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## JACK AVERY

**Date and place of birth (if available):**

**Date and place of interview:**

**Name of interviewer:** Peter McKenzie-Brown

**Name of videographer:** Peter Tombrowski

**Full names (spelled out) of all others present:** N/A

**Consent form signed:** Yes

Initials of Interviewer: PMB

Last name of subject: AVERY

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PMB: I'm still here in Fort McMurray. I'm now speaking to Jack Avery, who is going to give us his commentary. You worked in the refinery at Suncor and we just started to get into some interesting discussions, so I'll turn it over to you now.

AVERY: My wife passed away on March the 10th.

PMB: So a week and a half ago.

AVERY: This year. Yeah, that's right.

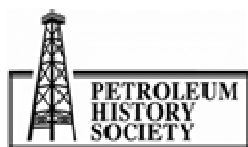
PMB: Please accept my condolences. And would you mind telling me a bit about her. I understand that she was a tremendous volunteer, especially for the school system.

AVERY: Well, to tell you a little bit about her background, I met her on a blind date. And I had arranged to go to a party. Now this was in 1947.

PMB: The year I was born.

AVERY: And the young lady I was going to go with, she couldn't go that night. So she said, "I'll get you a date." So she did and I went to where Olga lived. And I knocked on the door, she answered the door and she looked at me and she said, "You're it?" And I said, "Yes."

PMB: So she knows how get a date off to a good start, doesn't she.



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VERY: Yeah. And that's how we got started. And we got married on May...

PMB: When were you married?

VERY: March the 12th, 1949. And my career, I got to Grade 12, I joined the Army...

PMB: Where were you born?

VERY: In Lacombe. I joined the Army in 1943.

PMB: Sorry, how old were you?

VERY: 18.

PMB: What year were you born?

VERY: February the 23rd, 1925. And I was in the Army until October '95, two years.

PMB: Ah, '45.

VERY: Yeah, '45 because the war was over then and I, like so many young people, wanted to get out of it. And don't ask me why because I don't know, but I did.

PMB: Where were you stationed during the war?

VERY: The war? I was stationed in Kingston, Ontario. And I spent a little time in Ottawa. I was in England. And I was in Holland.

PMB: Were you there for the liberation of the Netherlands?

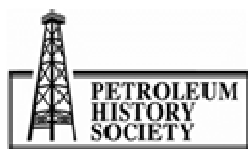
VERY: Mm-hmm yeah.

PMB: Were you?

VERY: Yeah.

PMB: Congratulations.

VERY: Then I was discharged from the Army. I worked for my father in Lacombe. My father was a baker, he had a bakery. I worked for him for some time. Then I went to work for Greyhound Lines in 1948, I guess it was. It was interesting, when we got married. The morning after we got married I had \$3.00. And a friend of ours, I was working for Greyhound at that time. And one of the bus drivers bought us some breakfast. For a honeymoon, my father and my mother went away for a month so I ran his business for a month.



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PMB: That was your honeymoon?

EVERY: Yeah.

PMB: Your mom and dad actually had the honeymoon.

EVERY: Yeah, yeah. And we had a place to stay. We had food to eat. We had the car to drive. And I even got paid. So we had a good honeymoon, we really did. We were living in Calgary then. And I was moved to Medicine Hat as [Regional/Legal] Manager in 1952. In 1956, I went to work for Northwest Nitro Chemicals. That was a fertilizer plant in... Oh, I had been transferred to Medicine Hat by Greyhound. And that was... Greyhound was closing down some of their smaller depots like Medicine Hat, North Battleford, Brandon and some of these places. To keep from having to move back to Calgary, I went to work for Northwest Nitro Chemicals, in the office as an accountant. And I worked for them for some time and they had built a new ammonia plant; a 60 tonne a day ammonia plant. Now this was one of the first plants that came like a jigsaw puzzle. In other words, it was a built and it came on skids and they put it all together. And I remember I knew the superintendent of that area. And I said to him, "You going to hire some people for your new ammonia plant?" He says, "Oh yeah." And laughing really, I said, "Would you hire me?" He said, "Sure." And that was my introduction to being an operator.

PMB: Essentially, chemical processing operator.

EVERY: That's right. At that particular time there were union agreement, they were under union agreement. There was a loop-hole and after 90 days all my seniority was good. And I became the number one trainee and as I moved up the ladder, I was pretty well at the top. But I had to learn these jobs; it wasn't like it is today. Nobody took me and trained me, I learned.

