

AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER  
Oral History Transcript

**Interviewee:** Chuck Croft

**Interviewer:** Toni Thomasson

**Date of Interview:** August 23, 2016

**Length of Interview:** 95 minutes

**Original Tape Number:** 3295

**Subject Headings:** Architects--Texas; Architecture--Texas--History; U.S. Marine Corps, 1945-1948; Atomic bomb--Testing --Marshall Islands; Casa del Sol (Harlingen, Tex.); Pennybacker Bridge (Austin, Tex.); Westlake High School (Austin, Tex.); Concrete construction; Post-tensioned prestressed concrete construction; Precast concrete construction; Folded plate structures; Oil fields

**Geographic Names:** Oklahoma; Austin (Tex.); Brownsville (Tex.); Marshall Islands; Honolulu (Hi.); Matamoros, Mexico; Rio Grande Valley (Tex.); Corpus Christi (Tex.); Harlingen (Tex.); Lakeway (Tex.); Lake Lugano, Switzerland

**Key Names:** University of Texas School of Architecture; Roessner, Roland; Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (Mexico); Kermacy, Martin; Scott, John Lynn; Fehr and Granger; Granger, Charles; Saarinen, Eero; Eames, Charles; Kinney, Girard; York, John; Taniguchi, Alan; Craig, Clark; Engleman, Dave; Portland Cement Association; Office of Naval Intelligence; Bergstrom Air Force Base; Robert Mueller Municipal Airport; Cranbrook Institute

TONI THOMASSON: This is Toni Thomasson. Today is Tuesday, August 23, 2016. Today I'm interviewing for the first time architect Chuck Croft. This interview is taking place at Mr. Croft's home at 9401 Springdale Road in Austin, Texas. This interview is being done for the Austin History Center and is one of a series of interviews with and about Austin, Travis County architects.

Hello, Chuck.

CHUCK CROFT: All right.

THOMASSON: Why don't we start by having you tell me your full name and when and where you were born?

CROFT: My name is Charles Benjamin Croft. I was born on November 10, 1927 in Enid, Oklahoma.

THOMASSON: Okay. And did you grow up in Oklahoma?

CROFT: Partially. I was—say this, that even though I was born in Enid, my parents lived in Garber, Oklahoma, where my father worked for an oil company, Sinclair Oil, and so we stayed there for some time. Then he got transferred to another oilfield town, which was Seminole, Oklahoma. We stayed there for some time, and I think it was probably in 1935 we moved to Texas. We moved to what they called an employees camp, which was a string of houses that house the different workers and executives for that particular gasoline plant, which took crude oil and converted it to gasoline. And so my father was the office manager for the plant. Whereas he dealt with any contractors having to do with the building of the plant, whether it was an addition and so forth, and to interview employees and so forth. Then he had direct contact with the home office in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by that meaning either by telephone or a wire or whichever.

THOMASSON: And how long did you live in that camp?

CROFT: I recall living in that camp until—except for leaving partially for summer jobs to go places that—I left there in 1945, and I went to—I decided to go—not like everybody else from up there did. Most of them went to Texas A&M.

THOMASSON: Oh, Okay.

CROFT: And I says, “No way that I’m going to be in the kiddy car,” and so what I did was go to the University of Texas. I signed up there for engineering school and was drawn up. In the oilfield I didn’t know much about engineering except I knew that they use chemical engineers and they use other engineers, so I went to the University of Texas and signed up for engineering school. That worked until I got to the draft age by that time—

THOMASSON: Yeah, the war was on, wasn’t it?

CROFT: —and so what happened is I along with all the other eighteen-year-olds at that time were put on a bus and taken to San Antonio and given physical examinations and so forth. So I was notified after I—I did not go to summer school. So I stayed there until it was time for summer school and went back home. I was doing summer jobs in the oilfield. There were plenty of them for teenage men and so forth. So in between, my mother had read an article in the paper and it said if you join the marines this week, we guarantee you—is you get the GI Bill of Rights, which was education, I think it was then. And so she showed me the article, and I said, “Okay, that solves it.” So I went over, I joined the Marine Corps. And so after that is a pretty long story.

THOMASSON: Yeah. We don’t need the war story.

CROFT: Yeah.

THOMASSON: When did you get back to UT?

CROFT: Oh, my goodness. I got back—I was in the Marine Corps then from '45 until 1948. So I had been on special duty to that point. I'm trying to—I don't know whether to tell you about experiences in the Marine Corps except I was on a secret mission—a top secret mission—for atom bomb testing in the Marshall Islands, and that lasted for some time. And then they brought us back and finally, finally discharged. I'd been in—before that I'd been working for the navy in the 14<sup>th</sup> district of—

THOMASSON: But you got back to UT then after you were discharged?

CROFT: Well, I did not quite then because when I got back I was stationed at the office of naval intelligence, 14th naval district. We were stationed in Honolulu for a while, and then from there they brought me back. Long story short, they discharged me and at that time I went back to East Texas. Then I—what did I do? Then I enrolled back into, well, really—

THOMASSON: Did you go back to engineering school, or how did you get to architecture?

