

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Wes Rabey - CSEG Presidency

INTERVIEWER: David Finch

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DF: Today is the 8th day of August in the year 2000 and we are with Mr. Wes Rabey at the offices of the Canadian Society of Exploration Geophysicists in Calgary. My name is David Finch. The purpose of this interview is to specifically talk to you about your association with the CSEG and particularly your year as president, but, you were here when the CSEG was founded. Do you remember that founding meeting and the events around it?

WR: Yes, I can remember that. It was a cold fall evening that we went down to the Palliser Hotel and it was a big discussion of whether we should do this or not because we were sort of a segment of the SEG but here we are now, setting ourselves up as a separate society, under the arm of the SEG, but where we have our own executive and do our own thing. And so we had a lot of pros and cons and a lot of the U.S. boys that were up there said, no, they didn't think this was a good idea. But the Canadian boys that were there said, we think we want to do our own thing here and we did do it then, that was the inaugural meeting. I can remember after the meeting there was a lot of discussion, there was a lot of pros and cons about whether we should have done it or not. But it turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened for us here in the geophysical industry. And of course, the geophysical industry is so strong in Canada and because we are all collected here in one centre pretty well, Calgary and maybe to a certain extent, Edmonton, but having us all in one close knit community, we are able to exchange ideas and do things that isn't that possible in the U.S. where they have different regional areas in the cities.

DF: What role has the CSEG played in industry over the years?

WR: In the early days it was just a copy of the SEG, having lunch hour seminars and then you would have some papers. People would contribute papers for the annual meetings that they would have and their publications. So it was just really a copy of what was going on in the SEG but with a Canadian flavour. But it gave a lot of chaps the opportunity to express themselves that might not have been able to put their ideas and their theories into print as easily as it was doing it through the Canadian side here. We made a lot of contributions to the SEG doing that as well. I think one of the other big things was that it gave us a chance to be a society where we also got a good social mix. As the CSEG, of course you know, we had the golf tournament, the Doodlebug Golf Tournament, so just a lot of social aspects as well as the technical and the business part of it. So I think that was a unifying force here in the community to bring all the geophysicists together in a social manner as well as being in a technical manner. In many cases, you're competitors, because you work for different companies, so you're not going to be talking to this guy

over here but when we were doing it as a social thing that was fine. So we did cement relationships there so I think it was very good.

Video Tape #04:04:35.23

#035 DF: You were President in 1973, but obviously you don't just become President overnight, how did you come to be on the executive.

WR: I was always active in the geophysical scene here because I'm fairly opinionated I think and I like to express my opinions if I think they're worthwhile putting forth. So I think it's just a case of you get to know a lot of people and they selected me one year to put my name up as President and I said sure, I'd like to do that. So that's how I got up to be President of the Society. I think they do a little different format now, but in those days you were selected the year before you sort of took a learning experience from the chap who was President and the next year you stepped up to be President. So I got selected as a Vice-President and then. . . . And I found that very, very interesting because we were very interesting times in '73. As you will probably recall that was when Peter Lougheed decided to change the take that the provincial government got in royalties, and just unilaterally changed the royalty rates and imposed them on the industry. I took great exception to that, I felt that there should have been some dialogue back and forth between industry and the government. I don't like unilateral impositions of dictates like that being done but of course, that's the way it was done.

DF: That's an important point because often times we in the west, say that Ottawa does that to us but here's a situation where our own Alberta government did it to us.

WR: That's right.

DF: But yet people don't remember that anymore and Lougheed is a big hero. What did you do in that situation?

WR: We lobbied to say that this wasn't a fair deal to do. We kind of took exception to. . . I took exception, put it that way and so I thought, what we'll have to do here is to form a committee. And so I formed the first Government Affairs Committee, under my leadership. I had a chap by the name of Jack Pullen who headed up that committee. So between he and I we formulated some letters that we forwarded to the government. So all these things had their impact, of course, it didn't change anything but it certainly showed them that here's a technical society objecting to what you're doing on a unilateral basis. Which is hard for an oil company to do, but we as a group could do that because it was affecting our jobs. What we had seen through the years, as the industry moved up and down, when you're on the up cycle and everything is going, you hired people right, left and centre and then when you got into a down cycle, these people were being let go. So good technical people were leaving the industry and going off to other industries and didn't bother coming back to the geophysical industry. So here we are, every time we had another boom we had to hire a bunch more green people and train them and we lost a lot of good valuable information with the people that had left before. So this is why, I felt that we needed to have a Government Affairs Committee, to try and put forth the views of the majority of the society members. It wouldn't be all of them, you can be sure of that, because they're a bunch of individuals in there, like myself. Then what we did there, another thing was to apply for geophysical incentives, in that year that I was there. They had given incentives to the drilling companies, if they drilled certain wells then the government would pay you a certain portion of the cost to encourage more drilling.

