

PETROLEUM HISTORY SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Lyle Caspell

INTERVIEWER: Harry Simpson

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Audio length [23:28]

HS: 10:00 in the morning of the October 30th, 1985. And this is Harry Simpson interviewing Mr. Lyle Caspell at his home in Calgary. Well Lyle, I guess the first question would be: when did you get the word to go up to Leduc to get involved in the Atlantic 3 blowout?

LC: Well now, we are going to have to ... time or dates...

HS: No, I think if... I think you told me it was 2 days after ???...

LC: Yes, it wasn't quite that long. It blew out one day, and I was up there the next. They couldn't get me the first day but they got me that night. So the next morning we got a plane and flew to Calgary and then drove out.

HS: Right. Okay, and that was... let's see.

LC: That was the day of the blowout, whatever that date that was. Because I'm not sure.

HS: So we could say that you arrived there on March 9th or 10th.

LC: Yes.

HS: Okay. And who was it that requested you go to Leduc?

LC: Executives in Pacific Petroleum's office who were controllers of the operation.

HS: Right. So it would be Frank McMahon and...

LC: No, he didn't notify me. He didn't... he wasn't there either. He was in Los Angeles.

HS: I see.

LC: I think it was Ted Maygess.

HS: Okay. When you were involved with the Atlantic 3 blowout, where did you live while you were there?

LC: I lived in, hoteling it.

HS: Hoteling it. And to whom did you report at that time?

LC: Frank McMahon. On behalf of Pacific Petroleum, and Atlantic.

HS: Yes.

LC: Spy Langston reported to Denton and Spencer company.

HS: Yes.

LC: Because he was associated with them. Cody Spencer and...

HS: Right, and what was your relationship with Denton and Spencer?

LC: Beautiful. I mean, complete accord in everything we did.

HS: So it didn't matter who was telling who what to do?

LC: No it really didn't. It was complete accord.

HS: Yes. Okay. The large cement job that involved 10,000 sacks of cement that was performed out at Atlantic 3. Can you tell me who was it made the decision to do that large job?

LC: Frank McMahon. In the McDonald Hotel.

HS: And that's the cement job that's covered by your pictures that you've

LC: I sent to...

HS: You've mentioned previously that a Conservation Board engineer approved the setting of 296 feet of 10 3/4-inch surface casing. Is that correct?

LC: Well yes, it was approved. And the drilling superintendent at that time was, or the drilling of the well at that time was under the direction of General Petroleum because they were the contractor.

HS: Right.

LC: So evidently they had to get permission in the application.

HS: Yes, the application for a drilling license which was submitted to the Conservation Board would have included the casing program.

LC: Yes.

HS: So actually, Atlantic Oil proposed the casing program which included setting of 296 feet of 10 3/4-inch surface casing.

LC: I would think so.

HS: Okay. And I'm not sure if you know who it might have been at Atlantic who prepared the casing program that was included in the drilling license application?

LC: I have no idea.

HS: No. Okay. And I'm wondering at that point in time was that depth of surface casing considered adequate for wells drilling at Leduc, and drilling down to the D3 zone?

LC: I really wouldn't know. Because there was many, many different depths in which surface casing was run.

HS: So various operators at Leduc used various lengths of surface pipe.

LC: Yes.

HS: Was there any shortage of 10 and 3/4-inch casing at that time?

LC: I would suggest there was.

HS: And would you say that that was perhaps a reason for only roughly 300 feet of that pipe being run at that well?

LC: No. There was 2, at least 2 joints of 10 3/4 on the pipe racks after the blowout.

HS: Okay, so what you are saying I think is that they had another couple of joints at least of pipe..

LC: That they didn't use.

HS: That could have been used. They could have drilled further down through the glacial drift.

LC: There again, I wasn't on the location, but I know there was surface pipe there after the blowout.

HS: Okay. Now I understand some difficulty was encountered in cementing the surface pipe at Atlantic 3.

LC: Yes.

HS: And that was because the pipe was bottomed in an unconsolidated glacial drift zone.

LC: Correct.

HS: So when they attempted to, or when they did cement it, there were no cement returns to the surface. So it... I believe they tried a number of times to...

LC: I think I explained that in there. We even borrowed a string of pipe and ran down the outside of the casing. And thought we had... but didn't. It just didn't work, that's all.

HS: Right. Okay, can you tell me Lyle, in your opinion, if there had been 500 or 600 feet of surface pipe set at Atlantic 3, do you believe that might have avoided the blowout and ultimate loss of control of the well?

LC: I certainly believe that.

HS: Yes. Do you think if it had been possible to cement the 296 feet that was run, to cement that pipe successfully, would that have prevented the blowout and loss of control that resulted?

