

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Charles B. Barlow & Willis Gibson

INTERVIEWER: Harry Simpson

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Audio length [00:30:16]

WG: Well we are recording now so...

HS: Yes, okay. Today is Friday December the 11th, which is just 2 weeks away from Christmas. And I'm in the offices of C.B. Barlow Jr., and I have here with me Willis J. Gibson, otherwise known as Gibby, and C.B. Barlow himself. And we are very glad that you were able to be with us. Oh, and it's 1987, that's right... we've got to get the year right because CB was just saying how fast the years went by. And the address here is 614 816 7th Avenue SW. CB, right off the bat, where were you born?

CB: Tennessee, 80 miles east of Nashville, on a farm.

HS: And that was...

CB: That was 1903.

HS: 1903. And your parents? What were they doing?

CB: They were farmers in the timber business. My father and his family, grandfather, had a number of acres of timber land which they harvested, or cut timber for lumber, during the winter and farmed summer.

HS: That was pretty hilly country, wasn't it?

CB: That's in the hill country of Tennessee, yes.

HS: Right. And what kind of education did you receive?

CB: Country school, 8th grade. That's it.

HS: That's right. Well then, somehow or other you found your way to California?

CB: Well the first money I earned pulling a cross bit saw with one of my uncles. Then I bought a pig, and then I had pigs all over the country, that's how I got the money to get out of Tennessee.

HS: Then you became a pig farmer for awhile.

CB: That's right.

HS: What age did you leave Tennessee?

CB: Well I was quite an old man. I was 15. I went from there to... had enough money to get as far as Utah, Salt Lake City. I got a job and worked for the Utah Copper Company for a year. From then I went onto California in 1920, started in the oil business. In the old Coalinga field, California.

HS: Right. Just backing up, from Tennessee to Utah, you would be traveling by train.

CB: That's right.

HS: And you would have to change trains probably at Chicago, would you?

CB: Kansas City.

HS: Kansas City. And how many... do you remember how many days it took you to travel?

CB: It was 4 days and 3 nights.

HS: And no sleeper?

CB: No sleeper, no.

HS: You were sleeping on the slats?

CB: Sleeping in the seats, yeah.

HS: In the seats eh? And they weren't really cushioned very well.

CB: Not very well in those days.

HS: No, right. So why did you stop in Utah? What was the...

CB: Well that's as far as my money would take me.

HS: I see. And then what did you do to keep alive in Utah?

CB: I first got a job helping carpenters with what they called a Scenic Railway. And they would ??? over the Great Salt Lake. From that I went to work for the Utah Copper Company.

HS: Would you stop there to see if we are getting...

(pause audio)

Okay, C.B., you went to this copper mine and was there a smelter there?

CB: I was working in the flotation department where they took the copper from ore

HS: Right.

CB: Wasn't in the mine...

HS: And was there a smelter there? Or did you ship the concentrates up....

CB: There was a smelter nearby, yes.

HS: And this was you said, it was 15 miles west of Salt Lake City at a place called Garfield?

CB: Garfield. That's right.

HS: Right. So you worked within the plant there at the mill, and then what else did you do in Utah before you got to California? Were there any other jobs that you did there?

CB: Well I did. I got the smallpox. Was in the ??? for 21 days. And the doctor advised me to take a light job. So I went to work for the McDonald Candy Company for a couple of months, then went back to the Utah Copper Company for the remaining stay.

HS: And then what compelled you to move on to California then?

CB: Well I had a brother, and a couple of old uncles, and particularly the uncles were what they called Cable 2 drillers in those days, and that's... I went and got a job as a roustabout. They wouldn't transfer from the drilling department to the ... drilling department, so I had to look for another job. I worked at another job and within 2 or 3 months they put me on the drilling rigs.

HS: Were these cable 2?...

CB: Cable 2's.

HS: And what year was this again?

CB: 1920. April of '20.

HS: And you said it was at the Coalinga field?

CB: Coalinga, yes. About 70 miles west of Fresno.

HS: Right. And then you said that you started at \$3.50 a day?

CB: That's right, I started roustabouting at 3.50 a day. Stayed in the bunk house with 145 other people.

