

Breene: John Browne, the one who's seventeen years younger than Rob, and me, and Sam, did very well in Florida. He owns a movie company but he's hurting now because of obviously the real estate market has tanked and April's been—but he was there when it just—sky high. So he made very well and he's—he'll last.

McElwee: Okay, I'll start this, John, 'cause we set it up. We're having a conversation this morning, it's October 31st, it's a Friday, a beautiful day in October the year 2008. The conversation is with Mr. Charles Breene. Most of his friends call him Charlie and if you don't, Charlie, I'll call you Charlie. Charlie has a family history, a personal history actually that 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 earlier years here in the National Transit building and how your family was involved with this building.

Breene: My grandfather, Edmund Cornelius Breene, never finished high school but he read law and became a lawyer and became a 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 ?? and they did very well in the oil business. One of their daughters of one of the brothers, the ?? 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, Southern Democrat in the Fifties. Kerr McGee. When he left the scene LBJ took over the oil lobby. But that's-- They went out to Oklahoma because Tulsa was the oil capital 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 had a cousin, P. C. Lowinger who was from Pittsburgh but he was a first cousin and the publishing empire split and the Lowingers went to Tulsa at the turn of the century, very early in the 1900's and P.C.'s father started the Oil and Gas Journal. So the Boyles owned forty-nine percent of the Oil and Gas Journal and the Lowingers owned forty-nine percent of the Derrick. Fifty-one, forty-nine. The Boyles bought out the Lowingers back in the big,?? Of the late Seventies, early Eighties and 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 1922, 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, that was one of those sections in town but the view is just stupendous. I mean, if we ever really prospered here, I could see townhouses 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, Grandma just figured we'll go out and visit my brothers-in-law and their families and they got off the train and Grandfather said "Anna, this is where we're gonna take up housekeeping." And Grandmother's jaw dropped, she said "Edmund, if you think I'm gonna live here, I'm just gonna get back on that train and you stay here." That's why Grandfather lived in Oil City the rest of his life, because that was a Wild West town. And Grandmother put up with enough of that back in Oil City in the oil boom days. But Oil City prospered very quickly. I know I'll never forget Quentin Wood at some—oh, I think it was one of the oil heritage events, Quaker State must have been honored and Woody 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, eighty-three I think, but he was a banker also. And Mr. 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 (unintelligible). Yeah, yeah, so they're in that location. Well, the building was a four star building, they took the top off. I think Jud Tracks ended up owning it. He took the top half off and then modernized it. I used to hang out 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. You know, certainly law books then were gigantic, I could hardly carry them, four thousand pages. So I'd hang around there, a fly in the ointment. Grandfather'd give me a dime and I'd run down to the C and N Smokes Shop and Tim Woods owned it, it's Powman and Woods now. George Howe, they made sodas in there and for a dime I got the best chocolate soda I've ever had in my life. I can still taste it and they don't even make chocolate sodas anymore. You know, ample ice cream and seltzer.

McElwee: Fountain-type things.

Breene: Yeah, right. So, then Grandfather sold the building, moved over here. And in 1956, Grandfather died in '61 but he was a lawyer up till when he died. He spent all summer fishing in Canada. He'd go up in April, come back in September but they actually—I'd had this question in my head. How did Mr. Sewer and Grandfather and then Mr. Sewer's two sisters and their husbands, and so the four couples built cottages on a lake that was totally isolated. It was real wilderness, it's main stream cottage country now in Ontario, beautiful lake, beautiful area. And my mother owns the cottage now and my family is fortunate enough to go up there and 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 then up to the cottage and it's sort of the same thing that Grandmother's—when she got to Bartlesville. The women got off the boat and mosquitoes and everything but they had a

lot of people helping them and they spent the summer there. Well, how in the heck did Mr. Sewer run Pennzoil from up there? And there were there for two and a half months every summer. And 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 it's 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." And so, the economy of words to try to get messages, vital messages running a big company through—

McElwee: Through the telegraph, think about that.

Breene: Exactly.

McElwee: They had the code system, you had to.

Breene: 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 was in charge and Mr. Sewer's father was one of the founders. It was Germania Oil. They had a refinery in Plummer and when the refinery burned to the ground in 19—it was 1870's, the gigantic stones that are part of the foundation here were carted down from the Germania to the refinery in Plummer. But Mr. Sewer was also on the board of Standard of New Jersey, on the main board so that's when Exxon stayed in the family. But when we, when 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 Lynn who was the D.A. in the county for a number of years in the Seventies, Sixties, Seventies. Well, they bought the building here, Father and Dick Frame. Dick was ten years younger than my dad and he became a prominent state senator. He was President Pro-Tem of the Senate and Chairman of the Republic Party. Now that sounds like a conflict of interest but that was what it was. So I guess it'd be like Nancy Pelosi being Chairman of the Democrat Party plus Speaker of the House. 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 we—at the time Senator Frame was a young man, just graduated from Yale. He went to the Hill School, also. I went there, Hank Sewer went there, Bob Jeffrey went there, from Oil City and Erie. But in 1956 my father and Dick Frame formed a corporation called Petroleum Royalty 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 six dollars a square foot.

McElwee: Square foot now?

Breene: Yeah.

McElwee: Max, max?

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

McElwee: And that was fifty years ago?

Breene: No, that was in the Seventies.

McElwee: The Seventies, okay.

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 got the head offices here. But it was all a balanced group of tenants. I mean, it wasn't all the eggs in one basket 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 four percent. Well, it's down to four now but the interest rates—I'm a real estate broker by trade, I don't do too—I still have my license but I don't do too much anymore but back in the Seventies interest rates were anywhere between eight and clear up to fifteen percent and they stayed there for long times. But it—probability prospered and I used to run around here when I was young, too, but I was a teenager when I came here. 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 Fine Art Gallery.

Breene: Okay. There must have been six chairs in there. Bache and Company—there was Laidlaw across the street and then Bache. Bache had an office here and the old timers'd go in and sit on folding chairs and watch the ticker tape all day long and that was somewhere on the first floor, too. The annex, that's pretty much where National Transit was. This was Barr's Insurance.

McElwee: We're in New York 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 a kid had a ball just running around rummaging all through the annex and the lower halls and all the ways to get around the building and climbing on 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 Eighties 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 in a lease, formal lease. 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 the streetcars 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 into town, heading 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 twenty feet from the line up at 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 to Friday night shopping. And it was every Friday but it was booming, you could barely—it was like Mardi Gras on Friday night in Oil City. And there were dozens of downtown nightspots. And there were bars that would be a working man's bar downstairs and then upstairs or in a backroom would be this—where ladies got dressed up, the man got dressed up they always wore ties. I'm not talking about older, I mean they were old to me then, but they were in their twenties and it'd be just like going to Billy's or Double Play now. 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. It's a National Historic Landmark. Sue Rinn, who was my father's secretary, helped me get it registered. Father assigned me to do that when I had my real estate office here in town and Sam Brown and I ran the office and I owned it and my father owned it. To get a broker's license, I couldn't own it till I got a broker's license and a lawyer could be a broker—a lawyer in other words could walk in and start his own real estate firm. They didn't have to go through the training that a lay person would. Now I've been rambling and maybe you could direct me in some other direction.

McElwee: Alright, I'm gonna 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're talking about the town that's really tight. The scale here is small and so when you talk about these things we're not talking about over great distances or down mini walks or anything like that. Everything's right here, but the days you were talking about Oil City is 26,000 people. They are literally right on top of each other. This building is—had so many years since it was built in 1890, it's literally a history book of Oil City, it's a history book of the early oil industry in so many respects. Many companies, South Penn Oil, Pennzoil, I think Quaker State even used some parts of this when you were right across the street.

Breene: Quaker State, now my grandfather on my mother's side, Charles Barry and his brother Jim Barry, they were about a year apart in age. They both died, one was fifty-six the other was fifty-five, within about a week of each other. And one was Chairman, one

was President, I can't even remember which was which. But everybody's heard of Jim Barry, he's my cousin. He was actually Jim Barry Jr., was mother's first cousin. 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 that was in 1919, a terrible flu epidemic but then my grandfather remarried Carla Smithmen. And Mr. Smithmen, her father was the founder of Monarch Park. And that's another story with the wars between the competing railroads lines to get the line out to the Park. And the Park was a big moneymaker and it faded with the automobile, basically. But when my father, my grandfather—I'm named after him, Charles Edmund is my other—my grandfather on my father's side. He and his brother merged four or five small oil companies, including their own, into Quaker State. It became Quaker State as such. The C.J. or the C and J Oil Company and then the Bayers were involved and H.J. Crawford, the head of ?? and so, Quaker State always had their office here but they never had a refinery here. And the refineries were up in Farmer's Valley, New York, right sou—near Olian 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 and I think that's still—

McElwee: And they had the Independent up her, which people don't talk much, it closed in the Fifties but the Independent right there on the line going into Cornplant or Klatt farm, right there. You know where the--

Breene: Oh, I didn't

McElwee: --the ?? Paint is? Yeah, there was an Independent refinery there.

Breene: And that was Quaker State?

McElwee: That was also bought--

Breene: (Speaking at the same time). I just learned something here.

McElwee: --that was in the Thirties. Thirty-one, I think, when they pulled that all together, but yeah.

Breene: West Virginia, the Congo plant came later, but wasn't there a plant in West Virginia also?

McElwee: Um, was it at Saint Mary's, West Virginia?

Breene: Yes, yes. I remembered Saint Mary's, Farmer's Valley, and Emlenton.

McElwee: Yes, yeah.

Breene: And the Independent was up here.

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 then.

Breene: Well, when the two Barry's died, and it was devastating, in their fifties—the company prospered, though. The Messer's were involved, Messer Oil and one of the Messer ladies, they call her Dotie, Dorothy maybe, but Dotie Koontz, she married Florest Koontz from Sin City, Iowa. He could've 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. Then there were some others in between but Florry Koontz and then especially Lee Forker. Lee Forker took over and really elevated Quaker State nationally. The stock skyrocketed under Lee's management and he was quite and amazing man. I mean, I used to just love to talk to him. I was lucky enough to—well, I knew him from when I was a little boy and Pam and Robin are a little older than I am, but they lived next to my mother's mothers' house, or my mother's stepmothers' house—and Lee Forker, in later years with Mr. Boyle, E.P. Boyle, and Charlie Beck and George Needle and others, we'd meet after the Oil City club closed. We'd meet for lunch at the Holiday Inn. And I'll tell you, I got owlish looks or phone calls from Mr. Boyle when I didn't show up for lunch. And Bill McFaight. This was back, this has been a while ago, this was in the Eighties. I just—everybody else'd just be chattering away and I'd be talking to Lee about minutiae of historical details. He was like an encyclopedia, very, very interesting man. But Quaker State was in this building. Valley Camp Oil Companies was here and there was another division of Quaker State.

McElwee: There was an insurance company, I think, in here 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 'cause—

McElwee: (Beginning at the same time). I realize it may have been headquartered in Cleveland. Kind of an odd thing, but it was something they got into.

Breene: And it wasn't that big, that part of the operation but it might have been in here. There was a—Dick Rumling ran it, it was over in the annex. It was one of the divisions, or not a

division it was just one of the operations of Quaker State's office and then Valley Camp Oil.

McElwee: I happened to be reading about Valley Camp here just—

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 and what have you. They did kind of turn that around, I think, did they spin that off again before--?

Breene: Yes.

McElwee: Right. You mentioned Lee Forker and I happen to have an opportunity again to review something about him. And the writer of that history of Quaker State, clearly in the modern era he was considered the best chief executive they had up to that time and truthfully, there were some good men afterwards, don't get me wrong. But he really—that was the Golden Age of Quaker State in the modern times.

Breene: Well, he was right on top of everything, every little detail.

McElwee: Let's take a little break here so that you and I can kind of 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 worked up at the refinery, Pennzoil Refinery. And the refinery issued people up there Brookville gloves.

Breene: Who were your neighbors?

McElwee: Tom Meyers, we called him Tucker.

Breene: I should know him, but—

McElwee: Well, he lives right on the alley right across from ?? Black. And Tucker worked at the refinery—

Breene: ?? Tucker.

McElwee: Yeah, everybody knows him as Tucker. 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 can talk a little about that, but he mentioned the Brookville gloves and in fact he showed me his several prized pairs that were still in the package. And so, I go, "well, that's something." And he said "no, these are the best in the world." So I pushed it ?? and then I find out a little bit later that that's your company.