

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Percy Powers

INTERVIEWER: Jean McLaws

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Side 1 only – 30:00

JM: My name is Jean McLaws and I'm here to interview Mr. Percy Powers. The Powers' live at 3991 Bellnoire Place, Victoria. Where did you first meet Aubrey Kerr?

PP: I think it was when I was with Eddie Laborde and he and Wilder Ripley had a place in the Petroleum Building. Eddie were just starting out his promotions at that point and Wilder had been in for a bit, Wilder I think was partnering with Max Bell of Calvan and there was other characters came in and out the door. I think that was the first time and then later it was with, when I was with Jack Webb at Alminex. And of course, Aubrey and Jack had known each other from a way back, sort of thing.

JM: These are saying Jack had left Canadian Oils...

PP: Yeah, Jack had left Canadian Oils to start up Alminex and Alminex was a subsidiary of Falconbridge Nickel and McIntyre Porcupine and it was a result of a promotion or entrepreneurial effort of a Dr. Fred Burton of Toronto and Bobby Brown of Home, and Home got Falconbridge and a group of little mining companies to pay part of Home's exploration budget and Kern County Land Company was also involved at the same time and they ultimately just...

[tape cuts]

Carstairs Gas Field, they were involved in the Swan Hills, Virginia Hills, Armada ????. So but this time there's a fair amount of assets had developed in Alminex's name, so the Toronto mining interests decided to pull it off and make it an oil company of their own and they got Jack Webb to head the operations in Calgary and that's how that got started. While he was setting Alminex up, I was free at the time, so I went with Jack and Alminex, and then he had a, he also got a geologist by the name of John Steven who I believe is still involved in the oil industry. But Alminex ... well I left Alminex after a while to go on an adventure of my own. So my association with all those people came to a close about that time.

JM: I was wondering, if you can just hold that thought I was wondering if you could say where you where you grew up and where you and where your parents were from, were they from...?

PP: I grew up in Edmonton. My father was still on the first telephones in the city of Edmonton in 1905 or something like that, but I just grew up in...

JM: Right, so I just wanted to...

PP: In Depression Edmonton.

JM: Right, I just wanted to fill that in. And also, maybe briefly that, like how you were in the Navy and then took your University and...

PP: Well, no, I got my university in '40 and there was nothing to do in those days except to join the Forces. So I joined the Navy because I didn't like a ??? uniform the blue uniform look pretty good. So that's why, that's why I joined. So I got overseas for a little while, but mostly I was in administrative work in the Navy.

JM: And then when you came back you...

PP: I came back and I went to work for the City of Edmonton Engineering Department and then oil came in Leduc and I figured I better get into the business because I wasn't going to get anywhere working for the City.

JM: But what were you around when the first well was discovered?

PP: Yes, I remember...

JM: Any stories of that?

PP: I remember... no, other than the pictures in the paper and a guy, Hewittson ?? I believe was President of Imperial at that time. It was well covered by The Edmonton papers and we were all, I think excited about it because we knew ??? east of Edmonton they'd been trying to drill for oil, company ultimately succeeded there by name of Chamberlain, but it wasn't prime oil country. No...

JM: This was before the discovery, you're talking about?

PP: Yeah. I think they were drilling east of Edmonton. Well, of course we knew about the Viking gas. That's where Jack Webb became involved in the oil business because he was with Imperial for that, and I guess he was also involved in the Leduc discovery because I remember him saying that that was entire... originally intended to be a gas effort and they were surprised when they got oil instead of gas, because gas was merchantable in that area that time.

JM: I think they had been looking more Cretaceous than Devonian.

PP: Yeah, they were, right. Yeah.

JM: So then you were telling me that you... oh, Cantex. When did you first...

PP: Well, yeah, that was that was around, that was in 1947 sometime, I think in the spring of '47. I came down to Calgary to work for Dick Harris as accountant and Cantex Drilling...

JM: And did you have anything that you could say about the Dick Harris at all? Like, did you...

