

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Bill Roliff

INTERVIEWER: Nadine Mackenzie

DATE: June 1984

NM: This is Nadine Mackenzie speaking. I am interviewing Mr. Bill Roliff, at the address, 4 Blanchard Rd. in Toronto. Mr. Roliff, thank you for having accepted to participate in our project. Can you tell me, when and where were you born?

BR: North Bay, Ontario.

NM: Which year?

BR: 1904.

NM: What did your parents do?

BR: My father was in construction contracting and he was in the Army for awhile.

NM: And where were you educated?

BR: Partly at Toronto University, London University, London, England.

NM: And what did you study?

BR: Geology.

NM: Why did you choose geology.

BR: That's a hard question to answer. I just liked it and I lived of course, in the mining country for a long time, Cobalt and I was exposed to a lot of the geological miners and also to the mines and the geology of silver and gold.

NM: While you were at the university did you take any summer jobs?

BR: Yes, I don't remember what they were though. After all that's what. . .

NM: A long time ago.

BR: Years ago.

NM: So how long did you spend at the university?

BR: That's a little difficult to assess too because I took some work and then I'd leave it for awhile then I'd go back and take some more so it . . .

NM: So it was a over a long period. What was your first post, were you hired by Imperial straight away after university?

BR: No, my first job was making maps. And ????. I mean I wasn't hired by the Air Force, but that's who I made the maps for. I made them for a commercial outfit that made maps for the Air Force from air photos.

NM: Air photos. And that was used during the war?

BR: Yes. The First War.

NM: The First War, yes, that's incredible. And after this just, what did you do?

BR: I went from there to Imperial Oil and I was with Imperial and its various subsidiaries ever since. That was in various places.

NM: And where did you work, was it in the east or in the west?

BR: The field work was all in the east. I did some work in Norman Wells and I was on loan to

various Esso companies, like Imperial, Humble, Carter and I don't even remember some of the names of them. I did some work for Esso through Imperial, in Germany, in the oil section of Germany and also in France. And I had a lot of jobs like that you know. I don't know what you'd call them really, they were all geological but I mean to say. . .

#041 NM: So you were travelling quite a bit?

BR: Right, I travelled quite a bit.

NM: How did you enjoy that?

BR: Oh, I liked it.

NM: How long have you spent with Imperial then, how many years?

BR: I'll start off with 47. It may be more, it might have got to 50 but somewhere between 47 and 50.

NM: Were you at Leduc?

BR: No.

NM: Did you hear about it at the time?

BR: Oh yes. You have to remember this, while I say I worked a lot in the east, a lot of my work in the east was with the governments on the oil end of the regulations and so on.

NM: Can you give me the names of people you worked with, do you remember a few of them?

BR: I guess I could give you a lot of names all right. You mean, with Imperial?

NM: Yes, with Imperial.

BR: I worked for Bill Clates for one, Don Mackenzie, Vern Taylor. It's hard to think of anybody else.

NM: So you worked with most of them, ????

BR: As I say it's hard to think of them all because your work was different. I mean, you'd be working with some and that would be a certain phase of the work.

NM: And then with somebody else.

BR: Then somebody else for some other phase of the work.

NM: Mr. Roliff, you got your PhD when you were 65, which is absolutely fantastic. Can we talk about it?

BR: They wouldn't like to hear what I had to say about it.

NM: Why did you decide to get your PhD?

BR: I decided for this reason, everybody I was coming in contact, which was mostly government people, like in Ottawa and various governments, like that, and I was dealing with people who had a PhD all the time.

#065 [voice faded out, like suddenly they were talking from far away]

BR: ???

NM: So that was the reason?

BR: Yes, that's right.

NM: But 65, it's quite an age to get a PhD.

BR: I got it on the advice of. . . I took my Masters degree in geology at the University of London, London, England and there was a chap over there that knew my grandmother. I thought he was going to give me a good lecture on what I didn't know. Instead of that he

said, let me give you a little bit of advice, I said, go ahead I was used to advice from everybody. He said, if you would just take that thesis, ??? a little thicker essay, you know, thesis on it, you'd get a PhD on it. And I thought, maybe he has something, maybe I should do that.

