

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Bill Watson

INTERVIEWER: David Finch

DATE: March 2000

DF: Today is the 29th day of March, in the year 2000 and we are with Mr. Bill Watson at his home at 70 McDougal Crescent in Red Deer, Alberta. My name is David Finch. Mr. Watson, could I start by asking you where you were born?

BW: Covington, Texas.

DF: Oh yes, and what year was that?

BW: 1927.

DF: What were your parents doing there?

BW: My father was a farmer and county commissioner for time and my mother was a schoolteacher.

DF: How did they meet?

BW: The same way everybody met back in those days, back in the early 20's I guess it was, not the early 20's. . . way back there anyway. This was a small town, Covington was a small town of about 200-300 people, down the road was another small town of about 200-300 people and another. . . which is not there anymore, it's probably reduced to 100 people in all those small towns these days, especially in that part of the country. Covington is in central Texas, actually right between Waco, Fort Worth and Dallas. How they met and where they met, I don't remember.

DF: That's fine. Now, what was your education like, what did you learn in school?

BW: I went to three different schools in grade school and graduated from a little, small town of Itasca, Texas, which wasn't too far from Covington. Then I went into the United States Navy for a couple of years and when I got out, I went to Pillsboro Junior college, which is about 10-12 miles from the place that I was born and raised. Went there for two years and then I went to Abilene Christian College out in west Texas.

#019 DF: What did you take at the junior college?

BW: Just regular studies, didn't major in anything.

DF: And then you went to the Christian College, it was like a Bible School or. . . ?

BW: Actually it was a Bible School, a very, very religious studied type of Bible School, which was sponsored by the Church of Christ and I went there for two years, majored in education.

DF: Were you going to be a teacher?

BW: Well, I don't know what I was going to be, the horse before the cart or the cart before the horse.

DF: So what happened next?

- BW: I went back home, went back to farming, helping my dad on the farm for a few months, then I went down and studied at the University of Texas, at Austin, for about half a semester. I was going to work on my Masters but I didn't have the ambition, or I didn't have. . . something was lacking, so I didn't get my Masters. After that I went out to west Texas and got in the oil field.
- DF: What was your first job in the oil field?
- BW: I was working for a company called Reed Roller Bit out of Houston.
- DF: Tell me what a roller bit does?
- BW: It's a drill bit, production type of drill bits, sizes from 7 7/8 to 12 1/4, in that range. I worked for them for a couple of years.
- DF: And what did you do for them?
- BW: I was a salesman.
- DF: Tell me what a salesman. . . what year was this?
- BW: That was 1951-52.
- DF: Okay, tell me exactly what a salesman did in those days, it might be different from today?
- BW: It's a little different. Today they're mostly pre-sold, back then there wasn't any pre-sold, it was all ??? jobs for the rigs, today it's turnkey, mostly turnkey, day work. Reed, at that time, probably had 10-15 salesmen covering the Permanent Basin in west Texas, New Mexico and I was one of the 10-15 or whatever they had. We had so many rigs per salesman or area and so I just covered that area and tried to sell bits.
- #043 DF: And you literally just went right to each rig and talked to who?
- BW: Most of the time talked to the pool pusher. Sometimes if the tool pusher wasn't there, you would talk to the driller or talk to both of them, but that's who you sold the bit to.
- DF: Now, did you have lots of competition or was. . . ?
- BW: Very much so. Hughes Tool Company, which was really going high back in those days, had about, worldwide, probably had 85% of the business and in the Permanent Basin they probably had about 90%. Reed probably had about 3 or 4%.
- DF: So how did you make a sale, was your bit different or special?
- BW: No, it wasn't that special, you just had to fast talk them I guess, you just had to be a salesman.
- DF: On price?
- BW: No. One thing about the business back then, there wasn't any price differentials, you had one set price and that was it, take it or leave it. Now, if the bit happened to perform bad, you had to make it good, but other than that, the product sold itself.
- DF: Now, your product, was it virtually identical to Hughes' or different in some way?
- BW: Back then, there was probably. . . the best I can recall is that, besides Hughes, we had two more competitors, one was a company called Chicago Pneumatics, which we called CP, and the other one was Smith Tool. Chicago Pneumatic manufactured a tri-cone bit, which was inferior to the Hughes bit and Smith and Reed manufactured what we call a flat bottom bit, it had four cones, pardon me, it had two cones and two rollers, kind of a cross section type of bit. It just didn't perform well, out on the Permanent Basin you can drill 10-15-20,000 feet and when you got down there, those drillers and tool pushers, they

wanted something, they didn't want to have to trip, make that trip. You know what I mean by making that trip.