HS: And was the board included in that?

CB: The board was a dollar a day?

HS: A dollar a day, eh?

CB: They furnished us a room, and a bed and mattress. We furnished our bedding and what have you. I walked to... got into town. Let's back up here a minute. I got into town at 10'clock at night. Got a room at the hotel, and I walked 3 1/2 miles the following morning to camp and got a job. Walked back to town and bought a bed roll and carried it back to camp that day. Went to work the following morning.

HS: So you had to supply some of your own...

CB: Had to supply all the sheets and blankets and what have you.

HS: And were all these men working for the one company?

CB: Working for one company, which is the Southern Pacific Oil Company. Owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad at that time.

HS: Were they drilling under fee lands?

CB: That's right. And later, 1926, I believe it was taken over the Cenit??? Oil Company.

HS: Of California.

CB: Right.

HS: So this was your introduction to...

CB: That was my introduction into the oil business.

HS: And how deep were those holes that you were drilling approximately?

CB: They ranged anywhere from 800 to 4800 feet.

HS: Was the gravity... was it a heavy oil?

CB: The west side of the Coalinga field was heavy oil, 14 gravity... and that was the Charlotte production. What they called the east side of the deeper production and it was 25-30 gravity oil.

HS: Would you say that the fact that you were involved in that 14 gravity oil had stood you in good stead when you come up to Canada later on?

CB: Very much so.

HS: Right.

CB: They were having problems in the Vermilion field putting those wells on production and keeping them that way. But I had the experience in that type of oil, and I think the first well we put on was... the pump stayed in the hole for 2 1/2 years. So that was unbelievable for that country.

HS: Well, I understand that is called a sergeant pump. Is that right?

CB: Well, I had later on handled the sergeant pump. I started out with the Axelson Pump Company, and I couldn't make a deal with them. I was furnishing pumps for other people without a commission on them. I sold them for what I paid for them, and I decided that wasn't good business.

HS: Well that wasn't the kind of... did you... you would see in your operations in California as you worked in oil ... you would see the gradual replacement of the cable tool by the rotary?

CB: Yes, we did. I had at one time made a remark I'd never work on a rotary, it's too noisy, but I found if I wanted to stay in the business I had to.

HS: By that time what were you doing? Were you drilling? Or were you up to tool push or...?

CB: Well I did work up to drilling before I went on the rotary. Shot at west side field, and we started at about 1000 foot holes. And my first rotary job was in late '22, in Santa Fe Springs field. Closed down the operations in Coalinga and I transferred to Santa Fe Springs. And I went roughnecking on the rotary, they called it the rotary helper. Later on got to drilling.

HS: Was this still with Southern Pacific?

CB: No, no. This was Mohawk Oil Company. As I stated before, I had to trade jobs in order to get in the drilling department.

HS: Right, okay. So the incidents that you... any really interesting incidents like blowouts or any other things that you recall in those early days?

CB: Well the first blowout I was involved with was in Santa Fe Springs. They called it the Bellview blowout. I think that was the worst we ever had in California. They ultimately had to back away and tunnel in to that well bore, welded on 8-inch coupling and hot tapped it and put compressors on to pull out a vacuum before they could slip the control heads over. And that burned for 6 weeks if I recall.

HS: Was that... that was oil?

CB: Oil yes.

HS: Was there much gas with it?

CB: Considerable amount of gas, that's where the pressure came in, a lot of gas along with the oil. And that could be seen for 60 miles away I'd say.

HS: What do you think they were burning up per day?

CB: Somewhere around 10,000 barrels a day.

HS: Right. So what kind of a head did they put on after they were able to put these compressors to get the vacuum?

CB: Well I believe it was a shafter control head that they slipped over that. They've improved those heads so much, and this that I'm speaking about is in '29 I believe.

HS: Right. Okay so then you stayed with Mohawk for how long?

CB: Oh a couple of years is all. I've changed jobs many times. You know I was always a dreaming kid. I've... didn't tell anybody this, because I thought I was a dreamer for sure, but I intended to get in business for myself so... All the jobs I left, I left willingly or they shut down, but I worked with a dozen different companies through the 10-year period I would say, to get the experience to better protect myself if I was fortunate enough to get into the ...

