

Ray Ackerman

Known as “Old Man River,” Ray made a career as an Ad Man and entrepreneur.

Chapter 1 – 1:00

Introduction

Announcer: Since he arrived in Oklahoma City from Pennsylvania in 1947, Ray Ackerman has given his time and talent to one project and one organization after another. His community involvement includes leading the United Way to chairing the National Finals Rodeo to overseeing a citywide pride campaign including the Bricktown Canal and the development of the North Canadian River, for which he was dubbed “Old Man River”. He served as a carrier fighter pilot in the United States Navy and spent a total of 35 years in active and reserve duty in the United States Naval Reserve, rising to the rank of Rear Admiral. Ray Ackerman has been recognized many times over the years for his contributions to the community, his industry and business in general. He is Chairman Emeritus of Ackerman McQueen advertising agency. This interview was recorded at his home September 30, 2009 and has been made possible by the founding sponsors of this oral history website, VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 4:17

Accident

John Erling: Today’s date is September 30th 2009, I am John Erling and I am here with this gentleman, if you would say your full name.

Ray Ackerman: My name is Ray Ackerman. My full name is Raymond B. Ackerman, but I have dropped the “-mond” and the “B.”

JE: Your date of birth and your age today?

RA: I was born on August 7, 1922, so I just turned 87 last month.

JE: Where are we talking today?

RA: We are in Oklahoma City.

JE: In the Ackerman home as a matter of fact. Where were you born?

RA: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JE: Is that where you grew up?

RA: I grew up there and I lived there for 20 years before I went into the United States Navy.

JE: What were your grandparents' names?

RA: My grandmother on my mother's side was Catherine Grasinger. I never knew my grandfather on that side. She was single when I met her. On my dad's side, his father was Karl Ackerman from Bavaria, Germany. His wife, my grandmother—they came over here when Bismarck was uniting Germany. They lived in this area and didn't like the Prussian army, so they migrated to the United States.

JE: Then your parents?

RA: My dad was born in Wheeling, West Virginia and my mother was born in Monongahela City, Pennsylvania. They got married in 1918.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RA: I have one brother, Karl Ackerman, five years younger than me, who spent his career and the State Department. I have two sisters. Mary Frances was two years older and she had quite a career as an advanced publicist for the Ice Capades for many years. My other sister was Kit Winkler, married to Bill Winkler.

JE: Your education, did you attend elementary and high school in Pennsylvania?

RA: Yes, I went to Assumption Catholic School and Bellevue High School and graduated in 1940. I worked at Mellon National Bank for a couple of years. I studied accounting at night school because my dad was an accountant and I didn't know what else to do and I thought it sounded like a good idea. After I moved down here, I got my degree from Oklahoma City University at night, while working for *The Daily Oklahoman*.

JE: Let's go back, you had a traumatic experience when you were about 11 years old?

RA: I fell down on my way home from school one day and cut my knee. Like a kid will do, I wrapped my handkerchief around it to keep the blood from getting on my knickers. I got the knee infected with a staph infection. I was literally in bed for almost five months either at home or in the hospital. There was no penicillin and there was no sulfa in those days. The way they cured an infection like that was boiling it out of you with tubes running through your legs to take off the pus. So I had three different operations, which left 11 scars on that left leg. It finally got all under control. When I took an exam to get into the Navy, the doctors could not believe that my leg was normal. They had me do everything but climb the walls. Then I was living in Pittsburgh the Navy team for Naval aviation came over from Philadelphia once a month. The team that came over and examined me the first time wouldn't pass me because of that leg, but the team that came over the next time verified that it was okay.

JE: It was in high school that you kind of began your military career if we can say that, because you are in the Citizens Military Training Corps?

RA: That was after high school. That was a program called CMTC Citizens Military Training Corps, which was the equivalent to our ROTC as far as getting commission. If you went for four summers, you got a reserve commission. I went through the summer of 1940 because the literature said swimming, boating and recreation at beautiful Lake Fort Meade in Maryland. It wasn't that way at all. I learned to slog through the mud and keep my rifle out of it. I learned to shoot and a few other things, but the experience made me decide that when the war started I wanted to go in the Navy.

Chapter 3 – 4:00

Military Life

John Erling: When December 7, 1941 comes along, what were you doing then? Where were you?

Ray Ackerman: I was studying my accounting lesson for night school. I closed the book and I never opened it again. I had the radio on and I was sitting at my desk. I think it was 11am or Noon. I kept saying, "Where's Pearl Harbor?" And nobody knew where it was. I started to try and get into the program (military) right away. I couldn't get into aviation originally because you had to have a college degree. Within a matter of weeks they changed that. In the spring of 1942 they changed it to being able to pass exams, so I went in and took the exams and passed them. I was sworn into the Navy in August 1942. I was just barely 20 when I was sworn in.

JE: You received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy?

RA: No, I did not receive an appointment. I went through the Navy Aviation Cadet Program. I wanted to get into the Academy when I got out of high school, but I could not get an appointment. Two years later, my neighbor who was a judge got me the appointment. So I got a tutor and I tried to cram for the exams for the Naval Academy. I took six tests and flunked one of them, physics, by 1/10 of a point, so I didn't make it. But the irony of the whole thing is, I did not have to take that test and did not know it at the time. If you had a good high school record, you only had to take two tests, English and math. But I didn't know that, so I took all six and because I flunked that one by 1/10 of a point, I didn't make it.

JE: But you did become an ensign in the Naval Reserve?

