

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: J. Warner Loven

INTERVIEWER: Tina Crossfield

DATE: August 2001

TC: Today is August 13th, 2001 and we are with Mr. J. Warner Loven at his home at 2424 - 34th Avenue N.W., Calgary. My name is Tina Crossfield.

WL: Okay, we can I guess, now get on with the interview.

TC: Okay. Can you tell me where you were born and when?

WL: Grande Prairie, Alberta, August 31st, 1928, it will be 73 years this coming August 31st.

TC: And can you tell me the names of your parents?

WL: My dad was Ed Loven and my mother was I think her first name was Priscilla, they called her Polly.

TC: And what did your dad do for a living?

WL: He was a carpenter and also, in 1930, when the NAR Railroad reached Beaverlodge they set up a Frontier Lumber retailship there and my dad ran the lumber yard there until he retired in about 1975 or so. My mother was a nurse and she was the first matron of the Grande Prairie Hospital, I think that was about 1922 when they first moved into the Peace River country.

TC: Do you have brothers and sisters?

WL: Yes. I had 2 older sisters and 1 older brother. My oldest sister passed away with cancer about 10 years ago but the rest are all living. And I had a younger sister and a younger brother, there were 6 in our family, 3 boys and 3 girls.

TC: Are any of them involved in the oil industry?

WL: No, just me.

TC: Can you describe for me what your childhood was like and your early education?

WL: It was pretty good. My mother was a wonderful cook and nurse and we had no doctor at Beaverlodge so she was quite busy in her kitchen patching cuts and broken bones and delivering babies. I remember people from the country used to come out and stay at our place and have their baby because there was no place to go. Or my mother would go out in the country and help. Then we had some very good friends that had a farm about a mile north of Beaverlodge, the Johnson's and I like animals and horses so I spent a good part of my growing up on their farm. And there was the old man and two boys. They came from Oklahoma and they were the first white settlers in the Beaverlodge valley. I guess the mother thought it was too tough so she went back to Oklahoma with the younger kids and Arnold Johnson stayed there and the two boys. So all through growing up I stayed at the farm and worked there and when I got to be a little useful they paid me. And I also spent quite a big of time helping my dad at the lumber yard. And I played a lot of baseball and hockey so I was busy.

#040 TC: Favourite subjects in school?

WL: I was pretty good in math, not very good in English. I guess the sciences were what I did the best in. I didn't mind French. You had to have a second language to get your senior matric back then, I don't know whether you still do or not, so I took French.

TC: Did you go to the same school all through. . ?

WL: In Beaverlodge, I went right from Grade 1 through Grade 12. It took my 3 years to get out of grade 12. I was working a lot and then my first year I got struck by lightning and I was in hospital 6 weeks. So I missed the final exams so that kind of wiped out my first year of grade 12. It was quite a day, I was centre fielder, this little cloud came over, the next thing I knew I woke up in the hospital. Holy, what happened, they said, you're okay but you got hit by lightning. So that took awhile to get over that. But then I missed my exams so then I had to repeat most of the subjects.

TC: Gee, were you badly burned from that?

WL: Oh yes. It blew my shoes right off, I had running shoes, probably saved my life because they weren't grounded, they didn't have spikes. Just in pieces, blew my shoes off my feet, big hole behind one knee, blew the end off one toe. I was all burned. My legs because my pants were burned pretty near off. I can show you my uniform, I've still got it downstairs. And the doctor of the village, Stock Young was the manager of the baseball team. And the hospital, Beaverlodge is a very small town, the baseball diamond was about 2 blocks from the hospital. I had no pulse, I was out and he said, my god, what will I tell Mrs. Loven but they got me to the hospital, gave me a shot of oxygen and adrenaline and I came to.

TC: Wow, you're really lucky.

WL: Yes. I guess so. Or we wouldn't be having this interview.

TC: Where did you go after grade 12?

