

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Howard Kirk

INTERVIEWER: Betty Cooper

DATE: April 27th, 1982

Tape 1 Side 1 – 24:00

BC: This is Betty K. Cooper speaking, and I'm talking to Mr. Howard Kirk at the Palliser Hotel and it is April 27th. Mr. Kirk, could I have some background to just put at the front of the tape your full name and where you were born? When were you born Mr. Kirk?

HK: I was born May 9th, 1899 on my father's Homestead, which is located some 25 miles southwest of Bozeman, Montana. I attended grade schools and high school in Bozeman, Montana with a two years Interruption when I was in the U.S. Navy in the first World War. I returned to Bozeman after leaving the service to complete my high school education preparatory to going to Stanford University where I majored in geology.

BC: Upon graduation from geology, where did you go to work?

HK: My first work after graduation was a plane table operator mapping lignite coal beds in North Dakota for one year, on completion of that, I return to Stanford to take graduate work in geology and worked as an instructor in geology field courses.

BC: And then following that after getting your graduate degree, you went off to work again.

HK: I didn't ??? graduate really, I did not write a thesis, I had all other requirements. I had an idea of doing a practical field job, but I got married and I had to work. So I never went back for the thesis.

BC: You did a lot of foreign service, did you go in, after you left the university, did you then go to Atlantic Refinery right then?

HK: No, in geology I specialized in minerals or mine geologist. My first job was a field geologist in exploration in Mexico. This work was for Henry L. Doherty and Company, preceder of City Service Company. I worked for that company for seven years in Mexico, Alberta Canada, ???

BC: So you were up in Canada, what part of Canada were you working in?

HK: I worked...

BC: At that time?

HK: Pincher Creek, and Waterton Lakes area, Canada. I did that for two summers.

BC: Did you make any discoveries there?

HK: No, I didn't, we did some drilling but were still drilling with cable tools and the maximum depth was 6,000 feet, subsequent discoveries in the area were 12,000 feet.

BC: So you were in the right place, but not deep enough. Did you feel that even though you did not discover it, did you feel that Pincher Creek was a good place for oil?

HK: All the Foothill belts, the Canadian Rockies and of course they found oil in Turner Valley and we had some of our structures in the, trying to think of the name of the river... Old Man River. Well, the Pincher Creek/Crow's Nest area say.

BC: You weren't in Turner Valley at all, you didn't work in Turner Valley at all?

HK: No. Only going there to get a comparison of what they had there and what we had in, further south.

BC: After leaving Canada, the two summers that you were there, what were the dates of those two summers?

HK: Must have been 1928 and '29. For awhile I worked summers in Canada and winters in Mexico and ??? for one winter period.

BC: Some of the, when you were working in Canada, were you working at all with people who stayed in Canada or came up and became part of the oil patch later on?

HK: No, the company set up offices in Pincher Creek and Len Farish was the ??? and was the manager of that operation and I only did geology, whereas he was drilling and other types of operation.

BC: You were a surface geologist, were you?

HK: That's right.

[00:07:14] BC: Then you went away and you went overseas for, you went overseas and did work in different parts of the world.

HK: Well, the depression came along 1933, '32 and '33 and I was discharged from Henry L. Doherty and Company, and I returned to Montana and I did, I went up and worked on Fort Peck mountainside, I think my title was a ??? river inspector. And I got up to Fort Peck, I went up there, I thought, building there at that time the largest earth dam in the world, and they had some high-powered men in charge, and I wanted to get up and rub shoulders with them. When I get up there, I found that the man in charge, past experience, in charge of foundation studies, his past experience had been in charge of driving piles?? to the Mississippi Levy, so without any promotion or authority, I became, I reported to a lieutenant and took charge temporarily of the work.

BC: That was quite a responsibility.

HK: Mmmm hmmm. Well to tell you how tough times were, we had something like 24 drilling rigs contracted to come in to drill shallow holes across the dam side. and the lieutenant in charge asked me how many geologists they would need. Well, I figure the holes were close together and one geologist

could watch three drilling rigs, and they were going to work 24 hours a day. So I said we will need 24 geologists just collecting samples and we will need at least two or more men in an office. That was on a Monday. The following Monday, 26 geologists showed up. and see how hard up we were for jobs...