HS: Well did you stay in drilling all that period of time?

CB: Not always. Production part of the time.

HS: Were there any...

CB: I took charge of the Tarr and McComb Oil Company I think in '34 and I stayed with that till '40. And they sold out, people were older and had a chance to sell, and fortunately they owned all their properties and fee and they decided to get out of the producing business and protect their royalties.

HS: What was the name of that company again? I didn't quite catch...

CB: Tarr and McComb

CB: Yes. They'd been in the oil business for a good many years and Mr. Tarr, I think was about 80 years old when they sold the company.

HS: And then you went...

CB: I was out of a job at that time. Had temporary jobs, went back to drilling for awhile and a little consulting with a drilling contractor that I know by the name of E.A. Vendor. And I was working with him when I came to Canada in '42.

HS: Now you mentioned that you were married in 1934?

CB: Right.

HS: And what place were you living in when you married?

CB: Bakersfield California. That's where the Tarr and McComb Oil Company was that I was looking after.

HS: And you were still in that area when you decided to come to Canada.

CB: That's right.

HS: What did your wife think about coming to up to Canada?

CB: Well I've been a fortunate person. My wife's been very cooperative, and any place I went she was glad to go. In fact the matter, the first year we was married we moved 5 times. And that was before I took over the Tarr and McComb operation.

HS: And you had been living in...?

CB: Long Beach, Whittier, and various places.

HS: But your dwelling place would be a... something equivalent to a trailer or a shack or...?

CB: No in those days you could rent lots of furnished apartments.

HS: Oh, I see.

CB: So we didn't have to move any of your personal belongings.

HS: Oh that's good.

CB: But fortunately my wife's parents lived in... she was born in San Diego?? California and maintained home there, so long as her father and mother lived. So we always had a headquarters.

HS: Right. So what impelled you to come to Canada in '42?

CB: Well, I'd always heard... the experts told us there is no oil west of the border... or north of the border. So I couldn't believe that, and when a fellow by the name of DeCope coached me to come to California, to Canada, I decided that was an opportunity to see the country and find out for myself about the oil. So I had an understanding with them when I came up to supervise their drilling and production that I'd... that it was favorable that I wanted to get in business for myself, and I'd give them a year's notice, which I did. And we formed our first little company in late '46 and drilled a few wells and done some contracting in Lloydminster and other places in Alberta. Using the money we was able to earn by the drilling and drilled a few wells for ourselves.

HS: Right, would you make deals directly with the Crown? Or with free hold land?

CB: Both. Yeah, both.

HS: But up to this time you hadn't contacted Eric Harvey.

CB: No, in '40... we got involved with Eric in '43, or my associates did. And later on I acquired a 10% interest from the DeCope and Camon DeCope. That's how I got involved with Eric and his group.

HS: Right. I understood that this working interest that you obtained was... had a very low price tag on it in terms of today.

CB: Well, ??? I think at 50 cents an acre. On the basis of that I think there was 148, 448,000 acres in the Harvey spread. And I think my interest in it ended in that it was 50 cents an acre, based on 50 cents an acre. That was cheap.

HS: Well I would say it would be. And that was of course that was before Redwater.

CB: Oh yes, before Leduc or Redwater. This all come about in '43. And I think I acquired my interest in Camon DeCope in '44.

HS: Right. Well...

CB: They'd given me that opportunity for the service that I had given them over all the years.

HS: Backing up to Lloydminster, did you have any dealings with Lloyd Klinch?

CB: Yes, I drilled some wells for Lloyd Klinch, yes.

HS: He was quite a promoter in that area. He seemed to have quite a bit of activity going there.

CB: He had... I think he was working with a fellow by the name of Brosser in British Columbia.

HS: He could have been. He just died about 2 or 3 years ago.

CB: Oh did he?

HS: Yes. But it seemed like he was probably one of the few land dealers around there.

CB: He was involved also in the old Vermilion Field. I first met him in Vermilion. He had, I think, a producing well or two there at that time. In fact, he had... his first well he put on us hadn't produced any oil until we got there and we serviced that for him and got it pumping.