WL: I went to university. But after. . . I worked. . . I had 1 or 2 subjects to do, that was my third year of grade 12 but I worked most of the time and attended school part time to finish off my senior matric. Then I went to university in 1948 I started.

TC: At U. of A. you said.

WL: Yes, U. of A. in 1948.

TC: What program did you. . . ?

WL: I wasn't really sure, I thought I'd take education and I looked at the curriculum there and I said, no, that ain't for me. So I saw a friend of mine and he said, I'm going to enrol in geology, why don't you come with me and I said, sure, that sounds like a good idea. So that's what I did. It was general science the first year with a geology major. So I toughed her out, didn't have much money, nobody did I guess. But the guys that were coming from the Second World War, they were getting subsidized by their government with the books and tuition and a monthly salary or payment I guess. So they weren't too bad off, unless they were married of course, then it was tough for them. My first summer off I worked at carpenter work, construction in Beaverlodge and played baseball. The second year I got a job with Imperial Oil and that was my first experience with seismic. It was an experimental pack horse crew in the Zama Lake area and I spent I think damn near 5 months there. I was late registering because of the time we got out of the bush at. That was a pretty brutal summer.

#092 TC: What did you do on the crew?

WL: Just about everything. It was a portable, you know, we just lived in tents and we had to dig the shotholes with a post hole auger and to lay the cables and geophones it was all by hand with ??? wheels and that. And we had moved the equipment, the instruments and batteries and stuff with a pack horse. And we were probably lucky to get a hole a day and now they shoot 3 or 4 hundred. But this was all pretty intense labour. And the bugs, and the bugs. . . were fierce.

TC: Where is Zama Lake?

WL: Don't you know where Zama Lake is?

TC: No.

WL: My god. You know where Peace River is, Grimshaw, you go up the Mackenzie Highway, up past High Level and then it's probably about 100 miles northwest of High Level. It's in the northwest corner of Alberta. And later it became quite active for finding Devonian reefs and stuff up there, but that was much later. 1950 that was, on this pack horse crew.

TC: Was it tough to move the equipment around with pack horse?

WL: Well, yes, because there was muskegs and the horses had difficulty crossing muskeg. But then when you got on higher ground it was easier. And we had a couple of guys making trails with axes, slashing trails. We had a surveyor and Party Chief and a horse wrangler, that was very essential. But I guess the worst part of it was the bugs, mosquitos, black flies, no-see-ums, deer flies, horse flies, everything that flew bit you. So I survived that, I thought, man oh man, I've got her made, I think I made \$1,200 that summer. It got me through till about February and I thought, now what, I'm broke again. So I got a student loan for \$400 and managed to finish the year and that was my third year. You could get a degree then, in three years so I got my basic degree and went to work in May of 1951 with Western Geophysical.

TC: And what was your position?

WL: They called me a computer then. I guess you started off, you were an assistant computer. And that meant you did the initial corrections on the paper records, no tape and you had to make corrections for elevations, weathering, near surface velocity and stuff like that. So that's why they called us a computer. So I did that for a while and then after 6 months or so they'd let you start interpreting the data on the records. So once you got to the point where you could make your own interpretation then you'd probably advance to assistant Party Chief. So that was a step up and then eventually you got your own crew. We did all the interpretation by hand on paper records. I think when I started it was 24 trace records. And today, they use I think, 3 or 4 thousand channels, it's mind boggling.

#142 TC: Is that the career path that you followed, did you become Assistant Party Chief and then Party Chief?