BC: They'd come from all over the country as soon as there was an opportunity.

HK: Most of them came from Montana, Idaho, and I believe we had one or two from North Dakota and Utah. And they kept me, they were good smart young geologists, they kept me jumping to keep 24 hours ahead of them.

BC: And from there you went to Seaboard Oil. From there you went to Seaboard, did you?

HK: No...

BC: No, you went to the Turkish...?

HK: When I was working there I received a cable offering me a job in Turkey, and I don't know whether... we'll just leave it that I was offered a job in Turkey, which I accepted.

BC: And you were there for three years?

HK: Three years.

BC: And you were actually in the East for longer than that, weren't you?

HK: I did a reconnaissance type of survey work over, I'd say, 3/4 of Turkey, and some of it was real reconnaissance but I covered that area, we did make some recommendations for drilling or detailed work to follow after I left.

BC: Did you, from the work that you did, were there discoveries made? Were there fields found as a result of some of this reconnaissance?

HK: Not right... one of the geologists I took over, who was a graduate of the University of Montana, Ed Foley, he made the location of the first commercial oil found in Turkey.

BC: So that, was that while you were there?

HK: No I had left. I had taken a job to go to Afghanistan for Seaboard Oil Company. I went over on a 2 years contract but after we've been there about a year, oil had been discovered in the Persian Gulf with Bahrain and they weren't interested in any oil that might be found in Afghanistan. We did point out at certain areas that later became productive in oil and gas but by the Russians.

BC: [00:13:54] And then you came back, or you stayed... you went to Atlantic, you went to Atlantic Refinery after that.

HK: Yes, I returned from Afghanistan, I had developed, I was sick and I was in hospital care for about six months.

BC: Did you pick up a tropical disease or, in Afghanistan?

HK: No, I got the TB, I don't know whether I want to put it in or not. It came from... well, I'd say I don't want to put this on...

[00:14:47] BC: No. What was it like being in Afghanistan? What was it like being in Afghanistan? How did you travel?

HK: Well in Northern Afghanistan, I worked with, had a station wagon, they had a few trail-like roads between villages but I'd go to a certain point and leave my station wagon and take horse, pack horses and usually make a 30 mile sweep and come back to my station wagon, move up another 15 miles and take another pack train, and worked that way until December when the weather got too cold, returned to Kabul for Christmas and New Year's holiday, and after we were snowed in in Kabul for two weeks by heavy snow, 40 inches of snow. Then they had assignment to look at the deserts south, southern deserts of Afghanistan and the eastern and the western Afghanistan near the Iran border. There was one road along the northern edge of the desert, and I made one trip clear on the road and seeing how I could work it and come to the conclusion all I can do is get a camel pack train and rode up like I did with the horses and camels, I, a 21-day trip, and was unlikely area for any, finding any oil. After doing that. I moved to the southwestern corner and took another camel trip from the Helmand River to the very southwest corner which was the border with Turkmenistan??, Iran and Afghanistan and back to my, where I left my station wagon at an army camp. When we started on this trip we crossed the Helmand River, which is shallow, when we got back it had rained and the river was about a mile wide, and I asked the ??? how long it would be before it go down. They said well about six weeks to two months. Well, I wasn't going to sit there for six weeks or two months. And I had them, the other, had some 26 men, swimmers with horses. I can't swim. And I stayed on my camel and it floated across the river. And I finished that trip then I moved towards to Iraq?? which incidentally is in the news recently, and started working in the area with, borders on Iran, I could work it with cars but my car broke down and it knew we couldn't get a part back in less than 10 days. I sent one man, told him to go get a bus, go to Kabul some, clear across the country, get the part and come back and I again resorted to camel pack train, and it so happened we worked just 10 days and came back to our car right when the part got there.

BC: It was very rugged territory to work in.