DF: Yes, pull all the pipe out.

BW: Pull all the pipe out and go back in. You'd spend more time pulling the pipe out when you got to 20,000' than you did drilling.

DF: Were these hardened steel bits or did they have diamonds in them or anything like that?

BW: No, mostly there wasn't too many diamond bits back then. There was . . . Hughes had a very superior bit, they just had a superior bit and they had a patent, now mind you, it was all patent and until that patent elapsed, they had 90-95% of the business. Today I don't know what percent of the business they've got, all the patents have elapsed and CP's out of the business, Smith is manufacturing a tri-cone bit and so is Reed. So during all that time, I guess it was . . . the patent's probably. . . mind you, every bit had a different type of patent, every little thing on there was a different patent, and of course, all those patents were probably elapsed within 10 or 15 or 20 years after 1952 or '53. So when you go into the 70's or maybe 60's, I don't recall, and they started getting some competition. By that time, I was still selling bits but I was in a different zoo other than that type of zoo.

#078 DF: Okay, where did you go next?

BW: I worked for a company called Grant Tool Company for awhile, which sold reamers. I worked for them for about six months, but there wasn't any bits involved then, I was just working for them, actually I was working in the office for them. After that I went to work for a company called Varel Manufacturing out of Dallas.

DF: And what did they sell?

BW: Bits. Geophysical bits. You're talking about a smaller size, you're talking about a 4 1/4, 4 1/2, 4 3/4.

DF: What other differences were there between that and an oil bit, is it still a tri-cone?

BW: It was a tri-cone. But it wasn't 6 1/4, it wasn't 6 3/4 or 7 7/8 or anything like that, it was . . .

DF: Smaller.

BW: What they drilled shotholes with.

DF: Yes. And so how many years did you sell those?

BW: I worked for Varel for two years, less than that, 1-2 years. After that I went to work for a company called Walker-McDonald, out of Greenville, Texas. I worked for them until March of 1956.

DF: Same kind of selling?

BW: Same kind of selling, same kind of bits, small sizes of bits.

DF: Now are you selling to geophysical contractors at this point, or drillers that sub-contracted to them?

BW: At that time, when I went to work for Varel, we sold to what they called, at that time, Party Chiefs on a seismic crew. And these Party Chiefs had their offices in small towns and they'd, what I call shoot the area, in those small towns, as long as they were there. They probably had 2-4 small drills per crew and the selling would be done to the Party Chiefs.

- #104 DF: That's interesting because often, other people have told me that the drilling was sub-contracted to somebody else, but you're saying in this case. . .
- BW: Not. . .
- DF: Not down there.
- BW: They had contractors, drilling contractors, but the drilling contractors worked for the ??? contractor. In a way I guess they were sub-contracted.
- DF: Yes. But this is a different development, I assumed that the driller would buy his own bits, but you're saying that the Party Chief. . .
- BW: Back then 99% of the seismic bits were bought by the Party Chiefs. Now that's going back there, that's going back to '52, '53, '54, '55.
- DF: Okay. Now how do we get you up here to Canada, what caused you to make that move?
- BW: Let me tell you a little story about the. . . when I went to work for Varel the fellow that hired me said, there's two things I've got to tell you, one is, when you first talk to a party Chief or Party Manager or whoever's going to do the buying on the crew, there's two things I don't want you to do. Remember, don't ask them who they're working for and don't look over the Party Chief's shoulder when he's drawing all these maps and all that or you'll get thrown out of the office. So the first thing I did when I called on this party Chief at a service station in Hobbes, New Mexico was I asked him who he was working for. He looked at me and said, none of your damn business. I already knew who he was working for and why I asked I don't know, but go ahead.
- DF: Okay, so in the mid 50's you were still working down in the States, how did you come to come to Canada?
- BW: I went to work for Walker-McDonald, in '54, I believe it was or '55 and one day, Mr. McDonald said he had to do something about Canada. He said, we've got to get, either get a new distributor in Calgary, or we've got to do something. I looked at him and I said, what the hell is wrong with me going up there. That started the ball rolling.
- #128 DF: So why did you want to come to Canada?
- BW: Hell, I don't know. I was getting tired of the dust storms out in west Texas and they were dusty. When that wind blows, it really blows.
- DF: So where did you land when you came to Canada?
- BW: The first night, in Fort Macleod. I got a room in a motel, the weather was good, there wasn't any snow on the ground. I woke up the next morning, this was March 9th, 1956 and I woke up the next morning and I never saw so much snow in all my life. I said, what the hell am I doing here. I went to have breakfast, that was in Fort Macleod, I went to have breakfast and after I had breakfast, I was watching that road out there, the main street of Fort Macleod and I was saying, what the hell am I going to do, I've got to drive to Calgary. So anyway I got out on the road, and got behind one of those big trucks, that was when there wasn't any 8 lane or 4 lane back then and it must have taken me 4 or 5 hours to get to Calgary.
- DF: Did Walker-McDonald have an office in Calgary at that time?
- BW: No. They had a distributor, called Seismic Service Supply. They sold seismic or