PMB: You learned by doing.

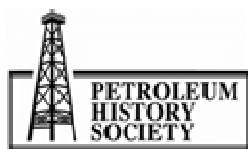
EVERY: I worked one job, I learned another. And then in 1966, I came to Fort McMurray to work for Great Canadian Oil Sands. And I worked for them until 1987 and I came back and worked 4 year. I retired and I came back at work 4 years.

PMB: You couldn't quite stand retirement, is that it?

EVERY: Well, it's the only way I'd get a raise. And after... in 1991 I had a bypass operation, so I didn't go back after that. And I've been retired ever since. I'm lazy. I'm ideal for retirement. I'm one of maybe a few people in this world who enjoyed retirement.

PMB: At the refinery, at the GCOS and then later the Suncor refinery. Can you tell me a little bit about that? First of all, what kind of function did you have there?

EVERY: To start with, the pipeline had been water tested for leaks and that.



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PMB: So it was tested with water rather than oil?

VERY: Yeah, yeah. And we pumped out the pipeline into a tank and then drained it. And that was one of my first jobs. The plant, when I started in September '66, the plant wasn't quite finished. So we started in '67, froze it up that winter, '67-'68. Froze it up, we were frozen up from the Grey Cup weekend to February I guess it was when we finally got some stuff going. So that was a...

PMB: So you mean after the processing plant, after GCOS started up and running, you didn't really have oil to flow into the pipeline?

VERY: Yeah.

PMB: For that long.

VERY: But not that long. See, when that plant was built it was supposed to be self-sufficient. Well, being self-sufficient in California is not like being self-sufficient in Fort McMurray. We have a little thing up here called winter.

PMB: And so it didn't have insulation, proper insulation and it couldn't...?

VERY: It just wasn't built for here. And, of course, it's all been changed and it's great now and we got over all that. But we were supposed to supply all our own feed gas. We were supposed to supply our own process gas. After we froze it up, they built the gas line. There was no gas line into here then. They built the gas line which gave us a supply of process gas and after that it was fine. We switched a lot of our coker heaters, heat oil fired and then when we changed to natural gas things got a lot better. Of course, it's been natural gas ever since. And, as I say, we got back doing things in February. When we froze it up, we lost the power house you see. And when the power house went down we had no power, we didn't have anything. And we ended up with a million leaks.

PMB: Well Lester, who I was just talking to told me that the, I think it was Lester, who said that the power system often seemed to go down. Do you know why that was?

VERY: Well the fact the place was supposed to be self-sufficient; there was no back-up. You know, when something goes down you hope you've got some back-up but we had none. And it was winter and you know it gets cold in winter.

PMB: And it wasn't built for winter, I see.

VERY: And then they got power house going and some genius put the 50 lbs. steam into process area and we must've had a million leaks. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face out there. It was an adventure. But, they got it fixed and everybody lived happily ever after.

PMB: Right now, it sounds to me as though you're about 1968?



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EVERY: Yeah.

PMB: So you've got rid of the worst of the original problems?

EVERY: That's right.

PMB: You got them fixed.

EVERY: And the plant ran... the plant... We had in the winter of '68, '69 I think it was, we had a stretch that it stayed really cold. And when I say cold, I mean -40 at night and daytime -30. And the plant ran good.

PMB: So within basically a year, year and a half...

EVERY: Yeah, yeah. Once we...

PMB: ... you had improved it to that extent?

EVERY: Oh yeah. Once we got the gas line, the gas line was the secret. That was the thing that saved us.

PMB: And you used the gas to fuel what, the power system?

EVERY: Yeah, they used it in the power house. See they were, in order for them to operate they were supposed to operate, burn the coke that was a by-product of the process. Well when the process wasn't working there wasn't any coke. And once they had the gas, of course then the... everything became gas fired. Well, they burn coke now and partially over the years, I don't know how much because I never worked there. The gas line was the saviour.

PMB: The biggest original issue was fuel. What fuel are you going to use.

EVERY: Yeah.

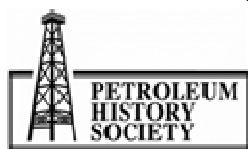
PMB: You couldn't use gas from the cracking or from the coking...

EVERY: Yeah, yeah.

PMB: ...because you needed to use, for whatever reason. And you were planning to burn coke, at one time, as a fuel?

EVERY: Well they were making... coke is a by-product and that was going to be fuel for the power house.