LC: I wouldn't... geologically, I would not be able to... I just wouldn't be able to make a statement on that because I don't know what was below the depth of the casing shoe.

HS: Right.

LC: We didn't know that until we drilled the rest of the hole.

HS: I guess the fact that the pipe that was run was bottomed in a very unconsolidated glacial drift would say that it wouldn't be an adequate surface casing job in any event.

LC: I think that's right.

HS: Yes. Okay, that's fine. Just 2 or 3 more questions here. Do you think that... well let me start again. Conservation Board took over the operation of the Atlantic 3 well on May the 15th of 1948, and Imperial Oil was appointed as their agent and placed in control of operations there. Do you think that Denton and Spencer, or General Petroleums, could have brought the well under control on their own if the well had not been taken over by the Board with Imperial's assistance?

LC: They couldn't have taken Atlantic 3 over without the assistance of adequate equipment on the lease to drill offset wells. Whipstock wells I should say.

HS: Right. Did Denton and Spencer, or General Petroleums ever consider drilling a relief hole at Atlantic 3?

LC: I don't know.

HS: You don't know that. Okay.

LC: I wouldn't be consulted on that. That would be the upper echelon.

HS: Right. But you never heard of any such possibilities in any case?

LC: No, I didn't.

HS: Okay. The final question Lyle. What do you think caused the well to finally catch fire?

LC: Well I think... my opinion was steel on steel. Well things were just bouncing around and flying out of that hole there. There was a lot of activity. There was a lot of iron there, my goodness sakes, there was

all kinds of iron everywhere. And the derrick only had to fall on one piece to cause an ignition. I don't... That would be impossible. I'm only sorry it didn't happen 4 or 5 months before then.

HS: Oh really? Why is that?

LC: Well it would have been all over right away. They would have had to go in and drill a whipstock hole.

HS: Oh I see, yes.

LC: But this way, they were toying with the production and...

HS: On the other hand, they would have lost 4 or 5 months of production.

LC: At least.

HS: Into the atmosphere, burning. Okay, well I think that about tidies us up here.

LC: There is so many tiny little stories. Every time a person talks about them you think of the things that had to be done. I was thinking the mornings there was 10-15 below zero, and we'd send crews out to dig little ditches to see if the oil, get it into the main pit. Sounds so simple, but it was a terrible job for those fellows.

HS: And dangerous.

LC: Oh terribly dangerous. I got this man to make some plywood shovels because it scared me to death to see those fellows digging with an iron shovel and gravel and stuff. And those fellows on those bulldozers that drove those bulldozers through the reserve pit and out in the open catch pits, those old D6's and D8's lumbering around there pushing rocks and gravel. How in heavens name they didn't start a fire long before something did.

HS: Just amazing.

LC: It was really... I've... not now, but for weeks and weeks after I used to lay in bed in the mornings and think well what in the heck could we have done different than we did that would have helped us. And everybody had the same objective. There wasn't a coolie on the place. Everybody had the same objective. How are we going to catch this rascal?

HS: Well I guess it seems that drilling the relief wells was maybe the only answer.

LC: I would think so. I actually was surprised that Myron Kindley didn't survive it. I've talked to him many times since Atlantic 3 because I had a bad well and I wanted some advice from him one time, and I phoned him and he advised me correctly and we got the well under control. But he was of the opinion that we could never have got it ourselves. There's just no way. There wasn't enough formation to hold what we were trying to do. And he said...

HS: Did he agree that one of the main problems of being able to control it without relief wells would be the inadequate surface casing job?

LC: Well that was out of his... that's a fishing job and that wasn't what his... but, what we needed more than any other single thing in the whole cotton-picking story, was some way of plugging the annulus. You can't swat a fly without a handle on the swatter. The darned thing, no matter what you put in, tons of stuff we put in there, and it just went on down the line. Came over and poor old Gillies' wells across the... and the poor guy, I thought he was going to have a heart attack. But the whole thing is that we couldn't shut the door downstairs. If we could have shut it with anything, peanut shells, or walnut hulls, or anything, then we could have shut the door down there, it would have just been a routine procedure. But we couldn't do it.

HS: Yes, that would have enabled you to use some cementing and etc., etc.

LC: Well and then the key to that was that we had the darn drill pipe was stuck. We couldn't pull it up to 3,000 feet and put a plug in. We couldn't do anything like that.

HS: Didn't get too many bricks.

