
NELL SPRAGINS

Date and place of birth (if available): April 23, 1930; Calgary, Alberta

Date and place of interview: June 7, 2012; Nell Spragins' Residence on Grotto Road, Canmore, Alberta

Name of interviewer: Peter McKenzie-Brown

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

Consent form signed: Yes

Note: Minor edits made at interviewee's request

Initials of Interviewer: PMB

Last name of subject: SPRAGINS

PMB: I'm talking to Nell Spragins. She is the widow of the great Frank Spragins. We're meeting at her house on Grotto Street.

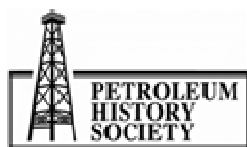
SPRAGINS: Grotto Road.

PMB: Grotto Road in Canmore, Alberta. The date is the 7th of June. It's the morning and the only people present are Nell Spragins and myself. And we're going to talk about... I'm going to be asking Mrs. Spragins about Frank's story. But we're going to begin with her story. So I wonder whether you would begin, Nell, by just telling us about where you were born, your early career, your education. And then when you met Frank and please be sure to tell us the story about how you met.

SPRAGINS: I was born in Calgary and I was raised in the Turner Valley oil fields out on a farm, as a matter fact. There were nine kids, I was number eight. I feel as if I raised myself. Anyway, I put myself in school and I was barely five years old. I was born in April and I went to school in September. School was three miles away and there was a great big hill, we called it the "Home Hill". So I was there for eight years, walking back and forth. The Americans picked me up hitchhiking to school. That's how I came across Americans and I thought they were the nicest people in the whole world. I didn't know they were such nice people.

PMB: Roughly what year was this?

SPRAGINS: It was 1935. So that's how I came across Americans and that's why I was attracted to this accent when I first met Frank.



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PMB: Frank's accent?

SPRAGINS: Right.

PMB: Because he was born in Mississippi.

SPRAGINS: He was born in the Southern States. Then for high school, I headed in the other direction which North Turner Valley High. And I walked across a farmer's field to get to that school. I wasn't hitchhiking, there wasn't any chance there. So that was four years there. Then I went to Calgary and I guess it was 1947 and my brother Bill McGregor, was very much aware of the oil fields and the history of the oil. He worked in Turner Valley. They hired me as Assistant Stenographer. Walker Taylor was manager there.

PMB: How big an operation was Imperial in those days? This is 1947.

SPRAGINS: Well to me it seemed fairly big, they had a big accounting section and all the different departments, personnel and what have you.

PMB: But it was literally the year that Leduc was discovered, wasn't it?

SPRAGINS: Yes, yes. I may not have got there until '48, that's after... So, then we used to go out for coffee in those days and they also sent some of us gals on a trip so we could kind of become acquainted with what was going on out in the field. The one trip they sent us on was to a trailer where Frank Spragins was showing us his geophysical stuff.

PMB: Would this have been up around the Leduc area or central Alberta?

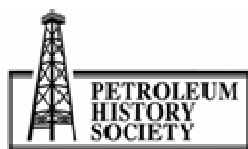
SPRAGINS: It was right in Edmonton. So he was in a trailer. And he talked to us.

PMB: This was a geophysical trailer?

SPRAGINS: That's right. So that's how I met Frank. And then we went out to coffee and he was there and so I proceeded to thank him for... I wanted to hear more of that accent, anyway. To thank him for what he had described to us and then he came to the... knocked on the door, the manager's door, telling me that he'd like to drive me home after work if I would like a ride. So that's how the romance started. That was in the end of a... or the middle maybe of '49. We were married in June 30th of '50.

PMB: Wow, what a wonderful story.

SPRAGINS: Yeah, yeah. Well I did see him out in the field with the gals. I did run into people that I knew working because of being in the valley. I knew some of the young guys. So I felt a little bit at home around the oil people.



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PMB: Did you continue to work for Imperial after you married?

SPRAGINS: No, I didn't go back to work. We started having babies and Rob was born.

PMB: And how many kids do you have?

SPRAGINS: We have four. We have Rob, Dan, Carol and Howard.

PMB: Now one of things, you wrote this wonderful little bio of your husband which is now available in the Glenbow Archives. And you told a story which I didn't get at first. Partly this is because I am not a country music or western music fan. But you told a story about Wilf Carter.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay.

PMB: Would you mind explaining that to me please?

SPRAGINS: Well, interestingly...

PMB: It had to do partly with him working for Carter Oil.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay. Just preceding that, just last Saturday, my cousin came over here and we went to Turner Valley. There was a party there for my brother and his wife, who was Joyce Carter and it was their 60th wedding anniversary. Joyce's father was the brother to Wilf Carter.

PMB: And Wilf Carter was famous...

SPRAGINS: Yeah, he sang cowboy songs and I think the Americans called him "Montana Slim." And so he was well known in Southern Alberta. But it happened that Frank was working for Carter Oil from the States and came up with Carter...

PMB: And Carter was a subsidiary of Standard of New Jersey...

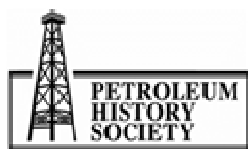
SPRAGINS: Yes.

PMB: ...which has become Exxon?

SPRAGINS: Yes. Coming up through Southern Alberta, I think the town was Taber, possibly. And his car, he parked it on the road, they were working in the area and he was on the street probably downtown and it said "Carter" on the outside. So some man came along and saw the name Carter, didn't notice it was Carter Oil maybe and wanted to know if Frank knew Wilf Carter. That's the meaning of that story.

PMB: So no concept about the oil industry.

SPRAGINS: No, not at all.