PMB: Yes, so would take coke out of the oil sands, this is almost pure carbon and then you would burn that and then you would use that. Oh, I see.



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EVERY: Yeah, that's right.

PMB: And that just was not realistic.

EVERY: No, no.

PMB: So you brought in the gas and solved the problem.

EVERY: Yeah. And we were producing our own oil for our heaters and oil fired heaters. I think they are a thing of the past, myself.

PMB: Oil fired heaters?

EVERY: Yeah, yeah. Gas fired, great. It's an awful business.

PMB: For most of the time since that plant opened, gas has been surplus and oil has not.

EVERY: Oh, yes.

PMB: So it makes economic sense too, doesn't it?

EVERY: Oh, I'm sure. Yes, yes. As I say, the building of the gas line was the saviour of that plant.

PMB: Now you were, as I understand it, you were a supervisor within the...

EVERY: I started out as a board man on the control...

PMB: What did call it?

EVERY: Board man.

PMB: So, on the control board?

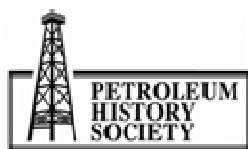
EVERY: Yeah, control board at Plant 6 and 7. That was the hydrogen plant was Plant 6 and Plant 7 was the unifiers.

PMB: What did you call it? Uni...

EVERY: Unifiers.

PMB: U-N-I-F-I-N-D-E-R-S.

EVERY: O-R-S. And, a unifier is like... well Syncrude is a different name for them. And other people... It is where you get the H<sub>2</sub>S out and you end up with gas oil and kerosene.



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PMB: Oh, unifiers.

VERY: That's right.

PMB: So it's like a little refinery; a little processor.

VERY: That's right. That's right. And we made naphtha and kerosene and gas oil, were the three main products that we made.

PMB: Those were the products, and of course they were eventually recombined into synthetic oil, weren't they?

VERY: Yeah, yeah. And they went down the pipeline in whatever the customer ordered. So, it was an adventure.

PMB: How many people did you have on staff... how many did you personally supervise at the beginning?

VERY: Oh, probably 17 or 18, something like that.

PMB: And then at the end, that number increased when you retired?

VERY: Well, I became the unit leader. And I liked the unit leader's job. It didn't have the... don't quote me, but...

PMB: Oh, I'm going to quote you.

VERY: I always thought the shift supervisor was the guy that looked after the shift as to when people were working and looked after the time and that. Unit leader actually had more to do with running the plant. You didn't have all the personnel problems. That was the shift supervisor. I didn't like shift supervisor, I liked unit leader.

PMB: Okay, yeah, because you weren't just looking after the administration of the staff.

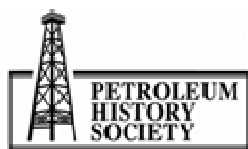
VERY: Then I became a trainer and I trained operators. Then they told me I was too old.

PMB: To train?

VERY: No, I was too old to work there.

PMB: And they kicked you out?

VERY: Yeah. I was 61 and they bridged this to 65.



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PMB: Well, that was the feeling that I got from talking to Germain and to Lester; that 60 seems to be the time that you retire from the plant?

EVERY: Well, they like everybody else, things... oil... The price of oil was down and the...

PMB: I'm trying to remember what year this was? '92 or?

EVERY: Well, I left in '87. In '86 I was supposed to leave in June '86 but they went on strike. So I got locked in the plant because I was working as a trainer then and I was management. The strike was in '86 for six months.

PMB: And I want to ask you about the strike, but let's leave that for a few minutes.

EVERY: So instead of leaving in the mid-86, I left January '87.

PMB: But then you said you came back a couple years later.

EVERY: Then I came back and did some work on the one of the ponds, we were recapturing some of the oil that was in one of the ponds, that we were supposed to be recapturing it. And then I worked on the sulphur re-melt system. Well, when that plant was built. Again, I'm just pulling this out of the sky. I believe the price of sulphur was around \$40.00 a tonne or something like that. It went down to less than \$5.00 I think. So we had sulphur, piled with sulphur all over the place.

PMB: They were all over the province. Every gas plant had one.

EVERY: Oh, I know. An outfit from Calgary came in and they set up a re-melter and they re-melted this sulphur and it was trucked down to some of the fertilizer plants I think or something. Anyway, so I was the coordinator on that job for Suncor. And my chief part of that job was keeping those guys from killing themselves.

PMB: In what way?

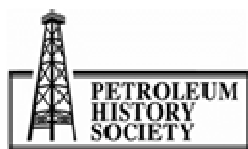
EVERY: Well they weren't very safety conscious.

