

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Rein de Wit

INTERVIEWER: David Finch

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DF: Today is the 22nd day of October, in the year 2001 and we are with Mr. Rein de Wit at 1055 Penterlew Place in Victoria. My name is David Finch. How are you today Mr. de Wit?

RW: Very well thank you.

DF: Good. Where and when were you born?

RW: I was born in Jakarta on the island of Java in 1914.

DF: And why were you born there?

RW: I was born there because my father was an officer in the colonial Army. We lived there of course, at the time and I lived there until the age of 4 or 5, I've forgotten. And then we made the trip by coal furnished ship to Marseilles I think, and then on to Holland. I lived there, went to school and lived there until the age of 12 and then went back to Indonesia. In the meantime my mother had stayed with me and the other brothers and sisters in Holland. After my last year in public school I went back to Indonesia in Banung, which was a real paradise on earth and I lived there with the family until my father retired, until about 15. And then we went back to Holland, I went back to high school there and I took a great liking to natural history. I was a member of a very active natural history club in Holland. That got me in contact with some boys who were interested in geology and later became geologists. After high school I wasn't quite sure if I should go into biology, so I chose geology and never regretted it.

#028 DF: So tell us about your education in geology, where did you take that?

RW: I went to the University of Leiden. The enrollment there was fairly small, my year was exceptionally big with 10 people. Before that it was usually no more than about 3. So it was suddenly, I don't know what set it off that the interest in geology suddenly became so much greater. I had some interesting professors there, one of them was de Sitter, and he became a well known structural geologist and wrote a famous book. He became the supervisor for my doctoral thesis, which was mapping the geology of an area in the southern Alps, near Lake Como. That was a wonderful time I must say, I was completely on my own, didn't know word of Italian but the Italians were so friendly and so pleasant that it was a wonderful time to be there. Daily I sat out and wandered through the mountains there, picking up rocks and actually, in a very crude way, doing geology. At that time we were not very sophisticated compared with what we do now. So it was main lithological mapping, I tried to collect some fossils. I did that for actually, 3 summers, the first summer for my Masters degree was a short spiel in the Apennines. But 2 long summers I had in the south Alps. That ended in 1939 with a telegram from the Dutch

Consulate that I had to return immediately to the Netherlands. I didn't know why, out there we were, there were no radio, very ill informed. So indeed, I just threw everything down, went by bus to Como and there suddenly the truth of the matter came to me. It was pandemonium in Milan and by sheer luck I got the last luxury train back through Germany to Holland. I can tell you that gave me very much the same feeling of doomsday as I had on Sept. 11th, just now. But in the first, almost a year, nothing much happened of course, until it really became a shooting war where we were involved. My brother, we had a system that in a family only the oldest son had to go into the army and the second was free so I never had a military education. During the war, young geologists, we all had graduated by that time with our Masters, most of the others went to the Dutch coal mines but I got a job with a very clever professor at the Technical University of Delft. That was my first job as a matter of fact. I earned a pittance but I was at least self sufficient. Then after a couple of years I had an offer to join the Soils Bureau of the Netherlands. The head of it was a very interesting man who, for the first time, wanted to see what he could do with a geologist to approach the study of soils. So I became a soil geologist. Funny enough, for me that was very useful. Not so much for them but for me. I had to map soil profiles in the north end of the country, near the tidal flats. And that gave me some more insight in how tidal flats work than most other people. So I did that for 2 years until the end of the war, then I got bombed out there again. I got a Canadian mortar in my house, had to go through the fighting for the city of Groningen, where I lived at that time, and through the fighting, went to the hospital with my wife who expected our first baby at that time. So I had there a very hot night I must say, the shooting over us was a pandemonium. But the next morning the sun was shining and the Canadian troops were in, it was a great moment. One of the unforgettable things in my life. And that is one of the reasons why people still, are very, very well disposed towards the Canadians. After that I got a job offer with Shell, who wanted geologists to send them to different countries. Some of the new crop of geologists were sent to Venezuela but I was sent, together with 5 other young geologists, to Canada, just to try things out. They had never sent anybody to Canada, they had their own geologists but they thought, well, like they do in other countries, we'll have a small contingent of Dutch nationals. So I landed in Ottawa and there was a small office there, in 1946, there was a small office there under Bill Gussow. Bill Gussow was the chief there and my first assignment was to go into the field in the Gaspé Peninsula. That was quite an experience for me, I was very used to outdoor life and to camping and so on but to go in completely wild bush was not something I had ever done before. Here we were going out with a group with about 5 geologists, including my supervisor and a cook and 2 porters. We made our way from the north coast, eventually to the south coast. Cross country, in part we used trap lines and trappers trails and in part we had to make our own with an ax. There were a few things I had to get used to, first of all, the bugs, I'd never seen in my life anything like it and second, handling an ax, I had never done that before. So that was a very nice experience. Bob Brown, my boss, was a very nice fellow, very gentle with us and good and willing to tell stories, he was a very good host. So we had a picnic there, although it was a very hard life, I must say that. One of the things I remember, we could at that time cross the rivers and there were several of them,

