



WILLIAM (BILL) M. HUMPHREYS

Date and place of birth December 1st, 1926; Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Date and place of interview: February 27th, 2013; Bill's home in Wildwood, Calgary

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

Transcript reviewed by subject:

Interview Duration: 1 hours and 6 minutes

Initials of Interviewer: PMB

Last name of subject: HUMPHREYS

PMB: Today is the 27th of February, 2013. And, I am in Bill Humphrey's home in Wildwood in Calgary. And, we're going to be talking about Bill's experience especially with the Abasand project a million years ago! So, Bill would you begin, please by telling us a little bit about your biography. Tell us a little bit about your career, where you were born and so on?

HUMPHREYS: All right. I lived in Edmonton and at that time, graduated in civil engineering in 1953. And, since that time almost exclusively I was involved with the natural gas production pipelines and that sort of thing. But, the reason why we ended up in Edmonton is that my father was working for Abasand at the time and I believe he was hired by Max Ball. And, I think we moved to Edmonton in 1942. We came out in 1941. I think that's probably when he had an interview in Calgary, because we lived in Winnipeg at that time. My father was the consulting refinery engineer at that time, but had worked for Imperial Oil for many years. And, we drove out from Winnipeg to Calgary at that time. That's when I believe that the connection was made. But, I also had a brother in the army at the Sarcee Camp in Calgary. But, I think we actually moved to Edmonton in 1942, because my brother just a year and a half older than I am, we both entered high school at that time. And, I started in Grade 10 and he started in Grade 11.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



And, then it was in that time that in 1943, the Hudson's Bay Company were looking for about six kids out of high school to work on the boats up on the Mackenzie. It could be war time and I guess they were having trouble getting people. And also, you might be aware that was a time when the Canol Pipeline was being built and the boats were busy up there. And, so I spent the summer on the SS Mackenzie and managed to cover the entire length of the Mackenzie from – well, they flew us up in an American aircraft up to Norman Wells. And, we picked up the boat at that time, just as the ice was coming off and we headed north into Tuktoyaktuk and then came back south and got to Great Slave Lake. And, by that time we were running out of time and I had to leave and go back to high school. And so, we took the other Hudson's Bay boats all the way down to Waterways and then, the train back down to Edmonton.

PMB: Let me interrupt you here before I forget. What is the date of your birth?

HUMPHREYS: December 1st, 1926.

PMB: Where were you born?

HUMPHREYS: In Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Well, really I used to call it Dartmouth. But, technically it's Imperial Oil – a housing project where the refinery is.

PMB: Oh, the Imperial Oil refinery there.

HUMPHREYS: Yes. Oh, I think he worked for a number of Imperial refineries, but that's where I was born.

PMB: Now, I had the idea somehow that your father actually moved to Calgary from someplace in the United States. That's not true?

HUMPHREYS: Yes, he got an engineering degree in the States. And, then he went into Canada and worked for Imperial and a number of the refineries, not just in Imperial Oil. But also, when my brothers were born – the younger one was born in IOCO refinery town in Vancouver, and the oldest brother was born in the States. There are three brothers, the one next to me and I were born in Imperial Oil communities. But, my grandfather was with Standard Oil (later, Amoco) in Chicago. So, being in that business you moved around and I think he ended up even in Sarnia at one time -- the refinery there. But, he decided to go into consulting and ended up in Winnipeg. And, I remember one time they built a smaller refinery in Saskatchewan and he was the engineer for it. And, I think it must've been that time that Max Ball discovered him somehow.

PMB: Now, we're talking about your grandfather or your father?

HUMPHREYS: My father. So, then that resulted in us moving to Edmonton. And at that time, I don't know what my father's position was or anything, but he was primarily in the office in Edmonton. But, he probably made trips up to McMurray, but I don't remember that. But, he stayed pretty well in Edmonton and looked after the materials and all that end. You have to realize, today's



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



terms when you think of all of the talk of highway up to McMurray, there wasn't anything like that. It was normally the Alberta Railway from Edmonton went up to Waterways. And, there was one straight through trip a week.

PMB: How far is Waterways from Fort McMurray?

HUMPHREYS: Oh, just a couple kilometres, just over the hill. The plant was sort of in a hole in there by the Horse River and down in there. But, to get into the actual town of McMurray, it sort of went over the hill and there was a bit of a town there. Waterways was just a couple of kilometres down, was the end of the line for the Hudson's Bay Company; all their warehouses were in Waterways.

PMB: There were just a couple of thousand people in the town at that time, weren't there?

HUMPHREYS: If that, I don't know. But, that was really the reason why the railway was there, to supply Hudson's Bay. My father used to complain about that, that it was listed as an unfinished railway which meant the freight rates were higher. So, anything you sent up to Abasand had to go by train and off-load at Waterways and trucked into the plant. And, so as I say, once a week there was one through train that went -- as I recall it was 300 miles and it took 21 hours. And, if you realize this, people talk about the muskeg in McMurray. Well, that train moved in there so slowly, you could get out and walk beside it. And, I think that what they did is they used 12 foot ties and staggered them. And, it almost was floating through there. And then, there was another train once a week that you had to spend overnight in Lac La Biche. So, that was really the only way of getting up there must have been some kind of a road or trail, not much more. So, it was really interesting.