PP: Well, Dick was a tough son of a bitch, but he was a very kindly guy inside the rough exterior. He was a driver, he was honest, he worked harder than anybody. But a real Texas driller of the old school.

JM: Were you saying he was a contemporary of Ralph Will or?

PP: Well, Ralph Will was converting Turner Valley steam rigs into internal combustion rigs about that time. When the drilling started to pick up and, outside of the Turner Valley orbit, but there was a number of rigs I seem to recall, or sitting around, and Ralph Will took a number of them and put them back into use, he still used them, some of them as steam rigs and converted some to internal combustion. Harris had picked up, I believe a steam rig from Turner Valley and used it as such and then converted to internal combustion. And they had brought Harris and Harry Bass who was, which was really Cantex Drilling, brought up a rig called a Houston and another one called a Wilson. These are named after the draw works. And another little corn popper that they tried to put together for drilling in southeastern Alberta. But it was the Wilson rig, the Houston rig and the steam rig that were the core of Cantex's original operations and the steam rig was ultimately abandoned for a new contemporary style of drilling rig. And then it just continued to grow from there actually.

JM: Cantex, where did all the money come from for this.

PP: Well Harry Bass sent this equipment up to Western Canada and got Dick Harris to run it for him and Dick Harris made money on most of the things and that's where all the money came from.

JM: Right, and so I know one of the questions he was asking and wanted to know, when did Dick Harris come to Canada? So we think that...

PP: I think it was somewhere in '45 because they hadn't been in business too long when they discovered that they needed an accountant to try and keep things together.

JM: You were, you were talking something a Lee C. Moore mast.

PP: Oh, yeah, the Houston rig had a Lee C. Moore mast that had the serial number of one, and it was made of tubular steel, not angular, the standard material for mast, but the Lee C. Moore mast apparently was the prototype of what became the series of, well Lee C. Moore's business was based I gather on that original mast.

JM: You know, we did cover the ??? doing internal combustion, and... getting back to Cantex office, i that still in the original, we visited the Cantex operation in Leduc...

PP: Yeah, that was the yard at Leduc, yeah.

JM: And it was right by the elevators, is that the original yard?

PP: Well, yeah, that was the only yard that I knew while I was with Cantex. He had to have some place for old equipment and drill pipe and all the rest of it and they found this place and put up, I guess it was a Butler Building type of thing, and that was the Cantex yard. Prior to that, they had been depositing stuff over drill sites all over the province and they had bring everything together. That's where they did it.

[00:12:16] JM: Aubrey was wondering if you would remember any of the contract prices at all in those days, anything of interest there?

PP: Not in particular. My recollection of prices comes later when I was hiring drilling rigs. And I remember we got Jimmy Drumheller to do about five or six wells for us out in the Coronation area at, I think it was around three dollars a foot. And that would have been in the early 50s sometime and that doesn't compare with what they pay now.

JM: I know. What exactly was your job again? I just, think you might have already said it, but I don't want to lose it.

PP: In Cantex?

JM Yes.

PP: I was the accountant. All Dick had, he ran all of the engineering, all the drilling and he had a couple gals in the office for doing the paperwork, but he had to have somebody who understood a little bit, I learned a little bit about drilling as a result of that. But somebody had to sit on top of the financial stuff.

JM: He mentioned it a couple, two names here that I wondered... do you know the name Reg Nelson?

PP: No.

JM: Or Harry Sledge?

PP: Harry Sledge, yes. It was a very sad case, Harry, Dick had had some heart problems because of overwork and by that time, I think they had five or six rigs going and Dick was always complaining about the poor quality of Canadian drillers. They didn't work as hard or as long as the Texas people did. And between he and Harry Bass, they found Harry Sledge in Texas in a place and brought them up to be drilling superintendent, so that Harris could have a little more time for rest because really he was in pretty poor shape. So Harry Sledge did the very same thing as Dick Harris did, but except one day Harry fell asleep while he was driving down the road and that was the end of it. It was up near Devon...