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PMB: But they did know Wilf Carter.

SPRAGINS: Oh sure.

PMB: Okay, great story. You said in your little bio, you said that Frank was instrumental in pioneering the use of trailers in the field. Could you say something more about that? Because, of course, ATCO which is a...

SPRAGINS: That's right, they were...

PMB: ... global company is based on that concept.

SPRAGINS: That's right. There is someone by the name of Ted Riback, he wanted to ask Frank to tell him about trailers and what would be suitable out in the field for people to live in and go to work and so on. So Frank did, gave him all the help that he asked for and that was how Frank had his picture taken by Karsh. I have it upstairs. This man wanted to thank Frank for all the help he got, so he went ahead and built trailers and made a fortune. He just was thanking Frank.

PMB: So this was a different person from the folks who started ATCO, Alberta Trailer Company.

SPRAGINS: As far as me, my memory just doesn't tell me that there was any connection however I don't want to say that for sure, because my daughter thinks there was.

PMB: Oh, really.

SPRAGINS: Yeah, it just came up the other day.

PMB: It was Ron Southern and his... that created...

SPRAGINS: Exactly, ATCO. And she came from Turner Valley, her dad was in the oil business and they had two sets of twins so I knew them slightly.

PMB: Ron Southern...

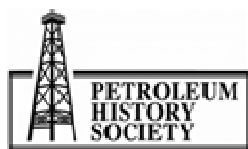
SPRAGINS: Marg Southern...

PMB: Marg Southern, his wife?

SPRAGINS: His wife, Marg. Their daughter runs it now, Nancy, I think it is.

PMB: Right. Oh, isn't that interesting.

SPRAGINS: So that's the connection with the trailer.



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PMB: Now I interrupted you while you were giving me your story. So we've reached the point where you've married Frank. It's 1950 and you've started to have babies and you had four. And I don't think you completed that sentence, I interrupted you.

SPRAGINS: I was thinking, something that came to mind as I was talking. I thought of it a couple of days ago. Frank loved to hike, to shoot geese, ducks, whatever, fish - two loves he had. Not that he did it a lot but he did. So the year we were married, it would've been in the fall I went hunting with him. In high school, one day they'd given us guns and we had a little shooting practice. That was the only time that I'd ever used a gun, laying down on the ground. I can remember the principal, Mr. Shearer showing us. Anyway, I went hunting with them and I shot something flying. And I can still hear Frank shouting to the other guys around, "Nell did that!" he said. And a goose, duck... I think it was a duck that fell to the ground. That was the only time I ever went hunting. So the babies started coming the next year. Anyway so that's the story first year.

PMB: So you bagged something the first time out.

SPRAGINS: I did, the only time.

PMB: The only time out. Good for you. And you gave me the names of the four kids. Where are they now?

SPRAGINS: Rob and Wendy had two boys and they're in Calgary. Danny is out at the coast, he works for Air Canada. He's on semi-retirement right now. And Carol is married to a lawyer, Bill Smith, in Calgary and they had two girls and they've both gone to university. And Howie is in Edmonton, RBC Advisor.

PMB: He works for Royal Bank of Canada?

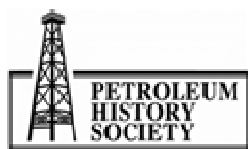
SPRAGINS: He's a broker. He and Nan live on an acreage out towards Spruce Grove.

PMB: And now tell me a little bit about your life with Frank as a... up to the point where, if you could just give me your immediate perspective from that point up to the time that he became involved with Syncrude and the impact that Syncrude had on your lives, your family life...

SPRAGINS: Well, it was obvious Frank was gung-ho. He was very involved in it and you could sort of tell. He'd come home and go out the back door and do his gardening. He was burying his frustrations probably in the gardening, which was good for him. He was great at gardening; a great worker. Certainly we were impacted. I pretty much raised the kids, I guess. It was a busy time.

PMB: Where did you live? Did you move around a bit?

SPRAGINS: We lived in first... no, not so much. We lived in 26th Avenue SW in Calgary was our first home.



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PMB: From when to when?

SPRAGINS: '50 to '57 and they sent Frank to Regina for two years but he felt he wasn't appreciated over there and I remember him going to Vern Taylor and saying, that really wasn't what he wanted to be doing, plunked over there. So we were over there for two years. And before we went we bought a lot in Mayfair that... Well this fellow, this Riback that he helped about the trailers, he owned this big patch of land which was Mayfair. So we decided maybe we'd choose a lot there because we had first choice. So we got that lot and then headed right to Regina, came back in two years and built a nice home there.

PMB: Now, did you both... you both went to Regina?

SPRAGINS: Oh, yes. One child, the youngest one, was born there, Howard.

PMB: What was he doing there?

SPRAGINS: Well he worked for one of the guys who left Imperial and went on his own and did very well. I don't really know what he did. He was in charge of one of the barbeques, I know, parties. He must've been busy but I don't really know what he did.

PMB: And so you moved back, I'm sorry...

SPRAGINS: Well he built a playhouse for the kids and grew... started a lawn because it was a brand new home again. And probably built a fence and so he was busy, I know that; and painted the house and so on.

PMB: So he was really, really hands-on in everything he did?

SPRAGINS: Oh, for sure.

PMB: You came back to Calgary?

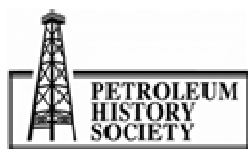
SPRAGINS: Came back to Calgary in '59, and built another home.

PMB: This was in Mayfair?