WL: Yes. And then eventually you got where you looked after one crew. We did everything on the crew, we made the payroll, we made the invoice to the client, we did the interpretation, contoured maps worked the survey notes, it was all done on the crew. And you had probably the Party Chief and 3 or 4 computers and Assistant Party Chief. Besides actually running the field crew as well. So it usually amounted to an 18 hour day, 7 days a

week. And then once you got to be a pretty good Party Chief then there was a position of supervisor, which then, you just check the other guys work and maybe had 2 or 3 crews to look after. I became a supervisor I think, in about 1961. Then from there I became Vice-President and Manager of Operations. I think that was about 1963 or '64 and I kept that position for about the next 20 years with Western Geophysical. And then I left there in 1983, the end of the year and joined a small firm called Pacers Geophysical. I was President there but it didn't last very long. Because of some of the client relations, we didn't get paid for a lot of our work so the company didn't last long. So I figure I was there for about 1 year and a half, maybe 2 years. When that folded then I went to work for Sonix. Earl Hale was the President there and I actually stayed there till I retired, through their acquisitions. Sonix was acquired by GeCo???, which was a Norwegian company and then about a year or two after that, GeCo was acquired by Schlumberger, who were not in the geophysical business until they acquired GeCo. Now they have acquired quite a few companies to become the largest geophysical contractor in the world, by far. That was 1986 when I joined Sonix and I was a supervisor there.

#184 TC: What regions were you working in, whereabouts were you working?

WL: Basically western Canada basin. We did have some operations in the U.S., in Wyoming and Montana, North Dakota. But basically the western Canada basin. And I have a lot of experience in the Canadian Arctic. I had the first western crew in the Canadian Arctic in 1960. That was just when Inuvik was getting some facilities, like water and sewer and stuff. It's a fairly modern town now and it's quite active. Back then, in 1960, they were just starting to move into the Arctic and in the 70's and early 80's there was quite a bit of activity in the Arctic. In particular the Mackenzie Delta and now, after about 10 years of pretty dormant activity the Mackenzie Delta is quite active again. It's one of Western GeCo's busiest areas right now, is working in the Mackenzie Delta. You've heard this talk about the proposed pipeline and the different routes it may follow. But there is large potential, well, a lot of proven trillions of cubic feet of gas have already been proven but they figure there's quite a bit more. So naturally, that's where we're looking. That is probably one of the hottest exploration areas of today. Besides that is the offshore and GeCo was big in offshore exploration, their marine vessels and stuff. And Western also had quite a few so now with the merger of the two companies, they pretty well I think have about a 95% lock on the offshore marine seismic business. And that's quite active again this year and has been for the last 3 or 4 years, around Nova Scotia, Sable Island, off Newfoundland, it's an active area, the east coast.

TC: Could you describe what it was like working in the Arctic?

WL: Goddamn cold. And it was depressing. Because the 1st of December the sun disappeared or late November and then you didn't see the sun again until about the first week of January. So it was dark all the time. But you got used to it, I mean, we worked every day. But it would stay around minus 40-50 below zero for 6 weeks. If it ever got up to 20 below we thought, wow, is it every nice out today. You kind of got used to it though. Of course, I wasn't working outside, I was in the office doing the interpretation and running the crew. But man, if it got much below 50 then you were better off just to park your

equipment because even . . . diesel would hardly flow, propane wouldn't come out of the bottles, metal became brittle, almost like glass at about 60 below. So if you went to work you'd probably break more stuff than you'd. . . so you were better off just to wait it out for a day or two.

#241 TC: Did you have native people on the crew?

WL: Yes, we had a few. But there wasn't the pressure in those days to hire First Nation people like there is today. In fact you don't hardly work anywhere in western Canada without having some kind of an agreement or an alliance with the local natives. They're becoming very difficult to work with but that's a fact of life, you have to do this. But back then there was no pressure on us to hire local natives. But we did, yes, and some of them were very good.

TC: Can you describe the equipment at that time?