geophysical supplies. One of their main items that they sold was they had the agency or distributorship for the Mayhew Drill, which was built in Dallas, Texas. They had the distributorship for that and they sold everything you would buy on a seismic crew.

DF: Okay, but explain to me how Walker-McDonald sent you into an area where you already had a distributor, isn't that a conflict?

BW: It is and it's not. As soon as I talked to some people I took over the dealership for myself and I guess that was the main objective that I came up here for, came to Canada for was to get in the bit business and so I did.

#152 DF: Set up your own company or. . . ?

BW: Opened my own company

DF: And what did you call that?

BW: I called it, at that time, it was called Walker-McDonald Bit Distributors.

DF: Headquartered in Calgary.

BW: Headquartered in Calgary.

DF: What kind of a sales staff did you have?

BW: None at that point. That's not exactly right. What had happened, in the meantime, before I took the dealership away from Seismic Supply was that there was a company right around the corner, on 9th Avenue, down by the zoo, where a fellow had a little bit shop and I can't even remember the name of it. So I bought him out. He had a salesman and a little retipping shop there. So that's what started it. The salesman lasted about two months and I fired him and started hiring other people.

DF: Tell me what you were looking for in those people?

BW: Something that was hard to do back then was to find somebody who wanted to work all day and part of the night and not drink. The fellow that I fired was a pretty good drinker. But he knew how to make out an expense account. Their experience and what they had been doing, most of the people that I hired were active in the geophysical business, working on crews or on the drills. I believe that over the period of time that I had hired two or three guys that had been drillers and hired one guy that had been a Party Manager, one guy had been a surveyor, and on and on.

DF: Tell me about what their work was like, what did they do on an annual basis, how did that change?

BW: What do you mean?

DF: Was it seasonal work did they go out in the field or did they. . . .

BW: No, no. Everything was out in the field. There wasn't no action down on 8th Avenue at all.

DF: So if somebody was out in Peace River country, you had to go there?

BW: Oh yes, in the wintertime, we went to. . . .at one time we had as many as 8 salesmen out in the field. At the height of the High Level boom, back in the 60's, we had as many as 3 or 4 salesmen in High Level one winter.

#184 DF: And how did they get around out there in the bush?

BW: Pick-ups.

DF: Even when they were chasing crews that were on track vehicles and so on, they still

bounced around in pick-ups.

BW: Back then, they weren't very many track vehicles on a crew. In the wintertime when the frost was on and everything was frozen up, the crews could work in the bush in that part of the country.

DF: And you were always in Calgary, or were you out in the field too?

BW: In '56 and '57 and probably part of '58 I was out in the field quite a bit. And then I kept hiring one and then added one and added one. At the height we got up as many as 8 people.

DF: So where did your company go then, how did you develop or change or expand, did you go into northern Alberta?

BW: High Level was northern Alberta.

DF: Yes, I know. But you said that was in the 60's, but in the 50's when you first got here, you were in Calgary right. So just tell me how you developed the company after that?

