

This interview is for the Barbara Morgan Harvey Center for the Study of Oil Heritage, through Clarion University of Pennsylvania. This interview is with Mr. Charles Breene, who has personal ties to Oil City's oil history. The interview is being conducted in the historic National Transit Building, located in Oil City, Pennsylvania, on October 31, 2008. The interview is being conducted by Neil McElwee.

Breene- John Brown, the one who's 17 years younger than ?? and me and Sam. Did very well in Florida, he owns a moving company, but he's hurting now because of obviously the real estate market has tanked in Naples. But he was there when it just went sky high. So he made very well. I mean he'll last.

Unknown- O.K. Neil, you're set. Rock and Roll.

McElwee- O.K. Alright. I'll start this shortly, because we set it up. We're having a conversation this morning. It's October 31st, it's a Friday, a beautiful day in October in the year 2008. The conversation is with Mr. Charles Breene, most of his friends call him Charlie, and if you don't mind Charlie, I will call you Charlie. Charlie has a family history, a history, personal history, that actually is connected to this fine, wonderful historic building: The National Transit, and we. Well Charlie, why don't you tell us about some of your early years here in the National Transit Building, and how your family was involved with this building.

Breene- My Grandfather Edmond Cornelius Breene, Never finished high school, but he read law and became a lawyer and became the lawyer for Pennzoil, and was friends with a lot of the early oil people. He worked in the oil fields to support his mother, who was a widow when he was young, and he was the youngest of seven boys; and two of his older brothers went out to Oklahoma, seeking their fortune. They did very well in the oil business. One of the daughters of the, of one of the brothers, the Bartlesville/Tulsa area was Grace Breene Kerr, Senator Kerr's wife, and he became the recipient of all the oil lobby money. So he was the most powerful Senator, he was a Democrat, a Southern Democrat, in the '50's. Kerr McGee, but his, when he left the scene, LBJ took over the oil lobby, but that's. They went out to Oklahoma, because Tulsa was the Oil capitol of the world, not Houston. It did slide down to Houston soon after that, but actually it started, the real money in the oil business even though the spindle-top dome in the Houston, Beaumont area the drilling was there. The money was in Oklahoma, centered around Tulsa.

Well the Derrick, the Oil City Derrick, which started in 1871, here in Oil city. E.P. Boyle, who just passed away in his mid-nineties, five or six years ago, has had a cousin P.C. Lowinger, who is from Pittsburgh. But he was a first cousin, and if the publishing empire split and the Lowinger's went to Tulsa at the turn of the century, very early 1900's, and P.C.'s father started the Oil and Gas Journal. So the Boyles owned 49 percent of the Oil and Gas Journal, and the Lowinger's owned 49 percent of The Derrick, 51-49. The Boyles bought out the Lowinger's back in the, in the boom of the late 70's, early 80's and then it crashed. It was one of those cyclical things, and they bought, they sold their interest in

the Oil and Gas Journal. That's the bible of the oil industry, but my grandfather took my grandmother out to Bartlesville on their Honeymoon, and it was 1902 I think. And Grandmother was born on Butler Alley, near Grove Avenue.

McElwee- Oh, is that right?

Breene- At that time, that was the carriage trade area. Now it's one of the worst sections in town, but the view is just stupendous. I mean if we ever really prosper here, I can see town houses hanging off the cliff there. But my grandmother and grandfather took the train out to Bartlesville, and Grandfather hadn't said anything about this, his plan. And I don't know if, grandmother just figured well we will go out and visit my brother's-in-law and their families. And they got off the train, and Grandfather said "Anna, this is where we are going to take up housekeeping." And grandmother's jaw dropped and said "Edmond, if you think I'm gonna live here, I'm just gonna get back on that train and you stay here." Well, that's why grandfather lived in Oil City the rest of his life. But that was a wild west town then, and grandmother put up enough with that in Oil City back in the oil boom days. But Oil City prospered very, very quickly. I never will forget ?? at some, oh I think it was one of the oil heritage events. Quaker State must have been honored, and what he said back in 1985, Oil City was the second biggest money exchange in the hemisphere. And for about two or three years. The Oil Exchange, of course Wall Street, but San Francisco, I don't know what would be the second biggest now, Chicago probably, but Oil City had that distinction in the mid-eighties.