PMB: Oh you mean from the hydrogen sulphide or?

EVERY: Well from just operating their little plant. Anyway, and then I had a bypass operation in March '91, so I didn't come back. I'd had enough.

PMB: Now, I want to go over a few things here. You told me how things really changed in the beginning. Is there anything you would describe that was really pretty fundamental?

EVERY: Well I think some of the most fundamental things, as I said, were the vast differences between Fort McMurray and California, or wherever they designed that plant. And we were... it's not



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that we didn't have good operators, but we didn't have good operators in that kind of a plant, because we came from all over the place. Like I came out of a fertilizer plant and people came from various jobs. Now remember, what I'm telling you pertains really only to upgrading or the refinery because I don't know anything about the rest of the plant, I never bothered.

PMB: Sure. And that's what I'm asking about because the other guys came from the extraction area. So I've learned a lot about that now.

AVERY: My employee number is five.

PMB: Wow. I'm impressed.

AVERY: So I've been around for a while.

PMB: Yeah. Okay, biggest challenges you met in your career and you've talked about a number of careers. What parts of your career: as operator, as a unit lead and then as a trainer. In each of those you must have surely had some big challenges. What are the kinds of things were they?

AVERY: The first biggest challenge, when I decided to become an operator, I'm afraid of heights. And I looked at these 60 foot towers and I knew someday I would have to climb them. Nobody pushed me. This was when I was working in Medicine Hat, working in Medicine Hat at the plant. And eventually I did. And mechanically, I'm about as dumb as you can get. And I didn't know a discharge end of a pump from the suction, all right. I didn't know anything mechanical, so I had to learn because I was completely out of my element then. But I did, I learned. And I guess I became a fairly good operator. And, incidentally, my son's an operator with... he's at Firebag right now. He's manager at Firebag. That's an in-situ.

PMB: That's right.

AVERY: He has moved from the truck and shovel operation like we have here, to Firebag which is in-situ.

PMB: What does he do there?

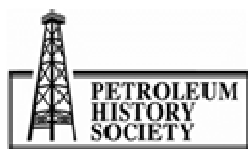
AVERY: He's a manager. They're building a DRU plant.

PMB: What does DRU stand for?

AVERY: DRU is whatever they add to the bitumen to transport it because bitumen is like mud. The DRU is a naptha, a heavy naptha that they add to it. And then this DRU plant recaptures it.

PMB: Oh, okay. So that would be a... trying to understand what he words stand for, DRU.

AVERY: I'm trying to think, I've always called it DRU.



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PMB: It doesn't matter, okay. So DRU plant which recaptures some of the solvents used to liquefy the bitumen.

AVERY: That's right. And he's... he worked 21 years here and he was a shift supervisor, but his wife and son were living in Red Deer so he quit here and he went to work out at Joffre for four years. Then Suncor wanted him back, so he went back on the proviso that they would not send him to Fort McMurray.

PMB: So he went on the Firebag operations.

AVERY: Yeah, well that's...

PMB: And the Firebag is quite close to this, isn't it.

AVERY: Yeah, yeah. Well, he was in their new plant Voyageur, he was going to be in Voyageur. He was their coker expert. And anyway, he's up at Firebag. He likes it. He's in a week and he lives in Okotoks, they fly him from Calgary and he leaves his vehicle at the airport, they pay for that. So he has been back with them six years now.

PMB: Well when I spoke to Germain a little while ago, not only did he work there, but his sons and his grandsons are working there. So they are really happy with this area and with these operations, but we'll come back to that in a couple of minutes. Are there any other major challenges that you or the organization faced?

AVERY: Well we had a strike in '69; I think it was '69. And we got settled for half of a bus ticket. The bus ticket was ten cents. I think it was a half of a bus ticket we got when it was settled.

PMB: So they changed the price of the bus ticket to five cents from ten or something?

AVERY: Yeah, something like that.

PMB: Well, it's a pretty important deal.

AVERY: And then they... '70? Oh Christ, '76 or something, I've forgotten now, we were on strike again. Now you've got to remember that that plant was unionized. All the union strength was in the mine. There were so many people, more people working in the mine than the lab and upgrading.

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PMB: Okay, now we're in the Sawridge hotel.

AVERY: Yeah, okay.



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PMB: I don't know what it's done. Let's just try it.

AVERY: Okay.

PMB: Please continue, we were talking about the strikes.