CROFT: No, I didn't. What happened is when I was stationed with the navy intelligence office, there was a navy lieutenant there, since I was on duty—security duty—for the naval intelligence offices along with two other marines. I noticed sometimes in the evenings we had—of course, twenty-four hours—we had to stay there and we were watching over all the files and the building and so forth. This navy lieutenant would come up late at night with a roll of drawings and they were blueprints. And finally, he came in and he says, "Did you ever have any drawing? You know, I know you went to college," and so forth. I said, "Sure, I had drawing in high school and had engineering drawing at UT." And he said, "Come on back to my office and I'll show you something," and he rolled out the blueprints and he showed me the details and what happened and so forth and at the process. He says, "You know, if you'd be interested, I think you would be a good bet for studying architecture when you go back to school. Are you going to go back into engineering school?" I said, "I'm not sure yet, but I'm going back to college at UT I know." He said, "Well, I understand since I'm from Georgia that the University of Texas has got a really good architecture school." So he says, "If I were you, I'd think about it seriously and from what I know from the questions you asked and your real response to the drawings, well, I think you ought to enroll in architecture." So I did.

THOMASSON: Wow! That's how you decided.

CROFT: That's how I got into my profession.

THOMASSON: So when did you graduate from UT?

CROFT: I graduated in the summer of 1953, and that was after my class had been to Mexico for the summer to take a summer course in design and planning at what we called Monterey Tech, which was really—you studied design and planning at the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico, and that was in 1953—the summer—'52 the summer. That credit was credited through our—

THOMASSON: Course work in—yeah.

CROFT: —in my class work and so forth. Then I graduated at the University of Texas in the summer of 1953.

THOMASSON: Were there any instructors or professors at UT that especially helped you or—

CROFT: Yes, very much. The main one that I recall, his name was Roessner—his name was Roland Roessner, Rolland Roessner.

THOMASSON: Roland Roessner.

CROFT: Um hmm. Roland Roessner.

THOMASSON: He was still there when I got there, yeah.

CROFT: Okay, yes. And he had been in the Seabees during the war, and he'd been on some of the islands that I'd been on when I was in the Marine Corps, and we kind of had a little thing going with that. We got something a little bit in common. But he was great because he was an instructor that really encouraged the design part of the professor.

I had other professors there. One who was called—I forgot his first name—Mr. Butler. He was an older architect, and he taught architectural history also.

And then there was another one called Martin Kermacy, He was also—he would challenge the students, which was what he did by challenging—when you'd do a design project, he would ask you questions, like, why did you do it? Why didn't you do this? So he would—by that he was putting pressure on you so that you would think about what you were designing and why, and then how you were going to get it done. So it kind of made sense and it had to do—we found

out later—with the profession itself. And he's the one that said mainly, "You need to program it," and we says, "Program what?" (Both laugh) So he said, "Everything." And he says, "You will learn that, I'm sure, so why don't you get out of here and get a job and surely you will certainly learn something there."

So I went out and I got a job.

THOMASSON: So you didn't work in school? You only worked after school?

CROFT: I didn't do any work in school.

THOMASSON: Your first job?

CROFT: My first job was with an architect named John Lynn Scott.

THOMASSON: Oh, yes. Okay.

CROFT: And that was as soon as I got out of school. I mean, that was—I was still fresh. (laughs) And so he was not bad to work with because he didn't mind giving you responsibility and then checking you on it and giving you advice on what you did and didn't. He was very much like they'd said in school that you do. And the main thing I got from him was he was doing some work for the government, and they were building—they were designing a border station for Brownsville and Matamoros, that area. So he said, "Okay, that's a government job and you're going to have to do some paperwork and so forth, so you're going to have to do the communication and all of this." So we started doing the border station, and another job came up with AGC, and he was doing work for what was then Bergstrom Air Base. They were doing a crash station for the—which is pretty much kind of like a fire station but for the airplanes. Several of them had crashed and so forth, and so consequently, I did—I communicated with the GSA, General Services, out of the federal government, and that got me to the point where I didn't want to do much smaller ones.

THOMASSON: The GSA. (laughs)

CROFT: And the organization and the design with pretty much I would say too wild for the government. I had used some concrete in it, and they had been used to apparently the steel framing of—it was kind of like an office building at that time. So we lost that job. And we didn't care.

THOMASSON: (laughs) Your boss didn't care either, huh?

CROFT: He didn't care. He says, "We got another one out on the base. We'll just take care of that one," and so consequently—

THOMASSON: So it looks like you worked for John Lynn Scott about two years?

CROFT: Yes. Um hmm. And I had already interviewed at that time with Fehr & Granger Architects in Austin. So I went back and interviewed with them again and Charlie Granger came in and said, "Haven't I talked to you before?"

THOMASSON: (laughs) He remembered.

CROFT: And I says, "Yeah," and he said, "You were one that went to that—you went to that Mexican school, didn't you?" (Both laugh) I said, "Yes, sir, but I really don't do Mexican design." He said, "Well, that's good because we don't do it either. So why don't you go in there and find a desk somewhere where the roof doesn't leak on it," and I said, "Yes, sir."