Well, my grandfather became a lawyer, and I was born in 1941, my grandfather died in 1961. He was in his early eighties, 83 I think. But he was a banker also, and Mister Sewer, his friend, started Oil City Trust Company, which became First Seneca, and grandfather started First National Bank. Which is right over across the street where Bruce Rosen and his son.

McElwee- Yeah. Alright.

Breene- So there in that location. Well the building was a four story building, they took the top off. I think Judd Tracks ended up owning, he took the top half off and they modernized it. But I used to hangout in grandfather's law office back in 1946, when I was four years old, and I had this thing about superlatives and I had to find the biggest book in the world. Well, certainly the law books then were gigantic; I could hardly carry them, 4,000 pages. So I would hang around there, fly in the ointment. Grandfather would give me a dime and I would run down to the C and N Smokes Shop, and Tim Woods owned it, it's Hileman and Woods now. And George Hileman, they made sodas in there. And for a dime, I got the best chocolate soda I've ever had in my life. I just, I could still taste it, and they don't even make chocolate sodas anymore. Apple Ice Cream, seltzer, it was really good.

McElwee- From the fountain, fountain type.

Breene- Yeah, right. And so, then grandfather sold the building, moved over here and in 1956 grandfather died in '61. But yeah, he was a lawyer up until he died. He spent all summer fishing in Canada. He'd go up in April and come back in September. But they actually, I have had this question in my head. How did Mr. Sewer, and grandfather, and then Mr. Sewers two sisters and their husbands, and so the four couples built cottages on a lake. And it was totally isolated. It was real wilderness. It's mainstream cottage country in Ontario. Beautiful lake, beautiful area. And my mother owns the cottage now and we, my family are fortunate enough to go up there. I just love it up there. It's my favorite place in the world. But they came into a lumber town, by train. Ten miles by boat, and then up to the cottage. And it's sort of the same thing, my grandmother, when she got to Bartlesville, their women got off the boat, and mosquitoes and everything. You know it was just, but they had a lot of people helping them, and they spent the summer there. Well, how in the heck did Mr. Sewer run his, run Pennzoil from up there. And they were there for two and a half months every, every summer. I mean, how did grandfather run his law office. Well, they took the boat everyday up to the western union office in Barry's Bay, which was as big then as it is now, because there was a mining operation nearby too, which is closed. And the timber business was big then, it still is, but its nothing, it's a tourist town now. But, that's how they did it, and my father, I asked him that question. He said, "Well, Mr. Sewer had a really good secretary."

McElwee- (laughs)

Breene- And so, I mean the economy of words to try to get messages. Vital messages, running a big company.

McElwee- Through the telegraph.

Breene- Exactly, yeah.

McElwee- Think about that. They had the codes systems. They had to.

Breene- Yeah, yeah. That's right. And Mr. Sewer was also on the board of, it was South Penn Oil, the headquarters moved to California. I don't know the history of that enough, and you probably know it better than I. But, I'd like to memorize that one of these days, because it was back and forth, back and forth. And then Mr. Sewer, though was in charge and Mr. Sewer's father was one of the founders, and it was Germania Oil. They had a refinery in Plumber, and when the refinery burned to the ground in the 1970, 1870's. The gigantic stones that are part of the foundation here, were carted down from the Germania from the Plumber.

McElwee- Plumber.

Breene- But, the, Mr. Sewer was also on the board of Standard of New Jersey; on the main board, so. A lot of that Exxon Stock stayed in the family.

McElwee- Oh, yeah.

Breene- But when we, Father and Senator Frame, he wasn't Senator yet. Richard C. Frame, from Franklin and father became law partners with grandfather. And Earl McGee, F. Earl McGee, whose father was a prominent doctor in town, was on the team, and Miles Lynne who was the D.A. in the county for a number of years in the 70's, 60's, 70's, was a partner also. ??Lynne, Frame, McGee. Well, they bought the building here, father and Dick Frame, Dick was ten years younger than my dad, and he became prominent State Senator. He was President Pro Temp in the Senate, and Chairman of the Republican Party. Now, that sounds like a conflict of interest, but that was what it was. And, so I guess it would be like Nancy Pelosi being Chairman of the Democratic Party plus, Speaker of The House. So anyway, I should, am I snarling when I mention the name Nancy Pelosi?