PMB: Now, Bill, I interrupted you. You said that you spent most of your career in the natural gas pipeline business? So, you got a university degree from where?

HUMPHREYS: From the University of Alberta.

PMB: In what year?

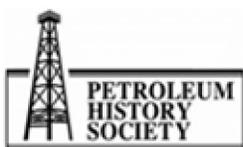
HUMPHREYS: In 1953.

PMB: And then, from then on you?

HUMPHREYS: I worked for a variety of companies. But, Hudson's Bay Oil and Gas was one of them. And, most of the years were with Pan-Canadian or its predecessors, as it started off with Canadian Pacific Oil and Gas. And then, I eventually ended up working for a company called Can-Ocean. And, that was sort of the last of my gas career anyway.

PMB: You left there to retire?

HUMPHREYS: Yes.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



PMB: What year was that?

HUMPHREYS: 1982.

PMB: Anything else you want to say about your experiences in the oil industry outside of the period in Fort McMurray?

HUMPHREYS: Outside of McMurray?

PMB: Yes, anything else about your later career?

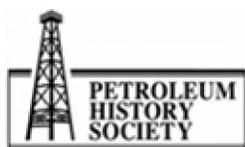
HUMPHREYS: Some of it, of course, in the natural gas industry was very early, because the Hudson's Bay Plant at Cessford was one of the first. That is north of Brooks, in that area. So, in that way I was in on the early part of that also, because in my summers at the university, I helped work on the gas distribution for the gas company at Banff. And, that was really the start outside of Edmonton and Calgary of putting natural gas into towns. So, we spent a couple summers up into Grande Prairie, Dawson Creek and up through there. And so, I got my start actually in utility work. And then, came back and worked after I graduated; first with a consulting company here that was doing utility work. And then, I ended up with Hudson's Bay Oil and Gas. In that respect, I got in pretty early on production and not drilling. I was never involved in drilling. It was all above surface and pipeline or gas processing. And, even in the later years I got a little more into ammonia plants and things like that. But, it was all surface or above ground. And, so it was an interesting time.

PMB: So, I want to ask you, obviously you must've known about the oil sands very early in your life. Had you heard about them before your dad ended up there?

HUMPHREYS: Well, I used to hear comments from my father, of course, and this is before I saw the thing. And, there is always an interesting point there because he mentioned that Abasand had the best leases. And, I remember he would call them Lease Number 4, which I believe was the same leases that Great Canadian took over which ended up as Suncor. Everybody knew there was a lot of oil sands up there. But, the rest of it is my own experience in the summer when I was up there in the summer of 1944. And, that I remember really quite well and that's when I saw it. My father had some samples of the sands. You used to hear him talk about it.

At the time, I guess I was 17 and you don't remember too much of that. But, in the summer when I was there I remember how they picked up the sand, how they handled that and samples of it that we used to pick up in our hands. It's not quite like you've seen in the press about squeezing oil out of that, it isn't quite like that. It's more like you see in the asphalt roads around here that mix -- what they put on the roads and they roll it in. But, you certainly came up with it on your hands. And, their system was fairly standard, I guess, except the sands were exposed more on a cliff than anything. And, they used explosives to loosen it up and a shovel to pick it up there.

PMB: Do you mean, just a guy with a shovel?



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



HUMPHREYS: No. It was a power shovel.

PMB: It was a mechanical shovel?

HUMPHREYS: Yeah.

PMB: Was it steam-powered or diesel-powered?

HUMPHREYS: No, no this was just a typical.

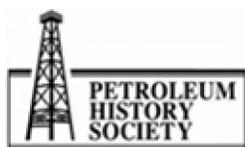
PMB: Diesel?

HUMPHREYS: Yeah, just a rather large diesel operated shovel. And then, they just had two dump trucks which were, to me, quite interesting. They were Macks. But, the difference with them they were big. You can see the Mack trucks around. But this one, I'd never seen anything like them, because they had external chain drives. And, that's hard to visualize. I don't know why I've never heard about them before or since. But, to me working as a mechanic's helper in there, we had the job of cleaning those. So, these chain drives were one on each side of the truck and every now and then they had to be taken off, because they got full of sand. And, there is where we got into it because they had to keep an old drum out in the field that was full of oil and you'd have to take these chains off them, put them in the hot oil to clean them. And then, the mechanics would put them back on again. So, this is a story of all of the equipment up there; the bulldozers that were in there they were always getting jammed up with the sand. So, you had to go in there with bars and try to clean the sand out of there. And, so you really get the feel of what it's like to work with that stuff.

PMB: It wasn't just sand, they would hit boulders sometimes?

HUMPHREYS: Not really. It was pretty clean, just saturated sand. And, then from there on a little bit of a description of the plant, they had the separation plant which was designed probably the same as -- you're aware of Bitumount -- it is just a hot water flotation. This is what Karl Clark, I think developed. And, so these trucks would dump it in an uphill ramp into the hopper into a separation plant. And, as a kid of course, you had a little bulldozer there, that's the smallest one I've ever seen. It was a Caterpillar. We called it Number 22 and never heard of it since. It's just a little guy.