THOMASSON: That was his way of telling you that you had the job?

CROFT: Yes, that was his—their office then was upstairs over a mechanical contractor's business, who manufactured ductwork. And all day long, you heard the clack, clack, clack of them pressing ducts for buildings somewhat all over, and it was absolutely pretty much nerve-wracking.

THOMASSON: You know where that building was?

CROFT: Sure, it was on 5<sup>th</sup> Street. It was on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, which was right across from a Mexican food restaurant, so it was there, which was called—the famous one—anyhow, it was a Mexican food restaurant.

THOMASSON: Was it east of I-35?

CROFT: No. It was west of I-35. It was on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

THOMASSON: Okay.

CROFT: Then what happened to that duct building was—there was a Mexican food restaurant who'd been across the street bought that building and turned it into a Mexican food restaurant. So meanwhile, we had gotten through listening to all the ductwork and so forth. So Fehr & Granger bought some property on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. It was east of the capitol, and they bought property there and we'd already designed—saying we—we had designed it and taken temporary space in the office of Clark Craig Engineers, and we shared quarters with him until our building was built. We moved in that building in, I guess, 1958, I suppose. And we got to--

In the meantime we got a little on-the-job training insofar as construction is concerned on Fehr & Granger's building, and so we'd go up there and watch them, see what they'd do and see what you ought to do, and so forth. It was very good on-the-job training. I stayed with Fehr & Granger until 1959, but before that had happened—

THOMASSON: What were some of the projects you worked on?

CROFT: The main project that I worked on actually was the Austin Airport. It was called the Robert Mueller Municipal Airport at that time. There were three members of the design team. No matter what everybody else has told you they designed it, they didn't. (Thomasson laughs) Because they didn't because there was a three-man team: Charlie Granger, Herb Crume, who was an associate with them, and Chuck Croft. Charlie Granger's position was dealing with the City of Austin and with the airport board. Herb Crume and I designed the airport. Nobody else did.

THOMASSON: So it sounds like you've heard other people say they designed it.

CROFT: No. I've seen two funerals where both guys have claimed they did the airport. Too bad I couldn't do anything, but they didn't do it. And the only people that had anything to do with it—we did build a model of the airport, and one guy did work on the model and he's one of them that says he designed the airport, which he couldn't've designed it we hadn't—I mean, he couldn't have built the model if he hadn't had—

THOMASSON: The design.

CROFT: (laughs) Nevertheless, I'm real sensitive about that because it won a national award for the best commercial building from an AIA firm from progressive architecture, and that was a good point because they were published in several professional magazines.

So that brings to mind—I guess you might say that, I think I was Charlie Granger's boy. What I'm saying is when he went up to Cranbrook University or Cranbrook College—have you ever heard of it?

THOMASSON: Yes, um hmm.

CROFT: It's like they draft people to come in there. You don't go up there and say I want to go to school here. They say, no. You don't go until we come after you. And so consequently, what happened is Charlie Granger was one of those. I'm sorry.

THOMASSON: What are you looking for?

CROFT: Oh, I'm looking for the other people who were there.

THOMASSON: Oh.

CROFT: Also, Eero Saarinen was there in Charlie's class.

THOMASSON: Was Charlie going to a graduate school there?

CROFT: No, what they do is they get into the other things, like they design furniture also.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay.

CROFT: Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames—you heard of him?

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

CROFT: —went to California and also designed some furniture out there. What they did, they studied furniture design as well as building design at Cranbrook. It's a special place. You can't go say I want to go to school here. They say, No. If we want you, we will let you know, which not many people ever knew. But the other guys, like George Wiess and some of the well-known—at the time well-known architects in the United States went to school there.

And I was going to tell you the story about when Charlie Granger was there, he called me on the phone and he says, "How're you doing? You're working, aren't; you?" (laughs) I said, "Yes, sir. I'm working pretty hard." He said, "What're you doing?" I said, "Well, doing what you told me to," and he said, "Well, I got a fellow here that wants to know on that airport that had been published—" Charlie Granger had taken the plans up to Cranbrook with him and showed them to Eero Saarinen. He said, "I got a fellow in here on the phone that wants to talk to you, and he wants to talk to you about the roof of that building." And I said, "Okay." He gets on the phone. "This is Eero Saarinen." And I says, "Yes, sir. How can I help you?" He says, "Well, it's probably too late," and I said, "All right, sir. Tell me what I should've done." He said, "Well, I just wondered what you do with that water on that roof, you know, to keep it from overflowing and splashing on the glass and putting mud all over the windows and stuff. I often wonder, and I was just talking to Charlie. He said, 'Talk to Chuck'." And I said, "Okay." So he said, "Well, tell me about it." I said, "Well, sir, you know every time it loops down, of course, it collects water." He said, "Yeah. What keeps it from going where the planes are? You're going to get splash on the planes and stuff." That's when they



had the planes—they didn't do like they do now. You had to get off and walk to a—

THOMASSON: That's right. No loading bridges.