RA: Once I got in, in August and went on active duty, I was going in for aviation but I had a chance to switch from being a pilot to being a navigator. I got my commission about a year early and had a contract to come back to flight training in one year, which happened. So

I got commissioned in August of 1943. The interesting thing is had I gone to the Naval Academy I would have been commissioned one year later.

JE: So you became a Navy pilot?

RA: I became a navigator, a bombardier and a fighter pilot.

JE: What kind of duty did you see?

RA: I didn't have any combat duty. I went all over the U.S. in my training program, Iowa, Texas and all over Florida. Then I had a carrier cruise in the Pacific the year the war was over. I was out in the Pacific for a year on an aircraft carrier.

JE: Is there a story from March 1947 about you taking an airplane?

RA: Why yes, there is a story there. I got my orders to go back to civilian life and get off active duty. My squadron had just come back from the South Pacific and was stationed on Maui. We had one two-engine plane in the fighter squad and that was to carry parts if somebody broke and all sorts of things. The plane was down for mechanical reasons. I went to the skipper and said, "I've got to get down to Pearl Harbor by the date on these orders to catch the USS Bairoko back to the United States. How am I going to get down there?" (Chuckle) He looked at me and said, "That's your problem." So, I thought, well, there's just one way, so I flew down there and tied it up and got onboard ship and came back.

JE: So you took a plane? (Chuckle)

RA: Yes, it was the only way I could get there.

JE: That was pretty gutsy on your part.

RA: The funny part of it is that some years later after I had made Rear Admiral, I ran into that skipper. He looked at that big, broad gold stripe and he said, "How in the hell did you get that?" (Laughter)

Chapter 4 – 5:15

Ray Comes to Oklahoma

John Erling: Along the line you visited your sister in Hollywood?

Ray Ackerman: That's right, just to see her and to get a little advice. I had decided for whatever reason John, I can't trace it to anything, but I decided that I wanted to be in the advertising business. I was sitting on a truck on Saipan drinking beer with a buddy. He said, "What are you going to do when you get out?" I said, "I'm going to get into advertising." My sister, being in public relations, I asked her for a little advice. She knew some people in the advertising agency business in Hollywood, so I visited with them. They all said to go work for a newspaper in a medium-sized city. On my way home to Pennsylvania from San Diego

I stopped in OKC because I had an uncle, aunt and five cousins living here. I liked the looks of the city. I remember coming in from the west and seeing the sunshine on OKC with those two tall buildings we had at that time. I thought it looked clean and it was much warmer than Pittsburgh, which I thought was pretty good. My uncle had the same interest in me that a man would have in his son. He wanted to know what I wanted to do and I told him. Oklahoma City was a medium-sized city and it had a newspaper, so he lined up an interview for me. I went down there in my uniform and filled out an application with really no intention at the moment of coming here. But when we got back to Pennsylvania, I got a letter one day that said if I wanted the job to be there on June 12, 1947. I thought, well, it's warmer and cleaner than Pittsburgh, which is something I wanted. I found out while I was visiting that I could get a degree at Oklahoma City University night school. I also found out I could fly in the Naval Reserve one weekend a month and they were stationed in Dallas, Texas. I went down and bought a used car and down I came to Oklahoma City. I put my electric train in the back seat with my clothes. (Chuckle)

JE: So that was a hobby early on?

RA: Yes. (Laughter)

JE: The newspaper you went to work for was?

RA: I went to work for *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Oklahoma City Times* as an advertising salesman.

JE: Then you were given some accounts while you were there at the newspaper, including B.C. Clark?

RA: B.C. Clark was probably my most famous original account. I was assigned to small companies that were already advertising to keep their programs going.

JE: Along the way, you met a lady by the name of Lucille?

RA: One of my cousins worked in the record department at Harbour-Longmire. My office that I worked out of for *The Daily Oklahoman* was just a few blocks away. I went down to see my cousin one day and there was another girl in the department by the name of Lucille Frances Flanagan. I liked her looks. The second time I went down there I asked her if she would like to go to the Oklahoma City Indians baseball game that night and she said, "yes." She was in a family of seven and there were three boys, but none of them liked baseball, but she did. Her dad used to take her to the games. So she was a baseball fan and that was a great beginning. (Laugh)

JE: Then it went from there?

RA: Well, it went rather quickly from there. On July 4th, she invited me to a picnic that her family had been invited to at this little lake. I went along and I saw the lake and I thought, man, this is the first thing I've seen come along that looks like Pennsylvania. There were lots of trees, lots of lush green grass and a lake with water. I thought that if I ever got the

chance that I would build a home on this lake. I might fast-forward about 10 years. At that time we had three children and we were ready to build that home. I called everybody on the lake to see if anybody wanted to sell me a piece of land and nobody wanted to sell me any. I knew Jack Johnson, who developed Quail Creek fairly well. I got Jack to get me a lot near a lake where I could look at someone else's lake. (Chuckle) I bought a lot on Northwest 66th Street just east of May. Jack was getting ready to pour the slab, and the next morning somebody called me and said there was a guy who would sell me a piece of property on that lake. So I went out there and bought the land. Then I called Jack and asked if he would let me out of this deal. He said if he liked the new lot that I bought that he would. He came out and saw it and loved it and we built our home there and lived there for 25 years. Now, Jack didn't charge me anything for that deal, but you know sometimes good deeds pay off. Jack discovered abandoned sandpits out on 50th across from Putnam City High School. He bought that land and developed them into upscale apartments, so that was his reward.