HK: Well, the biggest thing was, on the trips with camels, the longest we ever went without seeing a water hole was two and a half days, but after the wash water had been carried in still tanks, it tasted awful flat.

BC: I'm sure it did. Because I know your time here is short, Mr. Kirk, could I move into when you came up to Canada? You came to Canada in 1949, I believe.

HK: Yes.

BC: Could you tell me about your time in Canada?

[00:21:03] Well, just for, after returning from Afghanistan and hospitalization, that's when I started working for Atlantic Refining Company. And I worked in Haiti, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, ??? out

there, Guatemala, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Cuba and Guatemala. From there. I was loaned out from Atlantic to Tidewater to manage the Saskatchewan operation.

BC: Could you explain what Tidewater was?

HK: Tidewater Oil Company was a, principal area of operation was in California, and the Vice President ??? put together the concession with the Saskatchewan government for nine thousand, nine million acres, and he asked three other companies to join in the operation with him. Ohio Oil, now Marathon, Atlantic Refining, now Atlantic Richfield and Columbia Carbon which was merged with City Service some years later. Tidewater was the operator and I was loaned to Tidewater by Atlantic at Tidewater's request. And we started operations in 1949.

BC: I'm just going to stop at a minute.

Tape 1 Side 2 – 29:00

BC: All right, we're all set again. And this was 1949m nine million acres, hat's a lot of land to try to work.

HK: Yes. We started with the seismic operations and ?? at that time was some question whether you could do seismic work through the winter. At one time we had the greatest number of seismic crews, there was eight working at one time and we started, I can't give the year, I think about this second year was we first started drilling. The first well was Duperow after a village in Western Saskatoon, I still don't know the distance, I think a hundred miles but I don't want to put it in.

BC: That's where your where your nine million acres was, it was down in the Saskatoon area was it?

HK: The nine million carried an extension from some 20 miles west of Shaunavon in to the Montana border and up to Swift Current, past the southern boundary somewhere south of Moose Jaw in a rather irregular line and extended to it's Moose Mountain Park. Is that right? Moose Mountain Park in the southeastern part, with the central portion extending north almost to Saskatoon, and west to, I can't think of the border for the western, Rosetown, I believe there's a town of Rosetown in there. My memory is a little old from the western boundary.

BC: Was this all Crown land or was it spotted with CPR?

HK: It was owned prior to before I came up.

BC: But was it was it owned by the Crown or was partly owned by CPR?

HK: The only concession we had was Crown acreage, there were some free land in it, but we didn't, we had to lease that separately.

BC: And that would be land... that was not CPR land.

HK: Yeah, there was quite a bit of free land in the southeast corner, but that's about the only part that was much free land.

BC: That's a lot of land to try to work. Did you have so many years in order to decide how much you wanted to keep?

HK: Well it didn't, that didn't come up during my time. We didn't, wasn't word about cutting it back at that time. We did make one large farmout to Imperial in the southwest corner, but I don't know, is that necessary to put in here.

BC: How successful were, was, how successful was your exploration program?

HK: Well, our first success was a little field east of Regina called the Wapella field, a very small field and it was unitized with Imperial and Sohio, a really major discovery was the what we called the Dollard field, which was west little south of Shaunavon.

BC: And do you remember what year that was?

HK: I better not take it ???

BC: It doesn't matter. I can easily look it up. I just wondered if you...

HK: I'm trying to say it was '53, but I think we'd better check that.

BC: Just to be sure. I will, I will look it up. And what other discoveries, were there any other discoveries?

HK: That was the major discovery and I can't even give the figures on the daily production that it ????. We had an encouraging, what we thought was going to be an encouraging discovery is before J?? we drilled one well that came in that said early expectations as high as 1500 barrel a day, but it played down to practically nothing.

BC: Did you get into any pipeline production during that time?

HK: In the Dollard field we put in a gathering line in the field and they had the Canadian Pacific build a spur line, railway to Dollard, and besides the gathering line, we had one short line to the terminal, railway terminal.