AVERY: We didn't have much choice because if the people in the mine areas wanted to go on strike, there was nothing we could do about it. Because we didn't have enough personnel in the other area to offset the number of personnel they had. So we had a strike. And I forget what it was about, but it didn't last that long.

PMB: This is the one in the 70s?

AVERY: Yeah. Now the one in '86 was bad. It lasted from May until October, I believe it was; approximately, six months anyway. And it was again, I don't know why they went on strike because I was not part of the union. But I got locked in and my son was on strike. That didn't matter. It didn't bother either one of us. But I was locked in and I was a unit leader on Plants 5 and 8, that's the cokers and the sulphur plant, on night shift. But we survived, but a lot of people in this town didn't survive. I understand there were marriages broken up, there were homes lost and it was not good.

PMB: There were businesses that went down.

AVERY: Yeah. And I don't think the settlement of this strike didn't accomplish anything for the union; that I know of. I know the people came back to work and I worked from when they came back to... They came back and we didn't bother them or anything. We just worked with them and frankly, worked our way out of the jobs we were doing. In January, I was retired.

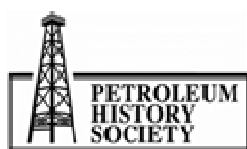
PMB: So really your last, you spent those six months as an alternative worker.

AVERY: Yeah.

PMB: Then a few months later, you decided to retire.

AVERY: Yeah. Well they... Things weren't good, I guess. I know they had wanted to cut back personnel. They wanted to shrink their personnel. And I asked them, they didn't demand that I retire. But I went to them and I said, "Well what happens if I don't." There are no guarantees otherwise. So I said to Olga, my wife, I said, "Do I want to go to work every day wondering if it's my last day?" And I said, "No." So I took the retirement. And they treated us very well in retirement and I've got no complaints or anything. They always treated us very well.

PMB: Now, let's look at that period. When you were retiring and when the strike happened. The strike was in 1986, May.



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EVERY: Yeah.

PMB: Exactly one year earlier, do you remember when the oil price just totally crashed?

EVERY: Yeah.

PMB: It went down from, I think it was \$40.00 or something and it went down to, God...

EVERY: It went down to \$10.00 a barrel.

PMB: It went down to \$10.00. There were even trades lower than that. That would be, of course, one of the reasons why the plant was really struggling financially.

EVERY: Yeah, they wanted to cut back.

PMB: Because the oil they were producing was generating not enough to cover the costs.

EVERY: Again, I have my own ideas about that.

PMB: Tell me about that.

EVERY: You know, the funny part of it was, the oil that we were producing at such a cost to us here was going to our own places.

PMB: It was going to some refineries in Ohio for example.

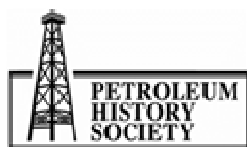
EVERY: Yeah. And I do think they were making money there. Now, I might be wrong but... So, it was sort of six of one and a half a dozen of another.

PMB: Well, but you could argue that they could've bought cheap West Texas intermediate somewhere.

EVERY: I was just an operator; I wasn't the high up in the food chain or anything. And I was just an operator who came to work when I was told to, and went home when I was told to. What I think, in my own mind, is not important.

PMB: Well, no. For this project it's very important. So you're thinking that there might not have been some fairness around that strike. Because it wasn't a strike really, it was a lockout.

EVERY: Yeah, well that was the union's fault, the lockout because they didn't win anything when they went back. And I really think the strike benefited the company because they found out the people that they didn't really need. When I needed something done, maintenance wise, I picked up the phone and phoned maintenance and they sent somebody over to do it. There was no planner engaged, no this and no that. They just came and did it. So the company learned some things.



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PMB: I don't understand what you're saying there. Please explain that to me a little better.

AVERY: I'm saying that the company found out where, maybe it took ten people before, maybe it only took seven people.

PMB: Okay, because if you called maintenance and then they sent somebody over immediately then that meant they had too many people there?

AVERY: Well, yeah.

PMB: Basically.

AVERY: Yeah. See, it had to go through planning; it had to get on a priority list and that. When the strike was one we just phoned maintenance and they came and did the work.

PMB: Oh, I see, I understand. Oh, okay.

AVERY: So I think the company learned a lot of things.

PMB: So the company learned from the strike because they had a lot of people like you, and people from Calgary and people from all over; office people working on the plant.

AVERY: Well sure they were. I had people working for me on the night shift who were making more wage-wise than I was.