JE: And the name of the lake?

RA: The name of the lake was Broadlawn.

Chapter 5 – 4:00

Daily Oklahoma

John Erling: You married Lou in 1948?

Ray Ackerman: Yes, that's right. I took her into church on her birthday, September 3, 1947. I stepped over in front of the vigil lights and lit a couple of candles and said, "You might consider marrying me and before you answer that, how many children do you think you would like to have?" She said, "I think I would like to have about six." I said, "That's exactly what I was thinking. Will you marry me?" She said, "Yes," and we got married the following June.

JE: So you asked her to marry you in church?

RA: Yes and we had seven children. We lost one early on, but we had a big family.

JE: Yes. So let's go back to *The Daily Oklahoman* and B.C. Clark. Did you handle other accounts as well?

RA: Yes, Connolly's Menswear and Parks Menswear are the ones I remember. I had a lot of accounts.

JE: You were doing some of that work at night?

RA: That's right. Those three accounts, Clark's, Connolly's, and Parks were actually paying me a little something to do a little extra work on the side for them.

JE: Kind of in essence almost starting a little advertising agency at night?

RA: Kind of.

JE: And while working for the newspaper you were tired of suits and ties?

RA: (Laugh) I wasn't really tired except that it was so hot in Oklahoma—particularly down on Main Street in those days there wasn't a tree for a few miles around. I had to wear a hat a coat and tie and I would take my coat off, which I wasn't supposed to do. Then anyhow, I was always griping to my ad manager that couldn't we not wear a coat and not wear a hat on these hot summer days? I asked him this so many times and one day I went in and he said, "Mr. Gaylord wants to see you." (Laughter) the big man, E.K. Gaylord. So I went up to his office. His desk sat in the middle of the room and he had a guest chair over in the corner. He had this habit, he always got up and went over and picked up the guest chair and moved it over by his desk and then he would sit down. He looked at me and he said, "Mr. Ackerman, I understand that you're having trouble with the heat and it's too hot and you want to take your coat off." I said, "Yes." I explained that I perspire easily and so forth. He had on a seersucker suit. He reached down and kind of touched the material and said, "Mr. Ackerman, have you ever tried this seersucker? It's really comfortable." (Laughter) As far as I was concerned, that was the end of that.

JE: There you had your answer.

RA: I had my answer.

JE: He was in his 70s I believed at that time?

RA: That's right.

JE: How would you describe E.K. Gaylord?

RA: I was an admirer of Mr. Gaylord. One thing I found out when I got the job was that a lot of people did not like Mr. Gaylord, a lot of advertisers didn't. Anderson Sporting Goods was in business in downtown Oklahoma City and was one of my clients. When I went down to get his contract renewed (chuckle) he scratched out Oklahoma Publishing Company and wrote in "the black octopus on the hill". Well, I hated like heck to take that contract back, but of course I had to. But that was just an example of Mr. Gaylord not being very well loved. People were really jealous of him. You know, it takes guys like Gaylord to drag the rest of us out of the mud. He did things like pioneered WKY radio. He did all kinds of things that we all eventually benefited from.

JE: When you were and his presence, was he intimidating?

RA: Oh, he had a big smile and was as friendly as can be. I wrote a little book titled *Tomorrow Belongs to Oklahoma* and published it in 1964. He wrote the foreword to it. He wrote in there that I was one of the promising young men in the community to keep an eye on sort of thing. I was most appreciative of that.

JE: Absolutely.

Chapter 6 – 1:45**George Knox Advertising**

John Erling: While you're there at the newspaper, you are also flying in the Naval Reserve?

Ray Ackerman: I was flying one weekend a month on Saturday and Sunday. Students at OU and some of us that lived in Oklahoma City would get picked up down at the Max Westheimer Field in Norman and flown on to Dallas where we went through training with our fighter squadron.

JE: Then you were becoming restless at the newspaper and you begin to get offers from ad agencies?

RA: I kept asking my boss at the newspaper what future I might have at *The Daily Oklahoman*. I never got an answer except to tell me that they had great plans for me. So, a man named George Knox had a very small advertising agency with a very good reputation for nice operations and good creative, approached me. So I went (to work for him). And my boss said to me, "Why didn't you tell me?" I said, "I tried to tell you for a long time but you never told me about what these plans were." He said, "We were afraid that if we told you, you would quit working so hard." I said, "Well, that would've indicated that I was the wrong guy you picked, wouldn't it?"

JE: So you went to work for George Knox Associates. What were some of the accounts that you handled there?

RA: I took those three little accounts that I mentioned earlier with me and kept those going, but Hales-Mullaly Company, which was an appliance distributor, was the account by which the agency was founded. By the way, the Mullaly was Megan Mullaly's granddaddy that had that business. Progress Beer came to town and each one of those two companies represented about one third of our business and we had a lot of little accounts. Hank Moran the insurance man was one of our accounts, and Kilpatrick Lumber, Hotel Black and City National Bank were some of the others.

Chapter 7 – 1:50**Bill Veeck**

John Erling: Your sister married the baseball man Bill Veeck?

Ray Ackerman: Yes, Mary Frances, who as I said earlier was a publicist for the Ice Capades. So when she came to town there was always usually a little sports-oriented activities going on. She met Bill at one of those in Chicago. Bill had been married before and had five

children by his first wife. They dated for a little while and then got married. Then they had six children too. (Chuckle)

JE: He had purchased the St. Louis Browns?