Now, you can get them from all sorts of companies, small ones. But, these were used to push the sand up into the hopper. And then, from there it went down into the tanks in the separation where they have these same systems that I think that they are almost still used today, with improvements that just paddle the wheels on sort of a chain drive. And, frothing; it would froth off and it would scrape the frothing off into a hopper at the end. And, at the bottom the hopper had a slow moving screw that took the clean sand out. And, that sand was very clean. And, then it went on and there was some processing and they did have a simple refinery there. But, that part I really didn't understand it at all and didn't have much to do with. Most of mine was just the physical side of it there. And, even today, they do have tours down on the site. The local historical society, so you can



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



go down to the site. They took that sand across the Horse River and you could still see the pile of sand over there. And, if you walk around you can see where they dumped just the bottoms, I guess, the bitumen and it's still soft. So, that's still down there. And, that's about all that's left of that plant except a couple concrete walls that were left.

PMB: Bill, I'd like to go back a little bit now. Now, you're offering tremendous information. So, thank you. What is your father's full name?

HUMPHREYS: He was Claude V. Humphreys.

PMB: Do you remember when he was born?

HUMPHREYS: It was 1892. My grandfather was Robert E. Humphreys; he was with Standard Oil at the time.

PMB: What was your brother's name? You said that your brother worked there when Abasand burned?

HUMPHREYS: That was Jim. At Abasand, he worked the summer before me at Abasand.

PMB: What is that brother's name?

HUMPHREYS: Robert or Bob.

PMB: Bob Humphreys, okay, Robert Humphreys. He was born when?

HUMPHREYS: Yes. He worked for Home Oil here eventually. He would be born in 1928.

PMB: And, he has passed away now, is that correct?

HUMPHREYS: And, there were the other two older. There were three brothers. And, there were two pairs, you might say. And, the oldest he was born in the States and the next one down was born in IOCO, in the refineries down in Vancouver.

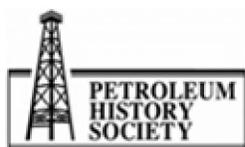
PMB: I wanted to make sure that we had their names.

HUMPHREYS: Well, the second one down ended up after he graduated in commerce. He worked for the same refinery in Vancouver, which was at that time, Chevron in recent years. He graduated in commerce. And, the oldest one was a geologist and he worked in Calgary.

PMB: So, you are the third generation in the oil business?

HUMPHREYS: Yes, in fact...

PMB: Your father and your grandfather too?



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



HUMPHREYS: My grandfather he was the original developer of the refinery in the Whiting Refinery.

PMB: Whiting is in Indiana.

HUMPHREYS: He was a doctor, back in those days. His equipment is in the Smithsonian. That's a whole new story, that one.

PMB: His equipment is in the Smithsonian?

HUMPHREYS: So, he developed the first cracking process for crude while he was with the Whiting Refinery out of Chicago.

PMB: Did he develop this cracking process at Whiting?

HUMPHREYS: Yeah. So, as I say there is a whole book out on Standard Oil and he's in that. It has our name on it. It's called the Burton and Humphreys Process. Burton was the president of Standard at the time. And, my grandfather ended up as a vice president. So, they paired the both names, Burton Humphreys. But, my father was a chemist at the refinery that developed the first -- well, in those days you didn't get much gasoline off of crude. And, all he did, it sounds so simple. He built a vessel and started to heat it up and started separating with heat and pressure. And, it just increased the amount of gasoline off a barrel of oil. So, that's gone down in history really as the basis for most of the refiners for a number of years.¹

PMB: So, that's the original cracker?

HUMPHREYS: So, this comes down through the family.

PMB: Wow! That's an amazing story.

HUMPHREYS: So, that's how I guess, my father got into the refining end of it too, you see.

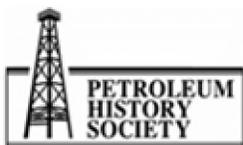
PMB: Now, what about your own children? How many do you have?

HUMPHREYS: My own? I have four of them.

PMB: Four? Their names are?

HUMPHREYS: The oldest one works for Lafarge up in Fort McMurray. And then, there's a daughter here and another daughter...

¹ According to an online explanation, "Company scientist William Burton and a colleague, Robert Humphreys, patented the thermal cracking process that doubled the yield of gasoline from a barrel of crude oil" sometime after 1912.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



PMB: All right. Give me their names, please? The son who works for Lafarge is...

HUMPHREYS: The first one is Patrick or Pat and then the next one is Carol. And then, there's a Susan that's living up in Leslieville if you know where that is?

PMB: I don't.

HUMPHREYS: It's up east of Rocky Mountain House in there. And then, the next one down is in Revelstoke in the fuel oil business.

PMB: That's a boy or a girl?

HUMPHREYS: His name is Peter. So, that's the four of them.

PMB: Okay, well thank you very much. So, some of them have continued in the oil industry?