SPRAGINS: That was in Mayfair. We went up to Edmonton in '64 and went into Grandview. And we were in Grandview in January '65 and it rained overnight and froze. So, Frank... there was a very important meeting coming up, so he started out walking to get downtown to the office because it was so icy. So that's when he became president.

PMB: You mentioned that in your little bio and I didn't quite understand that.

SPRAGINS: Oh, I guess it was frozen...



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PMB: He walked to work...

SPRAGINS: He started walking because it was tricky driving.

PMB: And when he got to the office...

SPRAGINS: It was an important meeting and that's when he became president.

PMB: So he had a meeting in the office and they said, "Frank, you're the Pres."

SPRAGINS: Something like that.

PMB: "Just thought you might want to know." It was a big promotion for him.

SPRAGINS: Yes. So we were in that house for four years. We built a... bought a lot out in a... further out south on Westbrook Drive, a beautiful lot, a big lot. And I got to design the house. I was usually involved whenever we built a house in designing it. It was a beautiful, beautiful home. We moved into it in 1968 and that's when they got some bad news that they'd been stopped again. They didn't get permission to go ahead for one reason or another, you know. I think I've written it down somewhere what the reason was that time. But anyway, it was a very nice home when we were there in '68. Frank passed away in '78 and I stayed on ten years on my own in Edmonton.

PMB: In Edmonton.'78 to '88. And then what did you do?

SPRAGINS: Well '68 to '78 down on Westbrook Drive. And then I sold the big house and moved once or twice in Edmonton into a high-rise, which was beautiful. But none of my friends were in the high-rise, so I didn't stay there five years. And moved to another place and then came down here.

PMB: And you came to Canmore when?

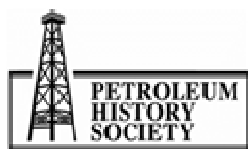
SPRAGINS: Ah, it was 12 years ago.

PMB: So, year 2000 roughly.

SPRAGINS: We had property in Red Deer, rental property, and I got involved in those units. They all had to be kind of redesigned and brought up to speed and I got involved in that for a year or two, on the way down here. I was busy.

PMB: So you've had quite a career as well. It's more than a housewife's career.

SPRAGINS: Actually, I did get involved in real estate too. I think I mentioned that in some write-up, for a couple of years. But I was with Frank and going out a lot. I didn't really bury myself in it but it was good to get out and do that.



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PMB: Anything that you'd like to add because now I'd like to... when you're done I'd like to try to see how much information I can get about Frank.

SPRAGINS: Well, okay.

PMB: Anything that you want to add to what you've said?

SPRAGINS: Well I'm back in the country where I was raised, but I actually prefer being further away from the mountains. And look at them from a distance.

PMB: Oh, really.

SPRAGINS: It's nice here and I kind of miss my Edmonton friends because I've got good friends up there. I may go back to Edmonton, in a year or two possibly.

PMB: Okay, well because you have a house. It's almost as though it's surrounded by mountains. They're so close.

SPRAGINS: It is almost. But I find when the sun is low in the winter time or early spring, it is way over there behind those houses and I'm always wishing it was shining in here. So in a way, I'm missing the sun.

PMB: That's a downside I would never have thought of.

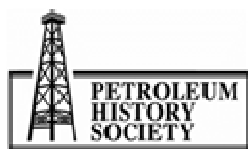
SPRAGINS: Well, interesting, a girl I went to high school with I located her recently, hadn't talked to her for about 15 years and she's out in Washington. She said that it's cloudy so much that she misses the sun and I said, "I'm exactly the same."

PMB: But it's the mountains that are the blocking the sun for you.

SPRAGINS: Mountains block the sun, when it sets over there it goes down behind the mountains there. But it's the morning sun, even though I've got all these east windows. Now it's great, it comes up over here you see, earlier in the day and it's great now.

PMB: Now I would like to ask you to please to tell me Frank's story from, obviously you've read a lot about it and you have a wonderful collection of clippings about Frank and his life. Could you tell me his bio up to the time that he met you and then I think we're going to just fast-forward to when he became involved in Syncrude.

SPRAGINS: Well of course I didn't know him when he young. He was down in the States and I do know that he had an older sister and brother. When he was born and he was just a new baby, his father was killed in an accident, something to do with lumber and near the train. I really don't know what happened.



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PMB: So right after he was born or?

SPRAGINS: Like he was six weeks old. So the older children were provided for, there was insurance but there wasn't any for Frank. He was so young. His mother didn't actually raise him, he was raised by his father's sister, I think. Over in a...

PMB: Was it Natchez?

SPRAGINS: I think around Natchez, I think so. And that must've been a different lifestyle.

PMB: And Natchez... is it in Mississippi?

SPRAGINS: Mississippi.

PMB: Natchez, Mississippi.

SPRAGINS: He went to high school and stayed with his sister over in the Rio Grande Valley, in Southern Texas. I think he learned how to study, really study hard. You had to have 95, I think, to get into the Rice Institute.

PMB: Now what is the Rice Institute?

SPRAGINS: Oh, it's a...

PMB: There's now a Rice University.

SPRAGINS: That's what it is.

PMB: So that has since become a university.

SPRAGINS: Yes.

PMB: And he studied what?

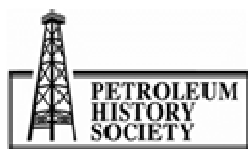
SPRAGINS: Electrical engineering, that's what he studied.

PMB: So now, back in those days there likely would not have been a professional engineering designation, I suspect back in the...

SPRAGINS: Electrical engineering was what it was, so that's...

PMB: Yeah, but there wouldn't have been the professional engineering designation.

SPRAGINS: No, possibly not.



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PMB: I think that's a fairly recent development.