RA: Yes. He had purchased the St. Louis Browns and I remember my wife Lou and I spent Labor Day weekend there one year in 1948 or 1949. It was quite an experience. The ballpark was open 24 hours a day. After the baseball game, some of the players came to the executive suite so to speak and drank a beer till Lord knows when. Then they went home and another group would come in for breakfast in the morning. Bill ran a real circus. He had a playground for the kids out behind the scoreboard in left field. We thoroughly loved it. We saw Satchel Paige and some other favorite players.

JE: Satchel Paige, did you get up close to him and did you say anything to him?

RA: I just said, "Hi Mr. Paige!" (Laughter) That's all. I was in awe of the baseball stars and really all sports figures.

JE: Do you remember any other names at that time that might come to mind?

RA: Oh, you know, the Browns weren't exactly laden with stars.

JE: Satchel Paige would probably be the biggest one?

RA: Yes. I remember Luke Easter.

JE: I had his baseball card.

RA: Is that right?

JE: Satchel Paige's, too come to think of it.

Chapter 8 – 7:08

Knox–Ackerman

John Erling: Meanwhile George Knox was away a lot in Colorado?

Ray Ackerman: Well, the day I reported to work, which was February 14, 1952, he told me he was getting ready to go to Colorado for a few days. He said while he was gone he wanted me to find new office space because our lease was expiring. He said City National Bank needed a new TV commercial and Hotel Black needed a new color postcard, and off he went. I knew nothing about producing a TV commercial or a color postcard. I very quickly got acquainted with the freelance talent in the community (chuckle). That's the way I operated originally, because he didn't have a staff of production people. He had a couple of gals and nobody really knew how to do this. That's how I got along for a long time was using external production. I found us a new location. We built a little building west of St. Joseph's Cathedral at 4th and Harvey.

JE: Then, soon a name change came about?

RA: Yes, George was gone all the time. He had a luxury soap business in Colorado Springs. It became more interesting to him and he wanted to move to Colorado Springs. He was gone so much the first year I suggested a name change to be effective immediately, so the name changed to Knox Ackerman on January 1, 1953. No change of ownership was involved it was just merely changing the name. Then a couple of years later I said, "You know George this is silly, I might as well buy you out because you're not here and you've moved to Colorado. So we worked out a deal and I got a five-year contract to buy him out for so much a year for five years. That was in 1956.

JE: So, what we can say is that George Knox served as the springboard for all of the accomplishments in the advertising world—it really started with him?

RA: That's right. He gave me a lot. He gave me a good name and a growing concern and appreciation for the creative product, which is what we are all about here in the advertising business, as you know.

JE: Yes. Let's talk about Progress Beer. You did the commercials. You were in them?

RA: That was sort of an accident. Very shortly after closing the deal with Mr. Knox, Progress, which was a tavern beer, realized that for their future they had to get into the supermarkets like all the other beers. So very suddenly I had to get a new package designed and new commercials. It was all kind of new territory for me. What we had back then for commercials were just back to the original days of advertising where you flipped cards and took pictures. It was terrible stuff, but I bought some time in a 30-minute show that was to run every Friday night. It was a family show so I needed these new commercials for Progress beer. I hired this good-looking articulate young man named John Harrison who was an announcer on radio and TV to do these commercials. So they go on the air Friday night and Saturday morning my phone rings and John Harrison says, "I understand we were on TV last night." I said, "Yes, what do you think we've been doing for the last six weeks?" He said, "You've got to get those ads off the air Ray. I didn't know that..." Well, he was lying through his teeth, but what I know happened is his dad Walter Harrison was running for mayor. I know he got John to night before and he said, "I'm afraid those beer commercials are going to kill me, so you've got to get them off the air." I had to have some new commercials produced by the following Friday. So I thought, well, gee I could do those. Anyway, I hired a guy named Doc Smith who was a freelance photographer and we shot me drinking beer with a few beers in me and with no beer in me and with one beer in me and they were all pretty bad. We went on the air with them on Friday. Something else I didn't know was the FCC had a rule that you could sip beer on TV but you couldn't chug-a-lug it. At the end of my commercial, that big ol' glass was tilted to the ceiling and every drop was gurgling down my throat, so that was a problem the next day.

I thought they were so bad. So Monday morning I went down to see the client with hat in hand expecting to get fired. I said, "I'll get you some new commercials as soon as I can. It's all I could do in this short notice." They said, "Well, you know. It's a funny thing. We've had two calls this morning. One of them said, 'I like that boy. He sounds like a good old Arkansawyer.' The other call was from a lady who said, 'I like him because he obviously wasn't one of those professional announcers.'" So the commercials ran and ran and ran and I became known as the guy who drank beer on TV. I guess the bottom line of this experience was being in church one Sunday with my wife who was pregnant. She had on one of these new maternity outfits invented by a lady in Dallas. The outfit was called a Page Boy. The outfits had a big hole in the skirt and then your blouse came down over it and then at the top you tied a string. There was a little boy sitting a couple pews in front of us. He was just staring at me and I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking that's the guy who drinks beer on TV. So at the gospel, precisely when my wife and I stood up, he pointed at me and said, "There's the guy who drinks beer on television!" By coincidence, my wife's skirt fell off at the same time! (Chuckle) Somehow or another that ended my career as a TV announcer I think.

JE: So you ended it, but it was an effective campaign?

RA: I guess it was. Progress Beer was pretty good.

