

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: Introduction: Voices of Oklahoma presents *Oklahoma Leaders*, a book featuring stories of influential men written in 1928. You'll be introduced to names you'll recognize and we will learn about interesting details of their lives. Notably, these men lived many years beyond the publication of this book to make even more contributions to our society. Listen to another episode in the series *Oklahoma Leaders*.

Barry Evans: William Grove Skelly

Oklahoma has produced many millionaires, some of whom are city builders, others state builders, and still others leaders in government and politics. These few constructive figures—cast in large mold—have attracted the attention of the whole nation, because of their vision, large operations, and broad influence, and have become important factors in the life of Oklahoma.

W. G. Skelly, President of Skelly Oil Company, of Tulsa, is one of Oklahoma's millionaires who is cast in a large mold. As the builder and head of an \$85,000,000.00 oil company, as president of the International Petroleum Exposition, as a member of the Board of Directors of the American Petroleum Institute, and runner-up this year for its presidency, as a large and familiar operator in Wall Street, he is one of the oil fraternity's most successful leaders. His position as a director in the Empire Trust Company, of New York City, and the First National Bank, of Tulsa, and his contacts with many other large financial institutions that serve the oil business make him a man of consequence in the finances of America. Through the office of Republican National Committeeman from Oklahoma, which he holds, he is recognized as the head of his party in Oklahoma and is active in all the larger affairs of that party in the nation. As president of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce for two terms and one of that city's very active, public-spirited citizens, his influence on the recent life and development of Tulsa probably is surpassed by that of no other person.

On June 10th, 1878, Mr. Skelly was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, the fourth child of a family of six children. His father, William Skelly, whose birthplace was ten miles from Belfast, Ireland, and his mother, the former Miss Mary Jane Sweatman, who was born in England, met and married in America, whither William Skelly had come with his parents to seek relief from the panic of Ireland, and Mary Jane Sweatman had migrated with her family in search of better opportunities. William Skelly was an energetic, hard working man, of more than average business ability, whose ancestors for generations were well-known horse raisers and turf men in Ireland, sport loving, and free spenders. Notwithstanding his inheritance of these same tendencies, he was level headed and conservative, a sound business man. His wife, of Scotch ancestry, noted for economy, good management, and mental attainments, was well educated and industrious; even today, at eighty years of age, she continues to put in "a full day of work." Among her ancestors were a number of very prominent churchmen—bishops, priests, and educators; and one of her relatives is now a bishop in Canada.

William Skelly and Mary Jane Sweatman met, were married, and settled on a farm not far from Erie, a short time after Skelly returned from the Civil War. They were frugal and industrious and did well on the farm, but the business tendencies of the man caused them after the birth of their second child, to move from the farm to the town of Erie. There the younger William was born.

The oil business of Pennsylvania was then in the full swing of its first important development, and William Skelly, like great numbers of men who lived in Pennsylvania at that time, became employed in it, as a teamster. As his sons grew into boyhood he and they hauled oil well supplies across the country from Erie to the oil fields a hundred miles away. In this manner at an early age the boy William began his contact with the oil business. He sold papers on the streets of Erie, he did odd jobs about the town and some trading, but always his eyes were turned toward the oil fields. An oil well to him was a challenge, and he decided that when he grew to be a man he would be an oil man. The romance and struggle of the business appealed to the fundamental instincts of the hard-fisted, fighting little Irishman. The struggles especially appealed to him, for he had no doubt that when he grew to manhood he would be able to win against the difficulties of the oil business just as handily and effectively as he won in his fights with the "dirty dozen" of Erie. The boys who played and fought with him, looking respectfully at his hard head, massive neck and powerful shoulders and arms, had little doubt that some day he would be a

great man. If they allowed doubt on this point to descend upon them at any time it was quickly dispelled by Bill's art of "gentle persuasion."