Because everything was in a pretty slack mode there, when the price of oil was low, but once the OPEC cut into the act, well then the price went up but part of that, the industry was in a slump. So I said to Jack, if they can give that to the drilling industry, we can certainly apply for that for the geophysical industry. And we went after Michael Day and he listened to us very carefully and finally agreed that, yes, he would do that. So under my term as President we inaugurated that and kept it going for later Presidents after that time. So that was the start of the Government Affairs Committee. I tried to install a theme idea so that each President coming in could pick a theme so that all of the various committees then, could focus on that theme and be more active in their own committee because they've got a theme to follow. I felt that was a unifying thing because some of the committees were very active one year and then not so active the next year. But if we have a theme to follow then they can all focus on that theme and all be busy and keep themselves moving ahead in that particular committee. So I thought that was a useful addition to the Presidency there. I enjoyed my year as President and as you can see by my write up there, I was pretty vehement against the government intervention and how it was sort of an imposition on our rights, as even individual's, to make an imposition like that. But I think it made them stop and think that they've got to be a little more considerate when they do those things.

Video Tape #04:10.50:11

#092 DF: Membership grew to 1,166 members during your year and you started the first annual convention. Can you tell us the reason for that convention?

WR: We kind of felt that we wanted to do something that we could get, again, all the industry, the service companies as well as all the oil companies all involved. The CSPG had had their little conventions and they had seemed to have a unifying effect on the group and so I suggested that we should maybe try and do the same sort of thing. So I think we formed a committee, I've forgotten now, the exact details on that. But I know this was to parallel what the CSPG were doing. And later on we actually joined with the CSPG, so we had a joint CSPG, CSEG convention at certain times. So it just made the two disciplines work together on that. So these were all unifying things again, for the geophysicists. I've always been the old geophysical supporter in trying to make things a little better and still do today. If anybody says, hey, what do you think of this, I'll always try to give them some information or input if I have any to do it. One of the things that I got involved with as you'll probably remember, and that was later in my career, was to set up a Chair in geophysics at the University of Calgary. That was an outcome of my meetings with a lot of the senior people in the industry.

DF: That was in 1979 right?

WR: I think it was, yes.

DF: Can you tell us why you thought that was important and how you went about doing the fund-raising?

WR: We felt that the University of Calgary was. . . being close to the headquarters of all the oil companies, that we wanted to make them the predominant geophysical centre. Edmonton were vying for that position as well. They felt that because they were the senior university that they should be the senior providers of geophysicists. But talking with people in the industry, senior members of oil companies and that. . . and one of the key guys behind it was Jack Gallagher of Dome. Jack and I talked about this several times

and he said, Wes, why don't you start up a Chair for Geophysics and that will give you a stature that will be better than just trying to fund it with funds to keep it going. So that's what I did. So I went out and got a group of guys together and we went out and canvassed the oil companies and individuals and then we had to search for the Chairman for the Chair. So it was very worthwhile I thought, that it gave Calgary the stature of the senior university in geophysics and that was our objective to do that.

DF: Now, the fund raising establishes a Chair, that money goes into a trust fund or something?

WR: Yes, it went into a trust fund to pay for the annual costs of the Chairperson that we selected. We've had 2 or 3 in the meantime I think, since then.

Video Tape #04:14.40:29

#130 DF: In 1976 you were Government Relations Committee Chairman for the CSEG, can you tell us why you wanted that position and what you did there?

WR: That was when we got into a controversy with. . . I'm trying to think when that was. That again, was to do with controversy with the governments. I think that's when the federal government got involved with. . . what do they call it, that was the program where they were trying to keep the American oil companies out of Canada. And insisting that any lands or any work that was done on federal lands, had to be a certain percentage of Canadian content. So it discriminated against the U.S. oil companies as I recall. So I said, I'll be glad to take the Government Affairs Committee. . . Chairmanship of that and try to generate some ideas and papers and presentation to various government committees to do that.

DF: Obviously you can always go and represent yourself to the government and say we don't like what you're doing but how do you convince them to do it differently.