McElwee- Oh, just a little bit, I noticed that. But that's alright. We forgive you.

Breene- Excuse me, ladies. But, the, at the time that Mr. Senator Frame's a young man. Just graduated from Yale. He went to the old school also; I went there, Hank Sewer went there, Bob Jeffery went there, from Oil City and the area. But, in 1956 my father and Dick Frame formed a corporation called Petroleum Reality INC., and they bought the building, and the corporation, and they paid an astronomical amount of money. I think it was 360,000 dollars, in 1956 for this building. And, I don't know what the rent scale is now. I used to manage the building in the seventies, but I think it's like 6 dollars a square foot.

McElwee- Square foot. Now?

Breene- Yeah.

McElwee- Max?

Breene- Well, I think it's going down a little bit. We were getting 6 dollars a square foot, when Quaker State had most of the building, and the Mellon Trust was up on the top floor.

McElwee- And that was 50 years ago.

Breene- That, no that was in the 70's.

McElwee- The 70's? Alright. Ok.

Breene- But, when it was bought in 1956, it was filled with lawyers, I don't think there were any doctors, but every, oh and National Transit Company had offices here. And, but it was all a balanced group of tenants. I mean it wasn't all the eggs in one basket. And, and it was filled. And it was a dollar a square foot, so it prospered. And I think the interest rate on that loan, the mortgage on the building, was 4%. Well, it's down to 4 now, but I mean

real estate, interest rates I'm a real estate broker by trade, I don't too, I still have my license, but I don't too much anymore, but back in the 70's interest rates were anywhere between 8 and clear up to 15%. And they stayed there for a long time. But, the building prospered, and I used to run around here when I was young too. But I was a teenager when I came here, and I'd get my hair cut downstairs, there was a big old fashioned barber shop right off Seneca Street. And I don't even know what's in there now.

McElwee- The Transit Fund Art Gallery.

Breene- Ok.

McElwee- Yes.

Breene- And, it, there must have been six chairs in there. And Baish and Company. There was Laidlock across the street, and then Baish. Baish had an office here, and the old timers would go in and just sit on folding chairs and watch the ticker tape all day long, and that was somewhere on the first floor too. And the annex, that's pretty much where National Transit was. This was Barrs Insurance.

McElwee- Where we are right now. Yes.

Breene- And it prospered, and it still does prosper. And my dad's office was directly above, and there were cubby holes and places in this building, I always used to say, I mean you could, a kid would have had a ball just running around and rummaging, and all through the annex, and the wormholes, and all the ways to get around in the building. And climbing the fire escapes, and getting on the roof and all that. But, the Transit Building, there was a man by the name of Dick Lockwood, who had been the President, and he was in his 80's, and father gave him an office, his old office. Just for his own purpose, on the top floor of the annex, and it was a dollar a year. He had a lease, formal lease.

McElwee- Get out.

Breene- But, in those days, it was a different era. Things were booming in Oil City, and it was a different era all together. I mean it was an ugly town, with all the telephone lines, and all the wires and everything, and the street cars. And there was bad pollution, sewage just poured into the streams and into the river, and Oil Creek was filthy with all the refinery fluids. But, it was prosperous, and everybody had jobs, and the town had about 26,000 people. Right in the town, and the downtown on Friday nights, you couldn't even walk. Every Friday night, they called it Friday night shopping. And I went to Penn Oak Grade School, cause I lived twenty-feet from the line up in Woodland Heights. And the people, some of the kids at Penn Oak, lived clear out by Venus. And so it was a huge event to come in once a month for Friday night shopping, and it was every Friday. It was booming. You could barely, it was like Mardis Gras, on Friday night in Oil City. And there

