

INTERVIEWER: DORINDA PRICHARD
INTERVIEWEE: REP. BOBBY NEWMAN
SUBJECT: EL DORADO OIL BOOM - 1920's
DATE: 11-7-85

DP: What is your name and when were you born?

BN: I'm Bobby Newman. I was born in 1926 in El Dorado.

DP: What is your occupation?

BN: Well, I'm an insurance businessman and a part-time legislator.

DP: When you lived in El Dorado, what did your parents do?

BN: My dad worked for Lion Oil Company. In fact, he was, uh--he was with them before it was Lion Oil. That was back in '22, and he went to work for them in '22 and, uh, later on--I have a paper at home when it changed and what have you--but he was a senior employee.

DP: O.K. Uh, what did he do as a senior employee? Did you watch him work?

BN: Oh, yeah. He was in charge of the boil hazards and the treater plant, the sulphur plant they had down there which they used to make their gasoline and what have you; but, he was in charge of their, uh, boilers primarily, supervised over them.

DP: O.K. Did you watch him? Did you go to work and see what he did?

BN: Yes, I--I worked at the refinery back when I was sixteen years old. Back there was during the second war. In fact, several of us school boys worked in the summer time, and they let us work on Saturday and Sunday to give us some extra spending money and also give them some extra help down there. The men were short at the time.

DP: Ummm. O.K. Um, did your parents live in El Dorado before the oil boom?

BN: No, uh, they didn't. My dad came from Mississippi and my mother from Louisiana; and, they married in I guess about 1920 and moved to El Dorado in 1922.

DP: O.K. Um, was there any place for them to live?

BN: No, they, uh, they had some real stories to tell about where they lived at the time. They lived in tents and one-room places. Just, uh--there just wasn't many places at all to live then.

DP: Was it a tent hotel or was it just a tent?

BN: No, they were living in just a--it wasn't a hotel-- just a little tent thing they lived in at the time, a tent-house more or less, a one-room deal.

DP: O.K. Have they ever, uh--did they ever tell you stories about when they first got there about the, uh, grocery store, where they bought their groceries or--

BN: No, but Dad told me that it was really wild back in those days, uh, you had to be careful. You'd go

someplace and you'd get stuck up. Somebody'd rob you just, you know, oh, at the drop of a hat, and it was just, you know, it was real rough at those times. Really, people--there was a lot of, uh, like they say, bad people, onnery people--they'd rob you before you turn around good then.

DP: Um huh. Just anywhere or would, like in the areas like Shotgun?

BN: Well, Shotgun Valley and Pistol Hill and places like that especially, uh huh.

DP: Uh huh. Um, do you remember any of that like from when you were a boy and was it like that when you were a grownup?

BN: No, it wasn't. I--I'm sure it wasn't 'cause I was born in '26. 'Course the boom was still going on then so to speak. 'Course I was just a child. It was, uh--the big boom was over with when I got up to be--when I could remember things really.

DP: Um hmmm. O.K. Uh, did you know of anywhere else that they had unusual housing arrangements other than the tents, family friends?

BN: Yes, I was, uh--I had one of my best friends I grew up with, his folks had a, uh, had a tent hotel over in Norphlet and they told stories back then about, uh, just had cots lined up in I guess much like barracks that you had, you know, later on except they were kind

of a tent type thing; and, it was--it was a real deal. Then, of course, someone may sleep in the bed day, and then somebody else sleep in it at night, they said and swap out and everything. There was a--back in those days, uh, I know I have a picture at home there--in the, at the depot at Smackover that there was 25 to 30 thousand people living at Smackover at that time, see; and, it was just a--it really was a unique situation. Uh, I have a picture of the old cafe here. The seats are cut out of, uh, uh--well, the whole thing was made, of course, out of wood, unfinished lumber. The seat would be just a round cut off out of a log, see, on a little deal there. They'd tell stories back then about one of the cafes--some fellow got killed and they just put him under the counter there for three or four days before they ever thought about him again, you know. A lot of that was going on back in those days.

DP: Um hmmm. O.K. Do you remember going to the railroad station when you were little. Was it busy?

BN: Oh, yeah, uh huh. We used to go up. That was a big thing back then to go back and watch those--watch the trains come in really; and, uh, we'd go to the barber shop and watch haircuts, you know, but, uh, it wasn't anything like it is now, T.V. and radio and everything. I remember the first radio we got, and I know I listened to the World Series on it; and, it was a big

thing back then. People come from all over the neighborhood would come in to listen to the ball game. It was just a real big thing then. I've been out to the old homes in the oil fields and they had to have gas lights in some of them out there, see. It was a different time from what you're living in now.

