

McElwee: We are meeting this morning and having a conversation with Mr. John Comet. This is November 2007. It's right after Thanksgiving. It's hunting season, we've taken John out of the woods. We're very thankful that you've taken the time to do this, John. John's a legend in this area. He's legendary for many reasons, he was the longtime president of United Natural Gas, the big utility in northwestern Pennsylvania, but also legendary for his youthful vitality, his great wit, his sense of enjoying life at all times, his beautiful wife, and was always a brilliance as there is today, there was always a brilliant light that we could all see in your eyes. We're always just pleased to be around you, John, and I want people to know that, so thank you for being with us here this morning. I'm gonna get going here. You and I are both from the Mon Valley, I learned that a bit earlier, and you're originally from Monessen, is that correct?

Comet: That's true.

McElwee: Okay, why don't you tell us a little bit about your Monessen days and then we'll get on with school.

Comet: Well, I'm startin with the name itself. Monessen was named from Essa in Germany which was a steel plant, steel city. And Monessen, the big thing was a steel plant. They had a glass furnace and we'd ?? every Saturday and put a nice pile of brown dust over her thing. But they named the city from Essen on the Monongahela River, called it Monessen. And I was privileged to be raised there and there was a lot of ethnicity there, from particularly Russian people through Slavic people through Swedish people, Finnish people, they were all in Monessen, so it was a very interesting place to live but it was always a place that for a nature lover it wasn't that good because there was a lot of contamination from the coal mines. But I was born and raised in Monessen and I enjoyed it and went to high school there. Was privileged to be the president of my class and was on the debating team. I'm afraid I'm gonna do a little bit of bragging.

McElwee: That's all right.

Comet: Is it?

McElwee: That's fine.

Comet: And I played the violin.

McElwee: Did you really?

Comet: And had a good time in Monessen. Then I decided to go to college. And I was gonna go to Carnegie Tech, that was the big engineering school. I wanted to build bridges. Somehow that got my focus. I wanted to build bridges. And I was going to go to Carnegie Tech and my dad who worked in the plants, steel plants there as a machinist, came home and he said "I heard that Penn State is a wonderful place for engineering training and not quite as costly as Carnegie Tech was." So I matriculated at Penn State

and enjoyed it, I enjoyed Penn State very much. I started as a civil engineer, hoping to be a civil engineer, but about halfway through, this was at the end of my sophomore year I learned about this other course that was just opening up called petroleum/natural gas engineering. So I looked into that, it had a lot of chemistry in it and it had a lot more variety than the old rules of civil engineering, setting up the transit and that kind of thing. So I changed over, changed over, and I've never regretted it, I loved that. That was my start.

McElwee: You had to be one of the earliest petroleum/natural gas engineers graduated in the state of Pennsylvania, weren't you? Wouldn't you think so?

Comet: I would probably think so although Pitt had a course in it and there were courses like at Marietta in petroleum engineering. That's what I did in the way of school.

McElwee: Now, we have to tell folks—you never really got away from—you fell in love with Penn State, too, and you never really got away from your love for the school and from what I've learned from your friends every year you've religiously gone to all the games, you have one of the better seats out there and you probably know Joe Paterno like he's your son for all—I'm not sure. You did miss a game or two this year, didn't you?

Comet: Oh, yes, yes, I had the scalp factor. I've enjoyed Penn State. My life at Penn State was a good one. So many bad stories about fraternities, for instance, and I belonged to a fraternity that was above all kind of levels of being a good place for a person to be. And incidentally, we used to listen to a barber in nearby Bellefonte whose name was Mills. And he had some sons and they called them the Mills brothers.

McElwee: Oh, is that right? Is that right? Is that where they came from?

