

Powerline Stories

In 1964 after hitchhiking from working at Lear Jet in Wichita, Kansas, I went to the electrician union office in Seattle, where I was a member from working previously in the shipyard, to see about employment. They sent me out to a job up in Bellingham to work as an assemblyman, bolting steel on a powerline that went from Arlington to Blain.

We would meet at the gas station shop, where about eight of us would climb into a "crummy", in the back of a pickup truck with benches, for the half hour ride to the job site.

Lots of stories were told and some wonderful ones from an interesting older guy, John Borne. His name for me was, "Big Dick, the Ladies Choice", (his idea, not mine). He was a multitalented tradesman, having worked as a carpenter, electrician, bricklayer and crane operator.

One day, he told the story about his own work on a "two-bit island", in the Pacific during the Second World War. He worked as a crane operator, unloading ships with supplies for the base there. One of the things they unloaded was beer, much loved by the soldiers, shipped in wooden boxes. He told his rigger to get the crappiest cargo net he had, which was then heavily loaded with beer cases and swung out over the water and raised very high with the crane. He then let it free-fall and abruptly stopped it at the water level, which released all the beer cans into about twelve feet of water.

The officer in charge, overlooking this, was concerned because the guys liked their beer and wanted to know about it. He was dismayed when told that the beer was gone in thirty feet of water.

Much later, when everyone was gone, the rigger became "the human clam shell", sitting on the crane line's "headache ball" and lowered into the twelve feet of water to retrieve the beer cases one at a time, which were treasured away in a secret spot in the warehouse and enjoyed by the participants.

A few years later, I was working on the second floor of a stainless steel fabricating plant on Harbour Island in Seattle. It was built half on the shore and half on pilings in the water of Puget Sound. Mid-morning on this day, the office on the second floor started to shake. I looked out the window and saw the telephone poles waving and the ground waves undulating from the Anchorage, Alaska earthquake - a very scary experience.

I discovered, on going to the main floor of the plant, that the asphalt covered wood floor had a two foot wide by one hundred foot long gaping split and the water was splashing below. When I got back to my rented house on Alki Point, I found the thirty quart bottles of my home brew toppled and broken on the floor.

A couple of weeks later, I was in touch by telephone with John Borne. When asked what he was doing, he replied that he was a bricklayer right now, making good money repairing people's broken chimneys.

Another lesson I received from John Borne, was the making of Purple Jesus. We all lived in rooms in a funky hotel in Bellingham and John said we should make up a batch of Purple Jesus. We secured a large jar (almost a gallon) from the restaurant where we had breakfast regularly and they packed our lunches. We acquired the necessary ingredients to make this much lauded beverage - 1 fifth of Everclear (the 190 proof pure alcohol from the state liquor store), as well as

two large containers of frozen grape juice. Add the water and stir it up for a delightful and very potent cocktail.

About five of us consumed the elixir and decided to go and race go-karts at a spot five miles north of Bellingham. We arrived there somewhat drunk and boisterous and they let us drive 5 go-karts, which we raced around the track, sometimes running into each other. A lot of fun was had by all and next morning hangovers all around.