DP: Your momma told me that they had a gas light in the yard, that gas would come up in the--

BN: Where a gas line--a pipe come up there and just natural gas would burn it off, uh huh.

DP: And she said that Gilbert never paid for gasoline he used. It sometimes came from--

BN: Casing or a drip, uh huh. Oh yeah, that was a big thing back when we were growing up as kids. 'Course gasoline didn't cost very much, but you didn't have anything then; and, uh, I know people that never did buy any gasoline. They went to those drips or casings or whatever you want to call it, and they used that in their cars all the time. And there's still some of that. Not like it was then, not near like it was then.

DP: Give you kind of a rough ride, wouldn't it?

BN: Well, no, it was--some of it was pretty high octane. I've seen people that--it would bust the piston in the car, it was so hot. You'd have to get your car repaired. But it was some pretty good gasoline. A lot of people used to mix it with--mix half of that--half a casing of it and half of refined gas.

DP: O.K. Um, um, how did your parents get to town when they first got there? Did they use the _____ service or did they have a car

BN: No, they came by train. I believe that's--they came by train. 'Course, uh, trains were more pleasant then used for passenger service than they are now, and there was some cars around and some of them had that; but, I think they came by train, how they got there.

DP: And once they were living there, did they live close enough to town to--

BN: Oh, you walked every place you went then. 'Course, town--the town wasn't as big then, wasn't as spread out then as it is now, and, uh, it wasn't very far from anything. I know the part of town we lived on was probably half way between, uh, the Lion refinery and half way from town. There probably wasn't over half to three quarters of a mile either way, see.

DP: Yeah. Uh--

BN: My dad tells stories about. Well, right there on Hillsburr Street where he seen--'course, uh, they had mules pulling, uh, wagons then. He seen--he was telling me one time about the mules he saw just sinking in the mud, just drowned in the mud, just sunk on down in the mud and drowned right there, just died. _____ just got another mule and went on.

'cause different companies selling out in oil field; but, they were from pretty good areas or places from where they came from and everything. 'Course there's a lot more students than there is now, too. You get schools--there was schools right there at, uh--well, there was schools at, uh, _____, and there was, uh, Crossroads, uh--'course Smackover was always there and one at Louann. There were four or five miles of schools, you see.

DP: Because there were so many people in town?

BN: Uh huh, that and transportation wasn't as good as it is now, you see.

DP: Um hmmm. And so everyone had to walk to school.

BN: Uh huh. Uh, I don't remember--growing up, uh, we didn't have a school bus that come into the El Dorado schools. We didn't have school buses up through the--well, up through the eight or ninth grade, didn't have a school bus to even come to our school, so it was some different than what it is now.

DP: Hmmm. Ummm, what type of restaurants were in El Dorado when your parents were--

BN: What type of what?

DP: Restaurants and where did they buy their food and--

BN: Well, I know--'course back in those days it was more--credit, uh, stores owned a big credit business, see. I know we went to--I think we bought--well, two

or three different stores, neighborhood stores, but they were pretty good sized stores, Holtz, I know was one of them there; and, uh, I guess different places, you know, like Brooks Grocery. And it was all kinda-- it was just more or less--it was a charge business and they delivered more then and now it's a cash business and they don't deliver, but it was more of a charge and they were good groceries more then than it is now.

DP: O.K. Uh, did they ever tell you anything about Hamburger Rowe or was that before your time?

BN: Oh, yeah, they had told about it. I've heard about it, but I don't remember that much about it. The stores they told me were just almost unreal the way things were going on.

DP: What kind of stores did they say were on Hamburger Rowe?

BN: I--I can't pick. It was something, you know, back in those--it's been so, a while. 'Course my dad's been dead a few years. But it--you forget about those things, you know. It's--it's unreal.

DP: Um, were there a lot of people going in and out of jail during the first part of the oil boom?

BN: Oh, yeah, there's was a lot. We have a picture there of--that's off that picture there I was telling you about there's the reception party that's kind of a hanging party then and, uh, justice was pretty swift

then if you went through all these courts then and everything. And a lot of them--

DP: Was there enough room in the jail to hold the prisoners?