CROFT: Nope. He says, "And the people will get soaking wet," and I said, "No, sir. They're sloped slightly—number one, they're sloped slightly toward the outside." He said, "Then it's going to splash on the windows and get mud all over the place." I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well, tell me why." I said, "Well, each one of them—does have a slope away from where the planes are. You can't see it. You can't tell it. And also each one of them has a roof drain in the middle of it—or not in the middle—toward the edge, and what you can't tell is that the edge slopes up a little toward that. So it goes in the roof drains." He said, "Yeah, and what's it do then?" I said, "Well, sir, what it does is you know how deep those deepest parts of the roof are? Well, what you don't see is the roof drains slope toward them and then slope in that big part of the roof, and they go all the way to the mechanical room, which was way down." You know, it was way down to the east side of the zone, and they go down there. And he says, "What do you do? You draining water and flood the mechanical room?" I said, "No, sir. We thought of that ahead of time. We drilled two holes in there in the concrete in the mechanical room. One of them we drain the roof drainage into. And the other one, it runs into a spring and pushes up the water into the mechanical room, which has a pump which pumps it into—when you turn it on, it pumps it into the water-cooled air conditioning system for the eastern part of the building," because they didn't air condition the whole airport at that time. They didn't have the same systems that they have—all they had was water-cooled systems, and they used to have these big coolers on the roof, and we'd have a water cooler but it wasn't on the roof. It was in there, and how we did it was pump it here and push it up here. So consequently, that was that story, and I'm sorry for taking up your time.

THOMASSON: So, Mr. Saarinen was impressed, I take it, after he heard your explanation. He didn't have anymore questions. (laughs)

CROFT: (laughs) No. He said, "Well, good luck to you. I hope it doesn't flood," and I said, "No, sir. If it floods, we're all going to be in trouble anyhow."

THOMASSON: (laughs) Well, I have a question for you. When you did the initial design, I assume that tower that's out there still was part of the design?"

CROFT: Was it what?

THOMASSON: The control tower, was it part of your design?

CROFT: Yes. But what happened there, as people don't know, some people think that the tower was built first, which it wasn't. And so it was built later, and the porcelain panels that were on it were put on and so that was it. We had the roof drain off the top of the tower, which went down to the outside, and—

THOMASSON: So you worked on the tower design too, then?

CROFT: Yes.

THOMASSON: And what do you think about, you know, it's still there in the middle of the redevelopment project and they're trying to figure out how to reuse it? Have you been following that?

CROFT: I've been following it some. I really don't like the idea of them taking over an airport, to tell you the truth. But what's happened so far is I've been trying to follow it some, and I finally decided to forget about it a little bit—

THOMASSON: And let it go. (laughs)

CROFT: I do know that there's shopping centers out there and all these things.

THOMASSON: But they left the tower.

CROFT: Yes, they left the tower.

THOMASSON: And do you know Girard Kinney?

CROFT: I don't know—

THOMASSON: Girard Kinney is leading the effort to find a new use for the tower.

CROFT: A new what?

THOMASSON: A new way to use the tower.

CROFT: Oh.

THOMASSON: They're going to keep it.

CROFT: I'll tell you what I've got. When you leave, I've got a sign that came out of the tower. Before I took it over, people could get into the tower and go up to the—walk up the stairs and go as high as they could. And I've got a grandson that went up in there and he got some stuff out of there that he thought—he knew

that I'd had something to do with it—so he thought I might like to have some of the stuff, so he got some signs off of the building. But one of them is by the front door, I'll show it to you on your way out.

THOMASSON: Okay. We'll do that.

CROFT: So consequently, that pretty much ought to take care of it on that particular—

THOMASSON: Fehr and Granger.

CROFT: Oh, Fehr and Granger, what happened there—

THOMASSON: After.

CROFT: Well, wait just a minute. I thought I had that--dadgummit. I stayed at Fehr and Granger and I was designing—I forgot what I was designing, anyhow, until 1959. In 1958 they were acclaimed as being the best firm in the United States, Fehr and Granger was and by the AIA. So I'll try to make it short.

There were two fellows that worked for Fehr and Granger, and there was an architect from the Rio Grande Valley named John York, and he wanted somebody that had the capabilities to be an associate partner and run our office. So these two—they sent a guy up because he was looking for—I mean, what was he doing? He was looking for somebody with these qualifications. As soon as he got there, these two guys who'd gone to school with him at A&M, said, man, there's your man right there. He's running this office right now (laughs) practically, and so he says, "Well, tell you what. We'll pay your airfare down there and we'll put you up in a hotel, and we'll go meet Mr. York, and we'll see what happens." So I did. Went down and met him, and immediately he said, "Well, looking at your qualifications," he said, "I've already talked to Charlie Granger, and he said, 'Well, if you don't use him, send him back.'" (Thomasson laughs) So he says, "You're hired," and he says, "what you're going to do—," and he told me, "here's the projects we've got, and what you need to do is you handle them because I'm going to Corpus Christi and I'm going to go in business with another architect up there, and he's going to run the job up there but I want you to handle the work here." So, bless her heart, I had a good secretary that kept track of everything, boy, and so she helped me out with who did what, when and so forth as far as clients, as far as contractors, and so forth. So she got me squared away pretty much as to who was calling on the phone wanting to know about the job here. So I jumped right into it and I was an associate partner for that firm, and that was my first partnership, I think.