Comet: Mmhmm. Yeah, they came from Bellefonte. So we used to listen as we went through, particularly our eating periods, and incidentally that time they tried to teach manners because you got all kind of people, you had all people, they were all nice but they had different kinds of training. You had the east and you had the west, one liked one kind of food, the other didn't like the other kind of food you had to do work with. But there was an upperclassman who sat at the table with the younger ones and he ensured that they had manners. That's a little bit different than what we have today. And they even taught manners in a fraternity house. We had some things that weren't that good. We had Hell Week, for instance, and I could talk a little bit about that, but that wasn't that important. I love Penn State. We had—I walked about a mile and a half to go to school from where the fraternity house was. And most of us religiously walked up to hear the Sunday sermon and I will say they had a wonderful chorus, beautiful singing. But one time we wouldn't have a priest, the next time we'd have a Methodist minister, sometimes we'd have somebody from a foreign country and it was the best show in town on Sundays and we went there. So, um—

McElwee: The whole campus probably went in those days. That'd be my guess.

Comet: Well, a lot of us did. Because it was good, it was worthwhile. Penn State was good for me. I've since learned that other schools were giving better courses in what I was into.

McElwee: Is that right?

Comet: Yeah. But it was just opening up at Penn State, they were feeling their way and so I worked with people that were trained better in geology than I was by far. Cornell, for instance, did an excellent job on--

McElwee: But that was a leading school in the country.

Comet: Yeah, that's right, that kind of stuff and Pitt was strong, good at that, too. So that was my start, then.

McElwee: There we go, that's all right. You graduated of course from Penn State with this degree in petroleum/natural gas engineering. Do you mind telling me what year that was?

Comet: Nineteen thirty-four.

McElwee: Nineteen thirty-four, depression years, those sorts of things.

Comet: Yes.

McElwee: You obviously are interviewing for a job, I would assume is how that went. And how'd that go? Just kind of tell us how that all—

Comet: There was a man by the name of Art ??, who was an Assistant Superintendent of Operations for the United Natural Gas Company, which was located in Oil City, Pennsylvania. And he was there with his secretary and they interviewed people to come and work for United Natural Gas Company. And I attended that interview session and I liked what I heard and I indicated that I was interested and that was the beginning of that.

McElwee: When you took your position were you based in Oil City or did they send you somewhere else because their territory is kind of extensive throughout northwestern Pennsylvania?

Comet: Yes, we were—we not only had the United Natural Gas Company as a distribution company that provided gas for you to heat your home, do your cooking, but we also had companies that were non-utility companies. One of them was called The Sylvania Corporation and it was primarily a drilling company but it was not controlled by the Public Utility Commission. And then we had another company called the Mars Company, and the Mars Company took care of our petroleum products. So gas wells, many of them made distillates which was a fluid, an oil, and we had a few little oil fields

of our own. And so the Mars Company took care of the petroleum product. The Sylvania Corporation took care of exploration and the drilling, particularly for deeper wells because in the years late Forties to mid-Fifties, there was a lot of gas that was left out in what was called the ???. It was a deep sand, I generally think of it as five thousand feet deep. And the Mars Company of course any time we found oil or something it went through the Mars Company. And we had a couple plants that we take that distillate and refine it into propane and butane and these people would come and buy from us to use in their camps or even to heat their homes with. So, it was a company that had a lot of opportunities, a lot of variety to it. In the accumulation of land in order to drill gas wells, you would have got at least—or if you could you'd try to get the whole land. We got land that had timber on it. We got land that had coal on it. People would come to the office and would want to dispose of it. For instance, there was a period of time—and this wasn't the made ??? the president at the time but I was working in the office and with the President who was J. G. Montgomery. And a timber man would come in and clear cut thousands of acres and when they were through they had nothing, except these taxes to pay for forty or sixty years, 'cause it took about sixty years for a tree to grow to mature. And they had the sight of getting the money now and then getting out of it. And J. G. Montgomery in particular got a lot of that acreage over around Driftwood, Banaszak, that farming country over---. And later turned out to be very valuable petroleum, or natural gas producing country. But it also grew beautiful, beautiful, beautiful trees. Particularly cherry, and cherry, I don't know if you know, cherry wood is expensive. And we had—I've seen cherry trees over there at breast high were about three, four feet, straight up there for thirty feet without a branch or anything, beautiful things. They were worth a fortune each tree. In fact they were taken down, some of them, and veneer cut, it was that important. I ???

McElwee: Oh, is that right? Yeah.