JE: Because you looked like a good ol' boy drinking beer?

RA: I looked like a good ol' boy from Arkansas. (Chuckle) After a year or two, Progress Beer wanted me to go to work for them as sales manager, with the understanding that I would be president of the brewery in two years. That was pretty tempting to a young man in his 30s. So, I contacted George and told him I had this offer and I had to considering it. So he agreed to cut the price. The original cost of the agency was \$40,000. I paid one year about \$8,000. And he cut the remaining balance in half. I went down to the bank to ask them if they would lend me the money. I didn't have any money. With my father in law guaranteeing the loan, they loaned me the money to buy it.

JE: So you paid how much for it?

RA: Originally they wanted \$40,000, but I ended up paying about \$20,000.

Chapter 9 – 4:00

Ad Stories

John Erling: Then as you said you became the sole owner of Knox Ackerman Advertising. You landed some accounts and lost others. You landed KOCO-TV as an account?

Ray Ackerman: That was kind of a funny experience. I remember making the presentation at night at a hotel by the Turnpike to Tulsa off I-44. The guy that was going to say yes or no was falling asleep during the presentation. I gave him hell. I said, "You wake up! We spent a lot of time on this presentation and I don't want you sleeping through it." Well that started the back and forth fighting. I got out to the parking lot and I said to my guys and the people that were with me, "Well, I sure blew that one!" He called me the next morning and said, "You've got the business." (Laughter).

JE: He liked the fact that you probably talked that way to him.

RA: I guess so. I want to tell you another little story that's so funny. Kilpatrick Lumber, they made louvers for windows. They advertised in *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes & Gardens*. The prices of lumber changed all the time and therefore the prices for the shutters went up and down. I had delivered some new brochures to them. John Kilpatrick called and said, "Every price in this brochure is \$3 too high." I knew that he had made the mistake and not me, but it was one of those things where the customer is always right, or do you just want to walk away and forget them? I didn't have \$900 to pay for a reprint. So I thought for a few minutes. You have to scramble when you are poor. (Laughter) So, for \$20 I had a little slip printed up that was inserted into each brochure that said: If you buy by October 1st, every shutter reduced by \$3. Business was fantastic and I got off the hook.

JE: That was clever. That's what made you the ad man you were. What were some of the names of people that you may have worked with back in those days of Knox Ackerman?

RA: Sure. I had an artist named Jack Moses. I had a PR guy named Ray Scales. I had a PR guy named Miller, who was the son of RG Miller of *The Daily Oklahoman*. As I indicated that we had wanted a rather large family and it was happening rather rapidly, it occurred to me one day around 1960 I guess or somewhere in there, that I couldn't afford to get sick. I wanted a shared ownership. I wanted to get some people into the agency that had as much into the future as I did. I made it easy for these three men to acquire interest. I paid them an extra large bonus that I couldn't afford that year with the understanding that a part of it was going to come back for company stock. I also took their automobiles in and gave them stock for the value of their automobiles. It was not a good idea to cheapen the stock the way that I did it. One morning I walked in and there were three letters of resignation on my desk, because the three of them left to start their own agency. So that was obviously a mistake. It was quite a scramble there for a while to get back on my feet. The guy I hired to start the rebirth of the company again was named Al Feigel. Al Feigel was quite a good creative man and to prove that point, he is the guy that came up with the B.C. Clark jingle. Al and I were a good team for a number of years. Sometimes a very creative guy won't let anybody else help him. It's like all other

things, you have six ideas and four of them are great and one of them is fair and another one is poor. I was never able to work Al being where he belonged, so I tried to put him into account service and he quit.

Chapter 10 – 2:56

B.C. Clark

John Erling: Let's talk about the B.C. Clark jingle because it became so famous.

Ray Ackerman: It did and it took awhile to recognize how famous it was. It went on the air in 1956. The commercial was about a jewelry sale before Christmas, which was unheard of in the jewelry business, but that's what it was. So we went on the air on Thanksgiving Day with the jingle. Five years later I went to B.C. and I said, "You know the lyrics are still good, but the music is getting a little dated. We ought to change the music." So five years after it started we went on the air with a new version of the spot. By noon on Friday we had to go back to the original one. So many calls came in asking where their jingle was. The new one didn't take, so we had to go back to the old one. That was almost positive proof to me that we had a winner. The final chapter was when my youngest daughter came home from first grade the last day before Christmas Break. It would have been about 1966 or so. You know you are always excited to talk about with your kids what they did at school for Christmas. She said they gave their teacher a present and had a party and ate cake and ice cream and exchanged Christmas cards and sang Christmas carols. I asked her, "What did you sing?" She said, "We sang Silent Night, Jingle Bells and Jewelry Is The Gift That Gives." (Laughter) So I thought, this is it. I think now this probably is the longest running commercial in the United States of America.

JE: Because here we are in 2009 and it's still running.

RA: And we are past our 50th year and it's still running.

JE: Is it in its original form?

RA: Yes. There's one little thing wrong with it. Back in the early days of radio you could run a little bit long on a commercial and not be caught, like 63 seconds, instead of 60. That's what the commercial ran and then science came in and it had to be 60 seconds flat and they looked for a way to cut it and they cut out a chunk of it. Unfortunately, about a year after that they had the technology to shrink a commercial. (Chuckle) But it was too late and that little segment is gone. I've always hated that. It makes for a little rough ending compared to the other one.

JE: At the very outset, did you introduce the jingle to B.C. Clark?