WL: We really didn't have any specialized equipment for the Arctic back then. It was just normal 4 x 4 trucks and wheel drills and wheel camps when we first went up there. But later they adapted more to the environment and the terrain and we did more track equipment, you know, Nodwells, then we had sleigh mounted camps which were easy to move. You had them in a string, probably 3 or 4 basic camps, one for your surveyors and your line cutters and your drill camp and your recording camp. They all had 3 or 4 basic units, sleepers, kitchen, diner, utility wash car, storage, all that in each string. So they were pretty well independent and they could move every day. You hook a cat on the front and move your string up, it was a very efficient way to get your field operations done. And they still use them today, they're going back into sleigh mounted camps. And for awhile of course, well there was no work in the Arctic for 10 years so there was no real need for them. And then later of course, we had track mounted vibrators. Most of the equipment now, in the Arctic, is track mounted. And it saves the terrain. You can't clean the snow off right down to the Tundra, you have to have what they call a shoe on your dozer blade to keep it off the ground so it leaves a pad of snow. And that prevents the Tundra from thawing out. But the equipment is not too much different, like for moving your stuff, with track mounted cable carriers and geophone carriers and all this kind of stuff. But the amount of equipment has changed drastically, or has increased drastically. From say we used to, it went from 24 traces, then 48, and 96, and then 120, wow. Now they have 3 and 4 thousand channels on a crew. But the method has changed too. Instead of just a straight line survey, what they call 2-D, they do rectangular patterns with your receiver lines, geophone lines and cable lines one direction and your source line, shotholes, in the other direction. And they record all these receiver lines in one shot and that's called 3-D and a lot of the work now is 3-D with multi-channel crews. And it's all computerized, it all goes on tape and then they send the tapes into the processing centre and they throw them in their machines and out comes a cross section, maps like you wouldn't believe. Mind boggling to me anyway. The amount of data that they can process is amazing. However I guess the cost justifies it because the odds of you drilling a dry hole are quite a bit less than if you didn't do a 3-D. I wouldn't say it's 100% but it certainly improves your chances of drilling in the right location. The right geology and

the right structure and the right stratigraphy and all that, you can interpret from these 3-D surveys. So it makes the explorationists job probably a little more inclined to be successful in finding the oil and gas with these new methods. So we're right up to modern times.

#319 TC: Pretty much yes. Yes, the explorations, it makes it a bit more successful when you can do all the computerization and the 3-D.

WL: Yes. The 3-D surveys have greatly enhanced your chances of drilling in the correct place. You bet.

TC: What were some of the challenges that you can recall, the challenges of . . . ?

WL: I suppose when I was. . . the Party Chief was keeping the crew happy so they would be more productive. I suppose my first trip in the Arctic, my first job in Fort Nelson was about 1953 and there wasn't even a town there in Fort Nelson back in. . . no, that was '54 I first went up there. Because my second boy was born January 1st, 1955, I didn't even know he was born for a week, I didn't have any radio, we had no communication. You know, like today, everybody walks around with a telephone in their pocket, we never had a radio even. Hell, it was brutal. And I remember the camp we stayed in was an abandoned army camp. You could damn near throw a cat through any wall on it. And cold. And we heated it with wood and he hauled wood with a dog team and his old air tight heaters. Well, it would be okay for awhile and then the stove went out and I had, being the Party Manager I had a separate little shack and it had a pail of water in there and it would freeze solid. So I had a little face cloth and I would rub it on the ice and give yourself a little rub around and that was your wash. A face cloth and a bucket of ice. But that was a challenge then, to keep your spirits up. I think one of the toughest things for me anyway, because I had a family and I missed them very much, I was away a lot.

TC: What year did you get married?

WL: 1951. It will be 50 years in November. That's her, the same one.

TC: And you have 2 children.

WL: 5.

TC: 5.

WL: Larry, the oldest, he's 49 I guess. Eddie was born when I was in Fort Nelson, January 1st, '55, so that would make him 46 I guess. Then we had a daughter, Maureen was born in Rockglen, Saskatchewan in 1957. Greg is our 4th one, he was born in 1960 and that is the latest one, Donna, and she was born in 1967.

TC: And tell me your wife's name again.

WL: Joy.

#376 TC: Did any of your kids go into the oil business?

WL: No. Hold it, Eddie, the second one is in the service end of the industry. He's into seismic data brokerage. He's just forming a new company right now, I don't know how he's making out. Our oldest boy went to university, he had a degree in math and a degree in industrial design and he works for an environmental firm now. Donna, the youngest one, she has a degree in nursing, she got the gold medal for the highest marks in her class.