THOMASSON: So it looks like you were only there about a year—

CROFT: Here it is. Here it is.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

So then you moved to Taniguchi?

CROFT: What happened there—yes—I'd been there for some time, and I'd been going to AIA meetings, and Alan Taniguchi came up to me and he says, "Man, I hear you've been doing a real good job over at John's office. You getting tired working over there. You're doing—I understand you're doing all the work, and you got another guy over there that doesn't know what he's doing." And I said, "Well, you're right." (Thomasson laughs) And he told me—I told him his name and I won't tell you his name—and he wasn't even a registered architect, and I said, "Well, he's not—he shouldn't be doing that." He said, "He's got a problem, hasn't he? York's got a problem." He said, "I got a problem. I need somebody like you in my office." I said, "How do you know you want me?" He said, "I've been talking around to contractors and so forth, and I was talking to my wife because I'm working twenty-four hours a day, and she says, 'You better hire that boy.'" (Thomasson laughs) And so he said, "Would you like to come over and try it for a while?" And I says, "Sure." He says, "Well, whatever he's paying you, I'll double it."

THOMASSON: Oh.

CROFT: I says, "That'll get me over there, right there, Alan, and I really appreciate it, but you don't—you're not paying me just to move," and he says, "No, I'm paying you so you can help me do some work because I feel like I've got stuff that you know how to do." So that's what we did.

THOMASSON: What kind of things did you work on with Alan? It looks like you were a partner with Alan.

CROFT: Oh, yes, yes. What happened on the partnership deal, Alan got a chance after I'd been there awhile and I'd done quite a few jobs for a junior high school and a bunch of stuff and also—this building is called Casa del Sol. That's a model of it. And it's a job—it's concrete. This is it now. I've got pictures of it somewhere, but I've got them in there so I can show them to you. But it's concrete and people says, "You can't do that with concrete." Well, they didn't understand that a catenary—which that is a catenary type roof, which was a kind of an arch upside down, and that's the way structurally that works because instead of a buttress here because an arch pushes toward the buttress, each one of those is dependent on the other one. So consequently, it puts pressure like this (illustrates) like the arch turning (undecipherable) and so that's the reason it's

not but three-and-a-half inches deep and it's not but two inches deep plus insulation.

THOMASSON: It looks very light, almost like a tent.

CROFT: Up here it's very light. It's been through several hurricanes already.

THOMASSON: So was it a tourist center? Is that what that says?

CROFT: Yes, it was built for a tourist center because all the Yankees used to come down to the Valley and spend the winter.

THOMASSON: Right.

CROFT: And then they turned it into a community center because everybody wanted to rent it, and so forth. The city says, "Well, let's make money off of it. Let's rent it to people." So they did, and they had some renovations, and they had a kitchen and everything behind it, which I've got a plan of it but you don't necessarily need it. That's all—

THOMASSON: And this was while you were working with Alan Taniguchi, right?

CROFT: That was for a while—and I was going to tell you that I was doing all the construction work—I mean, I was there doing the whole project. I mean—how that happened was Alan had gotten a chance to be a visiting critique to the architecture school, and so while he was up there, I supervised all the construction on it, and I got pictures of me sitting on top of this when they were pouring concrete. So I went ahead (undecipherable)—I got to change it a little bit. The design of it had not been done when Alan came up here because he was here supposedly temporarily. And he decided he wanted to stay longer, so I went ahead and designed it like this (shows) instead of—he wanted it to be arches, and I says, "No, I want it to be a catenary, and I want it to be—the theory there is each one is dependent on the other." So in order to make something really work I talked to my structural engineer and he said, "Why don't we post-tension the beams on that?" The beams come up like this (illustrates) and they came to a circle at the top, and then distributed a back force in a circle all the way around, and it also did the same thing that these were doing. Consequently, I went ahead and designed it while Alan was gone. So he comes back and I said, "I've already built a model of it and here it is, and it's like this." And he said, "Well, it looks like you've got it done." I said, "Well, I hope so because I've already checked with the city. They think it's absolutely wonderful and impossible but I haven't been able to do anything except talk to the city manager," who was my neighbor. (Both laugh) And so he said, "Well, they've offered me—I'd done several other projects with him and hired another man that was good." And he had worked with Alan

when Alan had a temporary little office in Austin. I don't know what he was doing. I've forgot, but anyhow—oh, he was hiring students just for (undecipherable), you know, showing them what to do. So consequently, I designed the tourist center myself, and in a way it's kind of like the airport. Nobody else did it. And everybody thought that really it was beautiful but impossible. And I remember—and of course, what we did, we introduced post-tensioning in the first building in—I guess in Texas, maybe the world—that ever used post-tensioning on a building. They'd been using—the highway department used it on bridges.

THOMASSON: Right.