BW: Like I said, probably the first winter. . . let's see that would be. . . I came here in March of '56, the winter. . . January, February, March of '57, I probably had one or two salesman out in the field, besides myself. Back then of course, you had road bans. You still do, but you really felt them back then because nobody was working. We had as many as 80 or 90 crews working in the wintertime, they'd shut down to maybe 20 or 30 or 40 in the summertime and the fall. I don't remember the ratio but there was quite a bit of lay-off and there still is, it still works that way. But it doesn't affect them as much now as it did then.

#209 DF: What percentage of the business did you have, with your company?

BW: Well, to start with I didn't have any. But probably from . . . after 10 or 15 years, we probably got up to around 40-45%. And it stayed steady like that way for years and years.

DF: What were the challenges in that time period, to keep your market share?

BW: Work, work, work. That was mainly it, just call on the crews, you know, if you say you're going to be there at a certain time, be there and that was it. No sleeping in or coming home every night or anything like that.

DF: Any adventures out in the bush?

BW: I wasn't out there that much. Probably got stuck 2 or 3 times in the snow, probably several times. I can't recall any adventure right now, right off hand.

DF: Once you took an order in the field, what was the process next.

BW: Well, you had that in the back end of your truck.

DF: You had . . .

BW: Had the bits in the back end of your truck.

DF: Enough to sell, whatever you needed.

BW: That's right.

DF: Okay.

BW: In one of those pick-ups you could probably haul, 2,000-2,500 pounds, at that time, it was half tons, we eventually went to 3/4 tons.

DF: So you were filling the orders right from the truck?

BW: That's right.

DF: And how often would your salesmen have to come back into town to fill up with more equipment?

BW: Sometimes they'd come back in every night, sometimes they'd stay out somewhere else and call on somebody else and make the tour and come back in. Usually, on the average, not counting the boom at High Level, that was what we called the Rainbow boom, but everybody stayed in High Level, everybody stayed in the same hotel and the hotel, you could tell that they had the only hotel in town. Back then, if you had a salesman in say, Calgary, I'm talking about the wintertime, and you had a salesman in Grande Prairie, you had a salesman in Fort Nelson and a salesman in Peace River, you pretty well covered the area. Now, when I say, had a salesman, sometimes you'd have two in Fort Nelson, sometimes you'd have two in Grande Prairie, whatever.

#243 DF: But those were your areas.

BW: That's right. Back during the High Level. . that one big winter in High Level, I don't recall the year, I think we had one salesman in Fort Nelson, one in Peace River and 4 or 5 or 6 in High Level, quite a few, and probably had one in Calgary.

DF: Really busy, eh?

BW: You have to remember, back in most of those years, you didn't have any crews in Saskatchewan or southern Alberta. Because they could work that area, most of the time, in the summertime or springtime.

DF: Right. How did you see the geophysical industry change over these years?

BW: One of the main things that changed, and I don't understand the scientific part of it, is that the crews went from analogue to digital, about 30 years ago I'd say. By going from analogue type of shooting to digital type of shooting, you did more. . .well, there's a word for it, I'll get hole of it in a minute, but you did more shothole drilling. Pattern drilling, that's the word I'm trying. . .did more pattern drillings, like back in the late 50's you'd have a drill that would drill 1 or 2 shot points every mile or every ½ mile. Later on you'd shoot patterns and you'd probably have 20, 30, 40, 50 shotholes. That's not the right numbers but. . . . That going along with digital, that was the main difference.

DF: Did that change your equipment or were you selling the same bits?

BW: No. Back in those days, in the 50's and 60's, you used a tri-cone bit, on what we called a conventional drill, which was a Failing or a Mayhew drill and those two drills would drill holes of 100 to 200 to 300 feet. Nowadays, they've got a different type of drill, which drills. . . auger drills, what we called an auger drill then and I don't know what they call them now. . and they drill, say a 60 foot hole, pattern holes. . .in a pattern, when I say a pattern, as many as 36 holes in a pattern. Which would be. . .and they'd have 3 or 4 of those patterns every mile. Those are the biggest changes.

#279 DF: What's the difference between an auger drill and the one you were selling, I don't understand?