RA: Well, yes, but Al Feigel created it.

JE: Yes, but you ultimately brought it to the client?

RA: Sure.

JE: Did they immediately love it?

RA: They loved it right off the bat, yeah. It's got a little something in it that you wouldn't expect would be so popular, but it is.

JE: It was even sung on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

RA: Yes, by Megan Mullally. Fortunately they played opposite the OU Penn State Bowl Game, which had ended by the time that was on but people were still on the ball game station and not the station Jay Leno was on.

JE: That would have been in 2001.

Chapter 11 – 5:00

Near Miss

John Erling: It was about 1959 that EK Gaylord was asked to speak to the Oklahoma City Ad Club about a public service campaign?

Ray Ackerman: His slogan at that time was 600,060. He wanted us to promote the fact that Oklahoma City was going to have 600,000 people in 1960.

JE: Did that idea take off?

RA: It wasn't a big deal. It was just a public service announcement and it ran for a short period of time. Frankly, I can't even remember if we made it to 600,060.

JE: In the 1950s he became active in the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce?

RA: Oh yes, early on, I think it was 1956 or 1957 there was a big air show and they wanted me to handle the advertising for it. I came up with a name—instead of calling it the Air Show, I called it the Air Fair and I thought was being pretty doggone creative with that name, I remember that. Yes, that was my beginning of interest in work with the Chamber of Commerce.

JE: Along in here you had your company name as Ackerman Associates?

RA: That was 1956.

JE: Do you remember how many people you had?

RA: Oh, we were probably \$1 million agency with 10 people.

JE: While flying in 1960 you had a near miss?

RA: My squadron was on its way from Naval Air Station Dallas to Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach. We were flying in two plane sections. My wingman over Marshall, Texas called me. He said he wanted to make a dummy counter event on me, which is an

authorized thing to do, but I wasn't sure I understood him correctly. So I keyed my mike and asked him to repeat it. And it was just at that moment that he hit me. He was above me and came down and if he would've hit me in just a dive that would've been the end of both of us. But he just pulled out too late and went across the top of me so closely that the Venturi Effect sucked our planes together. It cut mine in half three inches behind the cockpit and sheared off his wing. He went catapulting for five miles before he got out. I was at 37,000 feet when I got hit. I had a little trouble getting out (of it). I couldn't get my half plane upright so I had to eject upside down. The only significance of that was hanging on the seatbelt—it was hard for me to get my hand on the switch that would move the seat up and down so that I could get my backbone straight, so I ejected with a crooked backbone. I landed safely and my wingman got out too. I called my wife just barely in time. The report that came out of Oklahoma City was that two Oklahoma City pilots, Ray Ackerman and Al Joins had a midair collision over Marshall, Texas this morning and Lieut. Joins escaped with minor injuries. I wasn't missing—the implication was that I was dead of course. Everybody at the agency thought I was dead. I was picked up by this hearse out of this field and taken to a funeral home where the hearse was from in Marshall. I immediately got on the phone and called my wife. I got her about five minutes before she heard that on the radio and TV. She said, "Where are you calling from?" I said, "I'm calling from the funeral home in Marshall, Texas." (Laughter) She said, "What are you doing there?" So I told her the story. That accident did a job on my skeletal system. The Navy doctor cleared me. I started having pain in my right arm, so I went to see an orthopedic surgeon named Henry Freede. He discovered a little crack in the bone in my neck or something. Neither the Navy nor Henry realized that I had some injuries down low in my vertebrae. Anyhow, over the business with the crack in the bone in my neck, Henry was having to battle with this Navy doctor. The Navy doctor was saying, "It must have happened after he left here." Henry called me one day and he said, "If I called you, how quickly could you get in a hospital?" I said, "Baptist Hospital just opened up right across the street from where my office is. I could be over there in five minutes." He said, "When I call you, you go over there and get in bed, because if you don't, and I win this battle with the Navy, the Navy will send you to this hospital in Corpus Christi and you might be there the rest of your life." So sure enough, he called one day and I was over in that hospital bed getting my neck stretched. I had to wear a collar for about a month around my neck. Then, nothing else happened until about late 1980—I won't bore you with all the details but over a period of time I had five different knee operations, three hip operations and two back operations. But I'm lucky I got through it! I'm 87, hell, that's not too bad!

JE: Not too bad at all!

Chapter 12 – 3:06**Stanley Draper**

John Erling: Somewhere in there you received a promotion in the Naval Reserve?

Ray Ackerman: I got promoted right along and then in 1973 I was promoted to Rear Admiral. I was very proud of that.

JE: Oklahoma City grew to be a very large city in land mass. Stanley Draper provided some leadership in that regard, is that true?