Comet: I like working with United. I was hired as a junior engineer, but this junior engineer was taught how to dig a ditch with a hand shovel. Worthington, yeah. The first day I was determined to show them how good I was. Didn't know enough to wear a pair of gloves working with a shovel all day.

McElwee: Blisters.

Comet: Oh, my hands swoll up. I remember foreman coming along, saying "Oh, we gotta fix that, " and he went into town, bought me a pair of gloves and brought them out.

McElwee: I gather you enjoyed working with the men.

Comet: Yes.

McElwee: The men were a pleasure to be around?

Comet: They were. They were great for me. Women weren't so much in the picture at that time. It wasn't until Rosie the Riveter came along that we got the women in there. And thank God. I always thought we're bound to be ahead of everybody else because now we got, after Rosie the Riveter, now we got double the workforce, and it's a good workforce. We've got the women now working and that has to be nothing but good for us. Wrong. They were no longer at home, taking care of Ginger. And, so sometimes a little bit when you give—

McElwee: You lose some.

Comet: You lose some, yeah.

McElwee: Well, I don't want to get away from the company itself, but where did you meet your beautiful wife? Was it during this early time in Oil City or was it a little bit—was it at Penn State, or?

Comet: No, it was later on. When I first came there I was sent up to the **?? County Fields**. First, I went to Bradford and I worked on Pipeline there and I graduated from working with my hands, taking out roots, to being a time keeper. And after that helping out, sort of helping—they gradually worked me into a place where I was getting experience in a little bit of everything. I've stayed out in the field until about oh '38, '39. Then they brought me back into Oil City and I began to work as a geologist, of all things. I loved that job. I liked that job. It was being a detective. They tried to figure out where that rock was gonna outcrop on the other side. And you'd had a smidgeon of training and that's where I learned that Penn State wasn't that good at that time, but Cornell was. Because the man working with me had—Cornell, and that was **Don ??**, and I learned an awful lot from him but I worked with geology for a long time. I lucked out.

McElwee: You were really in a way fortunate to run into a Cornell-trained geologist. That's like going to the mountain and getting the best you could get.

Comet: Yes, that's true. Another Cornelian that I liked was Lee Forker.

McElwee: Oh, is that right?

Comet: Forker, yeah. He was from Cornell and I learned a lot of good things from Lee Forker.

McElwee: I'm sure his daughter'd be glad to hear you said that.

Comet: Well, she knows well how much I thought about Lee.

McElwee: Speaking of personalities, you made a presentation several years ago at the Oil City Library which a lot of us attended, and in that you mention that as a young man out in the field somewhere you ran across Harry Crawford, do you remember making that comment?

Comet: Yes, yes, I do.

McElwee: Could you share a little bit of that with us? 'Cause I remember that story. Could you recall what you said?

Comet: Yes, you asked a question and I didn't answer it, how did I meet my wife?

McElwee: Yes, let's go back to that first.

Comet: All right, I met ?? at a safety meeting at a school here in Oil City. I sat in one place, I looked across and I saw this beautiful woman and I thought I've got to know her. But I'm a very good salesman and it took me four years before she said yes. So—

McElwee: And you were a good prospect, come on, you were a good prospect.

Comet: Well, she didn't like me.

McElwee: Okay, now Harry Crawford, like you mentioned, like I said.

Comet: Oh, yeah, Harry Crawford.

McElwee: Yeah, could you relate that st--?

Comet: Part of my function was the old visiting wells that were drilled, particularly deeper wells and we had a pretty good feeling among the drillers and different companies that you could go on a well floor and ask 'How deep are you?, What have you gone through? Have you gone through any coals or anything? Do you have a log there that I could look at, would you mind?' And generally we exchange information. And I remember going to see this one well that we were drilling and Harry Crawford was on that thing. And as I remember what I said at that time, and I say it now, he had the coldest, steel-blue eyes. When he looked at me, I started choking. But he gave me the information and that's how I got to know Mr. Crawford.

McElwee: Yeah, we should point out real quickly here, he was legendary at that time; he was— Emlenton Refining and all those other things, so.

Comet: We got to know the person. I admired nearly everybody that I met in the oil gas buildings.

