



Four "big dumb white guys with pliers", placing 1/2" rebars every 8" or 16" (depending on the job). They're working on the 710 Freeway in Los Angeles. Looks easy, but 30 ft. straight up is the foreman yelling "next bar, move, Move, MOVE!".

# BIG DUMB WHITE GUYS WITH PLIERS

Written by Gary Cifra    Date: July 20, 2012

I don't know if I heard this before I started doing this work or whether I'd made it up later, but it certainly is accurate for 1968 ironworkers. I had been working for a company called MILIPART earning \$1.25 an hour drilling holes in parts for weapons to help defend our country against the Vietnamese soldiers who appeared to live in their pajamas. I remember working and thinking it's about time for our 10 AM break. It got to be at least 15 minutes until 10:00 but I decided not to look at the clock. Eventually I would give up and look at the clock, thinking it must be almost 10:00, but when I looked at the clock, it was only 10 minutes till 9:00 in the morning. It seemed endless.

I had heard somewhere that the ironworkers union was allowing people to work as an iron worker for 30 days if you paid a \$10 fee. The pay for an iron worker at that time was \$6.62 an hour! I told my friends and they didn't believe me. A couple of my friends tried it and they lasted till noon. Only one lasted a little bit longer - my friend Phil, who is a

rockclimber. I asked him about it recently and he said he only worked for a short time and all he could remember was the pain.

I contacted the ironworkers union and found out what tools I would need. I purchased a tool belt, a pair of pliers, a six-foot collapsible measuring stick, and a wire reel about 6 inches in diameter and about 2 inches thick. I paid the \$10 and showed up at the construction where they were building the 605 Freeway. There appeared to be a wooden bridge. Below it was a pile of rebar. I picked up a spool of wire and tried to put it in the wire reel with no success. I went over to the foreman and told him I could not get the wire in there. He grabbed the wire out of my hand and slung it off to the side saying, "you're not gonna need any wire. Get with somebody and start takin' that steel up to the deck", pointing to a stack of 20 foot long and about half-inch rebar. I went over to the rebar and started picking it up. I figured when somebody would come over, we could maybe take eight pieces of rebar. Then I saw someone hurrying over to me. He did not introduce himself, but I noticed that on back of his hardhat was a label that read: "HURRY UP"! He reached down and grabbed a handful of rebar - about 12 to 15 pieces - and then he and I lifted them up and put them on our shoulders. I had to squat to get it on my shoulder because it was very, very heavy.

I could see he was moving towards the ramp up towards the bridge. The steel weighed heavy on my shoulder but I figured when we got to the ramp he would slow down. He did not. In fact, I think he speeded up. As he went up the ramp, the weight transferred down to my shoulder. I could feel the ridges of the rebar digging into my shoulder and my legs



These guys were lucky - they have a hoist. I used to carry bundles of rebar like this on my shoulder....