#143 they were shallow with packs on our backs. We scooped up with our hands, the water, and drank out of it, that to me was something new and at the moment you certainly wouldn't do it either. At that time it was still so virgin and pollution was something unheard of. So that was one summer and then we went into the office for the winter, which was another experience because I had to get clothing for winter wear there. We came to Canada with hardly a thread on our backs, the shirt on our backs. It was after 5 years of war when nothing had been available and when we left, still nothing was available. We didn't have anything. So we got through that winter, I did office work. I did a study on, I think, Anticosti Island of something like that but then a study on southwestern Ontario. Shell had a very good idea and that is to send around some of their experts to give you a little bit of extra education. So they sent one man who was an expert subsurface man to show us how to do subsurface, something completely new to me. Drill cuttings, what you see of them, what to look for and how to log them and make notations of them. So that was a very good course that we had for just about a month, he worked side by side with us. And another man came who was a tectonic expert. He suddenly, with leaps and bounds, opened our eyes for certain things to look for, so that was an interesting experience. The next spring we went to New Brunswick and that was a bigger operation. There were something like 4 Party Chiefs and we were all together, with about a dozen geologists, Dutch geologists as well as Canadian geologists. We fanned out from 2 main points in pairs of two to map the country. That became a very good concerted effort. Bill Gussow was the man who digested all the information that we brought in and he put a geological map together which was very, very good for the time, I must say. He had also, very clever ideas about how to draw conclusions out of it. Shell drilled there a well or two but without success. There were seeps but it never took off and Shell abandoned it. To this day, New Brunswick has never gotten into its own. Then suddenly came a notice that some of us, the Dutch ones, were all transferred to Indonesia and there is where we all were very hesitant to go. We just came out of 4 years of war, and to go back there in the struggle for independence was not very attractive. We all had young wives, who had come to Canada as a matter of fact, in the meantime. So we all jumped ship and 4 of us got a job with the Geological Survey of Canada. That was in 1948 and I stayed with the Survey for 2 years and I have to say that was the nicest job I have ever had in my life. It was working with a bunch of people who were very dedicated and very helpful and congenial, it was wonderful. The atmosphere there among the people was very good. But the only problem was, I had so little money and still I hadn't been able to catch up of course. The way we lived was so poverty stricken. At the moment we'd go to the welfare to get . . . but at that time there was a housing shortage, we lived in a hut which was indescribable. Outside pump in the cold winter that had to be primed every morning. We couldn't afford a refrigerator so we had an apple box hanging outside. An outhouse was 50' out in the garden. To me it was Canada and I didn't know any better so I took it for quite awhile.

#221 DF: Where was this?

RW: In Ottawa.

DF: You're kidding?

RW: No, it was absolutely terrible. And with the Survey, not very much better. I'd started building a house there, because my neighbours, all poor people, a very fine bunch, said, why don't you build your own house. I said, I can't build a house, I've never done that, we'll help you and they did. So it was a small house. But after those years somebody came from the west to offer me a job, twice my salary. That was it, I couldn't. . so we moved to Regina. There I was with Sohio for 3 years and then Sohio . .

DF: What year?

RW: 1949 or '50, I've forgotten now. We worked there, it was interesting but the company had bought a huge block of acreage in Saskatchewan to see if they couldn't pull another Leduc out of the hat. Nothing was know about the deep geology of Saskatchewan so they just bought a blanket spread of land in the form of a cross across the country, wide cross and as bad luck had it, to this day, I don't think there has been one discovery on that huge bunch of acreage. Because, for instance, the Mississippian play of the southeast, at that time of course, was unknown and came much later. So after 3 years there in Calgary, they terminated virtually their. . they had a few wells in the Wapella field that had already been found, that was the only production they had. But they didn't find it themselves I must say. It was development acreage. But then they transferred me to Calgary and made me the Chief Geologist of the operation there, which was very small, in 1952. We had an office in the Bamlett building, in the basement and there I had 1 employee, that was Don Fraser and a secretary and we worked away trying to make subsurface maps of Alberta. Then they sent a geophysicist from the U.S. and it became a little bit larger operation, more geologists were hired. But still success unfortunately, for Sohio, was not in the books. I got enough of it after 5 years with them, so in 1956 I joined J. C. Sproule Associates, which was at that time, a fairly small outfit. They did mainly subsurface mapping and that was hard work, we worked there sometimes 7 days a week, I can tell you that. But he was fairly successful and built an office that he still has, near the Bow River Bridge and then began to branch out and do field work in the Fort McMurray area and in the Northwest Territories. And later, on the Arctic Islands, as you well know probably. I was involved in that work, the field work. Field work has always been my bag really, field and subsurface work. When I went to college the field geologists were the guys. They looked down on anybody who did anything else, palaeontologists were for the dogs and . . . So I was groomed in that way and I must say, I still enjoyed doing the field work for many years and it became my fate to be involved in quite a bit of field work. Not always enjoyed it, it was also hard time I can tell you. But I stayed with Sproule for 9 years and then went to Amoco, it was at that time Pan American but they changed their name not too long after. 1965. I stayed there until 1978 when I retired. With them I was mainly a subsurface man but I did also, some field work when it came to pass. So I have seen a lot of Canada, I must say, east and west and north and south. And I'm not sorry for it. The only thing that I am sorry for is that, in working in Canada, I never got assignments out in the Middle East or Venezuela, South America, where so many other people have had. However, I can't grumble.

#318 DF: Do you have any stories of your time up in the north, did you work with Stan Harding for example?

RW: Yes.

DF: Yes, I know him. And his son.

RW: Is that right, how is his son?

DF: Richard. Yes, he's doing well.

RW: He became a lawyer?

DF: Yes. So tell me stories about the north, what was it like up there in those days?

RW: It was very, very primitive. We worked from the base of Resolute Bay mainly. My first acquaintance was in Issacson, in the north of Elef Ringness Island. We were put out there. We had a few experts in to tell us, one a Russian, the other a Canadian geographer who had worked in the Arctic and they told us what clothes to buy and how conditions were. That was very helpful. When I look at catalogues at the moment of outdoor stores and I see the fancy down and Gortex and you name it, very expensive materials, we didn't have that at that time. We went to the Army surplus store and got very useful and very good, durable materials for a song. And that was all of us. We looked like the dickens coming out of the plane there, a bunch of vagabonds but who cared because there were no people. We made camp in the vicinity of some of the weather stations and we had a helicopter and a couple of Piper Cubs. The Geological Survey had pioneered working with small planes with DC-3 tire tubes to make it possible to land just about anywhere. So those were the adventures of the north.

DF: Any bear stories?

RW: Well, not directly. Some of the others had encounters with them, I never did. However, there were wolves, there were caribou, they were very, very tame there because it's a gam preserve you see. Arctic foxes all around the camps, we did a lot of fly camping too. Here's a cup of tea, let's have a small break.

DF: Okay. So we were talking about your career in the north. So you went into management eventually?

RW: No. I never was in management. As a matter of fact, our type of education in Europe was very much different from the education in Canada and the United States, which is far more job oriented. For us, we were groomed to like the science of geology. I never knew as a matter of fact, that I could earn anything with it. I obviously knew that people would go to Shell eventually, that was the main employer. But ever since, I have never had the ambition to get into the drivers seat, I was very satisfied in remaining just a geologist. So I never made it to management. I don't give a hoot either about that.