were dozens of downtown night spots, and there were bars, there'd be a working mans bar downstairs, and upstairs or in a backroom would be this, where the ladies get dressed up, the men get dressed up. They always wore ties. *I'm not talking about older, I'm talking they were old to me then.* But they were in their twenties, they'd be just like going to Billy's or Double Play now. But, and they'd dance to big band music. And so it was a totally different culture. But, the building, that's my first impression of the building. The building was built by John D. Rockefeller, and you know all that, and that's, it's a National Historic Landmark. Sue Rinn, who was my dad's secretary, helped me get it registered. Father assigned me to do that when I was, had my real estate office here in town. And Sam Brown and I ran the office. I owned it, and my father owned it to get a broker's license. I couldn't own it until I got a broker's license. And the lawyer could be a broker in that sense. A lawyer in other words can just walk in and start his own real estate firm. They don't even go through the training that I a lay person would. Now, I've been rambling. Maybe you could direct me in some other direction.

McElwee- Ok. I'm going to point something out to our audience just for their benefit, because they don't quite realize what our situation is. We're literally, the building you were talking about, the First National Bank Building across the way, where your grandfather was, we could throw a stone at it very easily from where you and I are sitting. We are talking about a town that's really tight. The scale here is small, and so you talk about these things. We're not talking about over great distances or down many blocks, or anything like that. Everything's right here. And in the days, you were talking about Oil City is 26,000 people. They're all literally right on top of each other. This building is, had so many uses since it was built in 1890. It's literally a history book of Oil City, and it's a history book of the early oil industry in so many respects. Many companies were here; South Penn Oil, Pennzoil, I think Quaker State even used some parts of this when they were right across the street.

Breene- Quaker state, now my grandfather on my mothers side. Charles Barry and his brother, Jim Barry, they were about a year apart in age. They both died, one was 56, the other was 55, within a week of each other. And, but one was Chairman, the other was President. I can't even remember which was which, but everybody's heard of Jim Barry. He's my cousin, or he was actually Jim Barry Junior, was mother's first cousin. They were only child, they were both only children. And my mother's father, my mother's mother was a Splain, and she died in childbirth during the flu. She got the flu, and mother was two years old. So, it was in 1919, terrible flu epidemic. But, then my grandfather remarried, Carlisle Smithman, and Mr. Smithman was the, her father, was the founder of Monarch Park, and that's another story with the wars between the competing railroad lines to get the line out to the park, and the park was a big money maker. And it faded with the automobile basically. But, when my father, my grandfather, I'm named after him, Charles. Edmond's my other grandfather on my father's side. He and his brother merged four or five small oil companies, including there own into Quaker State.

It became Quaker State as such, in CD Barry or C&J Barry Oil Company. And the Bayer's were involved, and H.J. Crawford had a hand in it. So, Quaker State always had their office here, but they never had a refinery here. And the refineries were up in Farmers Valley New York. Right south, near Olean, but very close to the line. Almost right on the line. And Portville area, and then they had.

McElwee- Of course Emlenton.

Breene- What?

McElwee- The Emlenton refinery.

Breene- Emlenton. I think it's still.

McElwee- And they had The Independent up here, which people don't talk about much, it closed in the 50's. But The Independent, right there on the line, going into Corn Planter, Clap Farm. Right there, you know where the Manny Paint is?

Breene- Oh, I didn't. Yeah. Yeah.

McElwee- Yeah, there was an Independent refinery there.

Breene- That was Quaker State?

McElwee- That was also bought, that was also.

Breene- I just learned something here.

McElwee- Yeah, yeah. That was in the 30's. 31 or something like that, when they pulled that all together. But that was (inaudible).

Breene- West Virginia, The Congo Plant came later, but wasn't there a plant in West Virginia also?

McElwee- Was it at Saint Mary's?

Breene- Yes.

McElwee- West Virginia?

Breene- Exactly.

McElwee- Yes. Yes.

Breene- So, I remembered Saint Mary's, Farmers Valley, and Emlenton.

McElwee- Yes. Yeah. Ok.

Breene- And The Independent was another up.

McElwee- There was an Independent up here. Which was fairly big. And then the Barry brothers were the marketing end of that. And also I believe your relatives and the Barry's basically were kind of always the senior management group of that whole culmination of companies.