As time passed, the boy grew rapidly. His record was good in the grade schools of Erie, from which he graduated at fourteen; and he entered Clark's Business College, from which he also graduated, at fifteen. Prepared then, as he thought, to enter business, he left Erie to enter the employ of the Oil Well Supply Company, at Oil City, Pennsylvania. Here, for the first time, he manifested those characteristics,—perseverance, fidelity to duty, comradeliness, faith in himself, desire for action—which are well known today in all his business operations. Realizing that he knew comparatively nothing about the oil business and determined that he would secure a full knowledge of its operations, he remained with the Oil Well Supply Company for six years. This work brought him into contact with every phase of the oil business, from the work of the well-dressed office man to that of the roughly garbed tool dresser. He learned the psychology and speech of the oil industry, and, at the same time, acquired knowledge of how successful oil men conduct business. He was a mixer, a very active young fellow, and he overlooked no opportunity to learn something from every one he met. People, liking him, enjoyed to be with him; he was jolly and natural at all times, a good story teller and a generous spender. Quick to sense business opportunities, he was equally as quick to take chances in embracing them. Money meant to him the ability to test his judgment, to engage in the oil business, and he speculated with all the funds he could earn and save.

So developed was he physically, so much did he appear to be the man, that when the Spanish-American War opened and he enlisted, his appearance caused him to be made private orderly to the General of his brigade. He went to Porto Rico, where he took part in the battle of Coama.

His work with the Oil Well Supply Company was interrupted only a few months, for at the close of the campaign he returned to his old position in Oil City. He had been back only a short time, however, when an event took place which started him on the course of life which he was to follow henceforth. Among the principal owners of the Citizens ' Gas Company, of Gas City, Indiana, was a man who lived in Oil City. He knew young Skelly, liked him very much and had confidence in his ability. The gas company needed a manager, and the man offered the position to Skelly. The two promptly reached an agreement, which caused Skelly soon to discontinue his connection with the

Oil Well Supply Company and in a short time assume the duties of his newly acquired position in Gas City. This was his first change, the response to the deep-seated desire to keep moving, to create something, which was to mark his future efforts.

After a year with the Citizens ' Gas Company, he accepted a position as traveling representative of the Westinghouse Meter Company, which took him into two or three states. He gave up this work in a short time, however, for the more enjoyable one of organizing an oil company. The gas and meter businesses, as was true also of the oil well supply business, were only adjuncts to the oil business, which was his true love. So, with a feeling of relief that was quickly followed by that of delight, he thrust them with all other adjunctive businesses to one side, and turned his life into the channel of his main interest.

For twenty years he reveled in the joy of creative work. He organized several oil companies; no oil field of any importance was opened in which he was not one of the first oil men to appear and " get in on the ground floor. " He moved, hither and thither, in the wake of the golden stream of oil, ever hoping for a " big strike, " making profits one month and losing them the next, cheerful, optimistic, a genuine Knight of the Derrick.

First, in Marion, Indiana, he organized two oil companies. From there he went to Muncie, when it was at the height of its excitement, and organized another oil company. These he sold at a profit, then left for Illinois, on the notice that oil was being found in that state. In Robinson, Illinois, he organized a company, associated himself with the local firm of Selby and Sissler (the forerunner of what is now the Selby Oil and Gas Company), in the firm of Selby, Sissler and Skelly. For five or six years he remained in Illinois, taking part in the boom of every new field in that section, and organized a number of companies and invested heavily in others. He hurried to Wichita Falls, upon receiving news of the first big strike in that field, to organize an oil and gas company there. Fortunately this company developed large production in a comparatively short time, enabling him to sell it for a profit that made him wealthy. From Wichita Falls he moved to the Duncan field, in Oklahoma, and organized and operated another gas company, in association with the Lone Star Gas Company, of Dallas. The Healdton field opened shortly thereafter, and he sold his holdings in Duncan and moved over to Healdton, where he joined partnership with a contractor by the name of Sankey in operating eight drilling rigs. Also, with a

Mr. Russell, he acquired ownership in an important lease in the new field, which proved to be very valuable. A number of large producers were drilled on the lease and he sold it to the Carter Oil Company for a big sum of money.

His next movements carried him into Texas, back into Oklahoma, then finally into Kansas, where at the opening of the El Dorado field he became one of that state's largest operators. The Tulsa World, in a recent issue, speaking of the development of the Skelly Oil Company, which began at that time, summarized Mr. Skelly's activities as follows:

"...Skelly was engaged as an individual in oil production and in 1916 owned a group of fine properties in the new oil field at El Dorado, Kansas. He was struck with the logical location of that town as a site for a refinery.... So he organized the Midland Refinery Company and began the construction of a refining plant which was completed and first operated in 1917...