#385 DF: So what was your first association with the Alberta Society of Petroleum Geologists?

RW: Well, immediately I was a member of the Saskatchewan Society when we lived in Regina. But in Alberta it was the thing to do as a geologist, to join the ASPG at that time. And it was a wonderful group of people. It was not too big and we all knew each other, at least by sight but many of them, easily by doing things together. I have the best of memories of those early years in the ASPG and later the CSPG. There was an old

tradition of doing whatever you can if called for. That was universal among the people, there was never any problem to find people to do any job. That is still, I believe, very much the case. Apparently now it's a little more complex, it has become such a big Society.

DF: Who were some of those early members that you remember when you first joined?

RW: There was Jack Webb, Gerry Henderson, and with Imperial Oil there were. . .

DF: Did you know Ted Link?

RW: Of course, he was there and he was quite a personality there but he and I, we saw each other but he was the big man at that time, I never knew him well. There was Ernie Shaw with Imperial and Doug Layer. Let's see, with Shell, I've forgotten now. I'm getting a little rusty with all the names of all those people of old days you know. What a joy to come across old membership lists and so on, I'd like to know how they would be. And then of course, in the ASPG there were Gil Raasch and . . . Great disputes about age of certain things and how it fitted together, it was really fun.

DF: Where did you meet when you first started going?

RW: We met at . . .the second place I remember, was Penley's, that was a dance academy. The number of people who came there at those luncheon meetings was something like 40 or 50 maybe, maybe not that many, I don't know. It depended a lot on what was on. But it was always nice to see . . . We had a little pamphlet called the ASPG Journal and we communicated in that. People were eager to tell each other of discoveries, either in the field, or in the office, I mean geological discoveries mainly. The technical side at that time, was not very openly discussed. There was a certain reticence there where the conversation stopped. At that time there was the system of the scouts who looked for exchange of information and the geologists usually were fairly discreet. We did tell each other about geological thoughts and so on, very freely, but not about what we were doing with the company when it came to brass tacks, buying land or planning to drill and so on and how far, that was universally respected the discretion of each other. A number of years I was an editor of the ASPG Journal and I enjoyed that very much.

#481 DF: Tell me about that, what did that job entail?

RW: It entailed prodding people sometimes, to write something for the Journal and to read what was handed in. But there again, people were quite willing to share their thoughts about geological subjects with each other. And it was in a casual way. That is my only misgiving against the Bulletin at the moment, I'm becoming completely out of date of course. Geology has taken a flight far beyond what I ever did. But at the moment there is not that easy communication between members any more that we used to have. The articles that are published are quite meaty and many of them look extremely good I must say, but I can't read them anymore because even the terminology I'm beginning to lose contact with. After all, it's about more than 20 years since I am out of it. But as I say, that easy communication and willing and pleasant communication that we had before, that is lost in those very thorough, professional publications that now exist.

End of tape.

Side 2

DF: Well, it's certainly become a much larger organization.

RW: Oh yes.

DF: How did you first become involved, who got you doing the editing and so on.

RW: Oh, I've forgotten. People would say, would you mind doing this and like most others, I would say, sure, I'll give it a try.

DF: And your company supported you in this?

RW: Oh yes. The companies were quite supportive and still are. That is a wonderful thing. And for good reason because it makes well informed, knowledgeable and let's say, proud geologists that we can carry on this way and collectively contribute something.

DF: So how did you come to be on the executive?

RW: There again, people would take me to lunch and say, how about it. At that time, most of us, if we could be of assistance we would do it. And that still I think, lives on. I have completely lost touch with the Society but from what I hear from loose remarks I think that they still have that pride in their profession and enjoying the cooperation, which is very nice.

DF: So what do you remember about the time you were on the executive?

RW: Not a great deal as a matter of fact. Life went on. One thing I do remember was that, while I was the President I got a telephone call from some people at Imperial Oil and they said, we have here some people that have a proposition for you. Would you like to talk about indexing our publications or your publications. I said, that's fine. So I got together with 2 fellows and they said, we are doing something new and that is, we punch cards and we put information on cards and that makes it handy to retrieve that information. For instance, for the publications of the CSPG to have the authors and the subject titles and so on, if you can list that then it's very easy to find something back. Actually I haven't got the faintest difficulty to retrieve any information I need from the lists that we have so what's the big deal. They said, this is a new way of doing it and it's free of charge, we won't charge the Society but for us it's an exercise and for you, it may be, in the end, useful. I said, well, if that's the case that's fine. So they went to work. That was the first brush with computers that I ever had. At that time the word computer was not even used, it was whispered that they had some system. At that time it was in its infancy, Amoco certainly didn't have anything here in Calgary to do that. But not very long after that of course, there was a computer group. First they had an upper floor completely full with big discs that punched cards and manipulated cards and so on. It became big business but now, at the moment of course, all those things are obsolete too. But I'm still not very computer friendly I can tell you that. I'm too old to mess around with it. But it still sticks me that I certainly didn't recognize that a new age was knocking on the door there when we had those Imperial Oil people do that.

#051 DF: So how did the ASPG help the people in the oil industry in that time period?

RW: That is not all that easy to explain that. It was more that exchange of information and

observations was very inspiring for all of us to do our best and to look in certain ways at the information. That was I think, the main interest and then of course, there was the discussions on general geological subjects. Plate tectonics had not been invented at that time yet and there were many people who looked in many different directions for a solution to the great questions of how mountains and basins are formed and how the basins are built up. It was a very interesting time because a number of people, and this is outside the oil industry, had different ideas to explain why mountains are being formed where they are. Some of those people were extremely knowledgeable and ingenious and they had a variety of theories. Wegener was well known, he was the father of plate tectonics really but way ahead of his time, long ago. But many of the people who gave lectures to us, for instance, who were concerned with these matters were very clever, hard working, interesting people. What they came up with were very clever ideas. In studying their raw material, they brought together a great deal of knowledge that remains useful to the day. We do need the bare facts, it can't come all out of computers by itself. Now plate tectonics really solved the problem. I always think back that those people who discussed these things, that they were no stupid ignoramuses, they did wonderful jobs. That is what sometimes people may forget, that in the old days, with the fact available people did a lot but in a limited usefulness compared with what we have now.

DF: Just reading over your notes here from the year you were President, you said it was a very good year and lots of people doing lots of things, publications and so on and that the financial health of the Society was pretty good. But you said new publications may temporarily put considerable strain on our resources. Do you want to talk about that?

RW: I've forgotten a little bit what the essence was that. We did look at new publications that we wanted to get out but the cost at that time, for our limited resources, was a little steep. So we were at times, hard pressed to have the resources to do that work.

#097 DF: And your membership wasn't really large, was it?

RW: No. I've forgotten how many there were. But it was maybe, 1,000, I don't know, no, I don't know if there was 1,000 people there yet. In 1965, no, it was more hundreds.

DF: So there was no conflict between the ASPG and working for a company?

RW: Oh no, not the slightest.

DF: Did the company tell you which information to keep to yourselves?

RW: No, they never did. It was a matter of discretion. I don't think it was ever abused. Things were quite casual by and large, in our mutual contacts.

DF: Did you want to look at the list of questions I sent you and see if there's anything else you'd like to talk about?

RW: Yes. One thing I tried to introduce was a new name for the ASPG and make it into the Canadian Society or Petroleum Geologists.

DF: The year you were President you say?

RW: Yes. But it was voted down. On a meeting that we had of a very few people that turned up at that meeting. Actually, that was a suggestion that had already been made by Bob McCrossan. Are you going to interview Bob McCrossan.

DF: Tomorrow, yes.

RW: I see. He was one of the big steps forward in the CSPG. He organized the Geological Atlas of Western Canada. He was really one of the most important people of that time.

DF: Good.

RW: No, other than that I don't have very much to say. Past President dinners, unfortunately, living out here, I don't get around to going all the way back to Calgary for it. Even though I'd like to see. . . most of them of course, I know you see, even the younger ones. But not the last few I don't know anymore. And to see all those old boys again, would be fun.

DF: Why don't you do it?

RW: Well yes, but I haven't gotten around to it.

DF: What have you enjoyed most about your career as a geologist?

RW: I think doing geology was indeed, both subsurface work, I enjoyed that very much too, which I did a lot in later years. At the moment those things are all completely fallen by the wayside because with computers you do that 10 times faster. I still feel that there is room for looking at rocks and even putting, with your own hands, the lines together and considering various choices. But with computers you have choices too I suppose.

DF: Any regrets, things you wish you could have done?

RW: I have one regret and that is that I haven't had enough experience in South America. Or for that matter, maybe in Arabia. Actually, just between us, I had an offer to go to Saudi Arabia but I knew how people lived there, in compounds entirely made up of company people. And to go into that, I had a horror of that because, those company places, whether they're in Venezuela or in Indonesia, in the old days, or in Arabia are awful places in many respects. Of course, life was good there, lots of food and so on, but it remains a closed community with groups of people, women especially are friends and the others are not friends and all those things. That didn't appeal to me.

156 DF: So now that the CSPG is turning 75, what do you think of 75 years of the CSPG being around?

RW: I think it's a wonderful thing and I hope it will continue forever and ever. Because it's still obviously, the support it gets from its members is phenomenal, from what I can see. What they, at the moment achieve, in the way of monstrously big congresses and far flung publications and so on, it's very, very good. So I can't see it ever deteriorating for the time being. There's still plenty to be explored. The Northwest Territories for instance, it's such a huge area.

DF: Where did you work up there?

RW: In the Richardson Mountains, in the Mackenzie Mountains, a little bit all over. Around Fort Good Hope, around Norman Wells a little bit/

DF: What were you doing in these places?

RW: Field geology. Mainly by helicopter. It was in some ways, somewhat frustrating because so little was known and they were just pin pricks and you had to make far flung conclusions about things that really were not well enough connected to make much sense of. But you have to start somewhere. So there is still plenty of room there to expand the knowledge there.

DF: Were you using much seismic at that point?

RW: No, very little.

DF: No, just surface geology?

RW: Surface geology. There is a good thing that at the moment it is far more integrated with each other. Partly because seismic has become so much more developed and pictorial and visible. It becomes easier for a geologist to discuss those things probably and form an opinion. Even though the way the stuff is gathered is beyond most normal people.

DF: So what of your accomplishments are you most proud?

RW: I have no specific accomplishments.

DF: No particular regional map or something?

RW: No.

DF: You just loved doing geology?

RW: I just loved to do it, yes.

DF: The helicopter work was pretty early wasn't it?

RW: Yes. We started that in about 1968 or something like that. In the foothills and very few people used it at that time. It was a help to get you out to various checkpoints let's say, that were accessible. But what it usually needed is a lot of spade work, just pin pricks here and there do not make. . . it brings you new information that you have never got any great idea about before but at the moment of course, it's very widely used. And if you do enough of it, it boils down to the same thing as working on your feet everywhere.

DF: You mentioned, just before we took a break, fly camps. Can you explain what was in the fly camp?

RW: The fly camps were done usually, with 2 people, one and an assistant. They would be set out somewhere, nowhere, with a helicopter or with a plane and camp for as long as necessary, 3 days or 5 days or a week, in a certain place and work out from there. With the help of existing. . there were somewhat primitive maps in most of those areas, and in other areas in the Arctic there were no maps, we used air photos. And oblique air photos at that, which were very hard to work with. But in the Northwest Territories especially, it was all flown and we used the air photos with a pin, made holes where we had an observation and then on the other side, a number and make notes as what it was all about. Measure the dip and the strike of the beds.

DF: So anything else you'd like to tell us today.

RW: I don't think I have really very much else that I could add about these things. I think we've covered the waterfront pretty well.

DF: Okay. So on behalf of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project and the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists, I'd like to thank you very much for allowing us to come to your home today and interview you and get some of your recollections.

RW: Oh, you're very welcome. Thank you for getting it all together.