

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Doris Bingham

INTERVIEWER: Nadine Mackenzie

DATE: 1984

N: This is Nadine Mackenzie speaking, I am interviewing Doris Bingham. Thank you very much for having accepted to participate in our project. Can you tell me, when and where were you born?

DB: I was born in Calgary on Sept. 10, 1926.

N: So you are a true Calgarian.

DB: Yes I am

N: What did your parents do?

DB: My father worked for the CPR. He and my mother were born in England, came out at different times, met in Calgary and married in Calgary, and my father worked for the CPR for many years, retired from there.

N: Where were you educated?

DB: In Calgary, I went through the public school system and I went to high school at Western Canada High.

N: And after high school, what did you do.

DB: Then I started working, at age 17. I had about four different secretarial positions before starting with Imperial Oil. Then I worked for them for 32 years.

#011 N: Before joining Imperial Oil, what type of companies were you working for?

DB: I worked for Dominion Rubber and the UFA Co-op, the Income Tax office and then from there to Imperial.

N: Did you take a secretarial course?

DB: I took the commercial course at Western.

N: And how did you join Imperial.

DB: Well, it was just after the discovery of Leduc. The oil industry became the exciting place to work in Calgary and I was working at the income tax office at the time. Of course, I'd always heard what a good company Imperial Oil was to work for so I went and put an application in and about three months later they did call me.

N: Who hired you?

DB: ??? Hunter.

N: Do you remember, for whom did you work?

DB: In the very beginning I worked in the steno pool, and the person in charge of the pool at that time, was a Ruth Ward and she reported to Bert McNeill. I believe both of those people have passed away now.

#022 N: How long did you stay in the steno pool?

DB: I think it was about a year.

N: And after that.

DB: I went to the Contracts Department.

N: And was it interesting?

DB: Very interesting, one of my favourite places that I worked.

N: What did you do?

DB: I did secretarial work. I did some record keeping too. I felt that I got to know the department sort of, inside out. We had a very, very good group of people to work with and usually the department was under Mr. John Poyen??? and then, I guess from him, that position passed to Mr. Frank Spagens???, who many years later of course, headed up Syncrude.

#030 N: Where was your office?

DB: The old Albertan building on 9th Ave. and 2nd Street.

N: Did you have a big office or a small one?

DB: Well, by today's standards pretty poor. Crammed, you know. In the steno pool for example, we didn't have enough room in the one room and so some of us were put out into the Accounting Department which was a big huge room, just loaded with bodies. In Contracts we had a fairly nice set-up, but again, the offices in those days were, you know, no air-conditioning. I can remember it being so warm in the summer time and you'd have the windows open and you couldn't get any air and you'd be so tired in the afternoon, you could hardly do any work and it was from the heat.

N: What about in the winter? Was it very cold?

DB: The winter time was usually pretty comfortable. I think they were quite adequately heated.

#041 N: Do you remember the name of other secretaries you worked with?

DB: Well, I remember, yes, the old timers in those days. There was Betty Ferguson and Doris Chapin???, she changed her name, she became Stephanie Ireland, Barbara Berland, who's still with the company there, Marguerite Walker, Betty Aldridge. I can't think of any others off hand that stayed for any length of time. There probably are others but that's all I can think of just now.

N: How long did you stay in the Contract Department?

DB: It must have been quite awhile. I think it was around eight years, something like that.

N: How were the conditions of working? What type of typewriter did you have?

DB: Oh a manual typewriter, which we thought was fine in those days, we didn't have electric typewriters.

N: And carbon copies. . . ?

DB: Oh, carbon copies. In Contracts too, because of the nature of the work, we used to have to make many copies to send out to, sometimes other departments and sometimes the other farnees???, the other people who were involved in contracts with us. And we had a girl whose full time job was typing copies because there was no such thing as a photocopier

in those days. We used to get correspondence in that had to be copied and some of our outgoing material had to be copies. All day, she would just type copies, type copies, type copies, which then of course, had to be mailed out. And I remember when we got our first photocopier, I can picture what it looked like, I can't remember what the make was, but it made funny little sort of, beige coloured copies and this material eventually faded, they discovered.

N: Really. . . ?

DB: Yes, it wasn't a good system at all, but we didn't realize. After a number of years we found that the print was fading off.

#066 N: So what did you do then, did you have to redo the whole thing?

DB: Well no. I can't recall that it ever proved to be very serious. I think that the material wasn't anything that we couldn't do without. By this time, quite a few years had passed by and by then we were getting better and better photocopiers.

