

THE PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
Collecting Data for Business and History

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Cet exposé décrit un ambitieux projet, d'une durée de cinq ans, sur l'industrie du pétrole dans l'Ouest canadien. Les différentes vues sur l'histoire qu'ont "l'Industrie" et "l'Histoire" ont mené à un conflit sous-jacent. "L'Industrie", comme "le Commerce", veut légitimer son passé, pendant que "l'Histoire" recherche une documentation juste et précise. L'auteur explique comment l'équipe travaillant au projet a essayé de répondre aux attentes des deux participants.

L'objectif proposé était vaste et la plus grande difficulté à été de définir le public cible et, par conséquent, de déterminer les renseignements pertinents. Une méthodologie était nécessaire pour préparer les recherches et ménager les entrevues. L'auteur donne un aperçu de la façon dont les interviews ont été choisies, de la méthode suivant laquelle les interviews ont été préparées et des techniques d'interviews. Elle explique également les problèmes qu'ils ont rencontrés et elle fait d'utiles suggestions sur la façon de les éviter. Divers scénarios, avec des renseignements généraux à l'appui, illustrent clairement son propos. Certains modèles qui sont ressortis des interviews sont aussi étudiés, en rapport avec l'occupation et le cadre de vie des personnes interviewées. L'article fait valoir l'histoire orale dans un domaine où les documents d'archives sont plus embarrassants (un problème de conservation) qu'utiles (une source de réflexion pour l'avenir). A part mettre en valeur les documents existants et fournir une documentation originale, l'histoire orale de l'industrie du pétrole fournira des pistes aux futures recherches des historiens.

The Petroleum Industry Oral History Project was an ambitious program, spanning five years from 1981 to 1985 and generating interviews with 221 individuals representing various aspects of the petroleum industry. From its inception there has been an underlying conflict between those who feel that it was created for the benefit of the industry and those who regard it as a history project and therefore responsible to the dictates of historical objectivity. The project staff, which consisted of six different interviewers over time, were responsible for dealing with this dichotomy while carrying out the project's mandate.

Industry, as a business, and History, as a discipline, are traditionally distinct entities yet they go through the motions of deterring to each other. Industry, and business in general, is maturing and wants to have an accurate record of its development. A growing appreciation for the applications of history in business have encouraged the establishment of company archives and the generation of company histories. However, business' use of history is still one of legitimizing its own operations. In an article "Using Business History" by Helen Cushman, the author states, "History in business terms may mean a number of values, qualities and activities. An individual company will define its own ways to use the light from its past".¹ She goes on to suggest how history can be used by the public relations, product management, personnel, accounting and legal departments. The majority of

company histories done in Canada still conform to the pattern of being either glossy corporate propaganda or the sensational product of the muckraker. Neither of these products satisfy the need for integrity in historical research and have led to what has been called "a mediocre record of official business history in Canada" which critics have termed "superficial, uncritical, compromised and myopic."²

History, for its part, would like to take a more critical and objective approach to business history. Historians are interested in business and industry as one of the major influences on Canadian society and the economy, but also feel a curiosity about the internal workings and thinking of the business community. Unfortunately few historians are permitted to satisfy their curiosity by being accepted into the corporate confidence. Fewer still are allowed to pursue their own research interests by reviewing company records. Even those who succeed in securing a contract to write a company history find little cooperation in accessing files or getting the bottom line facts. This closed-door policy is due in large part to the desire of the company to protect itself against criticism or exploitation. Also few company records are generated which provide the meat for historical enquiry. In industry a handshake is sufficient acknowledgement of a deal. Most negotiations are done over lunch or on the telephone, and corporate lawyers discourage executives from leaving detailed records of their moves.