BW: The conventional drill, you used a water truck. You drilled with water and you'd drill, say a 4 ½, 4 ¾ inch hole, and you'd pump the water out. Since I'm not a driller I can't quite explain it, but an auger drill, you'd have augers on that drill pipe and instead of pumping

it out, you'd drill it out.

DF: Just the action of the bit turning would push the dirt out of top of the hole?

BW: Yes. And you had those augers, you had those augers on the spirals.

DF: All the way up the pipe?

BW: All the way up the pipe. Those augers, those shotholes. . rather the augers they have working now could probably. . let me back up here. Every crew, every shothole dynamite crew, back in the 50's and 60's, I'd say there was the ratio of regular drills, which was the Mayhew and Failing to an auger drill was probably 10 to 1 or 20 to 1. Nowadays, there's no such thing as a conventional drill, you don't see a conventional drill on a crew at all. Because they're obsolete, as far as seismic is concerned. They still use these drills to drill water wells. That's one of the big changes.

DF: Do you remember when that change happened?

BW: Back in the. . they started changing in the late 60's I would say, or maybe a little bit before. Like from say 10 to 1 to 99 to 1 now, the opposite way.

306 DF: Why the change?

BW: Because they could get better records by using pattern holes.

DF: And the pattern hole system is shallower?

BW: Yes.

DF: But more holes.

BW: More holes, 60 feet. And 40 feet sometimes.

DF: Okay, whatever. But the conventional drill was typically drilling deeper though.

BW: Deeper, yes, 100-150 feet, something like that.

DF: Okay, so it had to do with the holes being shallower and more of them.

BW: That's right.

DF: So this other technology worked better.

BW: That's right.

DF: Okay. So did you have to change what you were selling?

BW: Oh yes. That's another thing. Most of the bits that we sold, to start with back in the 50's and 60's, were tri-cone bits, 4 1/4, 4 1/2, 4 3/4, along with something I left out, what we call a drag bit. A drag bit is something that would drag, instead of rotating, it would drag. And to use it on a conventional drill, you would use a water pump and whatever to release it. Nowadays, what we call an auger bit, the auger bit came into being right prior to the Rainbow boom, because that's when they started using a lot of augers. . . I may have my years mixed up here. Rainbow was. . . all that area up at High Level, and west of High Level was auger drilling.

#333 DF: Can you tell me more about this drag bit, what did it do, how did it work?

BW: When you leave here I'll take you downstairs and show you one.

DF: Okay.

BW: I don't have any literature with me right now. Instead of rotating, instead of the cones rotating on the bottom of the hole, the drag bit would drag and take a bigger bite. Of

course, you couldn't do that in hard drilling, you could do that in easy drilling, or soft drilling.

DF: That brings up another question, did you have different kinds of bits for different formations and so on?

BW: No, not really. When they used conventional drills. . .it all comes down to what kind of drilling it's going to be and they were prepared for it in most cases. A lot of times, back in a change over period, you'd see one conventional and say, three auger drills on a crew. When 10 or 15 years prior to that, you'd see nothing but conventional drills.

DF: What else was there to sell, you didn't sell explosives or any things like that?

BW: We sold strictly bits.

DF: Now did your company ever design anything along the way that was an enhancement? You said Hughes owned most of the patents in the early days.

BW: No, we didn't have any patent trouble with the bits that we made. Some people tried to put a patent on it but they didn't have much success. There wasn't too much technology involved.

DF: How much did a bit cost in those early days, say the 50's?

BW: Never enough. To the best of my knowledge, we sold a 4 ½ tri-cone bit for \$50 or \$60.

#364 DF: And how long did they last?

BW: That all depends on the driller. If you had a good driller, he knew how to get more. . . you know, there was no such thing as how long it would last, in that sense. It was just how long the driller wanted it to last.

DF: But if you had salesmen out in the field, you had to have some idea as to how often you had to visit a crew and so on?

BW: If you knew it was in rough drilling you got there quite often, if you knew it was in good drilling you had an excuse not to go.

DF: How many drills would you sell in a year?

BW: How many bits. . . .oh gosh. . . .

DF: Hundreds, thousands, what was it?

BW: I don't recall the exact number. Back in the hey day of the rock bits, you would sell maybe, 2,000-3,000. I don't know whether you would sell that many or not, maybe more. But these auger bits, which by the way, the size was 3 ½, all auger bits . . .you didn't drill that big a hole. . . 20, 30, 40, 50 thousand.

DF: Any other changes to the bit technology.

BW: The bits. . .that one auger bit that was so popular back. . .it's still popular. . .you just tried to make a better bit. You didn't do any major changes in it, you just tried to make a better bit by doing this to it or doing that to it.

DF: How long were the bits?

BW: I'd say, from . . .the auger bits had a box thread, the rock bits had a pen, a male pin and the auger bits had a female thread, they would be about . . .oh, 4 or 5 inches, maybe 3, maybe not that much, I don't know, maybe 3 inches at the most.

#398 DF: Any other technological changes to the bits over the years?

BW: No. And the reason for that is, you knew you were never going to get a big price for a bit in the geophysical business because in the oil business what happens, when these oil companies make out there budgets, whenever they're making out their budgets, who do they slash first, geophysical. So you had to watch the price and everything. Everybody else could get away with murder, everybody in the geophysical business, we were the paupers. Irregardless of what they tell you, irregardless of how many millions of dollars that some of them have made in it, that's true.

DF: That's what they tell me, geophysicists always got cut first.

BW: That's right.

DF: Now, did you ever become a member of the CSEG?

BW: Oh yes, I was a member for a long time.

DF: Okay, from the early time when you arrived here.

BW: Yes, I'd say from the early times.

DF: Okay. Now that's unusual because in the other societies like the CSPG and APEGGA and so on, those are technical societies. So tell me how it was that you came to be part of the CSEG?

BW: So I could go to all their functions and see the customers and mingle and all that. Not that I . . . I attended very few technical sessions. Most of them were drinking sessions, when they'd have their annual convention or whatever they had.

DF: Did you go to the Doodlebug?

BW: Oh yes, I probably went 20-25-30 years.

DF: Any stories there?

BW: Well, I never was much of a drinker so. . . .

DF: Were you a gold player or were you a sponsor of a booth somewhere along the . . .?

BW: We were a contributor but not a booth sponsor or anything like that. Not that I recall. . . they wanted your cash, they didn't care about the other. . . you know, in that sense.

DF: Yes. But who were the companies that supplied the refreshments around the gold course, was that not. . .?

BW: It varied from year to year.

DF: But it wasn't companies like yours?

BW: Oh yes. It was supply companies and geophysical contractors, geophysical supply contractors, geophysical supply companies, people like that.

#442 DF: Were you always selling bits then, still to the Party Chief?

BW: It evolved over a period of time. Back in the late 50's, the Party Chief at that time. . . when I was selling bits in west Texas and New Mexico, 90% of the Party Chief's were on a crew in various towns. When I came to Canada, it changed, they had what they called the Party Manager and they did the interpretation in Calgary or Edmonton or wherever. Back in west Texas and New Mexico, they did the interpretation out on the crews, here they did it in Calgary or wherever, but very few did it out in the field. Why that is, I don't know, I just don't know. I think one of the major reasons was that Calgary wasn't that far from. . . just the way it was set up to start with, Calgary wasn't that far from the crews and west Texas and New Mexico, the main offices were in Dallas and Houston and . . .

whatever.

DF: Meet any characters over the years?

BW: Too many. Gosh, I'd have to stop and think about the characters.

DF: What did you enjoy most about your career?

BW: I guess the work because I worked all the time.

DF: What else was involved in the work, I know it seems like just your story so it's old hat, but tell me more, what were the other challenges. If you went out on the field, what were the challenges in the office, keeping all this running.

BW: Well, the main challenge was get more business and I guess to meet people, because you meet different types of people all the time. As we go along I'll probably think of one or two.

DF: Okay, what did you do during the downturns. Obviously it's a seasonal industry, summer and winter, but when the industry really had troubles, what did you do?

BW: Well, you cut back on your salesman, actually some of the salesmen. . . we didn't . . . like, the winter when we had 8 or 9, back in the High Level boom, some of those people wouldn't work in the summertime, they'd go back to the farm and do this and do that, and you just had to work your way around it. Mind you, the salesman was mostly paid commission and you didn't have to pay them any commission because you didn't sell that many bits. But our business wasn't that bad. We had some bad summers, spring and summers but we had a lot of good summers and falls.

End of tape.

Side 2

DF: More what I was getting at was, almost every 10-12 years in this industry, there's a major downturn, when people stop drilling totally and you know. . . so. . .

BW: You just didn't sell as many bits, you didn't make as much money, you had to cut back on expenses, which includes salesmen and all that. But we stuck it out. As far as laying people off or anything like that, we didn't have to do that very much, although we did do it once or twice I guess it was.

DF: Was there any extent to which politics was important in your business, did you ever have trouble importing material from the States?

BW: Well, I'll tell you a little story. I may have to go slow here because I have to recollect what happened. We missed out on a sale, a big sale one time and I got mad and I turned. . . no, that's not it. . . I turned a competitor in to Customs. No, that's not quite right, let me back up here, subtract that or whatever, I'm getting my two stories mixed up here. Both of them were good. There was a machine shop in Calgary, I won't give you the name, but they tried to get in the bit business. They got a sale one time and I got mad and turned them in and they turned around and turned me in, because I got another sale and they got mad, because Canadian Customs come to see me. So he came and asked me a couple of times, I had 2 or 3 meetings with him and then I didn't hear from him again, so I called him up and I said, what happened on your investigation of this and that and whatever they thought I was doing wrong or our competitors thought I was doing wrong. He said, oh, not guilty, they couldn't prove anything. Other than that it was no problem. When we first started out in the 50's, we brought our own drag bit in. . . no, we brought the drag bits in, along with the rock bits, from Walker-McDonald. Then we started selling so many drag bits that they moved in themselves and started manufacturing them, we were the sales end of it and they were the manufacturing end of it. And I don't recall what years it was, probably in the 70's. So I said, to hell with that noise, we should be able to manufacture this drag bit ourselves, so we bought them out and we moved into another building. We built a building out by the stockyards. . . no, no that's not it. . . I'm getting my areas of the city mixed out. We built our own building out in south Foothills, you know where the Foothills district is out there, and we built a large building and moved out there and went real good for quite a few years, a large building, about 25,000 square feet.

#038 DF: This was your company did this?

BW: That's right.

DF: And where did you find the expertise to manufacture bits?

BW: It didn't take too much expertise to manufacture drag bits, but when we bought the company from Walker-McDonald, we just took the people with us. And they stayed there, some of them are still there.

DF: When did you get out of the industry?

BW: About 3 years ago.

DF: Had you built it up to quite a sizeable company by that point?

BW: Oh yes.

DF: You said earlier the name of your company, did it stay the same name throughout. . . ?

BW: Our company, we changed the name about 15 or 20 years ago from Walker-McDonald Bits Distributors, to Walker-McDonald Bits Ltd., which is the same thing and we kept that name until we sold the company.

DF: Who did you sell it to?

BW: We sold it to a company that became Alberta Basic, they bought the building and the company.

DF: Now, you say, we, were there other investors involved here or was this you?

BW: No, just me.

DF: Good. Now did you bits work for any other kind of industrial applications?

BW: Water wells. A little mining.

DF: How were they used, I can understand how they're used in water, but what kind of mining?

BW: There's just so many applications.

DF: Like coal mining, to break up the. . . ?

BW: Coal mining, to drill blast holes, I'd say basically that's what it was, coal mining. . but we didn't sell that many to the mines. The production companies, the bit companies, like Hughes and Reed and Smith and Western Rock Bit in Calgary, which became the Hughes Tool Company, 30-35 years ago. So that's basically what it was. Very few mining bits. Mostly, a lot of water wells, and water wells came on stronger all the time. But seismic had always been the basic of the business and still is.

#065 DF: How did things like Vibroseis cut into your business?

BW: There were Vibroseis crews back in the 50's when I came up here, there was probably one or two working. Quite a few were working down in the States. Down in the States now, I'll name you one area, west Texas, the Permian Basin down there, is 90-95% Vibroseis. Here, up until 3 or 4 years ago, it hadn't reached 40 or 50% and it goes up and down. You've got to remember that Vibroseis has got that ??? equipment and it doesn't work too good, even on frozen ground and the farmers and ranchers don't like it, it's just too heavy. But it still works. I'll tell you, it was probably 30 or 40% at one time.

DF: Did you make any special bits for say, the portable units, helicopter units.