WR: Well, I think it's just to show them that they're affecting a lot of people in this industry. As I mentioned before, we've had a lot of ups and downs and when you have these downs, people leave the industry in droves and don't come back or the majority don't come back. So when you do have an upswing in the industry you've got to start training people all over and you can't do that as an efficient way of running your geophysical programs that you're trying to do. You've got to keep a steady pace going and a gradual growth, or even if you keep it level, that's one thing. But to have violent upswings and down swings, it's very unsettling to the whole industry.

DF: And how can government help flatten that out?

WR: Because what they were doing, in this situation, was dictating that the American oil companies couldn't participate in this. So all of a sudden you're ruling out that. . . most of the money that was coming in was coming from the U.S., so you're going to dry up the funds that were coming in to Canada to do the exploration. And that's the risky part. So it was a protest, more than anything else, I guess you could say, it wasn't that we could do a lot about it but we wanted to express our opinions.

DF: You did more than express your opinions, you asked them to put in seismic incentives, that was one way, but something you already mentioned before, the oil companies themselves would quit doing seismic when they had too many drilling prospects on their hands. So wasn't it a balancing act, I mean, your own companies were cutting back on seismic because they didn't think they needed to do anymore until they did the production but then you would point at the government and say, we need your help. It's

always industry and government always fighting over these things, aren't they?

WR: These were interesting times because what we were trying to do there was try to encourage more geophysical exploration. If we get these incentives, that would give us the funding which otherwise the company couldn't afford to do it. So it was going to cost them a little less money than they could afford, maybe, to do these surveys. It turned out that there were a lot of participation surveys done from that, which gave a lot of information that was available to a lot of companies, over a wide spread area of Alberta. So it was quite beneficial. And it certainly buoyed up the industry for several years there when that was in force.

DF: What other things did you do with the CSEG?

WR: I think I was . . . on the SEG side, they asked me to stand for a position there. I was Secretary-Treasurer of the SEG, I've forgotten the exact year now, so I have to find that. Then, after I had been the Secretary-Treasurer, then they asked me to run for President of the SEG, which I did one year but I didn't make it. I was not well enough known in the U.S. to make that but that was quite an honour for me to be selected as a candidate for the Presidency of the SEG. I've had a lot of very good feelings about the geophysical industry and the contributions that I've been able to make towards it and help the chaps out and help myself out. It's been a very good career. I've really enjoyed it.

Video Tape #04:20.22:29

#187 DF: This is the 50th Anniversary of the CSEG, where do you see it going in the future?

WR: I think that we're getting far more sophisticated with the systems that we use now. I don't even pretend to try to know what they are because. . . I can run a computer but not to the extent that these chaps can do these computing exercises for geophysics on the computer now. I think it's going to get more and more sophisticated as time goes on. We have probably the best people in the world working in the geophysical industry. We handle so much data and it's so basic to a lot of things that are done in industry, when you're using seismic waves and measuring time and all the things that they are doing. To be able to eliminate extraneous noises and things like that, it's fantastic what they're able to do today. You get into 3-D seismic, why we never even dreamt of that when I was doing that, that's just a magnificent breakthrough. So I see it being a much better controlled and bigger opportunities in the future for it. It may not be as broad, it may not employ quite as many people but I think the people that are involved are going to be far more skilled than even the people of . . . well, certainly of my age and my day, they're heads and shoulders above us. But I think that's going to be the evolution that goes on, it will continue to be that way as time goes on. And we're getting to the point where we have tougher and tougher sources of oil to find. In other words, where do we find these and how do we find them because there's going to be a lot of places that we're going to find oil in the future that we haven't been able to find oil in the past. Based on new technology we're able to break through and be able to discover how these accumulations occur. So I think geophysicists will be with us for a long time. As long as there's oil to be found, they'll be here and I'll put gas in there too.

DF: Anything else you'd like to say about the CSEG?

WR: I think it's a wonderful organization and they're doing some very, very good things for everybody. I think as I mentioned earlier, it's a unifying force for the people that are in there and it gives us a chance to be able to express ourselves and also to enjoy ourselves.

I think it plays a very , very important part in the oil and gas industry that we're involved in. But I think it's going to be geophysics in mineral exploration and all of the various. . . . sort of, global mapping and probably inter-global mapping and inter-spacial mapping. . I think we'll see the geophysicists involved in all of those things. It's going to be terrific what's going to happen in the future.

DF: Wonderful. On behalf of the CSEG and the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project I'd like to thank you very much for taking this time to meet with us and letting us record your recollections. Thank you so very much and we'll end the interview at this time.

WR: Thank you.