"...In 1919 Skelly incorporated the Skelly Oil Company and transferred to it all his individual oil producing business, and admitted the public to participation in the company through ownership of stock. The offering of shares to the public was handled by New York bankers and was one of the Wall Street successes of 1919. The new capital thus put into the business was used in a plan of energetic expansion, and by 1923 the company, with its securities listed on the New York Exchange, and with its operations in progress throughout the Mid-Continent field, gained rank as one of the strong and progressive independent companies in crude oil production and casinghead gasoline manufacturers. But it did not meet Skelly's conception of a complete and balanced oil enterprise, engaged in all branches of the petroleum business. The Midland Refining Company, Skelly's other creation, had been successful and had expanded into a refinery of importance.... The Skelly Oil Company and the Midland Refining Company had each what the other lacked, would supplement and sustain each other in union. Nothing was more logical than that these creations of Skelly's thought and energy should join fortunes, and they did so in 1923 through the absorption of the Midland Refining Company by the Skelly Oil Company...."

Mr. Skelly established the headquarters of his company in Tulsa, where today it is housed in its own building. One of the largest independent oil companies in the world, it is active in all the important Mid-Continent oil fields in taking the oil from the ground and carrying it through all intermediate operations to delivery as finished products for consumption. Its best-known products are

trademarked " Tagolene " Motor Oils and " Refractionated " and " Aromax " gasolines, and its chief trade territory covers a tier of central states, ranging from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Skelly filling stations, attractive and well kept, are familiar sights in the towns and cities throughout this territory. In addition, many Skelly products are marketed throughout the world.

Since the organization of the Skelly Oil Company, Mr. Skelly's activity as an organizer of companies has ceased, as he has devoted his entire time to making this company one of the outstanding successes in the country.

Because of his enlarging influence, his aid to the cause of the Republican Party, his active participation in the business and governmental affairs of the nation and his pleasant personality, in 1924 Mr. Skelly was persuaded to accept the office of Republican National Committeeman from Oklahoma. He had never held a party office and was loath to do so then, but the office was virtually thrust upon him. After he assumed his new duties he fulfilled them with characteristic energy and success, and thereby won the respect and esteem of Republicans in Oklahoma. His ability to lead the party in this state without arousing antagonisms, and the important part he played in its larger national affairs have made him a big figure in American politics. On many occasions he has been prominently discussed for the United States Senate and for Governor. To all such suggestions he answers, "I am not a politician and do not aspire to hold public office. I'm a business man and my interest in politics is founded on the belief that good politics means good business, and good business means prosperity for us all."

A man so successful and prominent could not fail to arouse the interest of citizens of his own community. Tulsa, not to be outdone in appreciation by other communities, two years ago elected Mr. Skelly president of its Chamber of Commerce, and, over his strenuous protest, prevailed upon him to accept the office. He was a willing worker in civic affairs, but was reluctant to assume the responsibility of heading the Chamber of Commerce. However, he made his administration successful and effective, and at its close kept right on with his interest and efforts in behalf of Tulsa. As a result, today he is one of the most popular and influential men in Tulsa, in the forefront of every movement of civic importance; his support of a civic enterprise virtually insures its success.

Despite his broad outside activities, however, and successful though they are, his chief interest in life is his business, in which he lives and has his finest

being. He plans his business moves with considerable care, but his success is due to his capacity to accomplish results in spite of all obstacles. His courage and refusal to admit defeat, the sheer driving force of the man, have enabled him to achieve where most men would have failed. Coupled with his Irish love of battle is also his Irish wit and good nature, which have been of invaluable aid to him in his work with all types of people. He is at home in any group, as much so with the driller on a rig as with the president of a bank in Wall Street, because he loves people and cannot help doing generous things for them. The quality of his voice, deep and confident always, and the bulk of his solid body give him the appearance of decisiveness and determination. One feels that Skelly will go through to the end on what he starts, whether in doing so he is required to use the skill of a diplomat or the brawn of a fighting man.