SPRAGINS: I think he graduated in maybe '38 or something, just about the time the war was starting. And he was going to... he applied for commission and he got the commission but he was told they didn't want him to go to Sumatra, they wanted oil and they wanted him around looking for oil. So he did, he started out and just gradually moved north through the U.S. up through Wyoming into Alberta; came to Alberta in '42. And Jack Armstrong was with him which I didn't know until fairly recently. Jack eventually became president.

PMB: Okay now, I want to stop there because that's really interesting. Jack Armstrong became eventually the chairman and CEO of Imperial Oil. They were working together in the early 40s?

SPRAGINS: Uh-huh.

PMB: Were they on the same crew, or...?

SPRAGINS: Possibly. They were pretty good friends, I know. And when we were all together in Calgary, we were good friends and socialized a lot. Everybody entertained and had nice big parties, nice dinner parties which was lovely.

PMB: And of course, Jack Armstrong died at the very end of 2010, I think it was December, 2010.

SPRAGINS: That's right, it was. That's right, yes. He visited over here once or twice.

PMB: Over here meaning to the...

SPRAGINS: In Canmore.

PMB: ... to you in this house.

SPRAGINS: Well I had a big party one time, celebrating a big birthday.

PMB: And so I want to understand this about Sumatra. So he would've had been a commissioned officer with the US Forces in Sumatra in Southeast Asia.

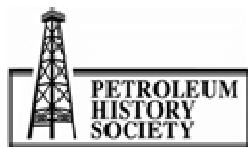
SPRAGINS: Yes.

PMB: And you said that they didn't want him to go to Sumatra but to help to find oil in the United States for the war effort. Is that basically correct?

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: So he was offered a commission but they recommended that they turn it down.

SPRAGINS: Yes.



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PMB: Meaning the military authorities?

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Okay. That makes sense to me. So then at the end of the war, by the end of the war he was in Alberta? Or, he was in Western Canada?

SPRAGINS: Ah, I think the year was '42 when he got into Alberta.

PMB: And he never went back to live, did he?

SPRAGINS: No, no. And he became a Canadian in '68, I think it was. And he said he joined the best club in the world.

PMB: Good for him.

SPRAGINS: I would have gone in a minute down there, I thought I loved the Americans which I did, you know. But no, we never did go back, no. We were busy here.

PMB: I have to tell you, I made the same journey. I was an American once and I would never go back.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay.

PMB: Never would. (Canadian passport) is the best passport on the planet as far as I'm concerned.

SPRAGINS: Interesting.

PMB: Sorry, just continue that story up until '49. He was involved with seismic exploration.

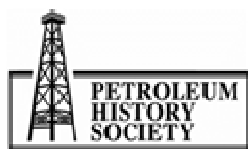
SPRAGINS: He had his own seismic crews. As a matter of fact, he might have been working in the ditch out where I lived. I used to walk to the Turner Valley Pool and I was walking home one day and there was a crew in the ditch. So, it was like ten feet away from. And one day Frank mentioned a guy's name, a young guy's name that was on his crew. I never knew him, but I knew his name and I knew he was the one that I used to see in the swimming pool. So I think I walked like within ten feet of Frank on that day. So that would've been early 40s.

PMB: Early 40s; isn't that ironic.

SPRAGINS: Yeah, it is.

PMB: And that takes us up to the time you met, basically. But he was also involved with seismic in the...

SPRAGINS: Yeah, he kept going up north.



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PMB: ... in Central Alberta and...

SPRAGINS: He said he named a town north of Edmonton and I can't tell you the name of the town, I think it had two words and I think one of the words was water. But I don't know which one it was, he just mentioned it casually one day, it's nothing.

PMB: Well isn't that interesting.

SPRAGINS: Well it is. If I looked at a map someday, looked at all the little towns up there, I might spot it but, anyway...

PMB: But he was in the articles that you showed me before we began our discussion, you were very emphatic that he was not involved in the crew that found Leduc.

SPRAGINS: He wasn't on the crew. That was Vern Hunter's crew. But he was in the area...

PMB: But now, Vern Hunter was the driller.... And so from that point on Frank got into the trailers and he transferred from Carter Oil which was a subsidiary of...

SPRAGINS: Standard.

PMB: ...Standard Oil of New Jersey, now Exxon. He transferred from that subsidiary to Imperial Oil in what year?

SPRAGINS: Ah, it's written down somewhere.

PMB: Oh, in 1949.

SPRAGINS: Okay.

PMB: I've got in your notes here. And you've told me that he used that famous old line, after you got married, "I chased her till she caught me." And that's a well-known...

SPRAGINS: Yeah, phrase.

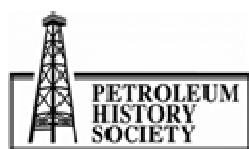
PMB: You said in your little bio, that in 1959 we came back to Calgary...

SPRAGINS: From Regina.

PMB: ...to Calgary from Regina and he became involved with Imperial's Athabasca Project. What can you tell me about Imperial's Athabasca Project at that time?

SPRAGINS: How many babies did I have then, four little kids.

PMB: Four little kids.



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SPRAGINS: I can't get into anything explicit, I just knew that he was excited and happy and he'd found his thing. And he was immediately travelling to the owners that were at that time, talking to them, keeping them interested. It just went on like that.

PMB: The potential partners in this were City Service, Athabasca so it's s subsidiary of the big, what was then a big American company, City Service.

SPRAGINS: Gulf, Richfield.

PMB: There was Gulf Oil, there was Imperial.

SPRAGINS: Imperial.

PMB: And there was Richfield Oil which later combined with...

SPRAGINS: Gulf? Was it Gulf?