TC: And Maureen, what does Maureen do?

WL: Maureen, she did take a couple of years at Mount Royal, I think she took medical secretary and then she took some newspaper work besides that. She lived in High River and she did free lance writing and photography for awhile, then she married a friend of mine actually. I hired him when he was a kid and they got married about a year ago I guess. It was funny, I hired him when he was about 18 years old and he finally ended up marrying my daughter. But she was married before and then divorced. And he's a nice kid.

TC: And your son Greg?

WL: Greg, he's working in town with Consolidated Confection???, he's sort of a salesman and he's kind of a handy guy, repairs their equipment and stuff. You know, they rent out coffee makers, popcorn stuff to wherever and sell coffee and nuts and pop and you know, confections supplies.

TC: When you were working with Western Geophysical who would have been your peer group, like the guys you worked with and your boss?

WL: Well we reported to, the head office then was in North La Brea??? Street in Los Angeles. Henry Salvatore, I knew him quite well, he was the founder of the company. Then the Canadian supervisor from LA was a fellow named Prestine. He was quite a reputation for being a real strict guy and tough guy but I got along fine with him. Everybody called him Press, you know, watch out, Press is coming. But Canadians, I was the Vice-President so I didn't report to any Canadians, it was all American fellows that were my supervisor, my bosses. The first Party Chief I worked for was Carl Cain, he was a real bright fellow, nice guy. So I learned a lot for him. But most of the supervisors when I started were Americans. The first manager that I worked for here was a guy named Cox, he was a former Admiral in the Navy, he was quite a character. I can't think of his first name right now. And then we had a guy we called the Colonel. It was Colonel Knox and he was also reputed to be a real strict, tough guy but he was very talented and I learned a lot from him. He was a good geophysicist. So I had some good teachers. Colonel Knox was one of them. Then let's see who happened after that. . . oh yes, after Mr. Cox there was a guy named Jack Desmond was our manager here. When he was transferred to the U.S. then I took over from Jack Desmond. And I think that was '63, I'm not really sure on that. How are we doing?

#468 TC: We're doing good. Now the field parties or the people you would have been supervising were mostly Canadian guys?

WL: Yes, just about all Canadian. We did have the odd American observer. That's the guy that operated the instrument truck to take the recordings. But that was in the early 50's and most of those guys were replaced by Canadians. So by I'd say, 1960 there were hardly no Americans left here, it was all run by Canadians.

TC: And the Canadians would have been coming into the work force with college. . .?

WL: A lot of them we'd hire, university graduates and for the helpers and trainees for field personnel we tried to hire as many local people, where the crew was working. Like farm labourers or farm kids if we could. And usually they turned out to be real good because

they knew equipment. Raised on a farm, they could drive a truck, they knew hydraulics, they were ideal.

TC: Like you.

WL: No, I wasn't a mechanic. But anyway, they were ideal helpers to train to look after the equipment. Because you know, you don't go anywhere if you haven't got a vehicle that doesn't run. So the mechanic was a very important person on the field crew. And we'd hire people from tech school that had survey technical training and electronics graduates from SAIT. And for data processing trainees we'd hire math graduates, physics, anything that. . . So we did, and still do, recruit and hire university people.

TC: Did you work on any sort of really big plays?

WL: No, I don't think I was every credited with making a big discovery anywhere but I worked in all the areas that were prime activity at the time, Rainbow Lake, you know, it was interesting working there because the reefs stood out so well. Rainbow lake, Zama Lake, Fort Nelson, Fort Liard, which is a big gas play there now and I worked there back in the late 60's. But it was always a team so there was nobody really got any special recognition if you made a correct interpretation and were lucky enough to find an oil or gas well. Fort Norman, yes, Norman Well, I worked a lot around there in the Territories. Pretty well worked from California to the Arctic Ocean.

#549 TC: I think you just answered my next question about which of your contributions do you consider the most significant.