A scrutiny of newspapers and magazines, in which articles and editorials about him have appeared, reveals such statements, as, "A virile man, a man's man—strong, energetic, purposeful." ... "Of endless energy and boundless faith." ... "Strong voiced, two-fisted—there is nothing the stalwart of the oil fields can do that he has not the nerve, the heart, and the muscle to do himself" "Scotch-Irish, with the hard fighting qualities of both races."

It was said of him by one of the bankers who financed his company in 1919, " I have known the directors of the Skelly Oil Company to decide against further acquisition of property at certain times when Mr. Skelly wanted to purchase land. He would bow to their decision, but would go out and buy the land with his own money. If the land proved valuable later, and prices went skyrocketing, Skelly would turn it in to the company at the price he paid for it. If no oil was found he would take the loss and say nothing about it."

Mr. Skelly was married to Miss Gertrude Frank, of Marion, Indiana, on October 4, 1905. They have two daughters, Joan Jane and Caroline Mary, who is now Mrs. F. W. Burford, of Shreveport, Louisiana. The Skelly home, one of the most attractive in Oklahoma, is the scene of many brilliant social gatherings. Distinguished guests of Tulsa usually are entertained in it, and frequently figures prominent in the financial, political, governmental, and sporting affairs of America come to Tulsa as Mr. Skelley's private guests. He is an admirable host, with a gift of making each of his guests, no matter how many may be present, feel that he is the object of special interest and attention.

The same capacity to mingle with people and to establish in them a feeling of warm companionship, shows in his contact with the employees in his

organization. Seldom, in fact almost never, does he drive by a Skelly filling station in a strange town without stopping his car and getting out to shake hands with every employee of the station. He likes to know his men, and they like to know him. He depends upon his employees for much of his accurate information in the operation of his company, but his decisions on all company matters of any importance are made by him. He is in touch constantly with all the details of the business, and directs its affairs with a care that has made it such a conservative, substantial oil company.

The caliber of his operations is reflected no more strikingly in the growth and scope of his oil company than in the policies and plans which he inaugurated at the time he assumed the presidency of the International Petroleum Exposition. It had been created and started enthusiastically by some Tulsa leaders, but after a few years was faltering. Mr. Skelly aligned with it the most outstanding leaders in the oil industry and launched upon a campaign of developing its physical equipment that have made it a permanent, annual institution in the life of the petroleum industry, known and respected wherever oil is produced in the world.

Mr. Skelly is a self-made man, a constructive, helpful influence in the life of Oklahoma. His allegiance to the state has been proved on many occasions; he lives in Oklahoma, maintains his operations in Oklahoma, and is credited with saying that he intends to die in Oklahoma. The state owes him much, and is not hesitant about voicing its appreciation of him.

Announcer: Since publication of the book *Oklahoma Leaders* in 1928, Mr. Skelly continued his leadership, influencing Tulsans in many ways. Many of Skelly's accomplishments survived him. Oklahoma's first FM radio station was established in 1947, operated by the University of Tulsa; Mr. Skelly's initials were used for the call letters: KWGS.

The IPE (International Petroleum Exposition) had its peak attendance in 1966 and continued to be held in Tulsa until 1979.

In 1952, the 51st street bypass -- the highway through south Tulsa that connects the Turner and Will Rogers turnpikes, now part of Interstate 44 -- was named Skelly Drive in William Skelly's honor.

Skelly was the primary benefactor of Skelly Field, the football stadium at the University of Tulsa, which opened in 1930. Later renamed Skelly Stadium, at one time, it seated 40,385. Renovated in 2007 and 2008, it was renamed Skelly Field at H.A. Chapman Stadium.

Spartan School of Aeronautics still exists and was renamed Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology on March 31st, 2015.

Skellytown, Texas was named for William G. Skelly as well.

Mr. Skelly was 78 when he died, April 11th, 1957.

You have just heard a brief biography taken from the book, Oklahoma Leaders, written by Rex Harlow, published in 1928 and available on Amazon Books. Listen for future episodes of this special series Oklahoma Leaders on this podcast and the oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com

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