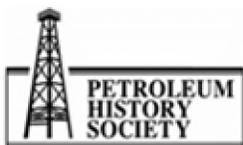
HUMPHREYS: Yeah. What's rather curious in that way, the oldest one he worked for Lafarge down here and then of course, he worked in a couple other batch plants as they call them. And then, he had the opportunity to go up to McMurray. So, he's been there for six or seven years now.

PMB: That's really great. We've got a long lineage here in the oil industry. That's tremendous.

HUMPHREYS: So, I get up there once in a while, of course, we visit. And, that's where I've been introduced to some of the historical people up there. And, there is one guy up there that's a second generation and lived in McMurray and he's doing a lot of work on the boats that were around McMurray. But, he didn't have much except casual knowledge from there, north; which I find it sort of surprising, because Waterways is really part of McMurray now, Fort McMurray. And, the little historical part there is one car from Northern Alberta Railway, but there aren't any tracks anymore. They disappeared somewhere. There have been various attempts throughout the years to get that moving again, but nothing has ever happened. Except, the government lately has been talking about rebuilding that one and I think they are with the CN, rebuilding a line into Hay River. But, it seems like it would make a lot of sense to get that track up there, except it will be very expensive. Because, as I say the muskeg is in there and then there's also a big valley that they'd have to cross. So, instead of that they've gone to the root of upgrading the highway.

PMB: Bill, I would like you to spend the rest of our time together just telling me as much as you know about your father's experiences there, your experiences there as a summer student and your brother's experiences there? So, we're starting in 1942 here?

HUMPHREYS: Sure. My father, as I say, at that time I really only know that he was working in the office. But, to back up a little bit, when I was there in the summer in 1944 we had two fires in there. And, of course, you hear a lot of stories about politics and fires in there. But, both of these were sort of legitimate you might say. They had a big cookhouse there and a wood-fired stove and it was sitting on a steel plate. But, I guess it got over-heated one day. And then, of course somebody made



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



a classic mistake, they decided to pry up the plate and put out the fire. Well, they just added oxygen to it. But, they did get the fire out. And then, awhile later the roof caught fire. And, that's a little story by itself. They had to a little commissary at the end there. And, the fire started and one of the guys climbed up on the roof and got the fire out. But, they found out that he was the one that set the fire. There is a bit of a story there, in this little commissary somebody remembered that they recognized the money. There was a bill or something that he paid for something and they traced it back to him. Now, why he set that fire, nobody knows. But, he set the fire and he almost killed himself. He went up on the roof to put it out and then fell off the roof. But, they got it out anyway.

PMB: You don't remember his name, do you?

HUMPHREYS: No, not at all, but when we came back to Edmonton and back to school, I remember very well when the big fire burned it down. I can remember sitting in the house on a Sunday when my father got the phone call that the plant had burned down. And, you could hear by his end of it what it was. And, I asked him about what had happened. And then, when I mentioned this ramp that they pushed this little bulldozer and took the sand up there, apparently there was a welder doing some repair work up there. This is the word he had, anyway. But anyway, and they had somebody standing there. I mean there's oil residue all over the place. And, they had this fellow standing there as a safety. And, it did catch fire and they couldn't stop it. So, the whole plant went up then. And, I think it was on a Sunday.

PMB: So, they had a welder actually welding and there was just bitumen everywhere?

HUMPHREYS: Yeah! So, again what you might call: a normal fire or just an accidental fire. And, I can't see any difference with that. But, with all these fires up there you hear these stories. The rest of it, I think it was just a -- none of these were anything more than accidental as far as I know.

PMB: Except the one.

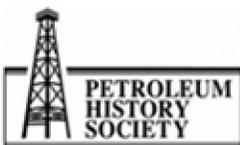
HUMPHREYS: So, he just stayed on there right up until 1951.

PMB: Your father stayed there until 1951?

HUMPHREYS: In the office in Edmonton, because he was trying to clean up the files. And, so he was in there. The fire then would have been late 1944, I guess. And then, the spring he said there was talk about rebuilding it again as a war effort. And then, of course VE-Day came along at that time and everything just stopped.

PMB: VE, that's Victory in Europe.

HUMPHREYS: 1945. So, for the next five or so years/five or six years and he was just trying to clean up the files and the records. So, where they ever disappeared to from there on, I don't know. And then, he came down with Eric Harvie when things were happening very quickly here. And,



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



found some kind of a connection there and with his experience, brought him down to work with him at Western Leaseholds as a purchasing agent. It's the Glenbow Harvie.

PMB: And, he was very important. He was a very wealthy man in Western Canada.

HUMPHREYS: That's interesting, because he's one of those that decided to build a company after instead of just selling out his interests. He built Western Minerals. But, by that time a purchasing agent doesn't sound very important. But, he said they got equipment and drill string all over the place and no one was looking after it, you see. So, he set that up for Western Minerals and ended up as a corporate secretary for the company at one time.

PMB: But, he also bought a lot of leases. He acquired a lot of leases in the oil industry.

HUMPHREYS: Yes, yes.

PMB: Really early on or as soon as Leduc came in, he just went on a buying spree and got a lot of properties.

HUMPHREYS: Yeah!