BN: No, no. They just, not--no, it was just as crowded then just like it's crowded now. 'Course back then you didn't have the court saying you got to do this and you got to do that and they just put them in there and if they half froze, that didn't make any difference either. They put them all in there together and whether there was comfort there or not, they was in jail. They didn't get there by saying two lines in Sunday School so they weren't treated that way. They were treated as criminals they tell me, pretty tough.

DP: Was there--was there--did the sheriff have a lot of deputies or--

BN: I don't know. Really, I've never heard them say. 'Course you had to have, uh--I'm sure had to have more then than they do now. 'Course the town had their marshals, too, see; and, they had a lot more authority then than they do now. 'Course they took more authority then than they do now, town marshals.

DP: Um, what do you remember from growing up that you think would be really different from what other people would know from being in the oil field?

BN: Well, 'course back then, I think everybody thought oil would last forever. 'Course it's gotta be like a-- just like it was there, well back then you had the-- three or four--had the Root Refinery and Lion Refinery and, uh, Bixaco Refinery. You had three or four refineries right down there in El Dorado, you see and, 'course your other refineries. And those things were going full blast and they were, uh--people worked hard. I know my dad told me he worked nine years with the refinery without ever having a day off. That was seven days a week, you know. And, uh, more than eight hours a day, and, uh, I don't know, seems like people were closer then than they are now, because you didn't have all those distractions. Didn't have T.V. and things like that, see. So, I think that really, uh, you had more friendships, really true friendships. I know that the kids I grew up with, we're friends moreso today than even like they were then, and, uh, I tell my children they're not near as close to their friends as I was to mine, because children nowadays have many more things to do, see. And, uh, we all spent the night with other and had parties. We had a party at somebody's house every Friday and Saturday night. You know, you just have a weinie roast or just something. Well, we'd just have a party, see. And I think, uh, people were probably closer then than they are now. Friendships were greater than they are now.

DP: O.K. Um, let's see. So that's what you did for entertainment. Did you go to the movies?

BN: Oh, yeah, we went to the movies some then. Back, uh--'course everyone went to the movies on Saturday, Saturday morning especially because you had a double feature and a comedy and a serial; and, those serials would last about fifteen weeks. You didn't want to miss an episode at all of that, you know. If you did, you'd miss a whole _____ out of the whole thing, so that was a big thing then that you, uh, everybody went to the movies on Saturday morning. And we'd know kids from other parts of town, see, in grade school. Back in those days, too, baseball was a big thing then. They had a _____ league teams down there; and, of course, we had our knothole gang and all the kids got, I think, fifty cents for a ticket for a year, and we got to see all the baseball games for fifty cents for a year. And, uh, that was the knothole gang, and we had to sit in a certain place. We had to be at a certain place. We couldn't just run all over the stand, but, uh, that was one of the big things then, was baseball. It was a big thing back then. All the companies, all of your oil companies then, had baseball teams and they had some kind of leagues around there, the industrial leagues more or less; and, this was just old rawbone stuff. I'm talking about it wasn't fancy like it is

today, and they played baseball. It was a big thing back then. Companies had the teams. They had a kind of a league. They'd play every week, you know, maybe on Saturday or Sunday or maybe sometime--they didn't have much of lights back then, you know, for the industrial teams, but the _____ leagues did. But they didn't--but that was a big thing back then. That was entertainment. 'Cause like I say, radio was just getting started good then, and you visited friends, visited each other.

DP: Um, did you ever go into Garrett Hotel downtown or the El Dorado before they closed down?

BN: Oh, yeah, we went to Garrett Hotel, Randolph Hotel. Yeah, uh huh. Yeah, in fact, I remember when they--well, they closed the Garrett down, it's been a few years since they tore it down. Yeah, that _____
_____, and, uh, yeah, we've been there amany a time.

DP: When we went down there, they said that's where it used to be.

BN: That was on one corner and right across the street was the Garrett Hotel--Randolph Hotel. And that was two big hotels--they was big things then, see. Those two were 'cause we didn't, uh--I never, you know, you didn't travel much then. You may--well, I had kin folks in Shreveport and go down there some, but I

didn't go--I been to Little Rock one time. I guess maybe by the time I was in tenth or eleventh grade in high school. That was one of our classes in school came up here on the train. In sixth grade maybe, the only time I went to Little Rock. You know, maybe I was, oh, eleventh grade maybe on the football--eleventh or twelfth grade coming with the football team up here. Just didn't go like you do now.

DP: O.K. Well, that's about all I had to ask you. I ran out.

BN: O.K. I'll send some of those pictures up there by--