McElwee: Okay, let's move forward just a bit. Your career progresses obviously. You ran Mohawk, isn't that what you told me?

Comet: I what?

McElwee: Did you say you ran Mohawk, the Mohawk part of the company? I misunderstood there.

Comet: I don't know what the Mohawk part would be.

McElwee: I must've heard that one wrong. But you progressed. At some point in time you're getting closer and closer to being what you ultimately became, the President of UNG, Natural Gas. What year did that occur, John?

Comet: That I became President?

McElwee: President, yeah.

Comet: Um, let's see, I was President for five years and I retired in seventy-eight so it must've been about 1973 that I became President.

McElwee: And were you down there at the building right at the head of Duncan Street? Is that where you folks had your office?

Comet: That's where we had our office.

McElwee: It's a beautiful building.

Comet: Yes, yes.

McElwee: Do you look back with pleasure at those last five years or was--?

Comet: Yes, I did look back—I found that I was living on the shoulders of the men that went ahead of me. All I had to do was say what they gave me and at least maintain it or—we had a—ran a philosophy in the company that was—I described it as a three-stooled table, three stooled. Let me see if I can find it here, I can tell you exactly what that thing said. It was related to what we were going to do for—and having been our philosophy they came back and sided—but it involved what we were gonna do for the shareholder, what we were gonna do for the employee, but most importantly—well, as important, what we were gonna do for the user, our customer. And this is what we had as a corporate philosophy we were going to let the customers shall be given the best service at a fair price. So I can relate that the shareholders can best be served by us being profitable. Shareholder relations situations were handled on the National Fuel Gas Company level. National Fuel Gas being the holding company. They had these different companies. Essentially three big dealers; one was the Oil City unit which was United Natural, The Sylvania ?? and the Mars Company. Then we had a company at Warren, Pennsylvania called the Pennsylvania Gas Company and that essentially served Erie and Jamestown, New York. Then we had Iroquois which was at Buffalo and it served the western part of New York. That was National Fuel Gas. So shareholders can best be served by us being promptful. But the shareholder relationships were always handled on the National Fuel level, which was at 30 Rockefeller Center. Then the employees were treated with respect and care and they were to be paid proper wages. And I would say we were a constructive force in every community that we served. We would

praise our people to help the community and I think we were generally respected for that.

McElwee: I think you were. We've had some discussions, at least at the Heritage Societies when you've been there, about the long ago beginnings of United Natural Gas, back in the nineteenth century and I think we all are kind of, well, interested in knowing just where they came from. Do you recall any of that?

Comet: Well, United Natural Gas Company applied for a charter and received it in March 24th, 1886. And it was signed by Governor Robert Pattison and we had a story at that time that ?? and received natural gas in Venango, Forrest, Butler, Armstrong, Clarion, Warren, Elk, and McKean County in Pennsylvania. And we were given the right to provide gas to consumers in those towns and villages within those counties and that's since been enlarged. But that was the start of it back in 1886.

McElwee: And that was a National Transit Company?

Comet: Well, to me it's always been fascinating the relationship between National Transit and Standard Oil, of course Standard Oil and National Transit, that was the same thing. There was always a Standard Oil man in our company, but we were never Standard Oil. The attorneys were very clever at that. Every time there was something big that happened you'd find there was a Standard Oil man there, yet we were never Standard Oil. Yet we paid for it at 30 Rockefeller Center, which was Standard Oil and we had a lot of guidance from Standard—30 Rockefeller Center.

McElwee: That's the way they did business.

Comet: Well, it was the way they did business. Now I don't know whether the fracas of the mudraker that happened up in Titusville when the woman said how bad Standard Oil was, whether that was part of the reason we weren't to be called Standard Oil, but Standard Oil man was everywhere that we did anything in all the policy or anything like that.

McElwee: There was some, at least culturally some connection?

Comet: Oh, there was a connection there but the lawyers were very clever at keeping—it was not Standard Oil.

McElwee: Now, in later years John, you've been instrumental in bringing to Oil City the artifact collection from National Fuel, I believe it's the Buffalo, I'm not sure where that came from but it's now in Oil City and it's down there in the Weaver Garage up there. Could you tell folks what your hopes and dreams are for that collection?