PMB: Let me just understand this: your father was involved from 1944 until 1951?

HUMPHREYS: Yes. From there on at Western Minerals, he was still involved in that end of it from a different aspect, yes.

PMB: During the Second World War, as I remember, the Canadian Federal Government was really the supporter of the Abasand project.

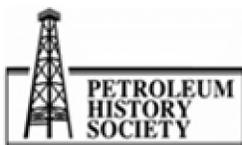
HUMPHREYS: Yes. And, I don't know. There has been a lot of talk and there's a book that I ran across when I was going through the internet one time. I think it was entitled "The Scandal of Abasand"² or something. I have a record somewhere. I'm going to go back and see if I can find that book.

PMB: Well, I'm actually going to go on the internet and see whether I can find that too. That's something I might like to add to my collection; very interesting. So, he would have left Abasand in 1951?

HUMPHREYS: Yes.

PMB: And, that was right after there was a huge oil sands conference in Edmonton. Do you remember that?

² The Abasand Fiasco, by Darlene Comfort.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



HUMPHREYS: No.

PMB: Do you have any recollection of that?

HUMPHREYS: I don't -- by that time; I'm not sure when things started to move with Great Canadian. Maybe, you know that date but I don't if that was before or after.

PMB: Well, in 1951 there was a big conference and that's when the Energy Minister, the Resources Minister (the name eludes me right now) laid out the rules for getting oil sands leases. And, big oil companies from all over the world started getting leases for the oil sands. It was a very important date.

HUMPHREYS: In those last days, I think it was him and one clerk that were still there. He was getting pretty tired of the whole thing.

PMB: What very likely happened is that he sold those leases to a group that was known as Canadian Oil Sands which was based in Toronto. So, he would have helped to transfer those leases.

HUMPHREYS: Yes. He probably...

PMB: And, then those leases eventually ended up with what is now, Suncor.

HUMPHREYS: He must've been involved in that. I don't know whatever happened to Max Ball after the fire, for instance.

PMB: He was never really actively involved. He lived in the United States. And, he got this thing started but then he kind of disappeared from the scene. I have a book that he wrote in 1950 and he talks about this.

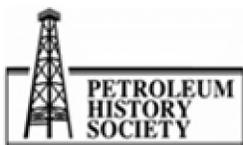
HUMPHREYS: I think I had met him once or twice. But, he would just show up once in a while in Edmonton and I guess that was it.

PMB: Do you have any recollections of him? Did he leave any impressions with you?

HUMPHREYS: I mentioned, my father would be involved in the leases or whatever, because I remember a law firm. It was quite a prominent one in Edmonton. The name escapes me at the moment. But, they were involved all the way through in the legal end of it.

PMB: Bill, do you have any impressions of Max Ball from when you met him? And, I know you were a young man then.

HUMPHREYS: Not really. I just remember the name. And, that's about all. But, I'm pretty sure I met him. But, I don't remember. By that time -- no, I was just too involved in everything else.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



PMB: Bill, at the beginning of this interview you talked about how you spent a summer at the Abasand project. You also talked about how you were involved in the boats that went up and down the Mackenzie River system. Would you talk about both of those things? First, tell me whatever you can about your summer on the Abasand project? Secondly, please tell me about your experience on the boats on the Waterways?

HUMPHREYS: Okay. My job there was a mechanics' helper. So, I worked in the shop there with a mechanic. And, they also had a master mechanic which may seem a little unusual, but he just couldn't put in a phone call here and get parts for what you wanted. So, I can remember the mechanics in there, even the pick-up trucks and so on. They had rebore cylinders and all of this kind of work. And, they also had a full machine shop up there. And, with the timing it was rather odd because they had a machinist there that was almost the typical, as they call it, as the picture of the German of that time. He was a strong, brush-cut and they just would pick them up. You could see that. And, he sort of stuck to himself. He didn't live in the bunkhouse with the rest of us. He had a cabin somewhere. But, he ran the machine shop and I remember a lot of that. He had to make almost whatever parts they needed up there to keep that plant running.

PMB: So, you had a forge and you had anvils...

HUMPHREYS: A whole rack of different kinds of materials. And, they had planers. And, they had power-saws and things like that. In those times, where a lot of that was running off one motor with a long shaft with bits of it that you'd hook up whatever you wanted to make. And, I used to like to watch him of course, because I'd never seen anything like that before. So, you do learn a lot of that kind of thing. And, the rest of it of course, was what I mentioned before, trying to keep the tractors cleaned up with the sand. And, that was the tough part of it.

PMB: So, the work that you did was mainly involved with getting the oil sand out of the ground?

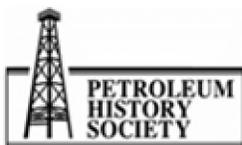
HUMPHREYS: Yes.

PMB: You had nothing to do with the refinery or the upgrader?

HUMPHREYS: No, not really. But, I certainly remember the separation equipment very well. And, I think that probably all I can remember except some of the pictures I showed you, which show the familiar where the sand went over the Horse River and that sort of thing. And, also I mentioned the brother next to me worked the previous summer there. But, I don't even know what he did. He probably went up as a laborer of some kind. But, the living quarters again, were not what you have these days. There was one big bunkhouse with rows down each side of the walls, single bunks. Down at the end was a washroom. So, that was the sort of routine in those days.