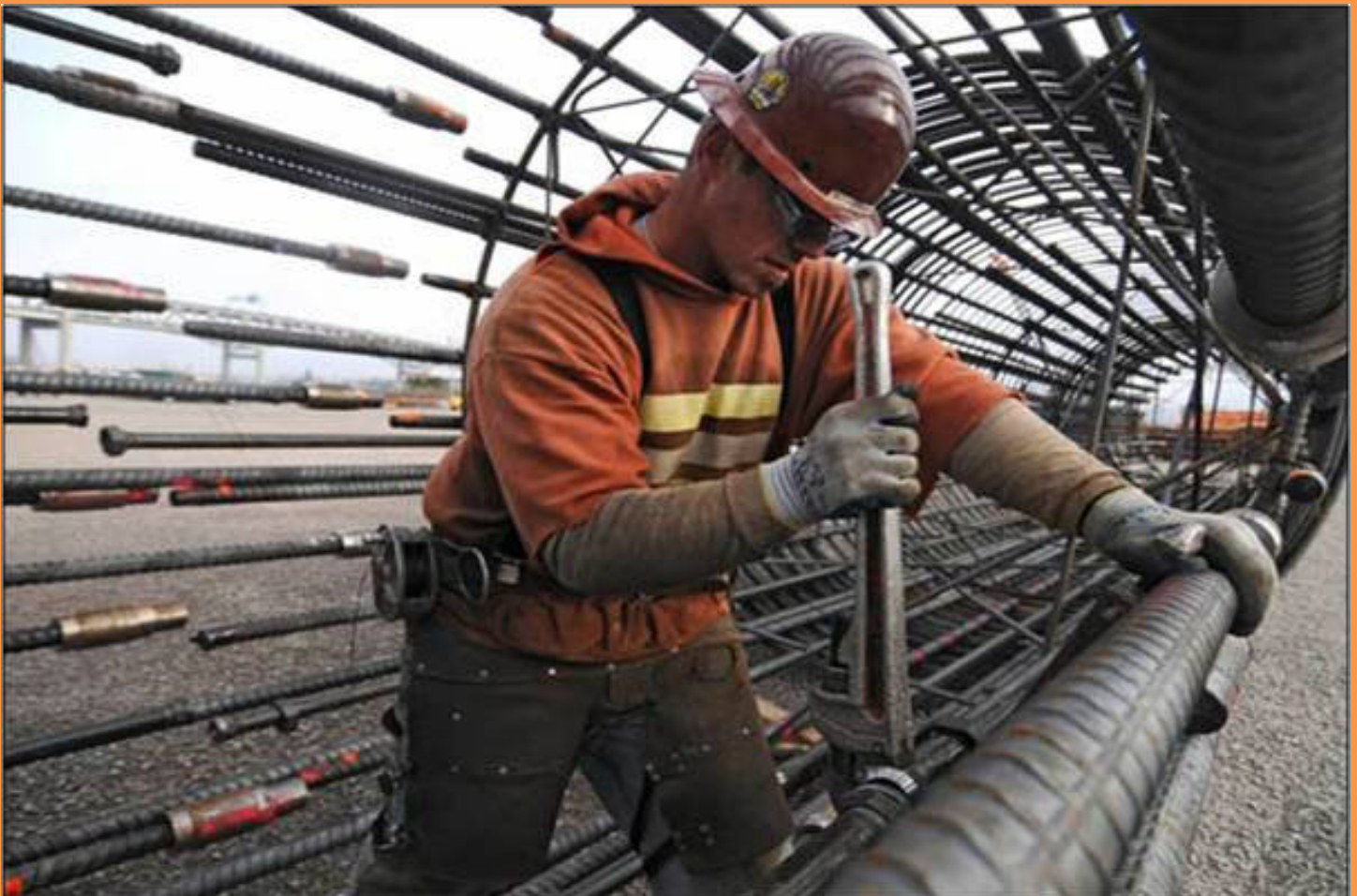


This is a giant column, tilted on its' side and being "tied down". The column coils are manufactured in a giant spool. The workers pull the spool open and tie long pieces of rebar to the spool to secure it in its' columnar shape. The workers are standing on rebar they've already placed and tied.

started to buckle as we went up the ramp. After we got to the top of the ramp, we went over to the deck where there was more rebar waiting, already placed. We went over to the end of the placed steel and lowered the steel from our shoulders to our laps. I held it on my lap with my left hand, and he started pulling out one piece of rebar at a time. I tried to grab them with my right hand, feeling like the whole pile was about to slip out of my my left hand. He would whip each piece of rebar up in the air and it hit my hand. "What a jerk", I thought. I grabbed a hold of each rebar he swung up with my right hand and was trying to hold onto the pile with my left hand – not an easy thing to do. Together we flung each piece down. I felt the whole pile was going to flip out onto the deck. I grabbed each piece and threw it in front of us and took two steps forward. I was able to grab the iron bars with both hands now. I held them like they were going to fall. Then he started whipping another bar up to my hand and it bounced off my hand. As I tried to hold on with my left hand, it felt exactly like the bars were going to fall from my hand onto the deck. I managed to grab the new bar and throw it down and take my next two steps forward. Even though I was holding fewer bars, it still felt like they were going to roll out of my left hand. We did this until there are only a few bars left and finally we were finished. What a