LC: No, we didn't. It was... oh the many hours that lots of us sat there and wondered what miracle can happen that would change this place, and it never did. I had another well that was just as bad, and it was blowing fierce, but didn't ignite. And we got that in 2 days, 2 1/2 days. No blowout went under it at all. They drilled without it and it got away. But we brought in Jim-pulled trucks and brought a big cherry picker and we picked up a well head. And I got about 8 or 10 men. In fact, one of the men stayed over night with us here about 2 weeks ago. And I said to Doug, we were BS'ing about the oil field, and he's still in it. Those guys jumped in there and helped us. He's now with McCall Oil Tool. We tied onto that well head and the blowout preventer. And we got a huge cherry picker from Edmonton. And it came up there, and then he swung that well head over there with guide lines being tightened up and loosened up by winch trucks 100 feet away. Lowered that well head, put the bolts in it, an hour and a half walked away from it.

HS: Where was that?

LC: At the south???

HS: Oh that's the picture on your wall here.

LC: Yes. Albeit, I had 2 or 3 of them in Redwater, but they were duck soup. All you had to do was plunk down the casing and it killed everything out there. And everybody has them, lots of them, but you never hear about them unless they are spectacular. If they're spectacular then the papers grab a hold of them.

HS: Oh, by the way, Aubrey Kerr wanted me to mention to you that he has run out of leads on how to locate those 2 steam engineers. Oh, what were their names? I can't recall now, but he asked me to let you know that he had made a good effort to try and find them.

LC: Let me see...

HS: And he had their names I believe. Yes, I'm sure he did.

LC: What the heck was that monkey's name? I know where he lives. A friend of mine was here one night, and he was on Atlantic 3 with me and a couple of other wells but he wasn't in any position other than just a worker. What the hell was... Hughy Rose. Was it Hughy Rose? Oh I can't... The guy's name was somewhere around here. Oh brother. What the hell was that guy's...

HS: I guess he.. I think Aubrey said he tried to locate him in...

LC: Lloydminster?

HS: No, in a little town just south of Mara Lake in B.C. there. South of...

LC: Lumby... no Enderby, Enderby. Yes.

HS: And Aubrey went to Enderby and looked in the phone book and inquired around town and so on and...

LC: My wife and I did the same thing.

HS: Oh did you?

LC: Twice.

HS: Is that right.

LC: And I found out that he was a great... that he... the last that this man and lady could help us was, he was the man at the service station, Harold and his wife lived there for a number of years, and he was a grader or what do you call it that runs up and down the highways. Grader operator or whatever they... And she said, well you could go over to the provincial office here that handles the road work. And I said, well gee, I was over there and it's closed. Oh, she said, I guess they'd gone away for awhile. But she said, I will make a phone call. And she phoned somebody and asked if she had knew where Mrs. Scoble was and whoever she talked to said, no I haven't heard from her for 5 or 6 years. Harold must have left there.

HS: Yes, I gathered that Aubrey did everything that he could, and there wasn't

LC: Aubrey sent me a couple of copies of some letters and there was another man, Hughy Rose, Harold Scoble, and Jackson up at Lloydminster. No was it Jackson? What the devil was his first name? Oh dear dear. Too bad I can't remember all those goddamned names. But anyway, I thought that I would might someday go... I know a person that knows his daughter. She's married and got a flock of kids I think somewhere around Strathmore but... What the devil was that name? I keep looking through here hoping a miracle will pop up but it never does. What the hell. I can't remember.

HS: Well listen Lyle, if you come up with anything on that at all, why don't you give Aubrey a call, and he would be most interested. He just wanted me to let you know that he had made a good effort to try and find these folks but...

LC: Hughy Rose was around for a long time, but I haven't seen any of them. I'd forgotten about them until Aubrey had sent me copies of their letters of whatever it was. I'd never even thought of those gents, those fellows.

HS: Well you know, we are finished in time for your appointment alright.

LC: I got that.. I was just glancing here, you know I took over North End 1 for Sam Nickles. That was a spectacular well. I mean it wasn't a well, didn't make anything, but we had a tremendous time on that. We'd fished for about 3 months on that thing. I had... got them somewhere. Oh yeah, it was called the deepest well in the British Empire was for Carl Nickles' father, Sam Nickle. And they wanted to write a story on it. I spent hours and hours, went through the drilling logs and everything, but it was one well. And it was... Sam wanted it because he raised all his money in Nova Scotia, in New Brunswick and he got a lease for it. Sam wanted to go get a lot of some of these. And you know actually it was kind of a spectacular situation but there was very little romance to it. It was just a well that got in trouble and it was just drilling trouble, nothing else.

HS: But you got out of the trouble in that place.

LC: Yes. Because he was taking advantage of the publicity that he had got through some people in Calgary. It was the deepest well in the British Empire and all blah blah blah, you know. I suppose he went down and sold another few 100,000 chairs.

HS: Well I want to thank you very much for...

LC: Well I didn't contribute that much.

HS: Well it's been interesting for me and I continue to be amazed by your good memory of events that happened that many years ago.

LC: I can't remember what I did yesterday. But I can remember them. I'll tell you if I had one...

End of interview.