Comet: Well, I have very little to do with that.

McElwee: Oh, is that right?

Comet: I have very little to do with that. We had a foreman who was assigned to the Titusville area who saw many of these artifacts, many of them quite valuable, being brought in as junk. And then being sold as junk. And he on his own decided that was too valuable a collection just to be thrown away as junk. He began to collect them and I'm not too sure he did it according to the standards of the book, because if you sell junk you get money from junk. And if you don't sell the junk you don't get the money for that junk and the supervisors, and me included, we would have sold it for junk. But he saw value in it so he collected it. But I think later on he began to understand that maybe he wasn't doing it quite according to the book and he backed out of it. And I was contacted by the employees who said there stealing us blind up here, people are taking away things that we think might be valuable and will you do something about it? And I said "Well, why don't you go to National Fuel and offer them some money for the whole thing and get it clean that way? Say even five thousand dollars, just see what you can do with it." I did not collect one bit of that stuff, I was just sort of the go between. And I made that suggestion, National Fuel came through and said if you have a confident acceptor of these we'll give it to you free, you can have it. And that was it. I did not collect any of it, all I did was make a suggestion as to how maybe they could get the thing moving and it got moved down to what I call the Weaver Garage and it's been professionally documented. And I think now it's in the hands of the Blue Ridge Alliance.

McElwee: The Oil Region Alliance?

Comet: Yeah, wherever it is now. I was just on the fringe. I was just on the fringe of making a suggestion of what they could do to make them look good.

McElwee: Okay, well. In your working career, during your working career it was prosperous in this area, generally speaking.

Comet: Yes it was.

McElwee: (Speaking at same time). Certainly after.

Comet: And ugly, and ugly.

McElwee: And ugly, okay.

Comet: I heard this expression to me, and I was working, you know, out of town, but I came in most every weekend to be in town. I rented a room and stayed there, but they said there were six ways to come into Oil City and every one of them was ugly. And they were. Oil City was not a pretty town in those days, but it was prosperous. They were just too busy to make it pretty, really. Since that time we made the town, in my book, into a very beautiful town. But I can remember sitting up at the Oil City Fund and talking to some of the mayors that we had then, particularly Mork.

McElwee: Yeah, Mayor Mork.

Comet: Remember him? And he was saying we ought to have a shortcut across Oil City, we ought to have a faster way from getting to one part of town out to the other part of the town and that's when we got the bypass road that we got across the river. Before that we had to crawl through Seneca Street to get out that way. But I remember talking with those people and they had foresight and they were beginning to look. To me, Oil City is a beautiful town now, it really is now, but we were too busy making money in those days to even think about making it pretty or attractive.

McElwee: Joe Barr was involved in some of those—

Comet: Yeah, Joe Barr was one of the major ones. He was that and he was so good that he was brought—Harrisburg wanted him. They had him there for quite awhile and then he came back and he still lived for Oil City. He was a great man.

McElwee: I had the privilege of knowing him a little bit before he passed away. I think the town's a pretty town now.

Comet: It is a pretty town, it is a pretty town. The river's clean. I used to swim in it and the froth from the pot ash that would come in from people just dumping their stuff right into it. And the fishies, that was common, you had to swim around them. Oh, it was terrible. Now that river is clean and nice, just beautiful as most of our shallow streams like French Creek and Oil Creek, they're—we made tremendous strides although we seem to forget the really true concept and that is you fool around with nature you better figure out how you're gonna compensate for it. You cannot have a little pond and then have it stay as a nice deep little pond, it'll fill up with sediment for you. And it was laughable to me that they were gonna make a white water thing out of Oil Creek at one time. Do you remember? The first year it would have been filled up with sediment.

McElwee: Your interest in these clean streams, I think you've been actively involved in those efforts, I believe, and I know your interest goes back, you said you were a boy scout back in Monessenn?

Comet: Yes.