PMB: No, not with Gulf but they later basically, and this became a fairly important issue. They later made the big discovery up in Northern Alaska.

SPRAGINS: Oh, Prudhoe Bay up there.

PMB: The Prudhoe Bay discovery.

SPRAGINS: Oh, that's right. That's what delayed one of the...

PMB: Atlantic Oils and Richfield combined and became Atlantic Richfield. And Prudhoe Bay was so prolific that they just eventually decided that we're not going to put any money into that Canadian Project, we've got too much oil up here in Alaska. And we have too many opportunities. So that was an important story and that led to the crisis of 1975, which we will get onto in a few minutes. So what his job at that time, when he became president in nineteen...

SPRAGINS: '65.

PMB: He became president in 1965?

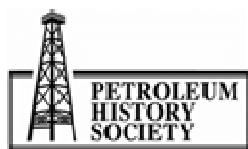
SPRAGINS: January, '65.

PMB: January, '65 and this is when he walked through the snow and...

SPRAGINS: And the ice.

PMB: And they told him that he was the boss now.

SPRAGINS: Yeah.



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PMB: So from 1959 until then, his job was to work with technical people or to go back and forth with the partners in this, the consortium and keep everybody happy and keep everybody onside?

SPRAGINS: He did that for a long time. He travelled a lot, to the US, Toronto, New York, LA, I guess.

PMB: So Toronto would be...

SPRAGINS: Imperial.

PMB: And then it would be Exxon, or sorry Imperial, you're right. New York would've been Exxon, if he went there. Los Angeles would have been Atlantic Richfield, probably Pittsburgh for Gulf Oil.

SPRAGINS: I'm wondering about Tulsa, whether Tulsa came in there.

PMB: Tulsa... I'm sorry, and then Toronto also would have been Gulf Oil because that's where Canadian Gulf had its headquarters in those days. You mentioned this in your notes, City Service had office was in New York City. Atlantic Richfield's head office was in Los Angeles. And I would add to that, Gulf Oil Canada had its office in Toronto and also, their international headquarters were in Pittsburgh, I believe. Okay, so for five years he was involved in discussions about the project. Probably in helping to prepare the applications to the Oil and Gas Conservation Board?

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm. Yes.

PMB: I'm making an assumption here because I don't know this.

SPRAGINS: And I wouldn't know the details of that either, as I say I had a new baby and they were all... the oldest one would be seven, so.

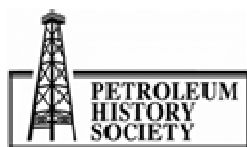
PMB: And then in 1964 we move to Edmonton and the following January, Frank was made president of Syncrude Canada. Now, what I believe is that... let me just think about this. The real crisis for Syncrude began in December, nineteen... Sorry, I'm ahead of myself here, I want to... I'll come back to that in a few minutes. So he became the president in January of 1965 and you said they were very discouraging years, very frustrating years. Why was that?

SPRAGINS: Just waiting for the go-ahead and not getting it. It was frustrating.

PMB: I'm trying to remember.

SPRAGINS: I was busy, I mean, it didn't bother me as much as it would've bothered Frank I suppose.

PMB: Because he made... I think Syncrude made its first application in 1960 and they closed, finally closed down their operation as I recall on the day that John F. Kennedy was... they shut their



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experimental operation on the day that John F. Kennedy was killed. So that would be November 22nd, 1963. I do remember that from Syncrude's biography.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay.

PMB: But then they went ahead and make another application and it took forever to get that approved.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: You talked here about, oh in 1962 City Service, which was the one that really was the operating company, applying for a permit to develop the oil sands. So it could be that I'm wrong about 1960. So probably it was... according...

SPRAGINS: Oh, I wouldn't dispute, I don't remember.

PMB: Well the date you give here is 1962.

SPRAGINS: Really, oh.

PMB: And you said that Cities Service applied for a permit and then the conservation board said you basically told the Province to delay the project to protect the conventional oil industry.

SPRAGINS: Oh, that. Oh, my goodness, well.

PMB: What can you tell me about that because that was a great story?

SPRAGINS: Oh, well they thought they needed protection. Heck, I think they went to court, if I'm not mistaken. It was that serious. They didn't want to lose out on anything and that's what they thought might happen but that didn't happen at all.

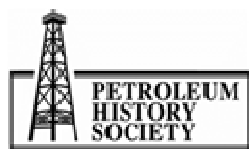
PMB: Because at that time the oil production in Alberta was still expanding. And the markets were fairly limited. So they're saying well if we keep exploring and expanding our production and all this synthetic crude comes on stream then we're going to have to shut in our wells.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Because you can't... once an oil sands operation is producing you can't shut it down.

SPRAGINS: That's right.

PMB: You can't reduce production. So where the production issues would be developed, would develop would be with the conventional explorers, they can shut down individual wells.



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SPRAGINS: Sure and go to the States, which did they do somewhat. That didn't help them at all. I mean, they went down to the States to try to carry on.

PMB: So that was an issue in the 60s?

SPRAGINS: Well...

PMB: I wasn't here at the time, I don't know that.

SPRAGINS: Whatever the date was, yeah.

PMB: November, 1968 is the time you moved into your new home on Westbrook Drive.

SPRAGINS: Uh-huh, beautiful place.

PMB: And you said in here, that Syncrude had one of their first but certainly not their last setbacks. And you said, and this again comes back to Prudhoe Bay. A permit to go ahead was deferred because oil had been discovered at Prudhoe Bay. It was thought to be a huge field and some people got excited and decided that we might have too much oil. You said Frank was one of the very few people who had the foresight to see what was going to happen. In 1968 he gave a speech in which he predicted our energy problems right to the day, never mind to the year. Can you elaborate on what you said there a little bit?