The lack of company records is also due to the pragmatic attitude of the businessman. In a recent presentation "Business History as Public History" McDowall summarized business's attitude as "History is not 'practical', it does not produce 'results' or augment the 'bottom line'". He continued, "Businesses tend to look on their past records as a storage problem rather than a resource for future reflection on the company's evolution. This tendency is perhaps intensified by businessmen's inclination to see oral evidence, as opposed to the written record, as the font of lively corporate history."³

The applications of history to business are therefore still under the control of business and its interests. Historians can dabble in business-sanctioned historical research; however, the final product is tagged "Official History" by the academic world, indicating that control is outside the elusive boundaries of historical objectivity. As long as historians continue to rely on written documentation to provide their sources for business history they will encounter the same obstacles. If, however, they are willing to use a more democratic, less formal research method such as oral history to provide their source material they will find more cooperation from business, since businessmen view oral testimony as harmless and a situation which is under their control. Also the results of oral history research can supplement or augment existing information on manuscripts and other documentary material. In an article "Augmenting Manuscripts Through Oral History", Irene Cortinovic explains, "Archivists learned about the motivations, attitudes and personalities of the people involved.... The manuscripts disclosed none of this information. There is simply no substitute for the information that can be provided by those who were personally involved in events."⁴

For the purposes of this paper I will look at the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project as a form of business history of the oil industry. The industry is basically a conglomerate of businesses engaged in various aspects of the exploration and development of petroleum. The project's success depended to a large extent on the cooperation of active and retired businessmen in providing their commentary for the interviews. In order for the

project to generate interviews which would be of value to the historical process, it was also necessary to impose a type of methodology in the research design and within the interview itself. The means which we employed to try to meet the expectations of both businessmen, as the narrators, and historians, as the eventual audience for the interviews, will be the focus of this discussion.

The petroleum industry has been singled out for an oral history project before. The University of Texas Archives sponsored a project from 1952-1958 which culminated in the book "Tales From the Derrick Floor: A People's History of the Oil Industry".⁵ Alan Anderson approached the Canadian oil-patch in 1980 to collect anecdotes for his book "Roughnecks and Wildcatters". He found that "oilmen, like farmers and fishermen, have an oral tradition and they are storytellers by instinct". Both of these projects produced popular histories focused on the anecdotal style of oral history. Although the PIOHP obtained anecdotes in the interviews we were also concerned with securing historically important information. In this way the staff of the project met Louis Starr's original definition of oral historians as:

"Men and women armed with tape recorders in quest of first-hand knowledge that would otherwise decay. This they would capture not for their own benefit but for libraries and other repositories to hold for the benefit of scholars and succeeding generations."⁶

The major difficulty of having such a general purpose was defining an audience. Scholars and succeeding generations may have many questions that we could only hope to anticipate and the interests of the petroleum industry in the final product might be varied. As a result we tried to assess each interviewee for his or her potential contribution to knowledge of petroleum industry history, technical information on equipment and processes, inside knowledge relating to specific companies, and other information pertinent to events, issues, companies and individuals. The type of information and the form of presentation differed according to the individual's occupation within the industry, as I will outline later. When we prepared our list of potential narrators, we tried to consider gaps in the record which might be covered by specific individuals. Our first lists were a general coverage of the industry which provided a chronology of major events such as the Turner Valley discoveries, the Leduc discovery, the expansion of the industry after Leduc and Redwater, and the building of transportation systems to move the production to markets. After this we tried to cover specific companies, looking at their operations within this framework.

The structure of the interview followed a general chronological framework, focusing on and developing relevant themes within the individual's experience. After covering a general background, we focus on specific companies the narrator worked for, dealing with the role they played within the company, the company's history and principal owner/operators, the activities of the company within the oilfield, its major clients, internal power structures, interpersonal relations between employees, and corporate philosophy. If the narrator worked for smaller, independent operators we focused more on a discussion of the fields worked in, technology used, operational strategies and significant industry personalities. In this way we worked from the grass-roots level, assembling a collective identity of the industry through the viewpoint of its participants.

During the interview process the content of the narrator's testimony was being assessed for the relative degree to which it conformed to known facts. We judged the reliability of the information being divulged in the following ways:

- comparing it with other sources - written
- comparing it with other sources - oral (other interviews)
- identifying common issues which all narrators want to deal with
- identifying folklore elements
- identifying situations of resistance which betray a conflict within the narrator's conscience.