relief. I turned to look and the guy was halfway down the ramp headed for the iron pile again. I turned and headed quickly down the ramp to the iron pile. By the time I got there he was already holding another pile and ready to pull them up onto our shoulders. If he had 15 bars before, he had 17 now and when he lifted them up, I barely got them up to my shoulder. We moved forward up to the ramp and then up the ramp itself again, with him leading. The weight up the ramp transferred as the elevation rose to my shoulder, and I could feel the ribs of the rebar dig into my shoulder and the bars even pinching my shoulder. We got up to the deck and got the steel back down to my lap. I held the bars as they were about to fall again, and went back to the same thing with the bar up, they grabbed it and threw it down... take two steps... do the next.

After a couple hours of this my shoulder started to ache, and as I continued up the ramp, I tried to hold the bar up, above and off my shoulder. By the time we got to the deck my arms were very tired and aching. I almost dropped the bars again but I held on and I did it again and again and again. It dawned on me that he wasn't a jerk, After a time I heard the guys say to me "lunch" and we went back down to the bottom of the bridge. I said to him "what happened to our coffee break?". "HURRY UP" gave me a sly smile and said "no breaks on this job, Hoss". After a half hour lunch we went back to the same thing. I guess working with "HURRY UP" was my official training. At the end of the day, the foreman asked if anybody wanted to work some overtime - time and a half. That would mean making almost \$10 an hour, the equivalent of \$50 in 2012 pay. I couldn't say no. I went to do some different work that was a little easier and I made two hours of overtime.



These columns were fun to put together for the new edition to the downtown Los Angeles Public Library.



The vertical rebar in this column is usually more than an inch in diameter. This support column could be used for the foundation of a building, a parking lot, or whatever the blueprint specifies. We often were not told what kind of project we were working on - remember, we were just "big, dumb white guys"!

I went home exhausted on my first day and my shoulder felt really sore. That night I had cramps in almost every muscle in my body.

I woke up wondering if I should go to work or not. But, what the heck, if I could stick it out two more days it would be the weekend. So I went to work the next day. I stuck out for two more days and it was the weekend. I felt like I did accomplish something and I felt proud to be an iron worker. I kept going back and after a few weeks got used to it.

I was on one job on a bridge deck. A foreman told me to start tying up the rods that we had just placed. He watched me tie for about 15 seconds and then said "Get back in the

iron pile." At lunch that day, I asked one of the ironworkers if I could see his pliers. They had a section of rubber hose on the heel hand of the pliers holding a spring that kept the pliers apart. The finger end of the pliers had a short hook on the end that kept your fingers on the pliers. I asked him "where can you get one of these things?" He replied: "From E. L. Wicker, he lives in El Monte. Get his address, send him \$15 and he'll send

you a pair". I got the new pliers and the next time the foreman asked me to start tying up the deck he watched me for about 30 seconds before he sent me back to the iron pile.

Later I gathered up a couple of pieces of rebar scraps and asked the foreman if I could take them home. He glanced at what I was holding and went back to work ignoring me. So I took them home and started practicing. The next time the foreman asked me to start tying a deck I tied for a minute or so and he said "Keep tying. Tie the carrier bar solid and the other ones every other one." After three hours bent over tying, my back was starting to burn. I lifted up my back to straighten out and started to feel good. The next thing I heard was: "HEY!" I looked over and saw someone rushing toward me from across the deck. I bent back down and started tying again, wishing I could have been sent back down to the iron pile for a few hours.