HS: Yes. Was it because of an incorrect type of pump? Or something?

CB: The pump was alright, but it had an oversized standing valve, and it wasn't seeding, was the only problem. They didn't seem to know what the problem was. We serviced that well and put it on production for them.

HS: Back in '43, '42 there, what kind of rigs did you have?

CB: Well we had small portable rigs but we were using wooden derricks; we moved those around on dollies.

HS: So you were what, just pulling singles?

CB: No, we pulled doubles.

HS: Did you?

CB: Doubles ???

HS: Well at that time it seems that General Petroleum was drilling some holes around Bradale??? and Vermillion.

CB: They were. That's where I met Spy Langson.

HS: That's right. Spy was looking after...

CB: He was a pusher for that district, yes.

HS: And then Allan Wright. Do you remember?

CB: Allan Wright, yes.

HS: Yes, he was up there.

CB: That's right.

HS: And then what about Mills? Did...

CB: Charlie Mills? Yes, I knew him quite well.

HS: He had his own ...

CB: He had his own drilling rig, yes.

HS: Was that Northern Development or...?

CB: No. Northern Development was Paul Roland's...

HS: It became Paul Roland's later on, but there was Charlie Mills and... was Paul Guthrie with him?

CB: Oh that's right. I backed up there...

HS: I think they called it Northern Development.

CB: They acquired that from Charlie Mills' estate after he passed away suddenly.

HS: Yes, right. But they were drilling holes in the area too, weren't they?

CB: That's right.

HS: Paul Guthrie? Do you remember him.

CB: Oh Paul, yes, I know Paul Guthrie.

HS: Yes.

CB: In fact he was running Mills' drilling operation in Lloydminster.

HS: What kind of a contract price were you people getting or charging on a, was it footage?

CB: Footage basis primarily. Some were turnkey jobs.

HS: How much would you...?

CB: 4 1/2 a foot.

HS: 4 1/2, eh?

CB: That was completed jobs.

HS: And that... but you'd go on day work when you are running casing, did you?

CB: Not in running casing, but in putting the wells on production was day work ???

HS: So you'd switch over to day work.

CB: That's right.

HS: So there wasn't a heck of a lot of money in those holes.

CB: No, there certainly wasn't.

HS: Pretty thin, so they had to be pretty careful of operations.

CB: Well everything was cheaper in those days.

HS: Well that's right, yes.

CB: And you had to work accordingly.

HS: Did they have to run surface casing? Or did you get by with just the one string.

CB: Surface casing in Alberta. In Saskatchewan you'd get by one string by cementing back to the surface.

HS: So you... what would you do, just run conductor pipe?

CB: That's right.

HS: What would that be? About one joint or two of casing?

CB: More or less. 15 feet.

HS: Whatever you could, yeah.

CB: We'd go down a few feet, 5 feet or so is all and cement them in.

HS: Do you remember Jack McCaskill up there? Vermilion, Wainwright. He was with the Conservation Board.

CB: Yes, I remember him. Bud Cory ...

HS: Bud Cory, that's right.

CB: Bud Cory was at Vermilion when I went there in '42.

HS: That's right, he was there.

CB: And he left in what... with the CPR operation.

HS: That's right. He did, yes. So there'd be several people who have crossed your path.

CB: I believe Goodman, boy by the name of Goodman, I believe, took Cory's place in Vermilion.

HS: Yes. Nate Goodman.

CB: Nate Goodman, that's correct.

HS: Yes, and he went on to be the engineer at Leduc later on.

CB: That's right.

HS: Yes. Nate was, he came out of Medicine Hat.

CB: Did he.

HS: So, this was developing into a combination of a drilling company and producing and getting some of your... getting to know more about the area. What were you making out of some of those wells? 5 or 10 barrels a day or what?

CB: Oh, some of those wells run up to 30 or 40 barrels a day. But one of the reasons that we more or less shut down the ??? operations was due to too much oil, heavy oil, in that area, and they cut us back to 10 barrels a day per well. That stopped the cash flow of course.