CROFT: Nobody had ever used it on a building, particularly not a building like this. (laughs) So there was a firm in Corpus Christi who had the equipment to do the post-tensioning. So I called them and they said, yes, they would be willing to work as a partner with a company, whoever got the contract, and they would do the post-tensioning themselves and guarantee it. And I says, "Deal," so what I did is I got an approval from the city.

THOMASSON: And that's with the City of Harlingen, right? Just to be clear, this was the City of Harlingen?

CROFT: City of Harlingen.

THOMASSON: Okay.

CROFT: And they said, Okay, if it won't fall down, we'll do it, and it still had the forms up because, you know, wood forms and columns everywhere that hold it up. So consequently, we went ahead and did it and post-tensioned it and did all this stuff. Contractor had finished except for taking the forms out. So I told them—I had a friend who was the—worked for the TV station and I says, "Well, you might on your newscast—you might tell them we're taking all the forms out from the Casa del Sol on Monday morning." So Monday morning you couldn't get anywhere near it because people were all around it to watch the world's first planned disaster. (Both laugh) And they says, you know, I'd already been up, put a pencil between the forms and the concrete. It had already done its relaxation, and it was ready. So those people all the way around it sticking clear out here, and I says, "Okay, now, to prove that this is going to work, what I'm going to do is I'm going to get the city manager here and the contractor, and we're going to go in there and we're going to stand there because we've got this fellow with this tractor who's going to hook a chain on the forms, and he's going to pull them out, and we're going to stand there while he's pulling them out because if it falls we're dead anyhow." And the contractor really didn't want to do it but he did. I said, "Chicken, chicken." (Thomasson laughs) So consequently, that's what happened. And they pulled them out and everybody was so upset because they didn't see

the world's first planned disaster. (Thomasson laughs) And so, they took off, and that was it.

THOMASSON: You had a beautiful building.

CROFT: It really—I've got all kind of pictures of it, but it's something. Nobody as far as I know—and as I said about sketching.

THOMASSON: Was that probably your favorite building you designed?

CROFT: That's one of the favorite buildings I designed. Really, like I said, don't listen to anybody else because I designed it. Here it is.

THOMASSON: You have pictures here of the formwork.

CROFT: Let's see. Am I sitting on top—I may have been. But they're pouring it right there. There's one here, and they poured them in sequence for this one and this one and then they poured—they alternated and then it was all set. Because when this one poured, it put the force here and all the way to here. So each one was dependent on the other one, as I said.

THOMASSON: Wow! Let's see. Let me do a time check here. We have only about twenty minutes left.

So there are a couple of things I want to cover with you. One is we said we would talk about sketches and how you use sketching in your work.

CROFT: Oh, yeah, sketching. I've been doing that for a long, long, long time. I found that we can use them and then many times that's how we tell and show the owner what the building is really going to look like and if there's something or sometimes don't look at the working drawings and the construction part of it, and so we like to show sketches. Can I show you some?

THOMASSON: Well, I'll look at them after. It's a little hard on the recording to talk about sketches, so we'll make—

CROFT: I've made sketches on practically every building. If I can't show you, then that's too bad.

THOMASSON: No, I'll look at them after. I just can't—it will take up time in our recording that will—

CROFT: Here's another thing I had something to do with.

THOMASSON: And what is that? Is that the 360 bridge?

CROFT: Yeah, it's called the—

THOMASSON: Pennybacker?

CROFT: —Pennybacker. And what happened, the reason I put this picture in here—the reason that that bridge has got this design is the highway department had a standard highway department bridge with pylons down in the lake, and so I happened to be president of the local chapter here—

THOMASSON: AIA?

CROFT: —and I got a committee and had three or four other guys and we go out to the highway department and says, You can't do that. That's dangerous. Somebody's going to get killed. Boats drive up and down that river at nighttime, sometimes without lights because they've got moonlight, and they think that, you know—and too bad. They says, Well, what do you think? I did a sketch and my grandson's got the sketch now or I would've showed it to you. I wish I'd made a print. But I showed it to them, and I said, "Here's what you ought to do," and they says, We don't know how to do stuff like that. And I says, "Well, if you'll hire this engineer, he'll do it for you," and they said, Okay. So they hired him.

THOMASSON: And who was that?

CROFT: I guess that was Clark Craig, I believe. Wait a minute. Yeah, it was in Austin, so it was Clark Craig, I guess, and Dave Engleman. Both of them we worked together, and Dave Engleman and I—oh, he's a good friend. Also he'd done a lot of stuff for us. So we go—he was my structural engineer—and we go to them and we show them. They hire him and they bid the job and it got in all their publications and also got on the map of the City of Austin and got on the cover of it. So what they did, they submitted it to the national department of engineering that they belonged to, and it won an award for engineering design. So what they did, they took the credit for it. I mean, they beat the drum, look what we did, and did all this stuff, and bid it out and built it. (laughs)

THOMASSON: That was a good thing that you did, though, to help them see another way of doing things.

CROFT: Oh, sure, because it's an arch. You got a mountain on this side and a mountain (laughs) on that side, anyhow.