SPRAGINS: It's so long ago, I actually other than what I wrote there. It was just a setback, it was major. But you didn't give up. At least I sure didn't give up. I figured it would go, anybody working that hard I thought it would eventually go.

PMB: My recollection of that story and this was... I wasn't here at the time. At that time this was just known to be a huge field. It was thought to be a huge field. And it ended being the biggest field ever discovered in North America. I think it was around ten billion barrels or some huge amount.

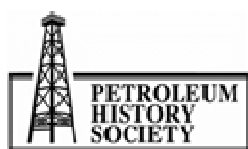
SPRAGINS: Prudhoe Bay?

PMB: Prudhoe Bay.

SPRAGINS: We flew over there one time. It was one of the oil companies took a bunch of us up; I don't know who it was. Bob Blair, I think. What was his company?

PMB: Bob Blair was with NOVA, or Alberta Gas Trunkline.

SPRAGINS: Yes, he was. So he loaded up, it was all presidents of companies who went up to Resolute and then onto Prudhoe. It was kind of fun.



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PMB: And now that would've been about the time that he wanted to develop pipelines through Canada, gas pipelines.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay.

PMB: Through Canada down to the United States.

SPRAGINS: Down through the... yeah, yeah.

PMB: I'll bet it was related to that.

SPRAGINS: Probably was.

PMB: So that's Bob Blair, that's Alberta Gas Trunkline which used to be known as AGTL and that later became NOVA Corporation and I don't know what has really become of that since then.

SPRAGINS: I don't know either, I sometimes wonder.

PMB: I think they were eventually bought out by an American. The petro-chemical part of it was eventually bought up by an American Company, I think but I'm not sure. The issue then was, at that time, to kind of put this in perspective as I understand it is that in 1968 this huge oil discovery had been developed. Alberta's oil production was still increasing and so is that in the United States, including Texas. Everybody was producing more oil than they could sell. And so then the question becomes, why in the world would you want to develop this very expensive, difficult oil resource?

SPRAGINS: Oil resource, yeah.

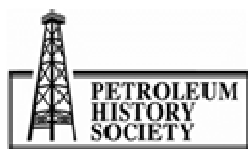
PMB: Prudhoe Bay story became important later on, because as I said, Atlantic Richfield basically pulled out of the Syncrude Project and that led up to another crisis. But what happened here in 1968 is that the conservation board said, "We don't want to put any more oil on production. We've just brought Suncor on production. Great Canadian Oil Sands a year ago. We have this huge discovery in Prudhoe Bay and everybody's production is increasing. Not only in North America but around the world, why would we do all of this stuff?"

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: So that's my memory of the story. But now you said in your note, or in your bio, that in '69 after intensive research Syncrude applied for and was granted a permit for 80,000 barrels per day. What more can you say about that?

SPRAGINS: I think that my feeling was that they might let them go ahead because they want to take out less than Suncor. I think Suncor was taking out more oil.

PMB: Now Suncor was, I think was about 45,000 barrels a day.



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SPRAGINS: Oh, okay. So my memory doesn't...

PMB: One of the reasons that Syncrude was willing to be delayed is that they understood the value of producing a lot of oil, the economy of scale. And they were not willing to build such a small plant as Suncor.

SPRAGINS: Oh, okay. I wouldn't know. I wouldn't be aware of that.

PMB: GCOS. But, so they were given a permit for 80,000 barrels a day in 1969 and then you said that 18 months later, so that would've been '71? Probably 1971, they applied for basically it would be a change in that application to 125,000 barrels a day and you said that the cost would be about \$800 Million dollars. This is what you said.

SPRAGINS: Well I would've read all that somewhere. I could never have written that now, but that information would've come some documents.

PMB: You said in May of '69, Syncrude agreed at a hearing to a three year delay. So there are a couple of things that are a little puzzling there. I don't quite know what happened there and I haven't found that in my research yet.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: So that three year delay took you to 1972 when the Alberta Government issued an order in council opposing, you said, "Opposing the Energy Resources Conservation Board's recommendation to allow Syncrude to go ahead."

SPRAGINS: I would've read that somewhere.

PMB: That's brand new to me.

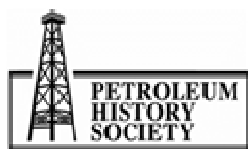
SPRAGINS: Oh, okay well.

PMB: And then in September the Alberta... Okay, so the Alberta Government... Oh! Oh, I've got it. This is just before the oil crisis of 1972 that came in September.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm, that's right, yeah.

PMB: And so everybody thought that oil production would continue to escalate forever and ever. And so we don't want to bring any more oil sands. So what happened and according to your notes is that in September, 1973 just about the time that the...

SPRAGINS: OPEC Crisis.



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PMB: ... I think the Yom Kippur War, the Alberta Government withdrew its objection and they were given approval to go ahead. That must be the way that worked.

SPRAGINS: I'm glad you can interpret it.

PMB: I'm trying to get through this so that we can put everything into perspective. And then finally, in 1975 you said that one of the partners of Syncrude, Richfield or Atlantic Richfield Oil decided they had to pull out of the consortium. And what I found was really curious about this was that Frank was... then there were... this happened, if I'm not mistaken, they pulled out. Atlantic Richfield announced to the partners that it would pull out of the project at the beginning of December, 1974. And they said, according to the terms of the contract, they had to pay their costs for one more month. Which they did and then all of a sudden 30% of the project was gone.

SPRAGINS: Mm, I don't know.