BW: Basically the portable drills use what we call a down hole hammer, which is, they use air as a mechanism and they drill about a 3 1/2" hole but they pound it in and then set off the charges, set the dynamite and set off the charges. I don't know whether there's a lot of portable crews these days or not, but back then they had. . .it started, I'd say 10 years ago, it got pretty popular, the portable stuff. I don't know how popular it is now.

DF: Did you sell into that sector?

BW: Oh yes. But we didn't manufacture the hammer ourselves, we bought it from dealers.

DF: So back to the question earlier, any interesting people you met along the way, any stories about them.

BW: I just don't recall. I remember one fellow, his name was Thomas Somerville, he was a

manger for a company called Electrotec here in Calgary and this would be about 20 years ago. He was sitting on that ledge, you know where they had the old, the Pro Shop at Banff, you know that ledge, by the patio, out in front of the Pro Shop. Well, he was sitting there, drinking on day and he had one too many I guess and he lost his foothold and stumbled and just went over backwards, down the pathway. You know, how that pathway spirals up there. We had to take him to the hospital, so he spent the rest of the weekend in the hospital.

DF: Kind of got banged up.

BW: Yes.

#096 DF: Any regrets from your career?

BW: No, not really you never can look back, so if you don't look back you don't have any regrets. Probably one regret, I probably stayed in it too long.

DF: Why, something else you wanted to do?

BW: No, not really.

DF: Anything else you care to tell us about your career, about the geophysicists, anything at all about the industry?

BW: I don't know how it is now, in the year 2000, but like I said, I would presume that they still cut the budgets, the oil companies cut the budgets and the first one they shave is the seismic money, the geophysical money and that hasn't changed and it probably never will. Let's see there was one big change that I noticed and I had it on the tip of my tongue this morning before you came in and I don't quite remember what it was. Although there has been changes, names have changed and more mergers and companies getting bigger and going public. Back 20-30 years ago, you didn't have that, but now everybody's going public.

DF: What do you think of that?

BW: Well, that's good and bad. If you go public, you have to have something to go public with and some of these companies, just don't, they don't do their homework or some of these people don't do their homework.

DF: Did you ever become a Canadian citizen?

BW: Oh yes.

DF: What prompted you to do that?

BW: I guess the basic reason that I became a Canadian citizen was. . and I can't explain this because it didn't work out that way, was to escape the tax, beat the tax. I had a friend, he's passed away now, John Fuller, he started Nass Exploration here back in the 50's I guess. He told me one day, he said, you've got to become a Canadian citizen, you won't have to pay all that tax. So that's what got me motivated. To me, it didn't make any difference anyway, because there's really no difference, other than taxes, there's really no difference being one or the other. Except that now I can't vote down south, but I can vote here. But politicians are politicians anywhere you go. I had one on TV just before you came in.

#127 DF: I saw that one, yes.

BW: Lying again.

DF: Yes. They sometimes can do that pretty well.

BW: Right.

DF: So what made you decide to stay here in Canada after you retired?

BW: I didn't have any reason for going back.

DF: The winters didn't bother you too much?

BW: No, the first thing I dreaded when I came up here was the winters and like I said, when I glanced out of that motel room in fort Macleod that day and saw all that snow, I said, what the hell am I doing here. But it didn't bother me. I remember the next night I stayed in the York Hotel downtown, and it was 20 below. I can remember thinking to myself, 20 below is not all that cold if you dress right. And it's not, unless that wind's blowing and it hasn't bothered me too much. But that was one of the things I dreaded was the weather. But I don't know whether I like it to be a little bit too cold or like it to be a little bit too hot. I'd rather for it to be a little chilly, because I don't really think I could stand the hot summers back home, back in Texas.

DF: And that dust.

BW: And that dust. And I just saw on the TV this morning where they had a big tornado there in Fort Worth. that's right downtown in Fort Worth, 679,000 people. There was just 4 killed, I mean I can't believe that, all that damage.

DF: Well, Mr. Watson, I would like to take the opportunity just now to thank you so much for talking to us.

BW: You're very welcome.

DF: On behalf of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project, we were just really pleased that we were able to get this chance, so we'll end the interview at this time. Thank you very much.

BW: Thank you very much.