PMB: How many people lived in the one room, in the bunkhouse?

HUMPHREYS: I don't know. But, in the bunkhouse I can remember there would probably be 20-25 in one bunkhouse.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



PMB: There were no private rooms. It was just 20 or 25 beds? Were they bunk-beds?

HUMPHREYS: I think in the picture, you can see one of those long buildings there. That's where most of them stayed. And, the rest I don't know. But, they had Caterpillar drivers and things like that -- operators.

PMB: Now, I interviewed a fellow named Tom Morimoto who worked at Bitumount in 1936 and 1937 and he basically wasn't even paid for his work. I think Bitumount was a little bit more successful than Abasand in the early days. And, in the end the whole crew they couldn't catch a boat because they didn't have any money. So, they waited for the river to freeze over and then they walked back to Fort McMurray from the Bitumount project in the winter. And, they didn't get paid, they didn't get anything. But again, where you were was in the war time and you were paid?

HUMPHREYS: Yeah!

PMB: Sorry, you were paid? And, do you remember how much you were paid?

HUMPHREYS: Oh, I don't know, but...

PMB: It would be a dollar a day or something like that.

HUMPHREYS: Labor rates probably. But, the most important thing to somebody that age of course, is a cookhouse. You talk about these camps now and they wouldn't believe it, you know. But, they were great. Those are cookhouses and they'd be long tables there and the cook they had up there, they had the best food, really, on a big wood stove. And, they always had the big pot on, all of those did. And, even on the river, same thing. Those cooks had a big pot on the stove that always there. And, whatever was left-over (greens) would go in there for soup. And, I don't know if these fellows could cook for guys like that, I don't know. But, they certainly didn't have any problems with that. But, getting into town, we only got in once in a while and you had to get a ride over the hill. I think they had a theatre of some kind up there. But, there wasn't much reason to go into McMurray.

PMB: So, there was basically a movie theatre or something.

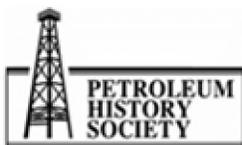
HUMPHREYS: Yes. So, whatever days off you got, probably one day a week, just hanging around I suppose.

PMB: You got one day a week off?

HUMPHREYS: I don't remember, but probably. There was nothing else to do anyway.

PMB: What were your impressions of Fort McMurray, the little village or the small town?

HUMPHREYS: Oh, there was very little there. I think there was in a lot of ways, more activity in Waterways than there. As I say, I think there was some kind of little theatre and that's about all I



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



remember. Because, at the plant and we had a little commissary where you could buy cigarettes and some pop, stamps and things like that.

PMB: So, when you were paid you were actually given cash? You were given a dollar a day or whatever it was? You were given cash rather than a cheque for example?

HUMPHREYS: I don't remember that part of it at all. I think it was in cheques. But, I don't remember how we cashed them. I don't remember.

PMB: Now, you worked also at that time on the river. I'm quite interested in that part of the story, because of course, during the war the Canol Pipeline was being built from Norman Wells to Skagway, Alaska.

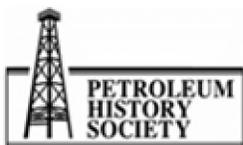
HUMPHREYS: Yes, yes.

PMB: Where there was a little refinery that never amounted to much. Can you tell me a little bit about working on the river?

HUMPHREYS: This was the main job, really, those boats. There were four stern-wheelers out there. But, they had to split them because up at Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald there are rapids between those two. And so, they had two stern-wheelers on the southern or upper rivers, they are a little smaller. But, on the northern side where we were or on the lower river, they had the one we were in and then the one a little bit bigger called the Distributor. The one we were on was the Mackenzie, yes it's Mackenzie. And, they were still supplying the Hudson's Bay Posts. So, this thing only made one trip to the Arctic and back. Well, we were on it and then I mentioned, then we had to leave and get back to Edmonton. And, the boats headed back up to Aklavik at that time.

They moved that, in effect, to Inuvik and that's where they put on all the surface facilities and that you see pictures of. Aklavik was much older and it's just in the Delta up there of the Mackenzie and I guess it was not too usable. So, they rebuilt it. But, it was there when we went there. And, I have a picture somewhere of Tuktoyaktuk, where you've heard about a lot of the drilling at that time and in recent years. But, at that time there was only Hudson's Bay Posts and a few tents and cabins up there, that's all. These boats couldn't stand any weather this -- this one we were on only drew a foot and a half of water. And, the bigger distributor took about two and a half feet of water and of course, like three stories about there they were strictly river boats. So, they had to be careful going across where there is any wind. And, when we got up in that area they had to wait in the Delta.