In each situation there were "red flags" which indicated an opportunity to probe below the surface of the narration and get to the source of the narrator's feelings as they influenced his memory of certain events. For instance, a narrator may have begun by making a general negative statement about a company or an individual. If the subject was pursued further, the reason for his judgement would become apparent. The interviewer had to recognize these opportunities since they would reveal a deeper level of reasoning and provide a broader base for interpretation of the interview.

The selection of narrators provided us with some control over the direction of the research, which was sometimes difficult to identify. The process of selection, however, was also a source of conflict between the interests of History and Industry. The industry's concerns were represented within the project structure by the Advisory Committee whose purpose was to assist in the selection of narrators and provide background information on narrators, companies and industry history. The Advisory Committee was made up of from three to seven industry representatives who were retired, and who had been interviewed for the project. They tended to favor an anecdotal approach towards the history of the industry and based their recommendations for narrators on people they knew and worked with, rather than on the need to document companies, issues and events systematically. Other potential narrators were suggested by those we interviewed so that a broader selection was obtained. An ideal structure for the selection of narrators might have been to pinpoint companies, events and individuals which we wanted to investigate, then ask the advisors to draw up a list of people who were involved first-hand and prioritize them. Unfortunately, the process was reversed: we were given a name, then faced with the responsibility of finding out how they fitted into the system and what they could comment on.

Once the selection of narrators was agreed upon, the people were contacted and a pre-interview was arranged for each. At the initial meeting the concept of the project was outlined and the possible topics for the interview were developed. Once the narrators overcame any initial apprehension about being recorded on tape, they settled comfortably into the role and were usually fairly frank in their comments. Many said that they found the interviews an enjoyable and even therapeutic experience.

Certain topics were sensitive and required special tact to approach. Most of the narrators were reluctant to discuss unpleasant subjects such as someone being fired, an unexpected company takeover, or cases of incompetence, fraud or bankruptcy. Even though the event often occurred over thirty years ago and all those implicated might be deceased, there was still a strong distaste for bringing up the subject. In some cases this was due to the bad press which the petroleum industry and its chief representatives are

exposed to, but more often it was simply out of a sense of loyalty to their fellow oilman. This loyalty stems largely from a desire for self-preservation since the "old-boy network" is very strong in the oil industry. This arises from two factors. First, you need to rely on other communications to keep you abreast of what is going on, and second, you use your contacts exclusively when looking for technical and financial assistance. You never know when good relations with your contacts will pay off, as this narrator explained:

"It's a great big friendly community in this oil business. A lot of it is all personal contact and I've always adopted the philosophy, you've gotta be nice to everybody in this business 'cause you never know when you're going to be working for them, through mergers you know. It's amazing, guys that worked for you at one time could well end up being your boss through a merger - you haven't the slightest idea. And so, it pays to be nice to everybody."⁷

As a result, most narrators preferred to discuss "safe" topics such as procedures, technology and events rather than personalities and company policy. They never felt that they had left the oilpatch, since all of their friends and acquaintances were part of it and most of them continue consulting after retirement.

Some narrators had trouble with the concept of oral history. If they were used to dictating letters to their secretary on the tape recorder they tended to lapse into the same style they used in their office, as in, "That's PETROLEUM, p-e-t-r-o-l-e-u-m comma". This resulted in a stiff, pedantic style of narrative. Others had difficulty understanding that we did not want them reading from copious notes, which resulted in a monotonous drone broken by the rustle of turning pages. They were also concerned that their off-the-cuff comments would sound disjointed or too sketchy or that they would inadvertently say something which they would later regret. Usually in this situation the interviewer could ease them into the more desirable question-and-answer format by asking questions based on their written account which they could "ad lib", gradually gaining confidence in their ability to relate freely.