PMB: And then that was the crisis and then all of a sudden, in the period January 1975 up to the very beginning of February there were endless negotiations that were going on between industry and government and all of this led up to the Winnipeg Agreement...

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: ... of the beginning of February, 1975. I think it might've even been February the 1st. And that's where in one day, the three remaining companies, the Federal Energy Minister, Marc Lalonde.

SPRAGINS: Lalonde.

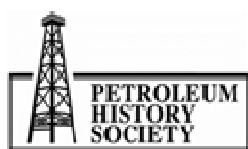
PMB: Wasn't it?

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Was it Lalonde? I think it was?

SPRAGINS: I think so. Yes.

PMB: Peter Lougheed and Bill Davis, the Premier of Ontario. And I think those were the three main political figures; and then representatives of all of the companies, plus Shell. Shell showed up there with the interest in maybe in taking a piece of the action. But they wanted a government guarantee for the price of oil they would receive. They didn't get it so they all went off in a huff. Now in your note you said that only those involved in the talks in Winnipeg really knows the emotions at work. You said Frank was at home furiously hanging wall paper. He was not involved in the talks because he was an employee of Syncrude and not of one of the partners, the participants in that. Can you tell me anything about that, what must've been a memorable day?



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SPRAGINS: Well it was memorable all right. I'm certainly vague on it. I just know that... just what I said in there, that's what was going on. He was in one of the kid's bedrooms upstairs where he was working to kill time.

PMB: He was putting up the wallpaper.

SPRAGINS: Burying himself in some work, that was how he...

PMB: Did he ever... did he talk to about this while it was going on?

SPRAGINS: Not so much.

PMB: Did he get a phone call from one of the participants saying we've reached a deal?

SPRAGINS: Well not at home. It didn't seem like he got calls at home at all.

PMB: Really, so...

SPRAGINS: The only times we got calls at home was after that CBC thing and the phone started ringing first thing in the morning.

PMB: I'm going to ask you about that CBC atrocity in a few minutes.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: So the only information he got on this agreement was through the media. The same way everybody else did?

SPRAGINS: Well he would have been in the office, I think, when he got the calls. I honestly can't tell you who would've called him or how that went. I just don't know anything.

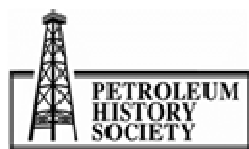
PMB: When he knew the negotiations were pretty much ended, he would've gone to the office because I don't think they ended until 8:00 o'clock that evening or something. So he would've gone to the office and...

SPRAGINS: I don't actually remember any specific phone call for sure. It just happened.

PMB: Now, he was at that time, the CEO. He was the president and CEO of Syncrude. The project was finally approved. There was finally a deal through the Winnipeg Agreement and he was made the chairman and CEO in 1975, according to your notes here.

SPRAGINS: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Now, about that time and I don't remember the year. The CBC ran a...



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SPRAGINS: '77 I think.

PMB: That was in '77?

SPRAGINS: Well there is a note somewhere that I...

PMB: Well the details of that matter, that's all public record. So I'm going to assume you're right on this, in '77, so a year before the plant opened the CBC ran a so-called documentary about the Syncrude project. And I've forgotten the name of the fellow who wrote... It was based on the book of a really anti-oil guy, I've forgotten his name.¹ And it was a one-hour so-called documentary. Tell me, what was his reaction? Were you sitting at home watching this?

SPRAGINS: We were at home, we invited Brent Scott to come over and I think somebody else was there. You just reminded me of something I want to get out...I made a list of... wanted to make sure you got that.

PMB: So you... Brent Scott came over.

SPRAGINS: He came over.

PMB: He later became the president of Syncrude.

SPRAGINS: Yes, he did.

PMB: So Brent Scott came over and with his wife or not?²

SPRAGINS: No, I don't think she came. No, I think.

PMB: So the three of you and maybe the kids were watching this?

SPRAGINS: Yeah, it was unbelievable really. But the funny thing about it, they put it in the schedule, on the TV schedule; they called it Tarzan instead of Tar Sands.

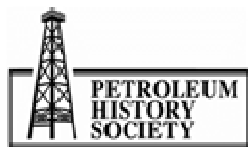
PMB: Tarzan and not Tar Sands.

SPRAGINS: People didn't know what Tar Sands was.

PMB: Hold on, let me clarify that. Did you say, "Tarzan?" T-A-R-Z-A-N?

¹ Larry Pratt

² Latter clarification by interviewee: Those present Frank and Nell Spragins, Brent and Lil Scott, John Barr of Syncrude, Murray Blakely of Syncrude, and Rob Spragins.



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SPRAGINS: Yeah. It was printed in the newspaper. That was going to go on the TV.

PMB: Isn't that funny, instead of Tar Sands. That's funny.

SPRAGINS: It wasn't familiar to them at that point.

PMB: And so tell me about your impressions of that program.

SPRAGINS: It was unbelievable, you know. Just how they could make it up like that and not even try to come close to what kind of man he was, unbelievable, really.

PMB: So he was portrayed as being, sort-of, foul-mouthed and...

SPRAGINS: Oh yeah, just a...

PMB: Cigar chomping, American oilman.

SPRAGINS: Just not at all familiar, looking at all. And it was just, you know...

PMB: And the same was true of Peter Lougheed and the other players in that documentary, wasn't it?

SPRAGINS: Yeah, that's right.

PMB: He was also a foul-mouthed SOB.

SPRAGINS: Nothing they could be proud of, that's for sure.

PMB: But now you know the story of what happened eventually. You know why you've never seen it since? Peter Lougheed sued the CBC.

SPRAGINS: Oh, did he?