I kept working on the 605 and the 210 freeways. Mostly on columns and bridge decks for ECONOMY STEEL. I worked on it generally 3 to 4 days a week and occasionally five days a week if I liked the job. Working a few days a week meant that I was making more than anyone I knew and had plenty of free time to go rock climbing, partying and whatever else I wanted to. I got used to working like a mule and getting paid like a king. I worked at different jobs for different foremen and everyone seemed to like my work.

One day at a new job, I was standing around waiting for 7:30 to start the day, when I noticed a man staring at me about 3 feet away as if I were a Martian or something. After a few

This guy kinda looks like me....hardhat, toolbelt, safety vest, gloves. Often I didn't wear my safety equipment like hardhat or gloves on the job. The sunglasses are a stylish touch!

uncomfortable minutes he said: " Who in the hell sent you out here?". I replied "Duke, down at the union hall." I may have had a peace sign painted on my hard hat (this was 1969), and I certainly had long hair. The foreman said "you're gonna work for me, huh?" I replied: "Sure!". He responded: "We'll see."

And he was really a tyrant! It was a hot day and several times I heard him say "You better stay away from that goddamn water can! Get back to work!" Finally he could take it no longer - and ended up kicking over the water can in a rage. All the water spilled to the deck.



**A bellowing foreman admonishing his crew: "Next bar...move – Move – MOVE!"**

Fortunately there was a union steward on this job, and he told everyone to stop working. It took a while for him to get everyone to stop but they all did and he told the foreman "Get this water can filled up - and with ice!". The foreman glared at him, and he continued, "I'll shut this job down right now – I will! I'll send everybody home!". It was at that point that I realized the foreman was not armed. Had he had any sort of firearm, he would've emptied it into the shop steward. He was fuming. When the water can was filled with water everybody came around and drank freely. Eventually everyone got back to work and the Foreman continued to fume at the end of the day there were about a dozen of us standing around. He pointed at us and said "You, you, you, you, and you. Come



Looks like a bridge deck, but it could have been one of the miles of subway I worked on just west of downtown L.A., perhaps MacArthur Park. Lots of steel on that job. There was a nasty young foreman supervisor, I recall!

back tomorrow." He didn't say anything to the other guys. I wondered what he would have said had he known that I was a card carrying communist\*? Well I know exactly what he would've said – "You, you, you, you and you come back tomorrow". I learned later that the Foreman got paid by the tons of steel they placed per day. What the hell did he care what political persuasion his

pack animals followed? Or whether I was a "confused" queer or dope-smoking hippie, of which I was neither. If they could move steel they could come back tomorrow.

What's wrong with that? I worked as hard as my grandparents and maybe even my great-grandparents, and got paid more than anyone I know. The foreman might bitch at you for drinking a little water, he might call you "Hoss" or "Babe" from time to time. I learned a lesson about the value of things. I did this for about two years and was grandfathered into Ironworkers Local 416. I was now a proud Journeyman of the International Association of Bridge Structural and Ornamental Ironworkers Local 416. I had to keep a book on my person and keep it up-to-date with monthly stamps per unit.

Then I turned 21 and made a brilliant new decision - I got married. To make a long, difficult, frightening, wonderful story short, it was 1979 and I was out of work and drawn back to the union hall. Duke gave me a knowing smile and chuckle when I asked if they're getting breaks yet.

My first job returning in 1979 was on a parking structure of a large upcoming apartment building. I'd never done this type of work before so I made several mistakes and ended up wasting a lot of time. At the end of the day the supervisor said, "come back tomorrow,



I like the way you work." He likes the way I work? Was he even looking? I think I know what he liked. I was "old-school".

I learned a few other things about ironwork. In the late 1960s several freeways were being built and lots of other things that required the use of rebar. The 605 and the 210 freeways had lots of bridges and lots of work. They figured out that it was cheaper to hire a bunch of yokels to bring the rebar up to the job site than to hire a crane to lift the steel up onto the deck. I also learned that ECONOMY STEEL was famous for fast steel placement on freeways. Often on big crews they had someone referred to as a pusher, like the guy with "HURRY UP" on the back of his hard hat. Also, I heard stories of foremen crushing up Benzedrine and mixing it in with the water. I never did I actually see that but I wouldn't be surprised.