Another interview scenario which could be difficult to control was when the narrator perceived the interview as an opportunity to seek revenge on an old antagonist or as a chance to "stand on the soapbox" and expound his political convictions. Although personal values and opinions have a place in the oral history interview they can also distort the actual facts and present a skewed version of events. In this situation we tried to explore the issues as much as possible so that some of the origin of their feelings become apparent. This most often happened with narrators who had been passed up for a promotion, had their company taken over through an unexpected merger, or experienced similar emotionally-charged events.

The major challenge in doing an oral history of the petroleum industry was preparing for each interview so that you knew as much as possible about the background of the individual, the companies he worked for and their respective roles in the history of the industry. This required considerable knowledge initially about the technology involved. We became fluent in the language and processes of many different phases of the petroleum industry such as reflection seismology, stratigraphy and sedimentation, cable-tool and rotary drilling, well testing and production and gas plant processing.

In order to trigger the appropriate response from the narrator we had to employ the vernacular of the oilpatch, for instance "spudded-in" instead of started drilling or "wildcatting" instead of drilling exploratory wells.

Background research was often difficult because of a lack of information about individuals or on the details of events. Most companies do not preserve their records and few company files are deposited in the archives. In any case, we did not have time to wade through files in order to extract meaningful issues and events on which to question the narrator. Our primary source of information was the narrator himself. In the pre-interview we tried to obtain a resume or spend a half-hour jotting down the major points of his career. From this we reviewed relevant publications which might mention his company's activities. Oilweek, (est. 1955), and the Daily Oil Bulletin (est. 1937), provide a summary of all drilling activity with details of the company, depth and any significant events. These facts gave a narrator the prompt he needed to expand on potential topics such as fishing problems, negotiations in securing a lease, attracting partners in an exploration play or drilling a discovery well.

The ability to produce a successful interview also depended on recognizing the type of narrator you were dealing with. The narrators did not differ significantly from those in any other oral history project since we were still dealing with human variables such as the fickleness of memory, coupled with the subjective influences of selection and recall. The completed interview bares the narrator's individual stamp but it also featured certain common elements with other interviews. By recognizing these common patterns we could provide interpretation within the interview and thereby assist subsequent researchers in understanding the narrator's testimony.

Several patterns emerged from the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project with respect to the occupation and background of the narrators. When we finish indexing the complete collection of interviews other patterns will also become apparent. I recognize three basic types which cover most individuals that were interviewed:

- Type A is the person who usually stayed in the field operations his entire career. He usually had a low level of education and began working at an early age on a drilling rig, usually in Turner Valley. He worked for many different drilling and service companies and may have eventually formed his own company. He usually retired in a management position.
- Type B is the person who has some formal education, usually a degree in Engineering or Geology. This type of person was often a veteran receiving his training just after the war. They were usually hired by a major oil company where they worked their way up to an executive or management position. They usually remained with the same company to retirement.
- Type C is the entrepreneurial person who has extensive experience in transacting business deals. They usually worked their way up through several companies before branching out on their own, often in lease brokering or putting deals together. They usually achieved a high degree of financial success and have extensive contacts throughout the industry.

This typology does not exclude the possibility of someone starting out in one type and switching to another. It also does not include the minority of exceptions such as academics who contributed to the theory of exploration geology or geophysics while not being actively involved in the industry.

Another exception to the rule were women employed in the oil business. There were very few professional women employed by oil companies. Even the Geological Survey of Canada had a policy against hiring "female geologists" at anything other than the PhD level. Most of the women interviewed for the project were secretaries or oil wives, who were able to comment from a different perspective on the oil patch. Most women who were married to a driller had to deal with the insecurity of having him away for months at a time, and not knowing when they would have to load up the skid shack and move on to a new location. The Oil Wives' Association started up in 1950 to provide an outlet for these women who had few ties in a new community.

Each specific type of narrator presented a special challenge to the interviewer. Those who were primarily employed in the field would be able to comment most effectively on technical aspects and would have considerable folklore which they inherited from their fellow roughnecks. The drillers who began in Turner Valley were generally less literate but had more colorful anecdotes to describe changing conditions and oilfield characters. Their chronology usually related to industry landmarks rather than specific dates, such as "We were still working on the Arca well when that discovery came in at the south end."⁸

The Company man was generally less anecdotal and preferred to discuss general trends in the industry and how they affected his company and overall field activity. They could comment on company policy, major land plays and give some interesting accounts of intrigue and decision making within the corporate structure. They were usually well-informed and eloquent speakers. Their chronology usually related to promotions, transfers, mergers or the loss of a company patriarch.

The entrepreneur was the most flexible class since its members come from a broad variety of occupations and experience. The major requirement was a willingness to take a risk and a strong motivation to succeed. The entrepreneur was tactful as a narrator since he didn't want to betray his contacts. He was a good raconteur, however, and would provide colorful anecdotes on events which were safely in the past. Their chronology related to successful deals and stock market fluctuations.

In general the oral history of the petroleum industry is also a history of the development of the province of Alberta, since the politics of energy have become a major force behind its development in the last three decades. The people who were interviewed depict the average Albertan's attitude towards American and foreign control of the industry in Canada, the issue of exporting petroleum products, the division of the profits and the nature of relations between federal and provincial governments. It is interesting to observe how completely the industry has affected the lives of those who have benefited from its presence.

In conclusion then, the history of the petroleum industry in Western Canada will benefit from the application of oral history as a research technique and a source of original documentation. Apart from enhancing existing records the oral history of the oilpatch will give historians many leads for future research. Few of the small oil companies which sprang up around Turner Valley in the 1920's and in the boom which followed

Leduc have survived through any formal documentation. However the mention of some old stock certificates can trigger a narrator's memory sufficiently to bring some long forgotten details to the surface.

From the industry's point of view, the frequent boom-and-bust cycle which characterizes the oil industry can be documented over a span of years through oral history and provide a reference for recognizing the relative health of the industry. Companies can also use the information in the interviews for many in-house productions and promotional literature.

The use of oral history in documenting corporate politics is also valid.

"Decision making in these institutions is frequently complex and seldom produces a record adequate for understanding this process. The minutes of private corporation board meetings do not reveal the deeper level of reasoning behind many decisions, nor the chemistry of the interaction of people before and at the time decisions are made. This interaction among protagonists, antagonists and decision-makers can be serendipitous."⁹

The industry men and women who we interviewed are survivors. They succeeded in staying involved for at least thirty years in the oil business and achieved a fair degree of success. The interviews will have many applications to both the industry and the historians but in general they provide insight into the lives of a group of people who had great tenacity and a strong will to succeed. Perhaps the oil industry will be only a brief, brilliant flare in the historical record, but at least some of its glamour and intrigue will be preserved. In the words of an industry spokesman...

"The oil business was a rough tough society in those days. The people were different then. We weren't gentlemen - we had a different kind of life - we had a different kind of attitude. But out of it came the people who are running the oil business today."¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. Helen Cushman, "Using Business History", American Records Management Quarterly (July 1977): p. 5-16.
2. Duncan McDowall, "Business History as Public History: One of Canada's Infant Industries", A Paper Presented at the Canadian Business History Conference: Trent University, Peterborough, May 1984.; p. 9
3. McDowall: p. 21
4. Irene Cortinovis, "Augmenting Manuscripts Through Oral History", American Archivist 43 (Summer 1980): p. 367-69
5. Mody C. Boatright and William Owens, "Tales From the Derrick Floor: A People's History of the Oil Industry", Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970; reprint ed., 1982
6. Louis Starr, "Oral History", Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, (1977)

7. Charlie Dunkley to Susan Birley, Petroleum Industry Oral History Project tapes, Glenbow Archives, Calgary. (1984)
8. Archie Miller to Jim Wood, Petroleum Industry Oral History Project tapes, Glenbow Archives, Calgary (1984)
9. Enid H. Douglass, "Oral History and Public History", Oral History Review 8 (1980): p. 4
10. Jack Browning to Susan Birley, Petroleum Industry Oral History Project tapes, Glenbow Archives, Calgary. (1983)