NM: That was a good idea.

BR: But that's my real reasons. Apart from what anybody else might tell you, that was my real reason.

NM: You went to London to study geology, why?

BR: I guess the reason for doing it was they had, which in my opinion, whether right or wrong, in my opinion they had better courses. More complete courses. And I was advised by others who had studied with London that it was a good place to go, it didn't make much difference to me.

NM: And how long did you stay in London?

BR: They have, I don't know whether you're familiar with the system or not, the only thing they count is the final examination. There are certain intervals that must go by before you can take these. So you can't do like, in Toronto you can maybe take a Masters course, I think it's 3 years, you can't do that at London. A minimum of 3 years has to be lapsed but they don't care how you fill it in or where even.

NM: I was told that you spent 40 years with Imperial but it was more than that.

BR: Yes, right.

NM: How long exactly was it?

BR: I think it was 47 as far as I know.

NM: Can we talk about Anticosti??? Island.

BR: We looked at Anticosti Island because there was evidence of oil in the rocks there. And it had to be a good location geographically. At the time there was a great demand for oil in the east, there wasn't much oil found in the east up to that point. I'm talking about the Far East like. So we took a look at it for that reason. And we drilled, I don't know, 6 or 7 wells over there. And we found some gas. We never developed it. We found it. . .

#106 NM: Why, what were the reasons?

BR: Economics again. The price had slid. It's the old story all the time, economics. But it was a good place to find something because you could ship it, you had the whole Europe you might say to ship it to.

NM: That's right, it was very well situated.

BR: That's right.

NM: Can we talk about the problems you came across there?

BR: On Anticosti. I think now, this is a long time afterwards but I think the government owns the mineral rights now and they grant it out steadily. But for awhile the Consolidated Paper Company owned the mineral rights, the oil and gas rights. There are various things went on there with the ownership of the mineral rights, between the government and companies like Consolidated Paper. And it's a long, long story that.

NM: Can you tell it to me?

BR: It's really quite a long story. It would take you more time than you have today.

NM: I would come back. So what happened exactly.

BR: Well, at least temporarily, we were given license to search for oil. We made some arrangements with the Consolidated Paper Company to share that license. Actually, we had what they call a sub-license, ??? from the Consolidated Paper. But the end result was just the same thing. Either company, they shared what they found.

NM: Who was the owners?

BR: The ownership of the oil and gas rights at Anticosti goes way back to France. The King of France granted these rights. I've forgotten some of the details now, I do have a lot of the details. I've forgotten the man's name even. And he granted these rights. Quite an article was written, I don't know where, ??? should have a copy of it, giving the history of the ownership of mineral rights on Anticosti Island and how they were like granted back and forth and so on.

NM: So how long were you involved with Anticosti Island?

BR: I would think, it was roughly 5 years I would think. Again, it's one of these things, you took a look at, you did some work, then you went away and forgot it and . . .

NM: And in time come back, yes.

BR: Of course, that's the history of the oil business all over.

NM: That's right, it is.

BR: You think you're through with an area, only to find you're back in. I don't know how many times I've said good-bye to an area, thinking I'd never see it again, then 2 years later, back.

NM: Can we talk about the work you were doing for Imperial here in Toronto?

BR: Here in Toronto. I had 2 very broad sort of assignments. One was I was what they called the manager of the eastern division. Imperial at that time, had 2 divisions, an eastern division and a western division. I was manager of the eastern division, Don Mackenzie was manager of the western division.

#154 NM: And what was your work as the manager.

BR: In fact you did everything. In the early days it was geological work. I did a lot of geological field work in all the eastern provinces. After that it was mostly the executive work. It's hard to tell you. . . I mean we can tell you, we went in, financing and finally, it was all done through the company of course, they never had to do outside financing.

NM: And how many years were you manager, for a long time?

BR: Yes, quite a long.

NM: Can we talk about 1971, when there was this purge at Imperial?

BR: What happened in '71. . . in those days there was. . . now they give you early retirement and all the rest of it. So that was after I retired of course.

NM: That's right, so it was nothing to do with you. And you retired in 1959 and what. . .

BR: No, 4 and 65, that's '69.

NM: '69. And what did you do after your retirement, did you went on working?

BR: Sure. I never wanted to retire. Actually, I was on the Board of a number of smaller companies. Like you see, I noticed in this morning's paper that one of the Director of Imperial Oil, I've

forgotten his name, his picture was in this morning's paper, he retired from Imperial and he's a Director of some other company now, took a job. But Upper Canada was one of the companies, I was on the Board for several years, I can't remember how many. Then Keno Mines. Those 2 companies in particular I can remember, I was on the Board for a number of years.

NM: It seems that oil people don't retire, they go on working.

BR: Yes.

NM: Did you do also, some consulting work?

BR: Yes.

NM: You did that too. And here in Toronto?

BR: Yes.

NM: Were you travelling too at the time, or did you stay mostly here?

BR: Well, the consulting work I did quite a lot here, but I did quite a bit of travelling for them too. I did consulting work for outfits that were working in Texas and Oklahoma and also that were in the west and some that had land in the western States. And quite a few with land in the Middle East.

NM: Where in the Middle East?

BR: Just south of Iraq and Iran where they're having all the fun right now. They were quite large concessions. I don't remember names of these companies.

NM: It doesn't matter. ??? Gibson told me that you were very active in the mining associations.

BR: Yes. Another of the jobs I had with Imperial, I had their. . .Imperial went into the mining business, that was somewhere around 1970, no before that I guess, maybe 1965 or something like that and I had the job of looking after this. So I had a number of consultations on this with Exxon people who were going into mining at the same time, diversification. I made a lot of trips to New York and that allowed me to get to New York with the Board of the Exxon Company, my connection with that.

#211 NM: You were also involved with a drilling program in the Maritimes?

BR: Yes.

NM: Can we talk about that, what was it?

BR: We drilled, we started right here in Ontario, we drilled in Ontario and I've forgotten how many wells, quite a number, 50, 60, I don't know.

NM: Were they successful?

BR: Oh yes, very successful. And in Quebec, in Gaspe, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia. Did I miss some of them? Well, Anticosti and Quebec. I guess I probably got them all there.

NM: Can we talk about your professional affiliations?

BR: The American Petroleum Institute and the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, Geological Association of Canada, Canadian Institute of Mining and

Metallurgy and I have various other. . . The Royal Society, I'm a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. I know I've missed some of them, but they're all technical.

NM: Do you have any publications?

BR: Yes. I counted it up one day for fun just to see what it was. I published something like 90 papers. Now I don't have them all, I have a number of papers around that I've published in ??? Francais de Canada and the American Petroleum Association, mostly in there, the Geological Society of America. Some in the Canadian mining journals.

NM: So you were very busy writing then?

BR: I guess so. Funny, you never think of that, you never think of this, you just do it and go on to the next one.

NM: And it piles and piles.

BR: Yes, and then you go on to the next one. To me, it's all been fun.

NM: That's good. Can we talk about the ups and downs of the oil patch, you have been a witness to so many of them.

BR: Yes, we can talk about them but I don't know what to say about them. Because you have good years and bad years. And you're all enthused about certain areas and then you cool off on them and then 2 or 3 years later you're back on them again.

NM: So it's like a yo-yo.

BR: Yes, just like yo-yo.

NM: Mr. Roliff, what do you think of the contribution of Alberta towards the development of the Canadian industry?

BR: It's been a very outstanding development.

NM: And you think the province of Alberta was instrumental in that?

BR: Yes, there's a lot of oil in Alberta, there still is. And it'll come back, it'll have another cycle.

NM: You think so?

BR: Oh yes.

NM: So that's the way you foresee the future of the oil patch in Alberta?

BR: I would think so.

NM: You think it's going to improve?

BR: Yes, I would think so.

#269 NM: Who were the most influential persons in your career?

BR: I think it would lead to many who were in the oil business. No, I don't think about. . . any person I could think about it would be Dr. Oliver B. Hopkins, who was a Director of Imperial Oil.

NM: Did he hire you or did you work with him?

BR: I worked with him for many years. He didn't hire me but I worked with him for many years.

NM: Do you remember who hired you at Imperial?

BR: A man by the name of John Ness. But he was in connection with the geological department. He was like a service man on maps and that type of thing.

NM: And who else, who was influential in your career?

- BR: Hopkins I think, was the outstanding man. But as I say, there were many in the geological, and some in the business end. I had kind of a like for business as well as geology.
- NM: Did you like business or. . .? Did you take any business courses? No. Did they train you for business at Imperial?
- BR: Yes.
- NM: Can I ask you, what was your PhD on, what was the subject?
- BR: The subject, geology.
- NM: Your thesis?
- BR: Particularly geology and the historical geology.
- NM: Historical geology? Why did you choose historical geology?
- BR: Because it's one of the most important things in oil finding, historical geology..
- NM: Where did you do all the research for your PhD?
- BR: I had the facilities available to me at Toronto University. Incidentally, at first, I took palaeontology at Toronto University. And my old palaeontology teacher, ???, she's still alive, [Madeline Fritz]??? is her name and she's one of the top palaeontologists.
- NM: And is she living here in Toronto?
- BR: Yes, she is. The other day I heard she wasn't so well. She lives in an apartment, 1st St. N. St. Clair, a large apartment, almost opposite the Imperial Oil building, over that way. She lives in there, she's lived there for years.
- NM: This is the end of the tape.

Side 2

- NM: What were the most exciting experiences?
- BR: I had many exciting experiences. To me the whole oil business was exciting and I'm afraid I can't really just single out any one particular that comes to me.
- NM: A lot of them.
- BR: A lot of them yes.
- NM: And what do you consider your achievements?
- BR: I don't know that I achieved too much but I had a lot of fun doing it anyhow.
- NM: Well, you achieved your PhD, you had many years with Imperial.
- BR: We went back, when I say we, Imperial Oil, and I was the person who did it, back in Ontario, which as you know is an original producer and almost phased out, it's the original producer way back, in the 50's or something. And we took another look at it. I recommended that the company come back in it again, and they came back and drilled, they had a commitment of 50 wells. They drilled a lot more, I don't remember how many they drilled, and it was a profitable deal, we made money on that.
- NM: So that was good.
- BR: And it's hard to measure just exactly but, in terms of the dollars invested in it, it's one of the most profitable areas Imperial's ever been in. Not the total dollars, but per dollar invested.
- NM: So that was very important for them then.

BR: Yes, well that's the final pay off eh.

NM: What did you think of the oil business?

BR: I think it's a good business. If the government would just keep out of it, all they do is mess it up.

NM: So tell me what do you think of the National Energy Policy?

BR: I'm not very happy about it. There's a great deal of room for improvement in it.

NM: And do you think that's going to happen?

BR: I think they are going to make some changes.

NM: And all the while, if they don't make any changes, what's going to happen?

BR: I think we will get less government control for one thing. And this is the last few years, the government has really spoiled the oil business by getting their fingers too deep into it. Too much control on it, too much say about pricing, government taking too big a chunk of the profit in taxes, it's awful you know what they take. I don't care who hears me say that either.

NM: Let us go back to your career Mr. Roliff. You were at Normal Wells. And how long did you stay there, was it for a short period?

BR: Yes, only for a short period. Different short periods. You see, the first jobs. . . at the time the government changed their regulations and I worked with them in Ottawa on the changes in the regulations. Then I was up at Norman Wells to see the ??? project from a working point of view, on the ground. There's nothing you could pick out, nothing startling. But it had to be done that way.

#039 NM: How were the living conditions?

BR: Oh, I think they were very good. Living conditions never worried me very much no matter where they were. Because I worked in South America for awhile too you know.

NM: Oh, what did you do in South America?

BR: I was down there with a Tropical Oil Company, which was another subsidiary of the whole Exxon group. As I said before, I got, if you like to call it, loaned out to these people. I was always on the payroll of Imperial Oil but I might be working for Tropical Oil or Humble Oil or Carter Oil or. . .

NM: So many companies were borrowing you. And how long did you stay in South America?

BR: I worked for a solid year down there, in Columbia. Then I went back on various consultation jobs to Venezuela. But they were just consultation jobs but Columbia I was just down there ???.

NM: Did you find oil in Columbia?

BR: Yes. I mean, I would say I found it. In those days you couldn't single out a person, here's a man that found it. He did phases of the work and . . .

NM: Right, it was everybody else, everybody was helping.

BR: Everybody contributed something and you can't say that any person really contributed what.

NM: No, nobody can claim. . . But there was oil there?

BR: Oh yes, a lot of it.

NM: What about Venezuela, were you involved in some discoveries?

- BR: Oh, there's an awful lot of oil in Venezuela. It's a fascinating country, from an oil point of view.
- NM: Politically it's not so fantastic. You were doing some consultant work in Venezuela.
- BR: I was mostly in sort of an advisory capacity. It's very fascinating really, what you would get. A well would get some good showing of oil, let's call it 500 barrels a day and they would abandon it. It's nothing. That's how much oil they get down there. And most ??? were in the water, like Malakibo???. They drill a well there, ??? you know. You can go out and sit and watch them put up the derrick, and watch the whole thing and watch them drill it and then move off again to another location.
- NM: So they don't stay very long at the same location?
- BR: Not at a place like that. They didn't have to drill too deeply you see. None of these 15,000' holes they're drilling all over the world now.
- NM: Just for a short time and then they move.
- BR: Yes. But they had oil. A lot of it too.
- NM: A lot of it yes. So you have enjoyed all your career, all the years?
- BR: Oh absolutely. I'd hate to get along without it. I'm awfully glad I had it. And it wasn't all roses either. But you don't expect it.
- NM: What do you think of the training of oil people in your time?
- BR: The training? I don't know how much training, I don't think we did very much training.
- NM: Were you mostly trained on the job?
- BR: Yes, on the job. But I mean, there was none of the formal schemes like they're putting in now, all formal schemes. They just told us how to go out and do it.
- NM: So people taught themselves?
- BR: I mean, I'd get sent to some place where I'd never been before and knew nothing about, just told to go. And not getting any advice or any cautions about what to do or where to live or anything else.
- NM: But were people ready to back you up if you were making mistakes?
- BR: I suppose so. I hope I didn't make too many. I know I made mistakes, nobody does anything without making mistakes.
- NM: Nobody's perfect.
- BR: That's right.
- NM: What do you think of the training of oil people nowadays?
- BR: I should be good. But they're not getting the variety, it's getting too highly specialized too.
- NM: Well, all the computers now and everything. So for you what is the best training, to be trained on the job or both maybe.
- BR: I really think you need both. You can't get along without the training on the job but you can't really absorb it without some of the like the university training and so on first.
- NM: You are still very interested in the oil business.
- BR: I like the oil business.
- NM: Do you keep up to date by reading newspapers and. . .
- BR: Yes, I read the newspapers on oil every day.
- NM: I still think it's so marvellous you got your PhD at 65 but you were telling me that you

know a lot of people who got their PhD at this age.

BR: That's right. I can't remember their names now but I can go down ??? and show you the articles.

#100 NM: What do you think makes people go back and study for a PhD at this age?

BR: I don't know. I like to study, I mean, it's just something I like to do. It's not work to me, it's just fun.

NM: So it was pleasure for you.

BR: Yes.

NM: Mr. Roliff, what do you think of Imperial as a company.

BR: In my opinion, Imperial as a company, is one of the best. They're fair to their employees and they're fair to the public. I don't say that because I worked for Imperial Oil, I've a great respect for it.

NM: They must have been good to you for you to stay so long with them.

BR: That's right, they were good to me.

NM: This is the end of the first interview with Bill Roliff.