N: What were your hours, were you starting early in the morning?

DB: No, I don't remember exactly, but we always had a 35 hour week, which was really something in those days, because most places worked at least 37.5 and sometimes 40 hours.

N: Did you go to Leduc yourself?

DB: No, never been there.

N: Did you visit any oil field?

DB: Once, when I was in Contracts, my supervisor arranged for me to visit an oil well which was being drilled in the southwest part of the province in the foothills. It was an exploratory well which was being drilled.

#078 N: And after eight years in the Contract Department, what did you do?

DB: Then I went into Exploration Administration. Mr. Lair was the Exploration Manager at that time.

N: So were you working for him?

DB: No, not actually. I worked for. . . oh, I know one of the person I forgot to mention in the list of secretaries was Ethel Rowe and Ethel worked for the Exploration Manager and the Assistant Exploration Manager at that time, it was Mr. Lair and Mr. Peter White. I actually worked for the Chief Geologist and the Chief Geophysicist and the Assistant Chief Geophysicist. Those people were Pierre Cote, Carl Chapman and Jim Murphy.

N: And what was your work mostly, writing letter or doing a bit of everything?

DB: Doing a lot of everything. I used to take well reports over the phone every morning and I used to have to phone them to our partners and I used to do filing and I did a lot of contracts, geophysical contracts, seismic contracts, things like that. It was a very, very busy job.

#092 N: Did you meet Ted Link?

DB: No I didn't know him. I remember the name but I think he was gone before I got into Exploration.

N: What did you do after working for the Exploration Administration Department?

DB: That department did change somewhat while I was still there. They did away with the positions of Chief Geologist and Chief Geophysicist and they brought in, instead an Administrative Geologist and an Administrative Geophysicist. To begin with the Administrative Geophysicist was Sheldon Gibson and the Administrative Geologist was Jack Nesbitt. However Jack suffered some health problems almost immediately and so he never really did get fully into the position and Barney Clare was brought in as the Administrative Geologist. Jack stayed in the department for some time doing special assignments but. . . .

N: So there was a lot of changes.

DB: Yes there was. So I worked in that for a long, long time until they changed things again. And then they ended up with an Exploration Department that had an advisory group attached to it. By this time the Exploration Manager had moved up to the Management floor, the structure of the company had changed quite a bit at this time and there was a senior person who almost did the duties of an Exploration Manager but I can't recall what the position was. I just don't really know what they called him. The first person in charge of that group as far as I can recall was Gordon Darling and I don't know if you've talked to him but he would be a very interesting person to talk to. He was in that position for some time and then he left the company and he had quite a number of different positions in the oil industry, retired a few months ago. He was replaced at Imperial by Harvey Hewitson and I worked for him for quite a long time, I can't remember how long, a few years. The advisory groups was under him at that time, and although I didn't work for the advisory group, we had some very interesting people in the group, such as George Demille and Don McIvor and Carl Chapman, Hank Kuntz, the very tops of the exploration people at Imperial Oil. There was a group of about, probably 5 or 6 of them.

#124 N: You must have learned a lot about geology working for these people?

DB: No, I wouldn't say that I really did. Probably because I wasn't that interested in it. I knew all the names of all the formation, I knew how to spell them, I wasn't really concerned with the geology. I was concerned with putting the letter together with correct spelling and correct grammar and things like that. I can't say I was a person that was interested in geology, not then, not now.

N: And for how long did you keep this post?

DB: It changed again, of course. That change, once again, Mr. Hewitson was moved up to the management floor. I went with him and I worked for a group on that floor, Cal Evans, Frank Hewitson and Mel Parsons for about a year and then they changed the structure again. This is the story of Imperial Oil.

N: They are changing all the time.

DB: All the time, all the time, always reorganization, reorganization. And at that time, they set up a huge, huge department which was called Exploration, Service and Research. And that was all the research aspects of the exploration department including the lab, the research facilities at the lab. And all of the service parts of the exploration department which would be like, the well sight people, oh there were many different sections, just off

hand I can't remember them. But I remember, by this time Barney Clare had retired and I was talking to him one day and he said, what is Mel Parsons doing and I said, well, Exploration, Service and Research, we do this, this, this, and this. And Barney said, my Lord, what does everybody else in the company do? It was such a big, big position. So I went with Mel and became his secretary. Eventually he left and I worked for the others who replaced him, up until five years before I retired.

#150 N: Which year did you retire?

DB: 1981

N: And then what did you do?

DB: Okay, the last five years I spent in the library and I headed up a new section which was developed called Data Distribution Services and it was very, very interesting. It was set up because they had a task force study this, I think for about two years and finally decided they needed a department like this. They realized that important material was not getting to the right people in the company because of the size of the company. Of course, by this time it was huge, floors and floors and hundreds and hundreds of people. And all kinds of government regulations, legislation and things like that came into the company and drifted to perhaps, a particular spot and these people might, if they were lucky, realize that some other section of the company should know about this, but it was very haphazard. So they set up our department with the idea that we would learn the operations of the company as well as anybody could. We had to go around and visit people in the company all over, out at the lab, department heads, junior geologists, everybody. In the computer field we . .

#169 N: Would you stay for awhile with these people, observing their work and . . . ?

DB: Not too much, mostly I would just sit and talk to them and ask them about what they did and make notes and summarize it and put it into memos and so on. Just learn, learn, learn, all the time and we did this for five years so that we really never stopped learning. And from this of course, we were able to get this material into our department and say, yes, this would affect the operations at this section, that section, this section, that section. We would then have it copied, now on the photocopier, thank goodness, and we would send out copies to departments. We had all the government material come through us, all of the letters that were addressed to anyone in the company came through us because often times there would be information in there that some other department might benefit to know about. We also subscribed to legislative material, cassettes, all of that kind of thing. We had someone go through them to pick out the important things that would apply to the company and those would be photocopied and sent out. We also had a newspaper clipping service. We subscribed to something like, I think it was 21 newspapers, or something like that and we had a girl who spent her day going through the newspapers clipping out everything imaginable and sending this material out to the appropriate people. And this would be

#189 N: That would be very interesting.

DB: Very, very interesting. This would go out to the personnel department if it had to do with personnel matters, top management, just anyone and everyone. We had a huge record of clients that we dealt with and we kept adding to it all the time. I did that for five years until I retired.

N: And after you retired, what did you do?

DB: Well, I had a part time job to go to. I had been working on it a little in my spare time before then and I still have this part time job. I work for one of the MLS's here in Calgary. He worked for Imperial for 25 years and that was where I met him and then he retired and he's still an MLA, so I still work for him in the afternoons.

N: And do you do anything else?

DB: Well, yes, I do a lot of things. I'm involved in a business with a number of different partners and we're in real estate which is a dreadful thing to be in right now, but we are and you can't get out of it. We own some apartment blocks around town. And I'm involved in the management of a couple of them, so I'm very busy, I work all the time.

#209 N: Can you compare the training of oil secretaries in your time, to what it is nowadays?

DB: As far as the secretarial skills are concerned, I'm not really sure. I think, in some aspects the training has probably improved quite a bit. I think that the girls nowadays get training on word processing equipment and things like that, that we certainly didn't get because they weren't available. I suspect that some of the basic skills though, spelling and grammar and things like that, are not as good as they were in my day. From what I gather, I find that they young girls don't know how to spell and don't know how to punctuate and things like that which I think is unfortunate. Companies are doing a lot more now though, about looking after their female employees. They will send them on courses. For almost all of the years I worked at Esso Resources, I was brainwashed to believe that all I could ever be was a secretary. Now we did occasionally hire a lady geologist or something like that, but the heartbreaking thing is that we girls, who were hired as stenos and secretaries in 1950, 51, 52 and so on were told that we could never be anything more than perhaps the senior secretary in the company. At the same time they used to hire office boys galore, with less education sometimes, than I had, young fellows that I went through school with who were no great shakes in school. I mean they were all right but they weren't brains. Some of those boys, all of them, I guess I can say, if they stayed with the company, got into positions that were way in advance of what I could even hope of getting. Much more senior positions, pay wise, their pay would be far, far higher than mine.

#235 N: That must have been infuriating.

DB: Well, it wasn't so much at the time, it is to me now, but it wasn't so much at the time because we believe, society believed at that time that the woman's place was in the home. And I used to say, well you can't blame Imperial Oil for not training a girl to become the senior landman because she's not going to stay. She's going to get married and have children and stay home. Some of us never did, quite a few of us never did, but they didn't know that. I mean they thought that when I was 21 or 23 or whatever that I would be

getting married and leaving them too. So throughout those years, no, I didn't really blame them, but of course, now I do. Now I see how very unfair it was, that some of those men could get into the positions they did and I was never given the chance. They wouldn't move girls out of secretarial jobs. I think I was one of the first that they did and that's only eight years ago now. Ordinarily that would have been a man's position, in Data Distribution Services. But I had said, I would like to get out of secretarial work and for some reason they considered two or three men and myself for the position. I don't know why they gave it to me, but for some reason they did. It was almost unheard of. Now since then, they've done quite a bit of that kind of thing.

#255 N: Was it is the policy at the time, if a girl was getting married, she had to leave the company?

DB: Yes. It seems to me in the early days, I remember something about them being allowed to stay three months and I can't remember if that was when I first started or if they brought that in after I started but that was true. You could stay something like three months and then you had to leave.

N: That's incredible nowadays.

DB: And then for a long, long time, they wouldn't allow a husband and wife to work in the same department.

N: Why? Because of the competition or maybe. . . .?

DB: Well, I remember asking one of our supervisors that, Fred Burkes, I don't know if you've talked to him, why, this is silly, why. He said, well, one of the reasons marriages work out as well as they do is that the husband and wife are separated for several hours a day. So I don't know if there was any basis to that or not.

#269 N: Maybe it was a question of promotion too. It would have been bad maybe, for the husband's ego if the wife was getting a promotion and not him.

DB: But in those days there was no problem, because the man could be promoted and the girl couldn't be anything more than the senior secretary in the department anyway. I mean, he already started in a position higher than she could ever hope to attain, so I don't think that could have been the reason at that time.

N: So in fact the oil industry was very chauvinist.

DB: Yes it was very chauvinist. More so than other places, even at that time. Although that was societies view, it wasn't just in the oil industry. But I noticed the difference going from the Income Tax Office to Imperial Oil. At that Income Tax Office, that many years ago, I worked at Imperial for 32 years, they were already letting women go into positions that would have been considered men's positions. I often wondered if I did the right thing in making that move but. . .

#285 N: You have seen the ups and downs of the oil business. Can you comment on that?

DB: Just very briefly I guess. I think it's life, I think this is probably what happens in most industries, there are good times and bad times and I wonder why the industry couldn't have been a little more perceptive with regard to what happened, the recession and so on.

It seemed to me that if oil prices were going to escalate to the point that they did, then it meant that everyone was going to want to go out and look for oil and that it would be economic to drill in the Beaufort and so on and that if we did that, then we would end up with an over supply. I'm surprised that the leading oil people in the nations around the world wouldn't see that this could happen, couldn't have foreseen this, but I guess they couldn't or didn't, I don't know. And I suppose there were many other factors too. The recession doesn't have to do entirely with the oil industry of course.

#305 N: What do you think of the National Energy Program?

DB: Well, I guess it really, really is dreadful. At the time, when it was first introduced, I followed it fairly closely and I remember being so terribly, terribly shocked at that 25% back into Petro Canada and I still am. To me that is thievery and nothing else, it can't be described any other way. I also recall that when it came out, I asked Mr. Musgrave, what the provincial government thought about it, they knew this was coming, they knew something was coming. And I said, is it as bad as you expected, he said, it's worse. It just killed so many people, it just. . .

N: And so many little companies just disappeared.

DB: Yes. And the large companies of course, were so badly hit by it and I can't imagine what kind of a group of people would dream up such a thing.

N: People who would not know a thing about the oil industry.

DB: Yes. And really don't care anything about the west too, I really believe that.

#324 N: How do you foresee the future of the oil business?

DB: I don't know.

This is the end of the tape.

DB: I guess there are much better heads than mine that figure these things out. There are a couple of things I'm concerned about. One is the over supply of energy in the world today. People say, well the gas bubble is going to disappear in a year or two and I think, well, how do they know that, they might find all kinds of gas supplies off the coast of Texas or something. Perhaps I'm a born pessimist, I don't mean to be pessimistic, but I just am concerned that the industry will never attain the heights that it once had. I also think that there's a real possibility that other energy supplies will come into focus and that perhaps down the road, oil and gas aren't going to be as important as they have been in the past. Of course, you can use oil for a lot of things, other than just heating and running cars and so on, petrochemical projects and things like that. So I don't know, I'm probably not the right person to talk about that.

#013 N: Can you comment on the contribution of Alberta to the development of the Canadian oil industry?

DB: Well, I think it all happened here. I don't think it had anything to do with a contribution by the provincial government. I think it was a contribution by Imperial Oil, who kept looking and looking and looking and finally found Leduc. And a lot of good has come to Alberta from that because it's all centered here. We have ended up with a world renowned expertise in the oil industry in Alberta. I guess it was just our luck that this is where it happened and so this is where it remains.

N: what is your opinion on a nationalized company, like Petro Canada for example?

DB: Well I certainly don't approve of nationalized companies. I'm a free enterpriser, I object to having my tax dollars to the things like the marble for the outside of the building and I object to their getting special favours like being given rights to certain lands without them coming up for bid and so on. I believe in free enterprise because they have to make it pay, if it doesn't pay, they go out of business. But with Petro Canada, it can go on forever. They could keep taxing the taxpayers.

#027 N: And do you think it will go on forever, this company or . . .?

DB: Petro Canada, I think it will go on. I don't think any government now would disband it. I would hope they might put reins on them.

N: It was Maureen Strong who was suggesting recently that she would sell part of Petro Canada.

DB: Yes, but you remember when Joe Clark said he was going to do away with Petro Canada, it turned out that most Canadians thought this was a good idea. That we should have our own oil company. So what politician is going to go against the will of the people, unless this opinion changes.

N: Who were the most influential persons in your career?

DB: I think that there weren't very many who were very influential. I would probably name Harvey Hewitson as the first person that I can recall who really backed me and really sort of believed that women should be able to go ahead. Perhaps because by this time, this

was becoming the thought in society. And then at the very end of my career, my last two bosses, Larson Brodener and Terry Harris would have been. . . , well I said to Terry many time, if I could have had her for a boss at the beginning of my career, I would have had a very different career. Now I think the reason that Terry and Larson were so important to me was that they believed in training, they believed in developing their people to their utmost and this is a pretty new thought in my life. I was expected to be able to type well, but Terry and Larson said no, you can do much more than that. And they believed in training, they believed in promoting me, they believed in developing my potential and until I met those people, this had never been a thought in anybody's mine. This, I'm sure, can be attributed to their training, to the courses they had taken. Our management people didn't used to get those kinds of courses, they didn't know and we didn't know, I didn't know, nobody knew that Doris should be sent on a skills writing course or a computer course of some type. Things like that just didn't occur to them. So I would have liked to have had 32 years with that type of person in charge, I would be a very, very different person today, if I had that type of training.

#055 N: What was the most exciting experiences in your career?

DB: I think the only really exciting experience that I can think of was heading up Data Distribution Services and developing the department and learning so much about. . . and being able to provide a service that had never been provided before and which we thought was very worthwhile. I can't really say that any of my secretarial position were all that exciting.

N: And what do you consider your achievements?

DB: I think having been able to organize quite a few departments, to set them up so that they ran efficiently and to get some people working who didn't really want to work, like some of the other secretaries and things like that. And then again, Data Distribution Services and being able to organize and set up that department.

#063 N: Looking back at your career, is there anything that you would do differently nowadays?

DB: Oh, yes, I would have taken other training, I wouldn't have been a secretary.

N: What would you have taken?

DB: I might have gone into accounting. I don't know, I didn't consider it so it's hard to say, but I know I like accounting. Perhaps something in the information specialist field.

N: Can you comment in the improvement in the workplace over the years?

DB: I think it's improved vastly over the years and I think this is what the young people of today don't realize. Imperial Oil was a very good company to work for of course. A lot of very unfair things happened to probably everyone, or almost everyone who worked there. But that's a personality thing, it was not company policy. They intended to be very fair and very good to their employees. There are a lot of people that complain all the time about everything. They don't realize how good they have it. We had a 35 hour work week when I started working there and I believe it's still the same, so there's been no improvement there. But they've now arranged the hours so that you can work 7:30-4:00,

8:00-4:30, whatever you desire. You get every 3rd Friday off, you get statutory holidays galore. I was getting six weeks vacation when I left. And the improvement in the esthetics, the buildings are so much better than they used to be. They're so much more attractive, the equipment is so much better. Generally these companies spare no expense when it comes to supplying their employees with comfort and good materials. They're giving people a lot of training nowadays which they didn't use to do. And I don't know if they're still doing it but they used to put on dinner occasionally and things like that.

#083 N: So they keep everybody happy?

DB: Yes. And yet, oftentimes they still aren't. They really don't realize how much it's improved. They say, nothing ever gets any better but it has gotten better, a lot.

N: And this is the last question. On the whole, what do you think of the oil business?

DB: Well, I think it's really wonderful. Even though I was never very interested in geology, I just think it's the greatest thing for Alberta, for Canada, for the economy, for jobs, for society, for everything. I just hope that it continues to be very important.

N: Thank you very much for this very interesting interview.