JM: Harry Sledge, you mean?

PP: Yeah.

JM: Is that right? Where did that happen?

PP: Well it was on the road up near Devon someplace, he was going from one rig to another and that was it.

JM: Gee, mmm hmm. In Aubrey's reviews of companies, he noticed your name was associated with Canadian Homestead.

PP: Yeah that was with Laborde and Jones.

JM: Have you any comments on that at all?

PP: Well, most of their success goes back to Warren Hunt which I'm sure Aubrey is familiar with, because Warren discovered Armina, and that was a Homestead discovery. Then we made a discovery out at Coronation, which is where we got Bawden involved in one of his earlier drilling, matter of fact, we gave Peter Bawden his first drilling contract, and we got him involved in drilling out there and I also mentioned that one with Jimmy Drumheller. But of course...

JM: What were you saying about Jimmy Drumheller?

PP: Oh, drilling price, because I had him till about five or six wells for us out there at his ridiculous price. But Coronation didn't pan out, the zone was very difficult to produce and it went to gas and it kind of went to sleep for a number of years and ultimately, when was it... a number of years later some of the more, some of the later developers got in there and made something out of it. But I think there was, about the only things that, while I was with Homestead that they had accomplished.

JM: Would you know of these, might be getting off the beaten track a bit, but there are some other people living out here, Reg Cornwall? Do you know him ???

PP: No.

JM: Peter White?

PP: No.

JM: Dr. Linton?

PP: No.

JM: Yeah, right, okay.

PP: Kind of living in an isolated world I guess.

JM: There's quite a list of people that live in Victoria.

PP: Yah, I think there probably would be, yeah.

JM: Now, I think there are some things you had mentioned to me before that, see if I can pick it up. You said that one of your first indications of how big it might be at Leduc was National Supply building and...

PP: Oh, yeah, they bought some land on Calgary Trail and built a \$20,000 warehouse and that was unbelievable in Edmonton in those days.

JM: 20,000?

PP: \$20,000 yeah.

JM: Can you imagine. What year would that be?

PP: Well, that would have been 1945-46.

JM: Before the discovery?

PP: No, it was after the discovery.

JM: '47 was...

PP: '47, yeah.

JM: Right. And had we talked about Hoddy?? Meech and Eric Harvie, and that connection, and George Crawford?

PP: Okay. It was Hoddy that got me to go to Calgary in the first place and he, at that point he was manager of Manager's Limited which was an operating facility for Eric Harvie or I guess his firm, Harvie Arnold and Crawford, but the interesting part is that George Crawford and I were together in the Navy over it at Greenock in Scotland and George was the first lieutenant of the naval establishment there and I was the Captain's secretary. George had been ??? and just prior to VE and he wanted to get back because he had a chance to article with a Calgary lawyer by the name of Harvie.

JM: Is that Eric Harvie?

PP: Yeah, that's Eric Harvie. I think Eric Harvie and Arnold were partners at that time when they were, and they had a, I think at that time they had acquired most of that land, picture that they ultimately developed. So I was, maybe with a little bit of help from the Principal Naval Secretary in London, we got George back to Canada early in the game and he became an article student for Arnold and Crawford and ultimately a partner. And in the process, I guess maybe they offered him a small interest in this land picture, which is what made...

JM: Could you ??? that?

PP: Well, my knowledge there is hearsay actually, excepting I believe he had around a 3% interest in in some part of the land spread.

JM: And this was the Redwater...

PP: This involved Redwater and Leduc and all that land spread that ultimately became Western Leaseholds. When that developed then they had to have somebody to run this side of the business, so they got Hoddy Meech who had worked in the Vermilion area with DeCoak?? and I guess Harvie was involved slightly in that Vermilion land play too. So Harvey knew about Meech and Meech had a good working knowledge of oilfield practices. So that's how he got involved. And then when he heard about somebody in Cantex, wanting somebody in Cantex, then he got a hold of me that's how I got to Calgary.