A vast berth of rebar....looks like it's hot out there in the sun!

I was once working on a deck and the guy next to me stood up and said "Who, me?". From across the deck, a man shouted: "No, the hippie-looking #\*\*#, get over here!". I hurried over and did whatever it was he told me to do. In my last year as an iron worker I stopped wearing gloves. I would stick pins in the palms of my hands and girls would squeal in fright! In 1968, \$6.62 an hour was big pay. Decades later in 2004, when I retired from my job as

an Engineering Tech for the Metropolitan Water District, I earned \$30 an hour. Out of curiosity I called the Ironworkers Union and asked what their current pay rate was, and learned it was \$29 an hour. I was making more as an engineering tech than an ironworker.

I got a great job as a licensed Water Treatment Plant Operator for MWD, making good money. Three years later, I ended up in the hospital almost completely blind, near-death and unable to move much. All I could do was lay there in the hospital bed and smoke cigarettes. Apparently this was not a health risk in 1983. It was great that I had insurance but I was eventually diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and went back to work as a Water Treatment Operator after a few months. In 1988, five years later, I was terminated

because I could no longer work graveyard shift. I filed a lawsuit with MWD and was out of work again.

I went back to the ironworkers union hall and signed up again as an iron worker. Ironically, one of my first jobs back as an iron worker ended up at the wastewater plant I had previously worked at near Playa del Vista. We were building a giant wall in a storage tank about 30 feet high, placing 20 foot half-inch diameter rebar rods every 18 inches. They had to be placed vertically with three people instead of two. Put a bar up, tie it, put another bar up, tie it, etc. We had a hook on our belt to hook onto the wall to hold us up as we climbed up with the stack of rebar. One bar tied with a U-tie or Figure-8 and a wrap around the vertical bar at the top to keep it solid and prevent it from sliding down. It takes about 8 to 12 seconds if you're experienced with tying steel. But the foreman had a different agenda. We were a few steps up the wall with hooks in place holding us up and a foreman bellowed a phrase that became burned into my brain for life: **"Next bar...move – Move – MOVE!"**

It was still hard work but we did have a morning coffee break now, and there were black ironworkers, even one female ironworker, though I never ran into her. I remember going out to UCLA one summer for an earthquake retrofitting job. I got there at 7:30 AM; it was already 95° and headed for 105° or more. An old timer said to me: "Drink plenty of water and enjoy it!" I've always had a fondness for wise idioms like this. I took his advice - I did drink plenty of water, and did enjoy it. I got to be pals with the foreman and we often joked about his cracked hardhat. It was very hot but it was one of my favorite on-the-job memories.

I continued ironworking for another two years. Afterwards I settled my lawsuit and went back to work for the Metropolitan Water District. I worked as an ironworker in the late 60's, late 70's, and late 80's. I never made it to the late 90s. I have been in a wheelchair since 1998 and expect to keep it forever. I often muse that if I were to get better, I would even think about going back to work as an iron worker. I'm sure after a couple of hours I'd think "What the hell was I thinking?" I've often heard people say "The Army made a man out of me". Well, Ironworkers 416 made a man out of me!

*\*Note: Straight out of high school in 1967, I joined the Socialist Workers' Party. What motivated me to join was their efficient protests against the unjust, stupid war in Vietnam. Today when I hear the word "socialist", it has a positive connotation for me, not negative (as in the Republican propaganda spreading around the United States today). To clarify my "card carrying communist" remark, I was a Trotskyist, not a Stalinist. Trotsky was one of the founders of the Red Army and the original Communist Party before it was corrupted. Trotsky's ideas were intelligent and sensible; Stalin was a murderous madman. I wish "communism" were renamed "community-ism", to signify that it is a system that in theory benefits the many, not the few. For the record, I no longer am a communist, but I consider myself way left of everybody and I still oppose illegal and stupid wars we are lied into.*