[00:07:49] BC: One of the things I wanted to ask you, to get nine million acres, that's an awful lot of acreage to have that concession on. What were the terms, do you know what the terms were that Tidewater had? It would be with the provincial government at that time. How did they manage to get such a big block?

HK: Well, they, let's go back and I'll give you a background before the ??? 1950 say, 1949 there had been very little drilling in the Saskatchewan Vulcans. I believe Imperial had drilled about maybe six wells and there may have been three other wells but they, drilling for the whole province was practically nil, and the new, what was the name of that government at that time?

BC: The CCF government.

HK: The CCF government were trying to get exploration done and they made available areas, and besides Tidewater it was Sohio??, Imperial and there was a Calgary firm, Ray, they some Weyburn field and... we just ended up getting several companies that obtained a large acreage.

BC: What concessions did the government give you to encourage you to go in there?

HK: Well, that all happened before I come on the picture. But I think it was, a big acreage and I believe there was a royalty to the government of fifty percent. But again, you should check my ????. I'm pretty sure it was a 50-50 deal once you got oil and got your expenses out.

BC: There were some people that worked with you at that time, some people, Mr. R.L. Milner. Do you remember Mr. Milner?

HK: R.L. Mil... Mitchell?

BC: No, I'll write it for you.

HK: Bob Milner?

BC: That's it.

HK: I hired him. He was a chief geologist. Brilliant man with a Ph.D. from McGill and an alcoholic.

BC: How sad. Was, he worked for you?

HK: He and I never had any trouble. I left, man had replaced me, really set this man off to drinking. He drank before but he was sober when I wanted him. Good man.

BC: Did he, and he was with you all the time you were in Saskatchewan.

HK: Yes. Well, no Milner has been, had background in, he'd worked with the Tropical Oil Company, a Jersey subsidiary in Colombia and other Latin American countries.

BC: Who replaced you when you left Tidewater, who came in to Tidewater when you went back?

HK: Well Claude Leach was a ??? assistant manager and he was at Tidewater and then...

BC: I have another name here. Bob Bishop.

HK: Bob Bishop was with Sohio??? a good man, good geologist. I've have lost contact with him the last year or two, last three or four years. Good friend of mine.

BC: He was with you all the time too when you were...

HK: Well he wasn't working with me. Sohio was...

BC: In competition to you.

HK: A competitor.

BC: Right.

HK: And other good man Al Graves of Mobil Oil, Harold Stoneman of Imperial.

[00:14:08] BC: Can you remember any stories about any of these people, any anecdotes of things that happened on the oil patch? You mentioned for instance that Mr. Milner was brilliant. Was there something that Mr. Milner did that you can remember because of his brilliance? In particular.

HK: No, I can't because we had an exceptionally fine group of geologists and geophysicists, although at the time it was always thought they couldn't work together, in our setup, why, Herb Dodson teamed up with Bob Milner, and Morgason with another geologist. No, one thing that might be of interest to you was that in our staff, and I hired them, they were all Canadians except one American geologist, he had come out of... most of them, well we got a couple, a few from University of Saskatoon, but most of them come from Eastern schools, Western Reserve?? I believe, one or two from Toronto and McGill, and one school in Manitoba near the Saskatchewan border. I can't remember...

BC: Was it a mining school?

HK: No, it was just a general, they did give courses in geology. They didn't have the best foundation. And these young geologists we used to hire would come here and we'd give them, all men were getting the six-week course in sedimentation. Then we'd have samples of wells we'd drilled and we'd given the whole set of samples and they'd had to do that one well before we'd put them out. One of the men you've heard of I'm sure recently is Jim McDonald who is heading up the ABG Show, when he came out he wrote one of the jobs, it was in the fall and we didn't have many wells drilling. They said we couldn't give him a job as a geologist, but if he wanted to come out as a draftsman, why in the Spring, I'd give him a job as a geologist. Well, he showed right up. He's left-handed and he was such a sorry dress man, I pretty near not give him a job ???

BC: But I'm sure you're glad you did.

HK: Then I later... he wanted ??? work and I had, I was able to have Atlantic Refining give him a job and they sent him to Venezuela and then brought him back to the Dallas office where he was, he was really learning office management. But he resigned when Atlantic sold their interest in Saskatchewan, because the Saskatchewan government, Saskatchewan wanted all of our Canadian boys with it. And Jim was insulted he was traded off and quit. And he's done very well with Dome. He met me at the plane the other night.

C: Were there many that did the same thing, were there many of them that felt insulted, were there many others that felt insulted?

HK: Many others that...

BC: That felt insulted, at being traded.

HK: No, I think they were probably, but I tried to tell Jim to stay on with Atlantic Richfield, he had quite high seniority, 15 years [pause in tape] He had always had an idea he was going to go on a consultant on his own, and he may yet. He's had experience from the Beaufort Sea and Mackenzie River Delta area. I don't think he worked in Alaska. ??? was a good man to know, he was about as youthful a looking man when he showed up, just rosy cheeks and he still look as old as he is.

BC: I have a couple of other names here. Mr. R.C. Farley.

RESTRICTED CONTENT NOT TRANSCRIBED

[00:24:16] BC: What about this gentleman, Charlie Shock? Did you work with him at all?

HK: No... Sharp?

BC: Maybe it's not spelled too clearly here. Charlie Shock.

HK: No, no, not unless it's after I left.

BC: Mmmm hmmm. What happened to the acreage that you had to give back at the end of a certain amount of time? Were you still there? Or did they still have the 9 million?

RESTRICTED CONTENT NOT TRANSCRIBED

BC: You can't remember that gentleman at all, Charlie Shock. You don't remember that name at all.

Tape 2 Side 1 – 21:00

BC: You were in Canada at a very special time. Have you any summing up, any recollections of your time here that you'd like to put down.

HK: Well. I'm primarily an exploration geologist, and one thing it made... Succession or seismic work, a great portion of the area is covered by glacial till in those areas that did not give the best of results, in the, there will be more oil found in Saskatchewan, but it will, a large part of it will have to be by I will have to be by well CAT drilling, and I believe there should be more oil found in the southern border of Saskatchewan, north of where they're getting ??? in Montana and North Dakota. And drilling south of the Shaunavon area towards down towards the Montana border have good oil shows. But we couldn't ever find anything of commercial nature to warrant further work.

BC: Did you feel your time in Saskatchewan was successful, was Tidewater successful?

HK: Well, yes they, oil, I don't know what year but they were in in the black for few years right after starting in shortly after I left. They were producing oil within two or three years, they had wiped out their past expenditures. I can't give you the exact figure because I wasn't, I was in another country working by that time.

BC: So your exploration work was very worthwhile, then.

HK: Yes it was, it wasn't, we didn't have the big success of a Leduc or a Redwater field. But we didn't go in the red all the way which some company did.

BC: Why did you leave? Why did you leave Tidewater?

HK: I had, I'd been farmed out for five years, and I thought I'd better get back to working for my own company before they bypassed me in the, not being on their active payroll.

BC: Did you ever come back again to work in Canada?

HK: To work in Canada? No. From, when I returned with, to Atlantic I first made a trip to Turkey relative to a joint operation with Seaboard, Tidewater and Atlantic. But again Tidewater was going to be the operator and wanted me for the job and I turned it down. I'm sure I could have found them some oil in Turkey. And they came back from Turkey and I was asked to go to Guatemala and to lay out concessions for three companies: Atlantic Richfield, Tidewater and Sohio, and Atlantic with the operator.

BC: Are you still a consultant?

HK: Well when people ask me what I want to know about certain countries, but they're not interested in, they're mostly looking for free information. So it's consultant without pay.

BC: You're not working actively as a consultant.

HK: No.

BC: No, you've been retired. You worked with Richfield till retirement age, did you?

HK: After I left Atlantic, I worked for three years with John Meacham, my independent operator in Houston on his ???work that entailed field work in Jordan, trips to, more of a scouting nature to the Persian Gulf countries and one trip to South Africa and in Mozambique.

BC: What brought you back up to Calgary? What brought you back here to Calgary this week?

HK: For about several years, I've been receiving invitations from the Canadian Petroleum Association to attend their annual meeting and I always planned to come some time. But this past year in mid-December I developed a cataract in my right eye and it will be some two years before it's in an operative stage. So I thought if I was going to come back to one meeting I ought to come back when I could see, even if I couldn't hear. And you can point out somewhere, I've been deaf since my days in the U.S. Navy.

BC: You worked as a geologist all those years and you were deaf as a result of your War activities? You became deaf during the war?

HK: Right, but I got a medical discharge from the Navy on account of deafness.

BC: Was this the First World War?

HK: First World War.

BC: So you've conducted [pause in tape] ??? while you were deaf.

HK: I've been wearing a hearing aid for 62 years. It's the, deafness has become progressively worse in the past three years. Five years ago, I could hear well on the telephone. Just an occasional voice I can hear now.

BC: So you overcame great difficulties in going out into the field, you overcame a lot of health problems, didn't you?

HK: Well, yes, anybody that's working in foreign countries is exposed to malaria, maybe a dysentery and...

BC: I want to thank you very much for taking the time to talk with you today.

HK: I would like to really proof what we've said, I don't want to seem to be bragging anywhere...

BC: You weren't bragging at all, it was most interesting, and my thanks to you for taking the time. Thank you.

[00:10:26] [Interview continues]

BC: Mr. Kirk, there are some names of people that you were associated with while you were in Saskatchewan, one is Charlie Hay, could you talk about him.

HK: Charlie Hay, when I first went to Regina, he was then a manager or president of the Highway Refining Company, that had a refinery in Saskatoon and some gas stations in Saskatchewan. We became close friends and...

BC: Go on, I'm just going to get this.

HK: And we worked together in forming the, in helped forming the Saskatchewan division of the Canadian Petroleum Association. And it was largely his prestigious position, I guess would be the word, that led to the success of forming that organization. In that same tone, I would have to mention Dave Thurman, the lawyer who also worked in writing the charter for the Saskatchewan division. And one outstanding man I admired, and you'll have to get his initials, is Mr. Brocklebank, Minister of Natural Resources, with whom I had many contacts in connection with their business of the company. I found him to be a fair and just man to do business with. There are many other fine people I met in Regina but they're too numerous to mention all of them here.

BC: Mr. Brocklebank, as the Minister, what types of things did he do to make it easier, make your life easier. Can you think of an incident?

HK: Well, there's so many different ??? down the small... I made suggestions to Mr. Brocklebank on two occasions which he adopted which I thought was to the benefit of both the government and the oil companies.

BC: Can you recall those?

HK: In one instance, they were writing a new petroleum law in regulations, the Department staff had assembled a thick draft of the proposed regulations which the Minister, Minister Brocklebank, called the managers of the oil company and asked us to approve them. It was such a monumental task to go through the amount of data they had, that I was not qualified to approve, and I doubted whether our other members of the Association were. And I says, I think there must be some experts in the country on this subject, and it would be to our interest and the government's interest that we get such a man to write the petroleum law. First Mr. Brocklebank refused my request, and later after a recess for lunch, he came back and said he would approve such an expert coming if the companies would pay his expense and that his name would first be submitted to him for approval. Well, I and others phoned to various home offices and the name of Robert Hardwick of Fort Worth, Texas was on everybody's lips, and these, our local Saskatchewan division's Association instructed Dave Thurman to contact Mr. Hardwick and arrange for hiring. We first submitted his name to Mr. Brocklebank who approved. Mr. Hardwick came up and with, in the short meeting with Mr. Brocklebank and a member of the staff, Dave Thurman, Charlie Hay and myself, Mr. Hardwick talked for about an hour and Mr. Brocklebank at the end of it says, you can write our law. I think that was one instance of the cooperation and there's another one. Gosh, my memory slipped on the other one

BC: Was it to do with the law also?

HK: Yeah. He was a good curler. I curled against him.

BC: Did you?

HK: I can think of the other for the life of me, let's just put down that one instance.

BC: That's just fine. Thanks ever so much. That's grand.

End of interview