THE PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT*

by W. J. Wood

Pendant cinquante ans, l'industrie du pétrole a été une force motrice dans le développement de l'Ouest canadien. En 1980, donc, la "Alberta Historical Resources Foundation" a décidé d'amorcer le project d'histoire orale dans l'industrie du pétrole.

Un comité consultatif chargé de l'organisation a été formé afin d'approuver l'orientation et les principales dépenses du projet, et également pour recommander une liste de personnes à interviewer. Après avoir sélectionner des interviewers, on leur a donné une formation sur les techniques de l'histoire orale, ainsi qu'un aperçu de l'histoire et du vocabulaire de l'industrie du pétrole.

Au cours des interviews, un problème important s'est vite posé: la majorité des personnes interviewées étaient des cadres relativement jeunes, durant les années 30 et 40. Il était facile de savoir ce qui s'était passé à cette époque mais il était difficile de savoir pourquoi, puisque la plupart des personnes occupant les postes de direction étaient décédées.

A la fin du projet, en 1985, plus de 200 interviews avaient été ménagées. Les sujets variaient de l'évolution de l'industrie du pétrole à l'impact du changement technologique, des histoires des compagnies aux importantes découvertes de gisements, des échecs au rôle des agences gouvernementales dans l'industrie. Les interviews enregistrées ont été indexées et déposées au musée de Glenbow, avec les documents qui les accompagnaient et le matériel recueilli par les interviewers.

To begin the conference session on Business History I will introduce the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project in broad perspective: the mechanics, structure and organization of the Project. Susan Birley will follow with a presentation more focused on the Project's results and products.

Over the course of the conference it has become readily apparent that the audience is quite familiar with oral history and the oral history process. However, because the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project is unique with respect to its scope and organizational structure, I believe it warrants discussion and will be of interest as an entity in its own right.

---

* This is the essence of an oral history presentation given at the 1984 Annual Conference of the Canadian Oral History Association. It has been rewritten to be more suitable in print, a purpose for which it was not originally intended.

PROJECT CLASSIFICATION

The conference organizers have placed the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project in the Business History Session as noted above. As is traditionally perceived, business history, oral or otherwise, most often is meant to refer to a single business or company (qq. Floyd 1984; Phillips 1984). The same can be said for public history, another term for business history (Douglas 1980). For the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project this classification is somewhat inaccurate as it does not reflect the Project's true scope. More appropriate would be the term Industrial/Technical history. To illustrate this point a brief consideration of the petroleum industry in Canada is warranted.

The petroleum industry is a highly integrated system of numerous companies doing a multitude of different, albeit related, things. At the most general level the activities of the petroleum industry consist of exploration, production, refining, transportation and marketing. The companies include the multinationals (e.g. Shell, Imperial and Texaco), independent producers (e.g. Canadian Superior, Home, Dome) plus seismic companies, drilling contractors, equipment sales and service companies, and petroleum consultants. The Petroleum Industry Oral History Project is approaching the industry as an integrated system or structure rather than focusing on an isolated segment or single industry. Further, within this context, the emphasis of the Project is on the evolution of the industrial structure and related technology.

From this brief overview it may be apparent that the topic of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project goes beyond what has been traditionally considered to be business or public history. This, however, is not to suggest that industry/technical history is unique to the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project although there are very few instances that come to mind. Allan Anderson's (1981) oral history of the petroleum industry dealt with its numerous facets, but in a largely anecdotal form. More germane, but further afield, is the on-going oral history of the chemical industry in the United States (Gorther 1983). Suffice it to say that while the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project is not breaking new ground *per se* it is approaching the study in an explicitly scientific framework focusing on the study of and causes of change.

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

The origins of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project date to 1980 when funds were first allocated by the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation for the interviewing process. From 1980 through 1982 the Project consisted of one part-time interviewer. Narrators (interviewees) were selected on the basis of the recommendation of a retired petroleum geologist. Throughout this period, however, it was recognized that the potential narrator population was too great for a single part-time interviewer even when sampling was taken into consideration.

The Devonian Group of Charitable Foundations provided additional funding in early 1983. Coupled with grants from petroleum corporations, other foundations and petroleum societies, a full-time secretary/transcriber, two full-time interviewers and a project coordinator (also an interviewer) were hired. Donated office space and logistical support were received from Esso Resources Canada Limited.

The organizational structure of the Project, in addition to the staff, consists of an Advisory and Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is composed of representatives of the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, the Glenbow Archives, the University of Calgary History Department and the petroleum industry. Although the day-to-day operation of the Project is vested with the coordinator, the Steering Committee approves the overall operational philosophy, major expenditures, etc. The Advisory Committee membership has been somewhat fluid but generally consists of four or five longtime personnel from the different facets of the petroleum industry. Further consideration will be given to this committee below.

The interviewing staff for the project would ideally have had graduate degrees in history and geology or engineering, employment experience in the petroleum industry and formal training as interviewers. As people with this background simply do not exist, or are at least rare, suffice it to say that when the interviewers began they did not have these qualifications, at least all of them vested in any one person.

Realizing that there was a great deal to learn prior to starting, the interviewers began a relatively short but intensive study of the petroleum industry. To learn the vocabulary and the general nature of the industry a reading program was begun which included corporate histories, professional and trade journals and textbooks. Practical experience was gained by visiting an operating drilling rig in Turner Valley, a gas processing plant and several producing oil fields. Visits were also made to industry trade shows and petroleum laboratories. Seminars were arranged on geophysics and seismic operations. All of this was accomplished as quickly as possible to develop the interviewers' ability to interview, understand and empathize with the targeted narrators.

INTERVIEWING PARAMETERS

As suggested previously, the petroleum industry in Canada is extensive, literally spanning the globe with a myriad of different enterprises. Prior to beginning the interviews it was necessary to limit the scope of the Project.

Geographically, the emphasis was limited to Western Canada which includes the prairie provinces, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the Arctic. The temporal focus was primarily defined as the era of exploration and major field discovery, roughly 1920 - 1960. With respect to the multifaceted nature of the industry only the "up-stream" end of the industry was emphasized: that is, exploration and discovery, excluding marketing, transportation and refining. Petroleum production fell into a sort of middle ground.

The purpose of the oral history project has been to document the basis and evolution of the petroleum industry as it is seen today in Western Canada. More specifically, the 225 interviews cover the evolution of petroleum technology and the impact of technological change, company histories, the significant events such as field discoveries and blow-outs, changing socioeconomic conditions in the industry, the origin and impact of government agencies and commissions plus other related topics.

NARRATOR SELECTION AND SAMPLE

As mentioned above the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project structure also includes an Advisory Committee. Membership of this committee consists of two geologists, a drilling engineer, a petroleum engineer and a geophysicist, all of whom have had a long-term involvement in the petroleum industry. The purpose of this committee is to recommend to the interviewing staff potential narrators, to provide background information on a potential narrator and to suggest productive lines of questioning and research prior to the interview.

As the Advisory Committee was formed prior to the major Project acceleration in early 1983, it had previously prepared a list containing approximately 200 potential narrators.

In April 1983 the Project staff began interviewing from this list. However, from the outset there was an intuitive discomfort with this approach and after two months, with an increased understanding of the petroleum industry, the approach to selecting narrators for interviewing was changed.

What was desired was approximately 200 completed interviews that would be representative of the petroleum industry's variety and complexity. To this end the following were identified: significant historical events, major occupational groups, the major companies, the most significant technological changes and innovations, and the government agencies and commissions. At this point the ideal would have been to have a complete roster of those who had worked in the industry, to classify them with respect to their ability to address one or more of these major topic areas, then to generate a stratified random sample to produce a statistically representative narrator base.

Unfortunately, to produce the necessary roster verged on the impossible. Therefore, representativeness was approximated by relying on the Advisory Committee. They were asked to identify those individuals who had first-hand experience. This appears to have been satisfactory although there are biases resulting from the scope of the knowledge of the Advisors and the additional selection criteria based on the potential narrator's age and/or health.

Based on a sample size of 170 completed interviews the relative frequencies by occupation group are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: INTERVIEW FREQUENCIES BY OCCUPATION

Geologists	.28	Landmen	.05
Engineers	.18	Administrators	.05
Drillers	.16	Secretaries	.03
Promoters/Entrepreneurs	.07	Salesmen	.02
Other *	.05	Scouts	.01
Geophysicists	.05		

*Others: journalists (N=2), machinists (N=2), pipeliner (N=1), gasplant operator (N=1), lawyers (N=3), electrician (N=1), stockbroker (N=1), palaeontologist (N=1)

INTERVIEW PROCESSING AND USE

Upon completion of an interview (length range: 1 to 14 hours/mean: 5 hours) the resulting tapes are duplicated using a Sony CCP100 high speed duplicator and placed with the Archives Division of the Glenbow Museum. Once there they are available to anyone interested. (Very few of the interviews have restrictions.)

In addition to conducting and processing the interviews, the Project staff are making efforts to make the interviews as usable as possible. To this end two approaches have been taken.

On one level the tape recorded interviews are treated as a data base; that is, as a collection of research material. The tapes are provided with a detailed expanded outline and some are transcribed. Also, in association with PanCanadian Petroleum Limited, the interviews are indexed with 16 access fields (Table 2) using a DEC WT 78, a sophisticated word processor.

Table 2: ACCESS FIELDS - PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Narrator	Events Discussed
Year and Number of Interview	Companies Discussed
Access	Fields and Wells Discussed
Length of Interview	Topics Discussed
Companies Employed By	Techniques Discussed
Period of Employment	Interviewer
Occupation	Miscellaneous Notes
Education	
People Mentioned	

At the completion of the Project all interviews (N=200+) will have an index. An example is shown as Table 3. These indexes will be bound and will serve as a Project catalogue. Of greater value, it is anticipated that the computer data base, i.e. the indexes, will be transferred to the Glenbow Archives where a researcher will have multiple levels of access. For example, if the Leduc oilfield is of interest the researcher would simply ask for all of those interviews in which Leduc was discussed. From the produced list of narrators that discussed Leduc the researcher would then turn to the appropriate tape outline and/or transcript and/or tape recording. Likewise, if one were doing research on Ralph Will, a well known early driller, the same process could be undertaken by identifying on the computer output all interviews in which Ralph Will is discussed. Many types of data retrieval will be possible. It is hoped that this will be a much used research tool analogous to the computerized card catalogue used in libraries.

TABLE 3: EXAMPLE OF COMPLETE INDEX

Narrator	FELDMEYER, Art
Year/No.	1984:RCT589
Interviewer	BIRLEY, S.
Access Code	unrestricted
Pages/Hours	2.5 hours: 3 tapes
Period of Employment Oil Industry	1938 - 1978
Companies Employed By	Superior Oil of California, Rio Bravo Oil Co. Ltd., Canadian Superior
Occupation	geologist, president of Canadian Superior
Education	B.Sc., 1937, Geology, University of California, Berkeley
People Mentioned	Nick Nichols, Dave Jones, Snap Laurson, Barney Barnett, Don Bohannon, Jim Pyle, Alex Beveridge, Bernie Jones, Bill Keck, Howard Keck, John Cody, Arne Nielsen, Keith Laatsch, Jack Porter
Events Discussed	formation of Canadian Superior, purchasing Calgary and Edmonton Corporation
Companies Discussed	Rio Bravo Oil Co. Ltd., Superior Oil of California, Canadian Superior, Calgary and Edmonton Corporation, Alminex, Rio Blanco, Rio Norte, Mobil
Field/Wells Discussed	Harmattan field, Stettler field
Techniques Discussed	
Topics Discussed	oil and gas leasing, oil company administration, financing, petroleum exploration
Miscellaneous Notes	23 years as president of Canadian Superior.

As well as encouraging and promoting the use of the oral histories the Project staff have already used the interviews as the basis of published articles on the history of the petroleum industry (Birley 1983, 1984; Wood 1984a, 1984b). An audio visual-program on early oil-well drilling techniques is also in production.

PROBLEM AREAS

The most significant problem encountered by the interviewing staff during the course of the Project, in addition to its sheer scope, has to do with the narrators. With few exceptions the narrators were all employed in the petroleum industry in the 1930's and 1940's. However, at that time they were generally young men and women, for the most part not occupying positions of power or senior responsibility. Conversely, a majority of those in decision-making roles in the 1930's and 1940's were relatively older at that time and are now deceased. Thus, it is fairly easy for the interviewers to find out what occurred at that time but not why it occurred.

Of course, this is a reality that must be accepted but it is a difficult problem when doing business, corporate or industrial oral histories. However, a similar situation exists in attempts to investigate the decision-making process for more recent events in the 1960's and 1970's. The major figures are not only still alive but they are still working as well. Regardless of the option to restrict access to their interviews, they remain reticent when the interviewers touch on major uses of power, corporate take-overs and reorganizations.

SUMMARY

The Petroleum Industry Oral History Project will conclude at the end of April 1985. At that time over 200 interviews will have been completed. All interview tapes, associated documents and ancillary materials collected by the interviewing staff during the course of their research will, at that time, be well organized and publicly available at the Glenbow Archives. The goals of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project have been to produce interviews of substance with the highest possible technical standards and to insure that the associated documentation is complete. All of this has been done with the ultimate goal of encouraging future researchers to use the oral history collection.

References Cited

Anderson, Allan
1981 Roughnecks and Wildcatters. Macmillan of Canada.

Birley, Susan
1983 Petroleum Pioneers Record Stories for Posterity. New and Views, 6:3, p 3.

1984 An Interview with Jim Lineham: Early Days in the Oil Patch Cornerstone, 7:2, pp 3-4.

1985 Oral History: An Industrial Approach. Alberta Museums Review (In press - Spring 1985).

Douglas, Enid H.
1980 Oral History and Public History. Oral History Review 1980, pp 1-5.

Floyd, Candace
1984 The Historian in the Gray Flannel Suit. History News 39-5, pp 6-10.

Gorther, Leon
1983 Oral History: How, Why and When? CHQC News, 1:2, pp 7-9.

Phillips, Charles
1984 History's Hired Hands. History News, 39.5, pp 11-14.

Wood, W.J.
1984a An Interview with Archie Miller. Cornerstone, 7:1 p.6.

1984b Images of Norman Wells: The Oral History of the Canol Project. Cornerstone, 7:3, pp 9-10.