PMB: Because they were a manager or something in Calgary.

AVERY: That's right.

PMB: Now, what I recall, what somebody told me is that there were actually... there's a camp within the grounds and the only way you could get in or out.

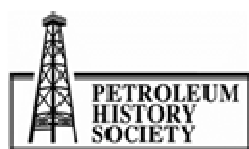
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PMB: We're continuing now with the strike, we've had to make one more move.

AVERY: And the strike was over in October, I believe. The people came back to work and that basically was my part in it. And I worked until January, when I retired. And then I came back and did some procedure writing for them.

PMB: Procedure writing?



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AVERY: Yeah, yeah, from my training days and that. And then I worked on the sulphur re-melt and that's the end of my career.

PMB: A couple of questions for you, because of the noise here, this isn't going to be a good recording. But, looking back on your career at Suncor, what impressions do you have about having been part of the development of the oil sands? What would you say to somebody out on the street who said, "You know, what do you think about the oil sands?"

AVERY: As a kid going to school, I read about the oil sands. And we were taught things about the oil sands. And I think it was basically known in those days that the cost of operating in the oil sands was beyond, most thought, and nobody wanted to take that flyer on it until Sunoil did. And that's how Great Canadian Oil Sands got started because to say there wasn't enough oil, to risk it, well you and I know there are all kinds of oil. I think all you've got to do is look at the economy, the economics of our country, our province and our country and know what a boom the oil sands has been to it. And they can, these Greenpeace people can run around doing what they want to and still you can't discount the amount of finance that this company, this area has put into this country. Believe me and that. So, I think the oil sands are good. And I think some of the drawbacks are being worked on and soon, at least someday they might... everybody might end up happy, but I doubt it.

PMB: What would you say to the environmentalist, who said, "Well you know, look at all the CO2 and it's dirty oil."

AVERY: Well, the term dirty oil is a misnomer because when you think of dirty oil, you think the oil is dirty but the oil isn't dirty. The oil is high, good oil. Where their getting their term dirty oil from is the process and the off-gases, I guess, from the process and that. But, it made a living for me and my family. It's given me a good pension, a good retirement. So I can hardly find fault with it.

PMB: Well have to make this fairly quick. But I just want to ask you a couple of questions; you said that you met J. Howard Pew once?

AVERY: Yeah, yeah.

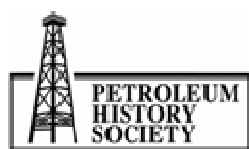
PMB: Can you give me your impressions?

AVERY: Well, he was the boss.

PMB: He was also, I think, the seventh richest man in the United States.

AVERY: Probably. Whether he was president of the Great Canadian Oil Sands, Thayer was his name. He was married to Mr. Pew's sister.

PMB: Oh, really?



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AVERY: I think it was his sister. Yeah, it was a relation anyway, which sometimes helps you in the food chain. I found any of them that came to visit us, they're fine. I was a public school boy, trustee for 26 years in Fort McMurray and I met most of the board of directors from time to time. Because if they were here, having their meetings then they usually had a little get together and I used to get invited to it. Not as an operator but as a school trustee or as the chairman of the public school board. So I got to know some of these people, and their people like you and I.

PMB: Now we started this conversation talking about Olga, and I think it was Burt McKay who told me that she was one of the longest serving volunteers with the school board, in this province. Or, maybe it was just in Fort McMurray.

AVERY: Probably in Fort McMurray. She started out as a volunteer then she went to work as a teacher aid. And then she went from the teacher aid to the secretary job. She was a secretary and she worked with the public school board for approximately 25 years. My wife was the senior of the year in 1975 and again in 2001. Dr. Clark Elementary School has a Grade 8 leadership award in her name, which you don't find too often in a school secretary and that. And she was a good person, I got a card in the mail and this woman said, she remembers all the... going down the hallway in a cart with somebody pushing her.

PMB: This was one of the students. She had a student in the cart. That's funny.

AVERY: Yeah, yeah. And she was the only school secretary that I knew of that had roller skates. They bought her roller skates.

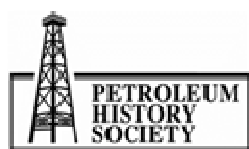
PMB: Now, I just wanted... this going to be the last word I think on this but I want to tell the transcriber that today is Thursday and your wife's funeral was last weekend.

AVERY: Yeah, it was on the 17th, yeah.

PMB: May she rest in peace, thank you very much.

AVERY: Thank you.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**



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