There was an Indian Eskimo graveyard in there that had been abandoned. And then, they had to wait there until the seas calmed down in the Arctic and at the same time, Hudson's Bay had a diesel boat up in the Arctic. They had a number of diesels on the river too. I don't know whatever happened to them. But, we met the diesel there and then when it calmed down, they made a quick run up half an hour or so to Tuktoyaktuk and unload there. And, this other fellow and I were stewards. So, we had the opportunity we could get out and walk around where the deck-hands were busy. As soon as they got through, they got out of there, you see.



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



PMB: Now, doing that work during the war, you would have been providing a lot of supplied for the Canol Pipeline? Do you remember kind of supplies you took?

HUMPHREYS: We should back up to that. When we made this deal in Edmonton and we would go up. We were all packed and had to wait a while, because they flew us up with the American Army, DC-3. That was before the days you had US Air Force. It was all an American Army at that time. And, we made almost an overnight flight up to there, one refueling stop and right up...

PMB: So, from Edmonton up to Tuktoyaktuk?

HUMPHREYS: No, up to Norman Wells. That's where we picked up the boat. And, across on the other side was where they wintered the boats in. And, they just carved out a piece of the shore and moved these stern-wheelers in there. And then, filled it in behind them and let them freeze in. So, when they flew us up there then they took us across to the other side. And, they were just getting the boats ready to go at that time. So, we left and we were living on the boat at that time. But, then we had to go down south to Fort Smith to do some servicing on the stern-wheelers. And, they just hauled them out of the shore and did some repair on the hulls and pull them back in again.

PMB: What kind of hull did they have? Was it steel hull?

HUMPHREYS: No, they were wood.

PMB: They were wooden hulls?

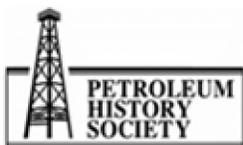
HUMPHREYS: There is so much of that history I don't understand, because you could go into the Yukon and you find stern-wheelers up there and even the Okanagan. Yet, these four just disappeared somewhere. But, I mean how old they were because I understood they put some -- this one we ran had a steel frame in it, which is put in on my birthday at 26 or something. So, it was around before. But, they were all cord-wood. And, we had an Indian family and this crew that went with us as we headed north. And, they dropped them off to cut cord-wood along the way. So, these boats every now and then would stop and load up with cord-wood. The one we were on, burned half a cord an hour or something.

PMB: So, they had steam engines?

HUMPHREYS: Yes.

PMB: And, they were fired by wood, by cord-wood?

HUMPHREYS: And, we had 110 volt power. They had a little turbine wheel, a Pelton Wheel they called it, for generating electricity. And, they'd fire these things up. So, they'd stop every now and then. They'd stop and of course, deck hands would have to get out and load the wood and we'd head north and up into the Arctic, landed at Aklavik and got out of there and headed south again. But, these boats would carry -- they would push. The boats were flat-front of those stern-wheelers



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



and they were latched onto the front. And, the barges around the front of there and sometimes, two or three barges loaded, heading north for all of the different Hudson's Bay Posts. And, then coming back they'd bring pelts and things like that from the Arctic back south. And, the bigger ones stayed in more the immediate area. But, we were fortunate to make the one long trip.

PMB: And so, were they carrying pipe and steel and that kind of thing, for the pipeline or not? What kind of materials were they carrying for the Canol? Were they carrying pipe? Were they carrying steel? Were they carrying drilling equipment?

HUMPHREYS: They had canoes and things like that, supplies mostly.

PMB: So, food supplies.

HUMPHREYS: Yes, food, yes.

PMB: That sort of thing.

HUMPHREYS: In those boats we even carried our own livestock. And, they butchered them on the way. So, that was an interesting twist.

PMB: So, when you got to the destination, would you sometimes leave live livestock?

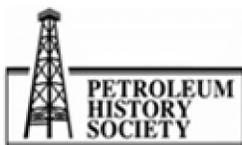
HUMPHREYS: No. We carried them on the boat and on one of the barges it was tied on or latched onto the front and the front had sort of a portable freezer or refrigerator. But, they would butcher them along the way. And, hang them up on top of the boat to sun-cure. And, we were well fed in there. Again, we had a cook that was down in the lower end on a wood stove. And, as passengers -- we had passengers on there, but we were two stewards. And, he had a dumbwaiter and he would bring it up from the ship down below from the cook. And then, we really didn't have any passages at war time except you might remember the old Star Weekly out of Toronto or something. They sent a reporter to cover that trip. And, we had a couple engineers that were being sent up to Norman Wells. And, they went along with us too. And, that was about all the passengers we had.

PMB: So, help me understand this. If you didn't really have many passengers, two engineers and a reporter, why did they need two stewards?

HUMPHREYS: We had to look after Captain...

PMB: And, the crew.

HUMPHREYS: So, we had to look after them too. Well, the food and wait on the tables. And, we learned how to wait table. We weren't too happy when we found out we were being stewards rather than deckhands. That was a more of a match-able job to have. But, it turned out by far the best. Because, every time we'd go into port we could get off and look around. As soon as the stuff was off-loaded, we were gone again. They didn't waste any time. Now, coming back, when you talk



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



about the war-time effort; the Americans of course, they had these -- there were a number of diesel tugs of the Hudson's Bay Company. But, Northern Transport also had diesel tugs up there. I think they're still in existence, the company. But, the Americans, of course, brought their own, up there as they would. Twin diesel tugs that drew, I think if I can remember about four and a half feet of water. And, of course out of Norman Wells, it's like a lake to get across there. And, they were always running aground with these things. And, we went on board one and they had propane fired cook stoves and the cook we had, had a wood stove down -- cooking for about 50 people or something.