McElwee: And you had an interest in nature that goes way back. You aren't just out there, you're a very knowledgeable man about that, that's what I've learned from your friends. You're also a great trout fisherman, one of the best and certainly one of the most knowledgeable. These creeks around here, I'm sure it's a pleasure to you to see them come out.

Comet: Oh yes, oh yes. And I'll tell you it's interesting to get the history of some of that. Now you take French Creek, for instance. It's what you call a warm water stream and yet up above that is Low Creek and it's a cold water stream and that's because a glacier came

down and it took off what we call—what do we call that, is it Hunchback? The hill there in Oil City that has a sign on it?

McElwee: Oh, Hogback.

Comet: Hogback, yes. The glacier come down just stripped off the top of that thing, took off about two hundred feet of it and dumped it. And then right below it, that was all warm water, that was—the stream had flowed north from the Pittsburgh area, north out and now that was all at French Creek, tied in as warm water. That's why you get pike and a different kind of mussel.

McElwee: Oh, yeah, totally different species.

Comet: Totally different species of fish as what you get north, which was a trout stream, which was North Country stream. So, we've cleaned the streams up. The one thing we didn't need to clean up was people. We had wonderful people, always have; nice, nice people. I'm not stupid enough to believe everybody was nice but you gotta have some bad ones to compare. You can tell how good you are because you gotta have some bad ones to compare.

McElwee: I'm sure when you're in those moments of reflection you think about what this place will be like years from now. I think it'll be a beautiful place, I think you'd agree with that but what do you see for this area twenty, thirty years from now?

Comet: Well, it'll continue to be a wonderful place to live. I really haven't thought about what resource it is because it seems to me that in the past it's been resource-oriented. If you had a lot of oil, that was the resource and that was the resource that we had here, that and timber. A little bit of coal but not enough. It'll be what people can work out, for instance, this campus right here—

McElwee: This campus, yes.

Comet: --Is the perfect example. And also the health care facilities are coming out of UPMC Northwest. To me that kind of thing will make it go. That brings the doctors in, it brings in a lot of professional people and the natural resource that we always look for in an area, I don't see it and I don't know it but them people that drilled for the first oil, they didn't know it was out there either. They suspected it because they'd see it on the ??, they'd see that fluorescent blue color and they knew it was coming from someplace. And of course that's the story of Titusville and Drake Well.

McElwee: Just to emphasize the ?? thing, it's a model for living and life in economic development; Pittsburgh, Cleveland, why not here? We have the beginning of it, that's for sure. I happen to agree with it. You've always been a man of education, you've always stressed education, you're a man of manners, you believe life should be lived to high

standards, that's why you've been so admired by so many people. You think the young people are listening? You think there's hope?

Comet: I don't understand. Of course, at ninety-four years old, I'm so many generations older than what's come on. I'd say nearly three generations have passed and I just don't think like they do. I don't hear their music like they hear it. I just don't understand their language. I don't understand their lack of respect. I don't understand their lack of manners. I think the thing that hit me first was music. Certainly Chopin and Mozart was not in the category of what they were interested in, maybe unless they could change it. It had the beautiful melody that we used to have. I think music has empathized to changes in the generations that come by.

McElwee: But there's always hope.

Comet: There is hope and it's gone according to a plan in my book. We were told religiously don't try to figure it out because you can't. Those thoughts are far apart from the way things are gonna go as the sky is from the land. We can't figure out how it's gonna end up. I think you end up with hope and even though you have to work awfully hard to bank til you find it. Again there's a constant of very, very much good will that runs through the whole thing. You find the bad ones and you get into places like the Hill District in Pittsburgh or places like Detroit where things are bad, but you find more good people than you find bad people. And I've never seen more good will expressed than just recently when we had turkeys and free meals for people—just come. And it was a beautiful outpouring on how people want to help people.

McElwee: We're coming to an end of this conversation, Mr. Comet, and it's just been an absolute pleasure having this conversation with you. The community has been so much better off because you've been with us. I want you to know that. I mean that sincerely and there's people in this room who share that and I'm sure there's many, many people in Oil City when they or their children see this in years to come they will say "That's John Comet, that was a man to be respected and we are a much better place because of him." And thank you.

Comet: Thank you.