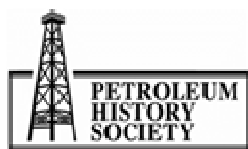
PMB: He did. And he basically got... basically a cash settlement on it.

SPRAGINS: Really?

PMB: But it included an apology from the CBC for producing it and it included a promise that they would never, ever, ever show it anywhere again.

SPRAGINS: He was very proud. He didn't want Frank calling him Peter. Call me Mr. Lougheed, he said.

PMB: Peter Lougheed said that?



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SPRAGINS: Yes, he said to Frank, call him Mr. Loughheed not Peter.

PMB: Did he say that?

SPRAGINS: He did, to Frank, the first time he met him.

PMB: And did they eventually become on a first-name basis?

SPRAGINS: Yes, I think maybe but not close, no. Well, that's interesting.

PMB: Well so in was, "Call me Mr. Loughheed." When I interviewed him a year ago, Peter Loughheed a year ago, one of his handlers said to be sure to call him "Mr. Loughheed".

SPRAGINS: Oh.

PMB: So that stands with him. Okay, and I'd like you if you don't mind, you were both there for the official opening of Syncrude. Can you tell me a little about that?

SPRAGINS: Oh, up in Fort McMurray?

PMB: In Fort Mac, yeah, in 1978. It was in...

SPRAGINS: Well he was quite sick. There was a huge crowd there and he was up on the stage with other notables, you know.

PMB: Did he speak at all?

SPRAGINS: He did a little bit, but it was obvious he was very sick. And some of the big wigs from Ottawa were there. I never... I was in tears, I don't cry easily, but I remember I was in tears. And Frank went and lay down on the bed in one of the bedrooms and that's where we were after.... Yeah, it was really... at least he was alive for the opening but terribly sick.

PMB: Now this was in September of '78, wasn't it?

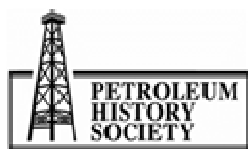
SPRAGINS: Yes, six weeks before he passed away.

PMB: Six weeks before he died. Can you tell me a little bit about his battle with cancer?

SPRAGINS: It was terribly painful. He was in the hospital one night, kept him at home. And one of the doctors from the hospital came, top man came to see him. But he should've been given a pain killer and he wasn't.

PMB: This was on his last day?

SPRAGINS: Uh-huh, the last few days.



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PMB: No pain killers?

SPRAGINS: There was something they should've been giving him, no. And I took him at noon on the Wednesday and he passed away at five the next morning.

PMB: And briefly, before I started this interview you told me that the problems had begun a couple of years earlier with cancer of the eye.

SPRAGINS: The year before, the eye. And really, I dated a doctor, very nice man, afterwards. And he told me that cancer would've been somewhere else first. We were never told that. He got involved in a... something he should've known but was not told.

PMB: So there was already some kind of cancer somewhere in his system.

SPRAGINS: I was told that the cancer would have been somewhere else, in the liver, before it got to the eye.

PMB: Oh.

SPRAGINS: And it's unfortunate that we were not told that.

PMB: And it took quite a long time to diagnose that?

SPRAGINS: It did, it took them all spring until the end of the June and I got Frank into Lake O'Hara.

PMB: Well, when you say into Lake O'Hara, what do you mean?

SPRAGINS: Up here, hiking. Absolutely beautiful area if you're hiking.

PMB: I've been there. I wasn't quite sure what you had meant by that, so you went to the lodge at Lake O'Hara?

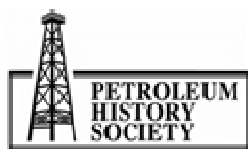
SPRAGINS: Uh-huh. Yes, one of the cabins there, it was so beautiful.

PMB: But today, if he were diagnosed with that cancer. Very likely there would've been some treatment for it and the diagnosis would've been done much earlier.

SPRAGINS: They told him there was just a 25% chance of it being cured. I think he said he'd be one of the 25%.

PMB: And how long was this before his death?

SPRAGINS: Well sometime between June and November.



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PMB: So maybe 6 months before he died, or less?

SPRAGINS: Less, less.

PMB: Four or five months. Is that when it was really, finally diagnosed?

SPRAGINS: Uh-huh. Yes, well it would've been, I think, July beginning of July.

PMB: Oh my lord.

SPRAGINS: Yeah, he got sick. He talked about his stomach bothering him in the spring, February/March it started bothering him and they didn't diagnose it very fast.

PMB: And when he obviously, he was... there were many obituaries and there many write-ups at the time of his being a great man. Funeral; what was the response of people after his death?

SPRAGINS: Well, I think you can tell by the write-ups. No doubt about it. We saved a whole row in the church, I was asked to do that by the minister, for government people to come. And I think there was only person from the government who came and that was kind of hard to see.

PMB: Wow. And the funeral was up in Edmonton?

SPRAGINS: Yes.

PMB: What church was it?

SPRAGINS: It was St. Paul's United Church.

PMB: Were you both church-going people?

SPRAGINS: Yes. He was good. He got involved in the church.

PMB: I'm about to turn off my recorder, so this is your last chance to say something for the record.

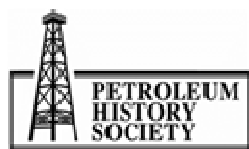
SPRAGINS: Well my record is what I wrote many years ago. I couldn't have remembered back to all those dates and so on. I miss the oil people, not having them around me. Anyway, I appreciate the fact that you're doing this and that it's going to be on the record there.

PMB: Well what an honour to talk to the Great Man's Wife.

SPRAGINS: Thank you.

PMB: It's been super, thank you so much for your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



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