JM: Where did Hoddy Meech come from?

PP: He's from Lethbridge?

JM: Oh, Lethbridge originally. Let's see... do you want to stop that for a minute?

PP: Okay. [tape shuts off]

[00:22:00] PP: There's one story, my recollection is not probably not too precise. But I think the first attempt to unionize a drilling rig was with the Dakar's and Leduc, and I don't remember whether it was the steam or the steam rig updatater or what it was, but Dick was always having problems keeping staff because...

JM: This was Dick Harris?

PP: Dick Harris, because he was a real hard driver and there was a guy by the name of Marsh, I believe it was who appeared on the scene and tried to organize a Cantex crew because I guess they were ripe for this sort of a situation, and they actually got to the point where the crew walked off the floor on one occasion.

JM: Do you remember when that was?

PP: No, I can't, my memory is very vague on this, but I think the guys name was Marsh, I don't know what he had to do with Cantex or their rig crew. Yeah, and he apparently upset some apple carts for a little while after then disappeared from the scene. I don't know very much about it. But I believe it was the first attempt to unionize a drilling crew or drilling company in western Canada.

JM: That's interesting. Did the unions eventually, ever get in? They never got into drilling...

PP: No it doesn't fit. It really doesn't fit.

JM: No. Yeah, that's interesting.

PP: ??? recollection but I can't remember the years, but I seem to associate it with the steam rig and in that case it must have been in the very early 50s.

JM: Have you any feelings or thoughts on the industry, like the excitement at the time or...

PP: I don't think you were aware of the excitement at the time, it was ... everything was interesting because you're always learning. The things that excited me was maybe the discovery of gas down at Pincher Creek, I couldn't understand why they'd spend a million dollars to drill a gas well until I realized that they had found about 12 million dollars worth of gas, and then that seemed to justify spending a million dollars on a well. Those are the sort of things that start to intrigue me about the oil business.

JM: Yeah. ??? the money...

[00:25:06] PP: The steam rig I gathered was more expensive to operate than the ones with internal combustion engines and therefore became difficult to bid using the steam rig because, one, breakdowns were more frequent and you can couldn't get as competitive a bid quite often with the rig, and at the same time that Harris converted the steam rig to internal combustion, Ralph Will with Hightower was doing the same thing because he had a number of steam rigs and he was gradually converting them to

internal combustion, but they were just obsolete at that point. There was, the modern equipment was too good for them. They just couldn't stay in business.

JM: Did you ever have anything to do with the service companies at all?

PP: No, no. No other than to phone them up and complain about the prices.

JM: Do you remember the prices?

PP: No, I don't really, I know that... Dick had a good point on discounts because a big thing in those days was a 2% cash discount if you paid the 20th of the month following, and cash was a little difficult when you were trying to build up the line of equipment and you didn't always make money on every well, you lost occasionally so that sometimes the cash flow was little tight. So sometimes you missed the discounts and I remember arguing with Dick once that we were missing discounts and he said, well it's cheaper to miss the discount than to hire somebody to make sure you got them all, and he was right.

I'll tell you another one about Dick, he always had some Texas boots under his desk and he said, you know, whenever I feel downhearted about things, I just put my boots on and I feel like top line again. And he, quite often he'd be wandering around with his boots on because you knew he wasn't feeling very well if he did that.

My wife's name was Blanche Lorrimer, we met in high school in Edmonton. When we moved to Calgary, we bought an engineered home for \$6,000, down in lower Sunalta. That was about the... housing was at a premium in Calgary in those days. So we thought were pretty lucky. But I also bought a lot at about the same time and in order to build a house on the lot, I had to sell the engineered home. So we rented an apartment on 26th Avenue that Harry Bass Jr. had been renting but he was going back to Dallas and the building was owned by Campbell McLauren, Judge McLauren. We lived there for a few months while we built the house in lower Elboya and then settled there for the rest of our term in Calgary.

JM: Oh, that's interesting.

End of Interview