THOMASSON: And no piers in the lake.



CROFT: No piers, no nothing. And it's suspended with cables, and so—

THOMASSON: Good.

CROFT: —they took credit for it, and it got on the Texas map, and the governor took pride for it, and so we just says, okay. What I'll do now is put application in—I mean, when they asked me to be a Fellow and I had to present stuff, this was part of it because this was something that I did for the community, not for me.

THOMASSON: Yeah. That you influenced.

CROFT: I should get it. I wasn't employed to do a thing, but anyhow, that was part of what being a Fellow was is how you've helped your community and so forth. You might've seen some of that stuff. Have you still got some of that stuff?

THOMASSON: No.

CROFT: Dave probably, I guess. You gave them all the stuff that he showed you, didn't he?

THOMASSON: He didn't show me anything. You're talking about Dave, your son?

CROFT: Uh huh. Oh, he didn't?

THOMASSON: I don't think so.

CROFT: Okay. He may have—I didn't know if he'd showed you.

THOMASSON: No, he and I just met briefly at the History Center.

CROFT: Okay.

THOMASSON: And then everything else we talked about was on the phone.

CROFT: Surely, he hasn't got enough—I hope he doesn't.

THOMASSON: He told me he had things that he wanted to donate to the History Center, yes.

CROFT: Okay.

THOMASSON: Yeah, and I connected him up with the right person for that.

So just to briefly go back to your career and finish that story up—

CROFT: Yes.

THOMASSON: —it looks like you went on then to—oh, you had your own firm in Harlingen—

CROFT: Yes.

THOMASSON: —and your own when you came to Austin and went to Jessen.

CROFT: Yes. And that's where I designed another favorite building.

THOMASSON: Which is?

CROFT: Westlake High School.

THOMASSON: Ah. Okay. That was a big project. Did you have people?

CROFT: Huge project, and I was—two guys. I mentioned Herb Crume awhile ago. He and I went out to present ourselves to the school board as why don't you hire us, you know? And they interviewed architects, and so when we did the interview, Herb says, "Go ahead and do it," so I answered all the questions and I said, "Herb, you take that one." He said, "Oh, Croft, why don't you go ahead?" and he says, "You know how to deal with these people," and I says, "Don't you?" He said, "I don't want to mess with them." I said, "Okay." So I did. And so we got a phone call at the office about two days later, and somebody called and so Al Grieven picked up the phone and says, "Who are you? What? We got the job?" He says, "Who you want to talk to?" He says, "I want to talk to Chuck Croft. He's the one that got you guys the job." He says, "What? When'd he do that?" I said, "Al, let me talk to him. Okay. I'll talk to him." And so I did, and I said, "You know you kind of upset Mr. Grieven. He's the one that answered the phone," and he said, "Well, tell him I'm sorry but you're the one I want to talk to because you're the one that sold the board on to hire you people. So what I'll do is I'll bring the contract to you. And you sign the contract and we'll go." So we did. So guess who got to design Westlake?

THOMASSON: Big project.

CROFT: So I did. It was a great building. They said we want one that's waterproof naturally. We want one that's soundproof. We want one that's hurricane proof." (laughs) "And we want one where kids are not slamming the lockers during other classes and stuff." And I said, "Well, we can do that." So as far as I know, it's the only school—it was the only school then that had a locker

court, that had masonry interiors, like, in the hall corridors and between classrooms, and isolating anything that made noise like the mechanical room, which we had then. They wanted an air conditioned building, and so that's what we got them.

THOMASSON: And that was built in the late '60s?

CROFT: Yeah, I've got it somewhere probably. I don't know when it was built. Okay. I've got something here. Retail. Industrial. Office. (laughs) Commercial. Good grief. Have I got the school? Yeah. Somewhere. Educational. Westlake 1970. Okay?

THOMASSON: Um hmm, 1970.

CROFT: That probably was one. I'm not sure—that may have been when it was finished. Yeah. Right here. Here's all the education facilities right here.

THOMASSON: Yeah, okay.

CROFT: Okay. And I was the design and project architect on that. And I went to all the board meetings, answered all their questions. They had a community gathering in the auditorium, and they put me on the stage, (laughs) on the spot and started asking me questions, and I'd answer the questions. And I did that for at least two hours, I guess.

THOMASSON: Wow!

CROFT: And then it was also, I think, the school that had a detached library, detached from the school with a courtyard in between so that if the kids had to go to the library, they'd go across the court, which was covered, and it also was the only one that we knew of at that time—in fact, they had to hire a consultant. That's well before computers took over, and that was the first school in Texas that I know of that had a computerized library—

THOMASSON: Interesting.

CROFT: —where each book was in its place and in its category and so forth, so a student would only have to look at it. So I was proud of that building.

THOMASSON: I have a question for you back to the start of your career when you were starting to work in concrete. Was there some—anything, any influence that got you to that point in your interest in concrete and those new ways of designing things? Was it from traveling, or was there a person?

CROFT: That did what, concrete?

THOMASSON: The concrete. What is it that made that—that triggered that for you? Do you know or remember?