WL: I just answered it?

TC: You just answered that pretty much.

WL: Well good, yes right, okay.

TC: Unless you want to add something?

WL: No.

TC: What have you enjoyed most about your career?

WL: I would guess the people you worked with would probably be the most rewarding and they stayed friends. . . .

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Side 2

WL: So I guess that's what is the most rewarding.

TC: The people that you've met along the way?

WL: Yes. Both people you worked with, even your opposition guys, they're a lot of fine people, clients, you know oil company guys. Like, I worked for Gerry Sykes, at Canadian Superior and his boss. He's still, I guess he's not a close friend but he's a guy I could call on if I needed some help some time. I met a lot of nice people. And I think that's the thing that will stay with you the most anyway.

TC: It's true, you could go into any one of a number of places and know people there.

WL: Yes. But it's getting fewer and fewer. More guys retiring, passing on and younger people coming up. I used to go to these CSEG social functions and know most of the people. For

instance, like the Doodlebug is coming up, golfing. Well, I'd go there and I would know 90% of them, I bet you if went there now I wouldn't know 10%. And I don't go to that anymore because I don't know enough people. But I'm going to this tournament at Carstairs and I'll know most of the guys because they've all got grey hair.

TC: So tell me again, when did you retire from Western Geophysical?

WL: I left there, I think it was the end of '83 and then, lo and behold, when Schlumberger bought Western or at least most of it, 70% of it I think, then I was actually working for Western GeCo for the last year. And I was actually consulting work for GeCo/Schlumberger from 1992 right up to 2000 when Schlumberger bought Western. Now the company is called Western GeCo. So I got my last consulting cheque from Western GeCo 50 years after I started. Quite a thing.

TC: Do you have any regrets about your career?

WL: No. It's too late now anyway. I guess probably the best thing happened to me is sitting right out there. I enjoy the family.

TC: Where did you meet Joy?

WL: Oh I knew her. She was from Hythe and you know, high school kids, we used to have ball games and she was one of the girls that hung around. Then she went to Edmonton to take nursing and I was at U. of A. so I thought, ha, I know that babe, I think I'll give her a call, see if she wants to go to a show or something. So that's what I did. I'd known her since at least in high school.

#036 TC: What was your family life like, you were moving around to a number of different. . .?

WL: It was tough. I'd be gone sometimes 3 months. So she had to hold things together. Then we lived in a trailer, that was the only way you could have your family with you most of the time was have a house trailer. So we moved around in that for about 9 years. Then I think it was 1961 we were living in a trailer park right where the Brentwood Co-op is right now and I came home and thought, my god, 4 kids in this trailer, we've got to do something. So I saw this ad in the paper for this house in Charleswood so I phoned the guy up and said, will you take a trailer as down payment and he said, sure. So I was home 5 days, moved Joy and the kids in here and then I went back up north again. That was in February and then I came home the end of April. So yes, it was very difficult. But we survived. Yes, that was the most difficult part was. . . well, the early days. Then after '61 of course, I was home all the time or most of the time and just make field trips and trips to Houston and stuff like that. So then you know, you were only gone 2 or 3 days instead of 2 or 3 months.

TC: It makes a huge difference.

WL: Yes. I'd go down there every 2 or 3 months, head office moved from LA to Houston about 1970. Had a few golf games in Houston, hot oh my god, hot and humid.

TC: Did you find that you had an advantage, coming from geology into geophysics?

WL: I don't think so. I was kind of lacking in the theory and the math part of it, but interpretation, it helped yes. It helped to know basically what kind of formations you were looking for and type of structure and you know, general terms, like stratigraphy and dip

and all that kind of stuff. You were familiar with the terms so yes, it was helpful.

TC: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, anything you'd like to add?

WL: No, I had some stories but I can't tell you. No, they weren't that bad but. . . No, I don't want to tell you nothing else. I just want to show you my uniform and that's it.

TC: Okay, well, I'll turn this off then. Thank you very much.