PMB: The Americans would have brought their equipment and materials north to the Arctic, is that correct? So, they didn't try to overland it to anywhere and take it down the Mackenzie.

HUMPHREYS: The refinery had been there for a long time. And, it was the idea of getting that oil up there. And, I think it was a four inch line and it never did get used. They got oil in it and then shut the thing down. But it was way -- I don't even know how many hundred million dollars that thing built. It was another big scandal. Because, it happened in war-time and it was just a blank cheque almost.

PMB: Which was a white elephant....

HUMPHREYS: There's a star reporter here. If there is an open, he'll look into it. But, when we came back to this Fort Smith and we had to leave the boat. That's where the rapids were. But, the Americans had built a road from Fort Smith across to Fort Fitzgerald on the south end of it. So, when we came back and when we went around and picked up the Hudson's Bay Posts, there was a whole American labor battalion up there in Fort Fitzgerald. And, that's one of those stories of those times too, there were over a 1,000 of them in there. And, they were finished. But, the story we heard with these -- and of course, all black at the time. I think there were one or two white officers or something. And, we took them back south to Waterways on a boat called the Echo on the Hudson's Bay stern-wheeler out of Fitzgerald. And, so we loaded these fellows on.

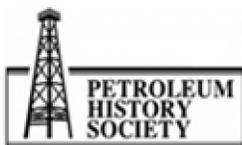
PMB: Let me see whether I understand that, because this is an interesting little piece of history. So, these were basically black American workers, had they been abandoned in the north or what?

HUMPHREYS: The story we heard a year or two before when this whole construction started. They loaded them on aircraft in Florida somewhere. They had summer uniforms on and they ended up in Fort Fitzgerald in the winter. And, they virtually had to build their own living quarters and everything else up in there. And, I think there was over a 1,000 there when we came up. So, they were a pretty happy bunch. And, we got to know a lot of them.

PMB: Okay, but let me understand. Why were they just left up there or were they just left there?

HUMPHREYS: No. They stayed right up in Fitzgerald.

PMB: Was somebody looking after them? Were they getting money?



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.



HUMPHREYS: They were slated to build a road around there, because those tugs they brought in must have had to come up through that road, you see. All of that stuff, heavy stuff and the pipe and everything would have had to come up that way.

PMB: I understand that there are villages in the north which are basically the descendants of aboriginal women and black American labourers?

HUMPHREYS: It'll be similar to the Alaska Highway. This is separate from that. But, there was a lot of black labour on that too. But, it was tough. They didn't worry too much about what can happen to them in those days. But, I have a Hudson's Bay calendar that I found somewhere taken probably before that one of the stern-wheelers taking a barge full of trucks north. So, all that construction equipment had to go up through that way, you see, every bit of it. So, these guys had to build the road and look after it and get this stuff across from there. And, so when we came back they loaded them, I don't know where they stayed on the barge.

It took us five days to get down to Waterways, the big Waterways of McMurray probably. And, they were one happy bunch, I'll tell you. And, when they had to load the boat with cord-wood before we left, they did it. I'll never forget this: they knew how to do that too. There was a long chain-gang all the way to up onto the top of the cliff. And, doing it like they should, they alternated on a chain. And, they started to sing as they will. And, they sure loaded that boat up in no time. And, just to get out of there. And, so we took them all back. And, we got to know their Master Sergeant, which was the guy that was really running everything. And, there was no problem with them, I'll tell you.

PMB: Well, I think you've given me -- a lot of what we've talked about had nothing to do with the oil sands. Any final comments you'd like to make about the oil sands? Is there anything else you would like to say about the oil sands?

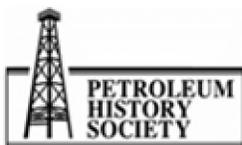
HUMPHREYS: Nothing more, I guess. I was just part of that. You read the stories that everybody knew about it, back in the Indians and Bitumont. I used to hear about that. And, I think there is still some of the equipment along the river bank up there. And, I can't think of much more on it, now. Except, that it's interesting for me to go up there now and Fort McMurray has got, what, 35,000 plus people in it now.

PMB: Oh, I think it might be close to around 90,000 now. It's a city.

HUMPHREYS: And, of course, my son on the concrete business has taken us in to show us some of the plants up there. So, it sure brings back memories and I got to walk down on the site of the old Abasand. But, the historical side, they do have regular trips they take people down and explain it.

PMB: Good. I'm going to turn this off. Thank you very much for a really excellent interview. That was a lot of fun.

[END OF RECORDING]



Sponsors of The Oil Sands Oral History Project include the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, Athabasca Oil Sands Corp., Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Canadian Oil Sands Limited, Connacher Oil and Gas Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, MEG Energy Corp., Nexen Inc., Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada.