

***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 seventeen years younger than Rob, 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- Okay Neil, you're set, rock and roll.

McElwee- Okay, I'll start this shortly John because we set it up. We're having a conversation this morning. It's October 31<sup>st</sup>, 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 mind Charlie, I will call you Charlie. Charlie has a family history, a 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. He 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. 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 their daughters of the — 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. He was the most powerful Senator; he was a Democrat, a Southern Democrat in the Fifties. 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 was from Pittsburgh. He was a first cousin and the publishing empire split— the Lowinger's went to Tulsa at the turn of the century, very early 1900's. 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 Lowinger's owned forty-nine percent of The Derrick, fifty-one to forty-nine. The Boyles bought out the Lowinger's back in the boom of the late Seventies, early Eighties 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. 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 could see town houses hanging off the cliff there. My grandmother and grandfather took the train out to Bartlesville. Grandfather hadn't said anything about this, his plan; I don't know if grandmother just figured well we will go out and visit my brother's-in-law and their families. They got off the train and grandfather said "Anna, this is where we are going to take up housekeeping." Grandmother's jaw dropped and said "Edmond, if you think I'm going to live here, I'm just going to get back on that train and you stay here." Well, that's why grandfather lived in Oil City the rest of his life because that was a Wild West town then and grandmother put up enough with that in Oil City back in the oil boom days. Oil City prospered very, very quickly. I know I'll never will 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 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. I was born in 1941 and my grandfather died in 1961. He was in his early eighties, eighty-three I think. 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 and his son—

McElwee- Yeah. Alright.

Breene- So they're 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. I used to hangout in grandfather's law office back in 1946, when I was four years old. 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, four-thousand pages. So I would hang around there, a fly in the ointment. Grandfather would give me a dime and I would run down to the C and N Smokes Shop. Tim Woods owned it, it's Hileman and Woods now and George Hileman, they made sodas in there. For a dime, I got the best chocolate soda I've ever had in my life. I just— I can 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 things?

Breene- Yeah, right. So then grandfather sold the building, moved over here and in 1956 grandfather died in sixty-one but 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, 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 a mainstream cottage country in Ontario, beautiful lake, beautiful area. My mother owns the cottage now and my family is 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. 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? They were there for two and a half months 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. The timber business was big then, it still is but it's nothing, it's a tourist town now. 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 through—

McElwee- Through the telegraph.

Breene- Exactly, yeah.

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

Breene- Yeah, that's right. 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. Then Mr. Sewer was in charge, 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 19— 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 Mr. Sewer was also on the board of Standard of New Jersey, on the main board so that's when Exxon Stock stayed in the family.

McElwee- Oh, yeah.

Breene- 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. 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 Seventies, Sixties, Seventies, 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. 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 we— at the time Mr. 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 Jeffery went there, from Oil City and the area. In 1956, my father and Dick Frame formed a corporation called Petroleum Reality INC. and they bought the building, the corporation, and they paid an astronomical amount of money. I think it was 360,000 dollars in 1956 for this building. 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?

Breene- Well, I think it's going down a little bit. We were getting six 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 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 Company had 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. 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 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. Back in the Seventies interest rates were anywhere between eight and clear up to fifteen percent and they stayed there for a long

time. The building 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 Fund Art Gallery.

Breene- Okay.

McElwee- Yes.

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

McElwee- Where we are right now, yes.

Breene- It prospered and it still does prosper. 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 all through the annex, the wormholes, all the ways to get around in the building, 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 eighties. 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.

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, all the wires, and the street cars. There was bad pollution, sewage just poured into the streams and into the river. Oil Creek was filthy with all the refinery fluids but it was prosperous and everybody had jobs. 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. I went to Penn Oak Grade School because 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. 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. There were dozens of downtown night spots, there were bars, and 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.

They were in their twenties, it'd be just like going to Billy's or Double Play now but they'd dance to big band music. So it was a totally different culture. 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 dad's secretary, helped me get it registered. Father assigned me to do that when I had my real estate office here in town. 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 didn'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- Okay, 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 when 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 was 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 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 and the other was fifty-five, within a week of each other. 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 my mother's first cousin. They were only child — they were both only children. 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, terrible flu epidemic but then my grandfather remarried, Carlisle Smithman, and Mr. Smithman was the —her father was the founder of Monarch Park. That's another story with the wars between the competing railroad lines to get the line out to the park. 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 is 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. 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. 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 fifties 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.

McElwee- Yeah, there was an Independent refinery there.

Breene- That was Quaker State?

McElwee- That was also bought—

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

McElwee- Yeah. That was in the Thirties, thirty-one 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, West Virginia?

Breene- Yes.

McElwee- West Virginia?

Breene- Exactly.

McElwee- Yes.

Breene- Yes, I remembered Saint Mary's, Farmers 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. 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 fifties —the company prospered though. The Messer's were involved, Messer Oil.

McElwee- Yes.

Breene- And one of the Messer ladies, they called her Dody, Dorothy maybe, but Dody Kuhns, she married Forrest Kuhns from Sin City, Iowa. He could have been a movie star. He was an extremely dapper, good looking, older gentleman with white hair. He was President and Chairman of Quaker State for a long time. 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, 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. Lee Forker, in later years with Mr. Boyle, E.P. Boyle, Charley Beck, 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 you, 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 has been a while ago, in the Eighties and I just—everybody else would just be chattering away and 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- (Beginning at the same time). There was, I may realize 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 Rumlung 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 be 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 and what have you. They did kind of turn it around, I think. Did they spin that off again before?

Breene- Yes.

McElwee- Right. I happened — you mention Lee Forker and I happen to have an opportunity again to review something about him. 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 kind of get recharged. Maybe come back to some of these oil issues and some of the older names. I got to talk about the Brookville Glove Company and I'm going to set this up. When I came to Oil City, twelve years ago or so, I told you this, my neighbors, 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. 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.