Breene- Well when the two Barry's died, you know it was devastating in their 50's, the company prospered though. The Messer's were involved. Messer Oil.

McElwee- Yes, Yes.

Breene- And, one of the Messer ladies, they called her Dody, Dorothy maybe? But I mean, Dody Kuhns, she married Forrest Kuhns, from Sioux City, Iowa. And he could have been a movie star. He was an extremely dapper, good looking, older gentleman with white hair. And he was President and Chairman of Quaker State for a long time. And then there were some others in-between, but Forry Kuhns and especially Lee Forker. Lee Forker then took over, and really elevated Quaker State nationally. The stock skyrocketed under Lee's management, and he was quite an amazing man. I mean, I used to just love to talk to him. I was lucky enough, well I knew him from when I was a little boy, and Pam and Robert are a little older than I am, but they lived next to my mother's mother's house. Or my mother's stepmother's house. And Lee Forker, in later years with Mr. Boyle, E.P. Boyle, and Charley Beck, and George Neeland, and others. We'd meet after the Oil City Club closed. We'd meet for lunch at the Holiday Inn. And I'll tell ya, I got owlish looks, or phone calls from Mr. Boyle if I didn't show up for lunch.

McElwee- Uh-huh. (laughs)

Breene- You know, so. And Bill Mcphate, this was back, this was longer, in the 80's. And, I just, everybody else would just be chattering away, and I'd get, I'd be talking to Lee about minutiae of historical details. He was like an encyclopedia, just very, very interesting man.

McElwee- Yes.

Breene- But, Quaker State was in this building. Valley Camp Oil Company was here. And there was another division of Quaker State.

McElwee- There was an insurance company I think in here too. That Quaker State bought. About the same time as Valley Camp.

Breene- Oh, insurance? There was a truck light company, which is in St. Louis.

McElwee- I could be wrong.

Breene- I think there was.

McElwee- There was, it may have been headquartered in Cleveland. Kind of an odd thing, but it was something that they got into.

Breene- And it wasn't that big. It was not part of the operation, but they might have been in here, but there was, Dick Rumling ran it. It was over in the annex, and it was a branch, it was one of the divisions, or not a division. Just one of the operations of Quaker State's office. And then Valley Camp Oil.

McElwee- Yeah. I happened to reading about Valley Camp here.

Breene- Or Valley Camp Coal.

McElwee- Valley Camp Coal, right. And actually that buy originally didn't turn out too well for them, because the coal market collapsed. What have you. They did kind of turn it around. Did they spin that off again before?

Breene- Yes.

McElwee- Right. I happened, you mention Lee Forker, and I happened to have an opportunity again to review something about him. And the writer of that history of Quaker State, clearly the modern era, he was considered the best Chief Executive that they had up to that time. And truthfully, there were some good men afterwards. Don't get me wrong, but he really was the, that was the golden age of Quaker State in modern times.

Breene- Right. Well he was right on top of everything. *Every little detail.*

McElwee- Let's take a little break here, mental break. So that you and I can kinda get recharged. Maybe come back to some of these oil issues, and some of the older names. I gotta talk about the Brookville Glove Company. And I'm gonna set this up. When I came to Oil City, twelve years ago or so. I told you this, my neighbors, they had worked, they had worked up at the refinery. Pennzoil Refinery. And the refinery issued people up there, *Brookville Gloves.*

Breene- Who were your neighbors?

McElwee- Um, Tom Myers. We called him Tucker.

Breene- I should know him.

McElwee- Well, he lives right on the alley, right across from Ron Black.

Breene- OK.

McElwee- And Tucker worked at the refinery.

Breene- (inaudible)

McElwee-

Yeah, Tucker. Everybody knows him as Tuck. Nobody knows his real name. But Tucker worked up there, and then he worked for National Transit before he went up there, because they were connected. We could talk a little bit about that, but he mentioned the Brookville Gloves, and in fact he showed me his several prize pairs that were still in the package. And so, I go "Well, that's something" and he said "Oh, Neil, these are the best in the world." So I had, I of course didn't know you. And then I find out a little bit later, that that's your company.