CROFT: Well, I guess it started in the Valley when I did a lot of concrete buildings. I did tilt wall schools. I did folded plate roofing. I have pictures of these too. But I did post-tensioning, and that—concrete people think that's fine. And I got awards from—what—all the concrete companies.

THOMASSON: So it's just something you liked working in?

CROFT: Yeah. I liked to work in concrete, and let me see. I did—I started with tilt wall and folded plates, and then I got into hyperbolic paraboloids and I've got pictures of that too. Anyhow, I got into hyperbolic paraboloids and then the combination of them, and so I won quite a few awards on that from the concrete companies because of that, and I've got them in there somewhere. The Portland Cement Association because they're concrete people. (laughs)

THOMASSON: I wanted to ask you one last question.

CROFT: Okay.

THOMASSON: Was there ever a project that you started to work on or that it just didn't happen and it didn't get built that you really wish?

CROFT: Yeah.

THOMASSON: Yeah?

CROFT: I bid a job for a multi-millionaire, who lived in Lakeway who—150,000,000. That's what he was kind of a billionaire worth. And he wanted me to add onto a building that was already there. And he wanted it to be storm-proof and rigid and not drift down the hill. His house was built on a hill here, and so I added the building, and I put in concrete walls, retaining walls, and everything. Even down the hill I put concrete walls because he said, "It's washing all my flowers, and the first thing you know, I'll be on a cliff." So what happened is I did, and he says, "Now, we're going to Switzerland, and we're going to look around out there for some property so we can build us a building because we plan on going—we like to go there every year or more, and we love the place, and it's across the lake—Lake Lugano out from that gambling place over there, that's in there. We like to go to that. So we're going to buy some property, and we'll let you know." Well, they come back and, boy, he was hostile. He says, "They told me—even I told them I'd pay them cash plus for this piece of property. And they

says, Did anybody tell you that you couldn't own anything here unless you were—I mean, you could only be a foreigner and own only 20 percent property. He said, "You're crazy, you know." They said, "If you're going to build here, you're going to go with the law here." So he come back, and, boy, he was cooked, and he said, "Boy, tell you what. I've got a piece of property over there. I want to build on it and they don't want me to." I said, "Well, what are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to pay them 100 percent plus twenty." I said, "God, do you think they'll go for that?" He said, "Yeah, I think the moneygrubbers might, but I don't know for sure." So what happened is he came back and told me—and I'll show you the results—it wasn't built.

THOMASSON: Okay.

CROFT: The reason it wasn't built is he said, "I outsmarted them." He said, "All I did—"what did he do? Yeah. It was a commercial building. It was a government building, government owned over there, and it was a huge condo complex right at on government property right on the lake there where you could see it. I mean, from everywhere. He came back and he said, "Well, I foxed them. I bought something on the government and the government approved it," and I said, "What did you buy?" He said, "I bought that whole condo complex." It must've been—I don't know how many—thirty condos in this one complex. He bought them all. And I said, "What are you going to do with all that stuff?" He said, "Well, I might rent it out, but what I'm going to do, I mean the top floors—the first thing I'm going to do—the first floor is I'm going to build that roof where it'll be safer than it is because I'm going to land my helicopter on it. I bought a helicopter over there and I've got a warehouse down there that I keep it in." (Thomasson laughs) "Now, they give me a hard time when I try to take off because it scares all the people and all that stuff. So I'm going to put a helicopter pad on the roof of this building." I said, "Can you get by with it?" He said, "Sure." I said, "How do you know?" and he said, "Well, I'm just going to do it. It's government and they go for money." Anyhow, blah, blah, nevertheless, I did his house out here in Lakeway, and I did the renovation on that, and I had to do it in metric, of course. I don't know what I've done with the drawings. I guess when I was throwing stuff away I did.

THOMASSON: That's one that didn't get built.

CROFT: That's the one that got built.

THOMASSON: Oh, it got built.

CROFT: That one did. And they used to go out there every year or more because then they had a place, and anyhow that happened and you asked me a question about: did I ever have a building I just didn't want to do or something?

THOMASSON: No, it's more did you want to do one and then it didn't happen. It was a disappointment to you?

CROFT: Yeah. Well—

THOMASSON: But you answered. That was good.

CROFT: I've done several of them that didn't happen. I've done a couple of houses that weren't built, and I've done a car dealership, which was in the Rio Grande Valley, which I designed using hyperbolic paraboloids and so the owners decided they weren't going to build it because they talked to contractors and they couldn't build that stuff. I said, "Which contractors did you talk to?" (Thomasson laughs) And they said, Well, your old buddy of ours, and he doesn't build them like that. So I said, "Okay. Then pay me my fee." We ain't going to pay anything, so I sued them and I won, and they didn't build it of course,

THOMASSON: Those things happen.

CROFT: But I finally got my money out of them.

THOMASSON: That's good.

CROFT: Paid the law fees anyhow.

THOMASSON: Well, we're going to wrap up.

Thank you very much for telling me your stories today.

CROFT: Oh, sure.

THOMASSON: I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW