

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Denis Blakeman

INTERVIEWER: Aubrey Kerr

DATE: April 7, 1993

Side 1 – 25:02

AK: I'm Aubrey Kerr, and I am in the home of Lester and Ann Key. And they have very kindly invited me here to meet with my long-lost friend Denis Blakeman. And Denis, I want to start off with you, as where you were born and when?

DB: I was born in Calgary, actually my mother and father were from Black Diamond, but I was born in the City of Calgary in September in the fall of 1927. I have one brother, an older brother, and a sister, an older sister, and another family of Blakeman's in which there are three siblings.

AK: Right. Now I understand that your father was Jack?

DB: My father was Jack Blakeman, and my grandfather was Jack Blakeman. My grandfather owned a butcher shop and to my knowledge he started the town of Black Diamond. My father was a grocer and had the grocery store, Black Diamond Grocery, and it's still there.

AK: And your mother's name was?

DB: Was Annie. Her original... her maiden name was Drinnan. Annie Drinnan. But for some reason all the people in Black Diamond called her Nancy. I never could get that combination.

AK: Oh. That's D-R-I-N-N-A-N?

DB: That's... yeah, that's correct. That was her maiden name, Annie Drinnan, but everybody called her Nancy and they still do. Nancy Blakeman.

AK: And when were they married?

DB: My mother and father were married to the best of my knowledge, I'm trying to say about 19... I would say 1925.

AK: Oh yeah.

DB: But then due to unfortunate circumstances they were divorced in 1930, so that was rather short-lived.

AK: Oh I see, so that was all. And your mother is still alive?

DB: My mother is still alive. Lives in the Foothills Auxiliary Hospital, which is in Black Diamond. And she's now 94.

AK: 94?

DB: 94.

AK: And she is fairly alert?

DB: Oh, yes. Well, so alert that the last time I was down as usual she said you need a haircut. So, she's not doing too bad.

AK: No, that's right. She's checking you out.

[00:02:25] So, your early days were spent right in Black Diamond where they?

DB: Well, yes. And it's one of the tie-ins, what you do in your youth you tie yourself into. The environment of the area, and it was the oilfield environment. Oil was drilling rigs, people who worked on drilling rigs, the continuous migration of personnel from the Turner Valley oilfields down into Montana and Cut Bank and Colorado and back again. So that your school chums were always... they would be here for one year and then they would be gone for two or three years and back. That never-ending migration north and south that took place in the early days of the oil business.

AK: Right.

DB: Go ahead.

AK: No, that's fine. That's the sort of thing I want. So you could capture the... you might say the spirit of the action out there even at an early age?

DB: Oh, yes, you actually lived with this action. And although as young people, you'd never realize the economic problems or the excitements that are caused by the finding of a new... when they opened the north end of the field and the south end of the field. You do remember the tragedies. I can remember we had a neighbor who was two doors away. His name was Spider Thomas, and Spider and his whole crew were killed in the north end of the field when they first hit that real bad sulfur gas. And so the Thomas', the Thomas kids whom I grew up with, were always without a father because Spider died.

AK: So, they were... the whole crew was gassed right out?

DB: Yeah, evidently... I think there was only one of them survived. But it was the situation, to the best of my knowledge there in the Millarville area. And it was the one of the first wells in Millarville. And the well had come in, they had a problem, someone went down into the sump to take a look and collapsed, and someone went down after him, and someone went down after him.

AK: Yeah, that was the old story.

DB: Yeah, and it just went on and on and on.

AK: Yeah.

DB: Mel Pope, I believe Mel Pope might have been the driller on that one, because I think that I can remember that being the case. And it had a very very strong effect on Mel for the rest of his life.

AK: Mel remembers that. I've talked to him about that story.

DB: Then it's the right...

AK: And he was one of the... only one, or if not the few that escaped.

DB: Yeah. Mel and one other. The thing that I can remember so well, and this is a little bit of...

AK: He's still around to live. He still is living in North Vancouver.

DB: Oh is he? Well, that's very interesting.

AK: So if you come to the OTS you'll meet him there.

DB: (chuckles) Well I worked with Mel for many years. You know, later and later years I worked with him. And one of the horrible stories about that, was that what he had to do, is he eventually and I believe one other person who he set out for help, and they dragged... they managed to get the bodies out from the sump by some method I know not what. And they took them, and they had them out clear of the rig. And he was sitting out there, and there were local, you know tomcats, the local cats in the area were attacking the bodies. And he had to then fend off the attack by these, you know, just ordinary house cats, but wild house cats. They were attacking the bodies. So it was quite a horrendous thing. And the other thing was Mel only lived a block away from where my mother and I lived. My mother and sister and I. And so we knew him, and Spider was there. And as I say, there's these kinds of stories. I remember the euphoria though in the field when they found 40 API in the south end of the field. And all of a sudden, these towns just they would just blossom. They called themselves Little Chicago, Little New York, Little Philadelphia and so forth and so on and so on. All of which terms didn't fit and thank God they all disappeared later. But I can remember these people they were going to have a carnival, and they all came down to Black Diamond, all the people from the south end of the field. And it was... they had a parade. And I can remember this fabulous time of a parade in a carnival, and they were hauling a building down there and so forth and so on. Those were... I remember those times.

[00:07:20] AK: Yeah. Well now, tell me as you were growing up... just a minute, I want to check something. What was that name? C.I. McLaren?

DB: Who was Mac McLaren. Who was the Principal of the junior elementary, junior high school.

AK: Yeah, did you attend school under his tutelage?

DB: Yes. All the time... all the years of my going to the Black Diamond school from grade 1 to grade 8, he was the principal at that time. Quite a character.

AK: And what... how would you summarize this character?

DB: Well, I think I would summarize him that obviously he was running a good school. The people that I know and the people who left that school and went on to high school and became very famous in the world, highly educated people, they must have had an excellent grounding. So therefore, in terms of an educator and a pedagogue, he must have been good. But the thing I remember about him is, my memory of him as a young person, is in our town we had a movie theater and it had a huge concrete step out in front of it, and I can remember Mac McLaren on a Sunday afternoon along with many other people from the community, men from the community, young people from the community, sitting on the steps of our movie house on the Sunday afternoon playing craps. And I mean for money. Now, that's my memory of McLaren.

[00:08:46] AK: Well, that fits. Now tell me Denis, as you were progressing in the valley, do you remember what your first job was in the summer?

DB: Oh, yes, the first job... well, I had several first jobs. One of the jobs I worked for Miles somebody. Miles... can't remember his name, as a, it was during the summer and I was a gopher on a pack trip that went up through the Highwood all the way up through the Smith Dorrien Valley, across into the Elk Valley and back into the Highwood again at... by Cataract. So that was one summer when I worked for Miles. I can't remember Miles' last name. His wife had very, very bad cancer, but we didn't know what that was. Then the next summer I worked for an electrician by the name of Gehman.

AK: Have you any idea what year that was?

DB: That would be oh... Well, I went on the pack trip when I was 14, so that would be when I was... that would be 1941 in the summer. And in '42 I work for Gehman.

AK: How do you spell that? Do you know?

DB: I think it was, it would be a German name so it was G-E-H-M-A-N. He was the electrician in the oil field. He was the only one that I knew of other than the electricians that worked for Royalite.

AK: Now, is this where you got the idea of being, doing electrical work?

DB: This was the... my mother had arranged the job for me, as I think she arranged a lot of things. And then I had this experience. So after leaving work, you know, working with Gehman, and then whenever he would have a job out any place and he needed an apprentice to go with him, I would go with him, just not go to school for that week or whatever and go with him. And we traveled all over Alberta working in very many strange and wonderful places. But I left school, it was quite interesting because I was sort of expelled from school in grade 8. Which was something that... well obviously I was an intelligent individual or I wouldn't have got to where I did in terms of education, but that's where I left school, was in grade 8. Then I worked for Drilling Supplies, which was part of Mac something... MacDonald Supplies or something like that. Worked for them and then finally the day I was 16 I went to work for the Royalite Oil Company as an apprentice electrician. September 19... whenever that would be September 1943.

AK: '43?

DB: In '43 I went to work as an apprentice electrician in the plant for Charlie Grattema.

AK: And now that was Grattema? G-R-A-T-T-E-M-A. Yeah, that would be it.

DB: Charlie was the guy with no ears.

AK: No ears.

DB: Well, he had been in a bad fire several years before, a serious fire and burnt his ears off.

[00:12:05] AK: Okay, but up to that time your summer work had been probably in terms of what, 25 cents an hour?

DB: Yes. Matter of fact when I started with the Royalite, I started at 43.

AK: 43 cents.

DB: 43 cents an hour.

AK: Right.

DB: And I worked for Gehman for 40 cents an hour.

AK: Right. Now when you started did you work right on the rigs themselves in the valley?

DB: No, I never really worked on any of the rigs in the valley in the sense of working as a roughneck.

AK: Oh.

DB: As an apprentice, as an electrician, of course, we were responsible for the main plant and all its motors and electrical. We were responsible for all the field stations and all the pumping stations, installations, and so forth and so on. We were also responsible to wire all the rigs. And they were all conventional rigs, so Charlie and I always wired the rigs. So when they moved them, we took all the wiring off, and when they put them back up, we put all the wiring on them.

AK: Was it like a harness?

DB: No, it was all a half inch and three-quarter inch conduit screwed together.

AK: Oh. Awful lot of work involved.

DB: Yes, it was, but then remember it was an awful lot of work involved in building a rig in those days because they build it from the ground up.

AK: So, you had lots of time.

DB: Oh, they had... as I recall, I think it always would take somewhere up to a month to get a rig ready as best of my knowledge. And to move it in and set up all the boilers because they're all steam rigs. So, everything was completely wired. We would take the piping off, one off the derrick and mark it. And

then when we assembled it on the next one, we didn't have to re-cut it. But we had to reassemble it. And then we moved out from... because I worked with Charlie, and he was the versatile electrician. We moved out and we started going out and wiring all the rigs that at that time, Royalite or Imperial, who knows what they really were, were building a drilling in Southern Alberta. I can remember being in Taber, Vauxhall, Grassy Lake, Armelgra, as they moved around. And in this process, we also started to revamp the wiring on some of the portable rigs, the Franks Rigs. And then eventually when they moved into Northern Alberta where we were having camps, I moved out to Minburn to build a camp there, Kinsella, north of Kinsella. And they had a large camp there. And that was really the last time I ever went... I never went home after that because I just moved from rig to rig and camp to camp and stayed with rigs until I left the oil business.

[00:15:01] AK: All right. Well, then let's just back up. When did you first go down to Taber?

DB: Oh, we went down to Taber. We wired a rig in Taber, I would think, well, if I started in '43, I would guess in either the summer of '44 or '45, one of the two.

AK: Alright. Now, do you remember who the tool push was down there?

DB: No, I do not.

AK: George Kirkpatrick.

DB: No, it was not George, because it was a conventional rig and he was never on a conventional rig.

AK: No, there was no conventional rigs down there. They were all the Franks Rigs.

DB: Well...

AK: No, there was no conventionals there.

DB: I might have been with...

AK: And the truck rig, the truck rig...

DB: You know what, it was most likely one of the first of that Lessie Moore??? derrick. Skid rigs.

AK: Well they were all jackknives.

DB: Jackknives? Yeah.

AK: Yeah. And the Franks Rig... there is pictures in those books.

DB: They were complete portable.

AK: So, there were no conventional...

DB: Well, it might have been one of those Lessie Moores??? But I remember going down there, and we wired it. I can remember so well being up on that derrick.

AK: Well, do you remember...?

DB: You know, this is not correct that there were no conventionals. There were conventional rigs... there was a conventional rig that was built on the Blood Indian Black Reserve.

AK: Oh, yeah. That was conventional.

DB: And that was a conventional rig. And we, every night use to have to extend the wiring above the level that the rig builders had built because we were in the range of the Commonwealth Air Service.

AK: Oh, yeah.

DB: And these guys used to come roaring over the hill and dive with the rig. And so we had to put a light above the highest point every night.

AK: Well, sure.

DB: And I remember that.

AK: Yeah, well you're correct there.

DB: Okay.

AK: Well, I don't want to be arguing in superficialities. But what about Floyd Wilker? Do you remember him?

DB: I remember the name, but I really was not on any rig with him. He was a tool push, and after all bear in mind I was an apprentice electrician. There's a long range between the apprentice electrician and the tool push.

AK: Yeah, you were light years apart.

DB: Yeah, light years apart.

AK: So...

DB: But most of these people knew me because they knew my mother and father.

[00:17:35] AK: Well sure, your name. And you said you worked up into Minburn. Now, would you remember Harry Webster up there?

DB: Yes, very well. Harry Webster.

AK: Harry was pushing up there.

DB: Harry was a driller there.

AK: Yeah, he might have been set back because...

DB: And then he got, finally we had two rigs in there at the same time, and Harry was sort of a temporary push and then that was the end of the war, and it was tragic for those of us who had worked on that, you know, not too good of equipment. I mean the equipment was not in good shape. And we worked under some pretty tough conditions. And suddenly the war was over, and instantaneously back from the war came all of those people who had joined up. And they immediately came in and took over our jobs.

AK: That's right.

DB: And I remember that very well.

AK: And everybody was set back.

DB: Everybody was set back. I knew a fellow named Morris who had been... Joe Morris. So, it most likely was Joseph Henry Morris the Second or something. He came back, and he took over part of somebody's job. And Harry got set back. It was a very bad time for those of us who had endured some very very hard conditions in western Canada, and then poof, we were suddenly set back.

AK: Yeah, well that was the arrangement.

DB: But we hadn't been told about it.

AK: Well no, you wouldn't. So, do you remember Bill Blinn?

DB: Yes.

AK: B-L-I-N-N.

DB: But not too well. I can't picture where he is. I remember the name, but I can't...

AK: Squeaky Leeson?

DB: Squeaky Leeson? No. Squeaky Leeson was on another... was not at Minburn I don't believe.

AK: What about George DeMille? Do you remember him?

DB: George DeMille. Yes.

AK: He was the geologist.

DB: Yeah, he was a geologist. He might have been there on that whole Viking set-up.

AK: Yeah, well that's where he drilled a lot of the holes. Or he was on a lot of the holes.

DB: Yeah. It was the first time that we had experienced what was called sample catchers, in the sense that they were all hired, and most of them were former... well they seemed to be former Army guys, and they all came out, and they were very poorly paid, and they were sort of not considered as part of the rig crew, as I was, because I was the electrician and not part of the crew. Later after that I didn't really leave the field crews, so therefore I think I became more of a roughneck than an electrician.

AK: Is that where you met Clark Siferd?

DB: No, Clark Siferd is from Black Diamond.

AK: Yeah.

DB: And that's where I remember him from.

AK: Well, he remembers you from Black Diamond too.

DB: Yeah. So, no I don't remember him being out in the field. I think he worked for production.

AK: Well, he was... I started him off sample catching.

DB: Oh, did you?

AK: Yeah, at Provost.

DB: Oh, okay.

AK: Then I took him on, and the next thing about 30 years later, he was running the drilling operations for Home Oil.

DB: Well, great.

AK: So, he did well.

DB: Great. Fantastic.

[00:20:50] AK: He's retired now. But going back to '46. When did you first hear that there might be something interesting at Leduc?

DB: We didn't really, the truth of the matter is, we didn't hear anything. That there would be a ??? anything interesting, or that anybody was even moving in that direction. The particular rig that I was on at the time left after traveling back and forth between Morinville, and Provost, and Viking, and Two Hills, and this general area up here. We eventually went down to Provost right after the rig left at Provost. It in fact went to Leduc, which is Leduc One.

AK: Yeah, now that was in the fall of '46.

DB: Okay. And then I moved at that time to a different Franks rig to do some wiring on it, and I think it was Franks Number Two, and it was sitting at Looma. And so I moved to Looma, we moved to Looma.

AK: Yeah, well now Looma...

DB: And that was the same time that Leduc One was due to come in.

AK: No. No. May I correct you on that?

DB: Yeah. It's... or maybe we were down at Camrose. We were working out at Camrose by that time.

AK: You see, Looma was drilled with the Franks Three rig that had drilled Imperial Leduc Number Two.

DB: You're correct.

AK: And they moved over there in May.

DB: Yeah.

AK: About the end of May, and I was on that for two weeks, and then they set me up running the Leduc field. So, Looma was drilled right after Leduc Number Two.

DB: You're... now you helped me straighten something out.

AK: And then from there, I think it went on up into, back up to Morinville or someplace up there.

DB: I was on one rig and then we moved it, and then suddenly I remember we were drilling out of Camrose, and we were drilling into the Hay Lakes area. And that was the time, when we were drilling there, I remember the officials from Imperial Oil coming out. They were terribly excited. We had drilled a hole north of Camrose in the Hay Lakes area, which isn't that far away from Looma. And we drove there and we were... I think we were producing something like twenty barrels a day, which was 50 percent water, and we were bailing. And we sat there for two months in the summer bailing steadily, and it was great excitement. And the officials came out from Toronto or someplace. They were so excited about this. And it most likely was in that fall that Leduc One, was found in Leduc. You might know that Aubrey.

AK: Well, I don't know about that hole at Camrose.

DB: Yeah, but the Camrose hole, the first time we actually had oil.

AK: Well, that could be, but you see there were no holes drilled up until Imperial Leduc Number One. There was no rigs in that area at all.

DB: Well, Camrose isn't that far away.

[00:23:57] AK: I know that. Well, let's not worry about that. But then when you'd finished at Looma, where did you go then? Do you remember?

DB: Well, I was only on Looma for a very short period of time. And then I went back to the smaller Franks rig again. We eventually... I can remember... I know that I was in Morinville. I had my 21st birthday in Morinville.

AK: Now, that would be...?

DB: In 1948.

AK: '48.

DB: My 21st birthday and at that time we were drilling north of there.

AK: Yeah, well that would be about right because they moved those light rigs in there and they drilled...

DB: That was the second time we were in Morinville.

AK: Yeah.

DB: After that...

AK: But you were roughnecking then weren't you?

DB: By that time, I was, you could say in the full effect, I was roughnecking. We moved from there to Egremont.

Side 2 - 45:24

AK: ...Murray Varty?

DB: Well, yes. Murray Varty. I had a tremendous respect for Murray. But let's go back to Murray as a young person. Born on a farm in around Provost.

AK: Right.

DB: Actually, worked on his father's farm there. Very severe asthmatic. Murray telling, I can remember Murray telling me about why he left the farm, because that would be a question I would ask him.

AK: Yeah, right.

DB: And when he... he explains one time he was out in the fields. Now, whether he was on dirt or whether he was running a combine I don't know. But he was out there and of course he gets a severe asthmatic attack. The way he solves it, he goes over, takes the bung out of a 45-gallon drum of gasoline and sniffs the gasoline until finally he collapsed. But that gave him back his breath.

AK: Boy, what a drastic...

DB: So, think of this drastic measure. So, no matter what escapades you want to talk about with Murray Varty, you must... I always recalled of him as having the intestinal fortitude and the guts and the initiative to turn around and go and... he can't breathe, he's all alone, he stops at a barrel of gas, he sniffs the gas, which shocks his system so badly that he falls back, the asthma disappears however it does, and he can breathe again. So, things that I would say, or talk, or hear, or the stories I would hear about Murray Varty, I would recall that incident in his youth and what it took as an individual to keep on going. And he did. He went through many escapades. But he was, he was quite an individual, more than... he wasn't an oilfield person. He was a snake oil salesman. And a good one at that.

AK: Yeah, and that's where he really got into it with drill stem testing and...

DB: Well, I think that was it. You see, Murray didn't have any history of being in the oil business. He was not one of the down-and-dirty types, the "get in there and risk his life"...

AK: Yeah. Well you'll read... I've got them written up in Leduc. So, you're going to get a bang out of that.

[00:02:25] Well, let's ask you... Do you remember what Lyle paid you? Was it a month? Or a...

DB: It was a monthly salary.

AK: Any ideas?

DB: I have no idea.

AK: You got a living allowance. You got expense...

DB: Oh. This is quite a story about... let me tell you a story about...

AK: Tell me about the expense story.

DB: The expense accounts. Okay.

AK: I want to know ...

DB: You had an expense account. Now, the expense account ran as follows: if you were out, if you went, let's say we went to Stettler. Now, obviously in Stettler we're down there, and we've got a hotel room which is paid for, we are allowed an expense account on which you can have breakfast, lunch, dinner, and you can also have a supper in the evening. So, four meals a day is what you are allowed. And you can charge out four meals a day to your expense account. Now, this developed into quite a thing, because the number of hours that we were working. It was really the wrong time to go to work for Halliburton because they were understaffed, they didn't have enough trucks. There was too much work, it was 24-hour days, their equipment was lousy, the good equipment was sitting in Denver, and we had the two-bit broken-down equipment here, which they rectified later when they started to get heavy competition. But one of the things, we worked long hours. Now, one of the people that was working for Halliburton at that time claimed that he was entitled to overtime. Now, the basis for overtime is, if my memory serves me right, is 200 hours per month. In other words, if you're working by salary, then they can, the employee can, the employer can work you 200 hours per month.

AK: Before he had to pay...

DB: Before he pays overtime. But he must pay it beyond that point. Or he did it according to the labor law. So, of course this fellow said that he had worked all of these number of hours. And we're back to the expense accounts, because this becomes very important. Halliburton denies this, he takes them to court.

AK: Is that right? He took him to court.

DB: Yeah, he takes them to court, or the Labor Board did, whichever.

AK: Yeah.

DB: So, it comes up to a judicial inquiry of some type. And of course, in this inquiry, he states that he'd been working 20 and 24 hours a day. The company said no, that wasn't so, that he'd been working normal 8 or 9 or 10. And the way that it was established by the courts, that in fact he really had been working these long hours, it was established that if you were out all day long you were entitled to put in four meals per day on your expense account. And that would imply that you were out there for greater than 12 hours. And that was the telling factor in the particular judicial inquiry, because he'd been charging out on his expense account as we all did, even when you were theoretically not entitled to. But the court said, that's proof that the man was working 24 hours a day, and therefore that's proof that he worked far over 200 hours, and therefore that's proof that you will pay him. Well, when this decision came down, it was a desperate situation because all of a sudden we were... our expenses were seriously restricted. We were not allowed to take and charge these extra meals out that we had done all those many years. So...

AK: Yeah, and you were... you had a certain limit on these meals, didn't you? Was it 50 cents for breakfast?

DB: Well, it wasn't... No, I don't really recall any kind of limitation on our... limitation. One of the problems we would run into, is that when we would arrive on the drill sites, every driller and tool push suddenly thought that because you represented Halliburton that suddenly you were a Halliburton brother or something. And quite often I can remember people coming by complaining bitterly that they had been someplace and they got up to pay their meal ticket, and suddenly the waitress said, 'oh and those three guys that were over there, they just said you'll pay for this.' And lo and behold, they were three people off the local rig, that they might have been the drillers, the tool push or whatever.

AK: Yeah. Well, they were expecting all kinds of favors.

DB: That's right, but we who worked for Halliburton were never in the position to, quote, 'dispense these favors', and consequently we got stuck for and then we would have to pay in turn.

AK: Except people like Lyle Thorne and Jack Sparks.

DB: And a few like that.

AK: They had expenses.

DB: Well, we had expenses too. And we eventually got all our moneys, I mean... I will say this, I mean when you came in with this tale of woe about how you got stuck, and you could tell who it was that did it, then the company would really reimburse you.

AK: Yeah, right.

DB: So, expenses were a very strange and wonderful thing. But they came to a grinding halt with this case. The fellow who proved his working hours by the fact that he charged supper out on his expense account.

AK: Yeah. Well now, would you say...?

DB: But I want to tell you a story about Halliburton.

AK: Well, go ahead because I want to ask you a question about...

DB: Okay, we were working, and Leduc field was going, you know, great guns at that time. And you know, well into production and maybe pretty well drilled out. But I can remember going out there and I went to the field, and it was quite late in the afternoon when I was finished. And I thought well, you know, what I'll do is I will take, instead of going out to Leduc, and then north, and then through the city, because we were in the west end at the Railhead. What I'll do is I'll go down and I'll take the ferry. And go across the ferry and out through the Enoch Reserve, and onto Highway 16 and to the west end. So I did, I went down and I drove all the way down to the ferry, which was a terribly steep, steep hill. So, I drove down there and we had one of these... they were called FWD's. 4 wheel... they drove on all four wheels anyway.

AK: That's right.

DB: And so I drove down to the ferry. The guy came in. He took one look and he said he didn't know whether he could take me across. And I said, of course he could, because somebody had just gone across it the previous day, which is most likely a lie because I had never been down there before my life. And I drove onto the ferry. Well, when I went on to the ferry, the ferry went down and grounded there on the ground, and there it was stuck. So, I had the back wheels up on the ramp, and the front wheels on the ferry. And the ferryman was going out of his mind and I was sitting up 12 feet off the ground in my little cab up there, and he said, back up, back up. So, I started to back up, and of course what happened is that on the slippery ferry ramp the back wheels spun, but the front wheels didn't spin on the dry ferry deck, and I proceeded to drive the ferry out a few feet before he screamed ????. So here we are, front wheels on the ferry, gap with the ramp from the ferry ready to fall off into the water, and the back wheels sitting up on the ramp. Now eventually, we took... he started his motors up, ran them wide open, I opened up the truck, let out the clutch on the diesel motor, and it took one great leap back. The ferry went ahead, the back wheels were on the ramp, the front of the truck dropped into part of the river, but the back wheels pulled me up and over the ramp and I was home free. So, I was back onto the ramp again and the ferry was driven out into the river with the ferryman shaking his fist and declaring he was going to kill me for sinking his ferry. I proceeded to drive all the way back into Leduc, back up the hill, out to Leduc, through Devon out to the Leduc and through Edmonton. So, that's the day I sunk the ferry with one of their trucks.

[00:10:42] AK: Well, that's a good story. I wanted to ask you about the attitude of the roughnecks and drillers. I think you've already inferred that, but did you feel that at that time with these service rigs running around, that applied to mud man and everything, that the drillers and roughnecks felt it was their, it was there right to be entertained, and their right to be wined and dined by the service company?

DB: Yes, they did. They felt that they were entitled to this. And I think one of the reasons was... and I cannot remember the actual amount of money, but, and it wasn't very much in today's terms, but like you would get \$500 or something, for cementing a well. And this was a tremendous amount of money in the eyes of the people on the rig. And so consequently they associated this huge amount of money, and I think it was 500 but I could well be wrong, they associated this directly with you, the operator, who is most likely getting \$200 a month or something. And so I think that that was the problem. I don't think they were... I think that was the only reason, because of the amount of money was known, what the service companies received for the job. And it seemed a princely sum.

AK: Yeah.

DB: And I think that was the association. I don't put any ulterior motive to it other than that.

AK: Well, what about the... it got to the point where some of these tool pushers were expecting a shotgun or a fishing trip? Do you remember that?

DB: Well, let me tell you a story that happened in the Palliser Hotel in Calgary. My very good friend Norman Blanchard at that time, was working for a diamond drilling outfit as a salesman. Now Norman was well known throughout the industry, and Norman had invited me down and they had some kind of a convention, let's call it that, I don't know what it was but some kind of thing that was happening in the Palliser. So, Norman was staying there, and I was staying with him. We went down to the desk, and we were called over to the desk, we were going out or something. We were called over to the desk and the fellow said, well you'll have to sign this bill. And Norman said, what bill was that? Well, it's the bill, and it was like several hundreds of dollars, where somebody had taken an axe and chopped into a door in the Palliser Hotel. Now that turned out to be one of the tool pushes that was there at the convention, worked for an outfit called Brinkerhoffer or something like that.

AK: Oh, yeah. Brinkerhoff...

DB: Brinkerhoff, right. An outfit out of Texas or Oklahoma. And he got drunk and decided he wanted to get into his friend's bedroom for whatever, good reason or bad reason, and couldn't, and went down and got a fire axe and proceeded to chop a hole through the door. And you know, the huge oak doors or whatever they were in the Palliser Hotel...

AK: Yeah, they were pretty substantial.

DB: So, the bill was two or three hundred dollars. And he had said, oh, well, just charge this to Blanchard, he gave Norman, had given them his card, and charge this to Blanchard. And so Norman is stuck with the bill. Before we left there, Norman got very angry with this and actually left that particular phase of the business not long afterwards, because he said he'd had it with this never-ending demand. When he left there someone had charged a couple of cases of booze to his room.

AK: Yeah.

DB: So yes, I know about that, but that was the excesses that... let me state this, I believe that those were the excesses that started after the boom was on. After Leduc, after Redwater. They were afterwards, and it was an entirely different group of people. It was maddening. Before that I think the wildcatters had been relatively conservative in the way that they had worked because you couldn't afford this wild and crazy approach.

AK: Right.

DB: But after the boom, then all sorts of things, the money was too big. There was too much floating around. And I think there was a different attitude on behalf of the drillers and the service people.

[00:15:15] AK: So what caused you to pack it in with Halliburton?

DB: Oh, I was studying as I tell you at the time. Halliburton sent me to work in the Peace River country. I did. I came back from there, I thought I was just relieving somebody. But Halliburton was having real problems keeping people in their outlying areas. I had been told that I would stay in the Peace River country and I said, like hell I would, and called Lyle and said I was coming down, because, then they'd better send this other guy back who had been there, as holidays must be over by that time. And so, I came back. And got back and then I was supposed to take the truck down to Lloydminster loaded with gel of some kind. Well, in the process of trying to fix it, I got badly burned with gasoline all over my chest and arms. But still in all, that was the way you worked. I mean the fact you're burned, you say, well, that's okay. I'll just go, I've got to go anyway and deliver this load of gel, which was so important. So, I was driving by the Royal Alex Hospital and suddenly realized that I couldn't drive any longer. The skin on my arms were cracking from this. So, I went into the hospital and they immediately put me... they just said, this is desperation. They cut my shirt off, they covered me with bandages, my face, my arms, my chest, the whole thing. And they said, this is it. They put me in a hospital bed and there I stayed. Well, I notified the company and they were furious that this truck was sitting outside. The hospital evidently said get your goddamn truck out of our parking lot. This guy is going no place.

So, I didn't go anyplace. I went back to where I was staying with a fellow named Bill Schmillar?? in the city of Edmonton. And I stayed with him. And after about a week I went back to the hospital and they're taking the bandages off and redressed the wounds, and they were, I guess, they were quite severe. I went back to Halliburton to discover the truck was still there and it still had the same load on it, and my assignment was to deliver this truck to Lloydminster. Well having known that there was such a panic a week or two before, then I said, what is going on? Well, and I confronted Lyle and a few others, they admitted that yes, I would have got down to Lloydminster, and then that would have been it. I would now have been the permanent cementer out of the town of Lloydminster, at which I quit on the spot as I recall. But I did get a really nice recommendation as I recall from Lyle. But you see, it was that kind of thing where it was almost desperation. That the fact I got the... the fact they were going to pull this dirty trick, but the fact I got the recommendation shows that people were desperate to keep operating at that time.

AK: Yeah, right.

DB: I don't lay any blame on the individuals. I blame it upon this wild and crazy system that was going on at that particular phase.

Audio interrupted [00:18:22]

AK: Now, Dennis you and I have just been treated to a lovely coffee break complete with hot cross buns. And it's now one o'clock. And I was wondering after you left Halliburton, you went ahead to earn your tickets in different trades. Is that right? After you left Halliburton?

DB: Yes, making a short story of what could become a very long story, I had an electrical ticket. I went to the Apprenticeship Board, a Mr. White who was head of the Apprenticeship Board, he agreed to let me write my electrical, which I did. I moved from there though into... they were building all the plants in and around Edmonton, their refineries. So, I moved from that into pipe fitting. So, I wrote a pipe fitting ticket, then a steam ticket, plumbing ticket, gas fitting ticket, eventually a welding ticket. And then added to these, both the Master's tickets in the plumbing and the gas fitting, which would enable me to run a job. After having worked then, you know, this took several years. At the same time, I was adding to my formal education, and I don't know what stage I was, but I think I was approaching the grade 12 level at that time. Taking it by correspondence. The principal of the correspondence branch was a Mrs. Lauria Flint or something. Harriet Flint. And there's quite a story to tell about how I got expelled from correspondence school. The only person ever to get expelled from the correspondence school in the history of the school. But I did. (laughs) Another story that I'll tell some day. But I... using these tickets and whatnot, and working for various firms, I eventually ended up back with Brown and Root whom I had worked for previously. Because of the particular qualifications I had, and the tickets I had, I ended up as one of their superintendents and worked in their engineering departments. We worked on a lot of projects. The Goliad project for, what was then, Drayton Valley.

AK: Right. Now that was a scheme to gather wet gas and to strip it from its liquids. Strip the liquids from it. Is that right?

DB: Yes. The important thing about that, it was a coordinated effort. It was a situation where all the operators set up an independent firm and agreed the independent firm acting as a Czar in one sense of the word, would have the total say. They would start the project, they would gather this, they would operate it on a computerized basis. Everything was to be done by them, and it was one of the first oil fields that I know of where it wasn't five or six multinational or independent operators, each vying against each other, but it was a total cooperative effort. Brown and Root received a contract to build all of the stations, they were all built identical, all the pipelines were under the same spec. And consequently it became... and it was so easy to computerize later, it became the first fully automatic computerized oil field in the world I believe.

AK: Well now, yeah. Now, one of the things that I recall from that, was that the prices of the liquids was so low that the royalty that they had to pay on these liquids and gas, was more than the darn stuff was worth. Do you remember anything about that?

DB: No, no. I know nothing about that.

AK: Well, that was a contentious point. But...

DB: One of the interesting things about that oilfield, a person who turned out to be a very good friend of mine in later years, Bob Ritter, Dr. Bob Ritter, later, one of his later jobs was the Dean of Engineering at the University of Calgary. Bob Ritter, in his thesis, his doctoral thesis, had worked on movement of liquids, fluids. And he was... worked on that particular job and proved to them that they were going to run quite a few pumping stations. And because of his, he discovered that with that particular type of distillate and crude both, that the friction component, that everybody had understood as being a coefficient of friction, for those particular liquids was not true when the liquids were under a given amount of pressure. This was his thesis. And of course, from that they discovered that the pipeline that they had out to that field was much larger than it had to be and they had a couple of extra stations on there they didn't have to have. And it was due to his research. But that's one of the things that allowed them to become more economical. Because they cut out a couple of the compressor stations. Anyway, incidental thing.

AK: No, well that's important. Because the behavior of liquids and vapors at high pressures is quite a bit different from what you would expect, you know, the super compressibility.

DB: That was precisely what he was working on.

AK: Yeah, okay.

DB: And he become very famous for his work as a ???

AK: Yeah, well there was a lot of pioneering work done there.

DB: Yeah. But in any case, we did a lot of jobs. We were working on various projects of the... Kelsey River Dam in, Kelsey Dam on the Nelson River in northern Manitoba, was one of the projects that I handled for Brown and Root. I was the only Brown and Root person on the job. It was a joint venture with McNamara.

AK: Is that K-E-L-S-E-Y?

DB: Yeah. Kelsey, yeah.

AK: Now, was that on the Nelson River?

DB: The Nelson River, yeah. That's the dam. And Brown and Root put up the money and I went there as their representative. And so I was the Brown and Root person on the job. The rest of the job was run by McNamara who had just finished coming off of the St. Lawrence Seaway. And the Cha... the Labrador, their railroad out of Chicoutimi going north. But in any case, I worked on that. I was there for, well, I went up there for three weeks to solve the problem, and I came home nine months later. Which tells you what would happen quite often with Brown and Root. I went, we went to BC one time. I went for a couple of weeks and I came back three months later. Then we bid and got the job of the DEW line. Now, it was refitting the DEW line. It was not building the DEW line.

AK: No. This is D-E-W?

DB: Distant Early Warning.

AK: That's right. And it was on latitude what? 75 or 80?

DB: Yeah, well, it varied back and forth depending upon where it was. It always had to be on the peninsulas of the Arctic Ocean so they could get maximum visibility with the radar. Now, the truth of matter, it was called a Distant Early Warning line. Actually, what it was is the biggest telephone line in the world, and it was the first microwave telephone line. And that's really what it was. 90% of the effort of that particular project, was its telecommunications by microwave. Very important. And that's where the Trans-Canada microwave system was in fact developed there. And microwave telephone communication was developed on that line. But I was up there, oh, I started off in the central sector. We were extending it, refitting the oil camps. At the same time, I had decided that I was going to go to university. So, I quit Brown and Root. I went to university, took my first year, ran out of money. Came back to Brown and Root, went on the DEW line job. Worked on the DEW line, and of course, when the fall came, I still didn't have enough money. And so I stayed there the whole year. And then returned to university to take the second year of engineering but actually when my fellow students were already in their third year. And then went to university that fall, had a lot of problems with health because of aches and breaks that I had from previous, from the oil business. Went out in the spring, went back on the DEW line, stayed up there again for another 18 months. So, when I came back to go into my third year, my fellow students had already graduated. There were long gone. Somewhere in between here we also built, I was the... we built the first sulfur plant in Alberta, at Windfall. We built it for Petrofina. It was the first of the big sulfur plants that was ever designed and built. Designed and engineered by Brown and Root out of Houston.

AK: What year was that?

DB: I'm going to say 1960. Oh, no, would be '60? '58, I first went to University in '58. So, it would be... I would say '59 or '60.

AK: Yeah, well the first plant was right out there near Okotoks.

DB: That was the second plant. Windfall... Brown and Root built that one also.

AK: Yeah, well then there was the one just outside of Calgary.

DB: But there was the plant outside of Okotoks was Brown and Root's second engineering job. It was based on the Windfall plant, which was the first plant.

AK: Is that right?

DB: Yeah. And it was a bigger plant. Twice as big. More than twice as big. Four times as big as the Windfall plant. But the Windfall plant was the first major sulfur recovery plant that was designed and engineered, to my knowledge, in Canada. And it was designed by Brown and Root. The strange thing is though, they didn't... after the Okotoks plant, they didn't really stay in it. But having gone through all of that and we built that plant, it was a good plant, it was a good experience. And Petrofina had done a lot of work on it. Then back to university, by this time I've been going to university for about six or more years, and I was still in my third year. So, one of my good neighbors who happened to be the assistant superintendent of the Public School Board, when one of the many times when I was home came over to see me one time I was home and said, why didn't... why did I not go to and take education and go into

this new vocational training scheme, that was then pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into education.

AK: Yeah. What year was this?

DB: That would be about '63. '62 or '63. So, he encouraged me to do this. I went back and talked to the Dean of Engineering, Govier.

AK: George? George Govier. Yeah.

DB: George Govier who had been very... he had been very prominent in the Petroleum Resources Conservation Board.

AK: Yeah, he was the Chairman.

DB: Yeah, he was the Chairman for many years. Went back and talked to him. He told me quite bluntly, you are doing so damn badly at engineering, you may as well get out of it because we're going to fail you anyway.

AK: Well, he was blunt wasn't he, eh?

DB: Maybe I draw a people to do this. So, I changed over into education and completed my degree that year, and everything worked out quite well. And then I just stayed in education for years and years, and it's been a wonderful fantastic time.

AK: Yeah.

DB: Always generally in the vocational technical area, which I had the expertise for. Which is where I met Les Key who was a teacher who worked for me at Jasper Place High School.

AK: Right. Well now...

DB: Quite a strange...

AK: Well, a mixed career if nothing else.

DB: Yeah. Started with no education, ended up with degrees. Started in the oil business, ended up in the education business. So these people who tell about change and what you can't do in this day and age, I have a hard time believing them.

AK: Yeah. Did you get your B.Ed.?

DB: Yes.

AK: You did?

DB: Yeah.

AK: You got three years of engineering.

DB: Yep.

AK: And did they give you credit for that, your B.Ed.?

DB: 26 of my courses.

AK: Oh.

DB: 26. You see, you have an awful lot of courses in math, physics, chemistry, all of these, even drafting.

AK: Yeah, right.

DB: You see, these are all good. But I think there was 26 courses or maybe I've 26 science courses, can't remember, but I got credit for a lot of courses. I put in one year in the faculty of education and had a degree in education.

[00:31:41] AK: All right. Well, then when you were ready to go out once again in the cold cruel world, was there a list of openings for you to teach?

DB: No, they... I had a job the day that I went in. They paid us to go to university.

AK: Oh, they did?

DB: They were paying tradesmen to go to university. Bursaries that were three or four thousand dollars a year, they completely covered your living expenses and your cost of tuition.

AK: Oh, is that right?

DB: And they were actively recruiting tradesmen and having a tough time getting them. Because the new vocational training scheme put out by the federal government who put up the money, stipulated that the teacher had to be a tradesman. That was one of the prerequisites. So, they had to hold a current and established Canadian ticket. Tradesmen's qualification in the particular area that we're going to teach in. So, they had to recruit us.

AK: Right.

DB: And to do this. of course, I wasn't recruited other than by my next-door neighbor who said you should do this. And I thought it was a good idea. And I was sick and tired of... by that time, I had been in the north so long, and sitting in tents in the north, and I had already made up my mind that I didn't really want to stay in construction. And this was the ideal thing. And occurred to me, hey, I can stay home. I can have a job where I'm home every day. And so, started with a degree. We were allowed a credit for the years that we could prove that we had worked at our trades, and I proved ???

AK: Oh, for pension purposes, eh?

DB: For salary purposes. And I started at the very top of the salary schedule.

AK: Yeah, because you go back to '43 then.

DB: Yeah.

AK: When you first signed up with Imperial.

DB: When I first signed up. So, I started at the top of the schedule. I couldn't, I, just really unfortunate, most teachers start, and they have a degree, and then the second year they get more money, and the third and the fourth and so forth all the way to the 10th or 11th year. Well, I'm one of those poor unfortunates that started at the top. So, I never got a raise. So, it's just been the story of my life. Never getting a raise.

[00:34:12] AK: What school did you first go to?

DB: I went to Jasper Place High School, which was then controlled by the town of Jasper Place.

AK: And that was just outside the city of Edmonton.

DB: West of the city of Edmonton. Most of the people that were in... the students that came to that school were from trade families. a lot of them from the oilfield families who had settled there. I knew an awful lot of people from my past that were right there. I left that school, the school board pulled me out of that school, sent me to their head office to the architectural engineering department where I worked for a year designing a new school. It was called a ME LaZerte. So, I designed and supervised...

AK: That's L-A-Z-E-R-T-E.

DB: Yeah.

AK: And where was that located?

DB: That was in the northeast section of the city. And so I worked on the design. And then when the school was under construction, went all over Canada looking at the various courses and how to buy material and equipment and design labs and did all that, and came back with the information and stayed in the school initially to set it up. And then into the curricular area and stayed at that school through for six or seven years. Left and went back to Victoria High School and worked back there in the Administration. Left there and went to Victoria High School where I was Administrator there and stayed at Victoria until I retired which was last June. So, there was my history. I really never ever left the oil business, the trades, the construction.

AK: No.

DB: I mean I just happened to be in a different environment.

AK: Well, what was the first time you met Lester?

DB: When we first came into... when we started up the school at Jasper Place. Les was the building construction teacher. I was teaching a pipe trades course, which was plumbing and steam fitting and that kind of thing, the welding course, science and math. I was teaching those courses. Les was teaching building construction and math. And that's when I first met him. And then he stayed there all the way through. Whereas I... as I mentioned I left, went to Central Administration, from there I moved into Administration at LaZerte High School, and then came back to JP, Jasper place that is. And Les was still there. Les later retired from there.

[00:36:59] AK: Right. What was the general, did you think that in those trade schools that you were getting to these kids, and they were absorbing enough to make them into good tradesmen? Or how did you feel...?

DB: The initially students that were in the trade schools I would say, for the first 10 years, were highly motivated, the teachers were highly motivated, the equipment was up-to-date, better than the industry in some cases. Very intelligent, highly motivated students. Most of whom went on into the trades, and most of whom came out as foremen, superintendents, or owners of their own firm. For about 10 years it was an unbelievably successful endeavor. And then they decided that, after all, there were students that we used the politically correct term, that they're less motivated or mentally challenged. We just said they were kids with lower IQ, which is the way it was measured. But they decided that these students couldn't handle the normal high school classrooms, but they had to go someplace. And progressively, the counseling and the School Boards filled the courses with the students with lesser ability. And of course the minute that happened then the students with higher ability didn't join the courses. And so, after a while, the scheme to produce tradesmen, and as I would say to many people, and I was at odds with many of the administration of the School Boards, all the time I was there. I would say to them, do you really want this student who can't handle academically a grade 10? Do you really want to pay them \$45 an hour to put the heating in your house, or the electrical in your house? Because that's what you're saying. That they can handle an academic education, and yet you want them to be tradespeople and work in the trades. And of course... so, eventually, I would say today, ten years ago for that matter, ten years ago, those courses were completely filled with students who either are academically challenged or unmotivated or delinquent, you know, in terms of their studies. This type of student filled the classes. The classes produced nothing. They were babysitting services to keep many of the students out. This wasn't a hundred percent true, but in the main that's what happened. So, a good scheme. But follow it in the history of education, and you'll find this is the third go-round of exactly the same thing.

AK: Right.

DB: So, I suppose five years from now, we'll be spending hundreds of billions of dollars to rebuild these technical institutes, so we can start all over again.

[00:40:00] AK: What, didn't talk about your personal life, if you'd care to say. You had some children?

DB: Yes.

AK: You were married for...?

DB: More than once.

AK: Oh.

DB: Had children by, I have an older son by one wife, and I have two younger children by a different wife. And I have no wife at this time.

AK: Right.

DB: I think I was following in my father's footsteps.

AK: And they are working somewhere?

DB: Oh, yes. One of my sons, Richard, is an iron-worker tradesman. Works in and around the Edmonton area. His younger brother is also an iron-worker, but is also... went to NAIT, and took his building construction engineering technology course, and so works at either of those jobs that he can. Mostly as an iron-worker because the technology courses pay so little that he can't afford to stay in them.

AK: Right.

DB: My daughter went through university, took a degree, a BFA degree in Drama, Fine Arts. But no, she's isn't... she stayed in the acting business for a while, but she's now the Executive Director of... for the Status of Women in Alberta, which is a job where she's a contractor attached to the Minister of Labour.

AK: Right.

DB: So, she's in charge of this department. So, that's her particular job.

[00:41:38] AK: Okay. Now, let's get back to you and me. Where do you remember me being? That's what I'd like to...

DB: Well, I thought about that and thought about it. I don't think I remember you being, so much as just knowing your name.

AK: Oh.

DB: And of course, you know working on the rigs, people were aware of the names of the tool-pushers. You were certainly aware of the names of the geologist. They were strange and wonderful people, that sat in shacks and stayed up all night long and grew long beards are looked kind of weird.

AK: And looked through microscopes...

DB: And looked through microscopes, and talked about micro-paleontology, and things like that that we didn't understand. But we knew somehow that you had, sort of an elevated position. And if you ever really did tangle with the geologist, and he went to the tool push, you lost. And so therefore, we knew all your names. I mentioned Whispering Tom and a few others that we knew of.

AK: Yeah, right.

DB: But also geologists traveled around. So, you seemed to have moved around, and I moved around so much, that it may well have been that period while I was wiring a rig, fixing something, I was on your site.

[00:42:59] AK: Now, okay. We're getting near the end of the tape. It's been a wonderful interview. But I was wondering as the fellow says, in 20 words or less, would you like to sum up your career? And you can take more than 20 words, but it's a philosophical note to wind up this interview with.

DB: My career started...

AK: Your careers or whatever you want to call it, your life!

DB: My working life started as an individual with no education and no money. And the thought in mind that you just worked for a living, that life is going to be wonderful, that no matter what happens to you whether you're hurt, wounded, or whatever; only death is going to take you away, so you might as well be happy about it. I never ever believed that I couldn't do better for myself than whatever it was that I had. And so, after all these years I'm most likely one of the most content people of my age, because I started with absolutely nothing, I had a fantastic life, I made a ton of money and lost a ton of money in the stock exchange. I've come all this way and I've really enjoyed my life. And I've done everything I ever wanted to do. Now, you can't beat that for a life.

AK: No, you can't. And I want to thank you very much Denis for this interesting... and it's given me a lot of insights into some of these other things, which really get to the crux of the oil patch. So, here it is. It's 1:30 p.m., and I'm going to say, sign off. Thank you again Denis.

DB: Thank you. Thank you, Aubrey. I hope this is of some value to you. And I hope it adds to a fund of knowledge about that wonderful time in Alberta history called the boom.

AK: Yeah.

DB: Of the 1940's.

AK: Yeah, that's far away from the 20 billion that we're faced with.

DB: (laughs) Yeah, the 20-billion-dollar gap we've managed to acquire in the past nine years, eight years.

AK: Doesn't take long. If you work at it, it don't take long. Well, thank you. Over and out.

End of Interview