who weigh under 150, are few and far between, but they are fast due to not carrying a lot of excess weight. The average ironworker weighs between 165-190, and tend to be able to do both the anaerobic and aerobic ability required to be successful in the field. The big guys, the 200+, tend to be strong but not always and the bodybuilders no matter the size are too weak to last the whole day of work and tend to do very poorly. The perfect size is a long distance runner physique that wights more than 150+.

The owners of this business are car salesmen, they upsell everything and tell you all the good without really telling the truth. They express the downs of the industry and how they are always losing money, but they also don't reveal what they are doing to correct such inadequacies. It is everyone else fault except their own, and rarely do you get straight answers, it is befuddling and discouraging at times. The leadership in ironwork is far, and few between, the people who don't wear their tools keep adding up, and fewer people

want actually to do the hard labor.

The day is almost over the bridge, and we are all ready to get in our cars and ride home, but someone finds a mistake. We have to stay until its fixed, and our minds are already in the car driving home, but we must wait till we fix it. We are friends, but we are also enemies for when we make mistakes it is like we don't know each other and the simple problem turns into entire feelings towards each other. We are ironworkers, but we must emphasize workers, for we work with each other but we need to be productive if we want our ironwork business to survive. Our foreman's mind is more on the current companies profit, and for that, he is willing to sacrifice personal feelings and friends to do just that. I have unfortunately focused on this particular facet of ironwork, I have made more money than I have friends, and that is due to dedication to being the best, to never stop, for stopping is unproductive, and that is unacceptable, and I expect the same from others, and I am disappointed, which explains my high firing rate. This statement doesn't mean I am the best it just says that I am continually trying to be the best, and that is why the years have been tough to endure being in the field. I don't live up to the standard I have set for myself, so I have to leave sometimes to try to reset my bar or include more scope in what I am trying to extract from my work.

The days at the bridge continuously invade my mind, for it is a time of youth, excitement, and accomplishment but at the same time it was a time of failure, stress, and feeling inadequate, and this dichotomy is and has always played in my mind. "When do I stop?", Seeped into my consciousness as I continued the trade, but I have thought of doing and being other things, but all the while being pulled back. Teaching others what I know is why I come back for quick jaunts now, but it always breaks my heart when I hear people say they are only in it for the money. You can't teach those who are just in it for the money; they don't want to learn any more than what keeps them in their current job.

The ride home from the bridge that day was hard, for when the tired kicks in it is hard to keep it off. Driving is an ironworker's best friend as well as a reliable car and the will to find addresses that don't exist yet are some of the many joys of ironwork. The address to jobs is more of a GPS latitude-longitude at times then a particular place.

The racism in ironwork is like a malignancy under the skin. It

is a white-dominated industry with almost entirely white leadership, but a majority of the ironworkers are skewing Hispanic, and yet have virtually no leadership roles. Spanish is everywhere on the job site, with stuttered English being spouted now and then as best as they can, but most speak English to the degree that wouldn't stop them from having upper-level positions. The kinship amongst the Hispanic population is very communal and inclusive, giving food they made at home wantingly handing it out, yet the white populous rarely share food or offer and is closed off a majority of the time.

Ironwork is about comradery and learning skills while employing those who have been deemed unemployable, due to their history for a lot of them, all the while being provided a living wage to support their kids and families. Ironwork is hard yet rewarding to those who want more than just a paycheck, while those seeking just money fall flat and never rise and sputter out, even risking their lives for nothing more than money that could have been had in a less risky trade. Bonds are formed, friends will take bats to enemies heads, steal cars/motorcycles to avoid paying for the rest of the vehicle and go out of their way to help out. Those friends are tight when they are in the same company and work together for years, and these friends or brothers of steel will sacrifice much to keep each other safe and happy.

Ironwork will leave lasting memories on those who persevere and want to see things few will ever experience, but it is not for everyone, and in fact, it is not for some who are in the field currently, yet don't know it yet that they shouldn't be in the industry. Some should be delivering pizzas, going back to school, or an entirely different trade. Ironwork is the navy seals of the building trades, yet some make it through the ranks that need to be let go for their own good, yet like the navy seal training camp, you have to quit, they won't fire you, unless extenuating circumstances require it.