HS: Sure it would, yes. Well was that the Conservation Board order?

CB: No, no.

HS: That was just...

CB: Husky Oil was the only place that we could sell the oil at that time.

HS: Oh yes after that...

CB: There was more at the refinery than they could sell or dispose of.

HS: Because if you couldn't sell to Husky, you couldn't sell to anybody.

CB: Couldn't sell, that's the idea.

HS: So they had their own co-rationing then.

CB: That's right, they had a small refinery and made a little bit of ??? and a small amount of gasoline.

HS: Well that is when the Nielsen's were running it.

CB: That's right.

HS: So that would be oil from both the Saskatchewan and Alberta sides then.

CB: And of course Nielsen had drilled a number of wells themselves and they were very fair about their production. In fact the matter, I think Nielsen shut down their wells completely and took the production from the other people, which was a very fair deal I thought.

HS: Yes, that certainly was.

CB: In fact Nielsen, through my knowledge, is a wonderful person. Honest and helpful.

HS: Yes. Well they came up from...

CB: Cody....

HS: Cody, that was their headquarters down there. And so probably they were the, you might say, the pioneering people in trying to get that oil to have a market.

CB: To develop a market. Would have never have gone so far in Lloydminster, hadn't have been for Mr. Nielsen and his group.

HS: You were saying you drilled some holes for the Canadian National Railway. And that oil was used directly in the locomotives wasn't it?

CB: That's right.

HS: And that was when it was steam locomotives.

CB: That's right. Had it during wartime. I think you switched over primarily after the war into the diesel in Canada.

HS: Yes, gradually. But CN was the first to switch over but... how did they handle that oil so they wouldn't ruin their boilers, because there would be some sand in that oil wouldn't there?

CB: No. that oil was cleaned.

HS: Cleaned by Husky.

CB: Cleaned by... we are getting back to Canal Oils... that's backing up to Vermilion. And that oil was cleaned down to less than 4%, and it was usable as delivered to them in the locomotives.

HS: So there was a direct loading rack there...

CB: That's right. They brought a number of car railroad... oil railroad cars in and they'd fill those as they cleaned the oil, and they'd come pick them up. Send a special order to pick them up occasionally when they become short of oil. But that wasn't necessarily the railroad. I think they had a company, they called it the Canal Oils.

HS: I think some of that was fee land. I think that Canadian National had... you know they still had some fee land in Saskatchewan but not much in Alberta.

CB: No. Primarily it was Crown land.

HS: Yes, that's right.

CB: I don't believe we had a... yes, we had one section in our operation that was fee land.

HS: Right. I guess it was somewhat of a change for you to come up to Canada and find that, unlike California where it was nearly all fee land except for the federal lands, that here you were coming up and dealing with government owned land.

CB: Well it was different. All of our land primarily in California, it was developed in the early state it was fee land. To get back to what we call the wilderness now, it's government land. And the Indian land of course...

HS: Well there was public land back in the boonies. Still is. So how did you get to meet Eric Harvey?

CB: Well I met him through Bill DeCope, the theologian I was speaking about who I came to Canada with. He was acquainted with Eric. In fact the matter is every person who comes to Canada in that day and age looked up Eric Harvey. Because he... unknownst to a lot of people apparently, Eric was involved in most of the oil operations in Canada after that time.

HS: Did he have...

CB: Like Bridgestone and Wainwright and various places that he was involved with them.

HS: He didn't have any... did he have any holdings in Turner Valley?

CB: I don't know that he had any holdings, but he worked... he was Counsel for a lot of the independents. particularly in Turner Valley. I believe Eric told me one time that he had been involved either financially or looked after their interest, counselled them legally, on 26 different projects in the oil business.

HS: Oh then he was no amateur.

CB: That's right. He was an oil man and didn't know it, hadn't got to production is the thing. ... at least. But Eric is a wonderful person. In fact, he made all of us quite well off. Put us in business, that's how I got into business really, is through my interest in Western Lease Oil when they sold out in '56. Then Jack McKenzie came along and wanted to work with me in '56 and we started out having gone through the California boom in the early days when gas wasn't worth anything.

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