RA: Well, Oklahoma City was lucky to have Stanley Draper. He was the managing director, or I think that was his original title, of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce for just under 50 years. His unique talent was being able to get all of the movers and shakers together to move in the same direction number one, and number two, he was a visionary. I'll give you an example of that—Tinker Field. Almost from its inception it was always subject to being closed. You had to keep it growing and keep it moving and keep getting bigger airplanes—more needs, more land. Stanley would get the big money people, the banks, all in a room and say, "I need to get this note signed. I've got to borrow so many millions of dollars to buy auctioned land out by Tinker Field. I think we need to get that land there because they're going to want it." So people would sign off on these notes. He even got down to little companies like mine, and I might be signing on for \$5,000 or something. Sure enough, the Air Force always wanted the land. The notes were never called. The money would always be there. Another example, maybe earlier than that, when airplanes got to where they were moving mail, every city wanted to be a hub. You had to have a certain number of pounds of mail moving out every day (to qualify). So Stanley had people mailing bricks out and other people on the outside mailing bricks in to meet the minimum weight requirement. He used to make signs in his garage on weekends—Oklahoma City 50 miles—Oklahoma City 25 miles. Then on Sunday he would go out along some road 50 miles and start putting those signs out along the side of the road all the way to Oklahoma City. He was a real leader. One of the big frictions I remember was over whether or not to bring water up to Oklahoma City from Southeast Oklahoma. Of course, we've done it, we have Lake Draper and so forth, but that issue split the city right down the middle. Half of the town was for it and half of the town was against it. Draper managed to force us together and get the job done.

JE: And that's why it's called Lake Draper to this day.

RA: That's right. I was a great admirer of his and one of the people that he called at 3 o'clock in the morning. If he had an idea, he was on the phone with whomever he needed to talk to and it didn't matter what time of day or night it was.

JE: And to recap he was director of the Chamber for almost 50 years.

Chapter 13 – 1:45**Sen. Robert Kerr**

John Erling: Senator Robert Kerr, were you around him any?

Ray Ackerman: Very little. I wrote about him in my little book because he was why we have navigable water from Tulsa as you know. I'll tell you a little story. I went over to St. Louis with the Chamber of Commerce delegation to the Mississippi Valley Authority meeting in about 1959. The Mississippi Valley Authority met every year. Every city that was on the Mississippi, or on a tributary of the Mississippi, came to those meetings to work together to get their projects developed. So we already had the Kerr-McClellan waterway under construction, or it was about to be constructed. We wanted to get it from Catoosa to Luther, Oklahoma. I sat down at a table over there with a couple of fellows from North Dakota. They told me about their water project and I rather smugly told them about ours. I said, "And all we need is Senate approval to get it extended to Oklahoma City." I'll never forget one of those guys looked at me and said, "That's where we were with our project in 1906." I was playing golf at Quail Creek when the golf caddy came up on New Year's Day and told me that Sen. Kerr had died. I had gone about two more holes and I thought, it's 1906 for Oklahoma City as far as the extension of the waterway goes. (Chuckle) And sure enough, it's almost been forgotten. I think I'm one of the few people that know that that plan is still on the drawing board.

JE: That would have been a big boon for this part of the country. There's no question about that.

Chapter 14 – 2:05**George Nigh**

John Erling: Moving along then—politically you had an ad campaign, where you almost defeated then the very popular George Nigh for lieutenant governor.

Ray Ackerman: Yes. Bob Wooten was the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor. He didn't really want to run, but he was a good party member and a good candidate, so he agreed to run without the slightest chance in heck of winning. We came up with a little campaign for Bob. The TV commercial was a real winner. It opened up with a black screen and all of a sudden two circles appeared there, then two dots appeared within the circles and you realize that they are eyeballs. Then there was a buzzing noise like a fly and you could see the eyeballs rolling around the screen looking for that buzzing noise. Then the

ad copy comes on the black screen, “Look out George, here it comes!” Then the two eyes became the two “o”s in “Wooten”. Then there was a slap like a flyswatter hitting a fly and that was the end of the commercial. (Laughter) We were polling and I remember calling Bob Wooten about a week before the election, “You know I think if you could get another \$5,000 we might win this campaign.” There was no more money available and we didn’t win it, but we gave George one heck of a race and George will tell you that.

JE: As a matter of fact, he has talked about that. I have interviewed him, and I remember him talking about that, that he hadn’t really concentrated on it that much. But solely on the strength of that TV commercial—

RA: No doubt about it. We reinforce it with this big outdoor board at 50th and Classen and a couple of other places. The painters would put the boards together a little bit at a time. It was fascinating for people driving by to see what it was going to turn out to be, which they couldn’t do until the whole message was up there.

JE: So those ideas came out of your agency?

RA: Yes.

Chapter 15 – 2:18

Ackerman-Tulsa

John Erling: Your agency grows and in 1967 you opened the Tulsa office?

Ray Ackerman: That’s right.

JE: A gentleman by the name of John Whitney offered to sell you his business. Tell us about that.

RA: Through the early 1960s I kept soliciting business in Tulsa. We were in contact with all of the business that we wanted in Oklahoma City, but we needed some new prospects, so I started looking in Tulsa. I always ended up second to some Tulsa advertising agency so I decided I needed an office in Tulsa. First of all, I talked to Whitney and several others about merging or buying and nobody wanted to sell. So we opened an office without any business, just a guy and a girl. It wasn’t 60 days later that John Whitney called me and said that he had been offered a job to be a professor at Harvard, which he wanted to do, so we bought his agency.

JE: Do you remember any of those accounts that came along with that?

RA: Yes, Blue Cross, Sipes Food Markets, First National Bank—that was a big one. We handled Git’n’Go for a while and The Oil and Gas Journal. I’ve got to tell you a story about The Oil and Gas Journal. It’s about naming a company and how hard it is sometimes and how easy it is sometimes. The Oil and Gas Journal was published by Petroleum Publishing

Company and they were getting another magazine, a computer magazine, so Petroleum Publishing Company was not broad enough. They wanted us to come up with a new name. They thought it would be nice if we pointed out their roots in Pennsylvania, but something that was still indicative of the petroleum business and something indicative of the word “business”. Some guy sitting at the table after about five minutes said, “How about PennWell Publishing Company?” And that’s what it’s called today.

JE: So you knew that was it right away?

RA: Yes.

JE: You were obviously able to attract business, but were you in on the creative side of it?

RA: Somewhat, but I did not actively advertise myself as being creative although I have. I will tell you that my better half would tell you that I am better at critiquing other work. I can spot a good idea in just a second, or a bad one, but I don’t originate a lot of them.

Chapter 16 – 3:15

National Finals Rodeo

John Erling: Here in Oklahoma City in 1965 was the National Finals Rodeo, NFR and you were involved in attracting that?

Ray Ackerman: I wasn’t involved in attracting it, but in handling it when it came here.

National Finals Rodeo had a five- or six-year history. They were in Dallas for three years and I think in Los Angeles for three years and they were losing money. It was a new venture. It was the World Series of rodeo, and this was the beginning. Because they lost money they were vulnerable. Oklahoma City on the basis of (telling them) our Chamber of Commerce will handle this—we told them they didn’t have to pay anybody to put on their rodeo. We told them we would do it. So they came to Oklahoma City and I was asked to be general chairman, which really meant sell a whole bunch of tickets and make sure that they didn’t lose any money. We put it on that first year and I think we made \$40,000. And every year for 20 years we made some money and it was a wonderful thing. We didn’t handle the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association properly. Toward the end there came to be a little bit of friction between it and the Cowboy Hall of Fame. The Cowboy Hall of Fame was one of the reasons that they wanted to come here as well as our state fairgrounds and the facilities out there. Those were both major reasons, but they were not treated properly at the Cowboy Hall so they were susceptible, say when Las Vegas came calling to move out there. Las Vegas was looking for something to fill the gap between Thanksgiving and Christmas, which obviously was downtime in

Las Vegas. The rodeo was a perfect fit with move in time and move out time. Las Vegas was tough competition. I remember we put together a plan here in Oklahoma City to keep them, which included that we promised to build them at home. We would build them a National Finals Rodeo Stadium. Our purse was up to \$750,000 or \$800,000 by our 20th year. We found out that Las Vegas was coming in with \$1.5 million. Before we went out to compete we got \$1.5 million to meet their bid and promised to build them a stadium. The presentations were made in a hotel out in Colorado Springs on a given afternoon. By 5 o'clock the PRCA Board took a straw vote and it was like 7 to 3 in favor of coming to Oklahoma City. The chairman doesn't vote unless there was a tie. By 11 o'clock that night a real vote was taken and it was 5 to 5. Then the chairman voted in his vote was in favor of Las Vegas. We have no doubt that money under the table bought the deal. I went out with Stanley Draper, Jr. to the first rodeo out there in Las Vegas. They had a little coffee-cup-sized arena, which is very bad for roping event because there is no straightaway you have to try to rope in a circle. I saw one of the ropers in the casino and I said, "How'd you like roping in that coffee cup?" He said, "For this kind of money I would rope in my bathroom." So we knew we were dead.

Chapter 17 – 4:30

Ackerman for Mayor

John Erling: I think you got into politics and ran for mayor of Oklahoma City in 1967?

Ray Ackerman: Yes. Our agency was invited to handle the advertising for a grassroots organization called the Association for Responsible Government (ARG) in about 1960. We handled campaigns for proper people seeking offices on the council or for mayor from 1960 until about 1967. I think they asked a number of people I am pretty sure before they asked me in 1967 to run for mayor, because they didn't ask me until about six or eight weeks before the election. Jack Johnson, I will never forget this, he asked me this and this is true. I said, "This is the only office I've ever thought I might like to serve in." It was primarily a PR job. City managers did the heavy stuff and that was right up my alley. I told Jack, "It's a bad time. I have six kids at home and I just opened an office in Tulsa without business." Jack said, "Sometimes the bus only comes by once." Because of that, I decided to run. I didn't have to raise any of the money because the organization was going to do that for me. All I had to do was go around and talk and all of that and I worked pretty hard at that.

JE: So you were running against?

RA: I was running against Jim Norick who had been mayor before and who had been a councilman before and whom *The Daily Oklahoman* had bitterly opposed eight years earlier when he had run for mayor. They had said that the city was on the verge of starvation under Jim Norick. I'll tell you, it was kind of interesting—I had problems with Edward L. Gaylord at that time, the son of E.K. Gaylord. I was kind of on his list of guys that he didn't like very much, so I knew he was going to oppose my candidacy. He kept calling ARG to ask who the candidate was and they kept putting him off. Finally not too long before the election it was announced that I was the candidate. So it was out in the open and I was exposed. They got Mr. Kimberling who was a grocer here in Oklahoma City, a pretty popular guy to run against me. Then I got a call one day from Edgar Bell who was the general manager and owner of KWTW at the time on a Saturday afternoon at about 4 o'clock. He said, "I just came from a meeting at the Skirvin. They just found out that Kimberling doesn't live in Oklahoma City, so they have to get somebody else." Then they came up with Norick. Then I got a number done on me and I had two black editorials on the front page of *The Oklahoman* before the election. One of them was on the Friday before the election and it said "City Slanderer" and said that I had made numerous derogatory statements about my opponent. They said that I said that the city was on the verge of bankruptcy when Norick was mayor. Well, I did say that. They had said the city was under "starvation" and I used a different word, but anyhow, that's what they said. The second one said "Divided Interest" and it said that I had numerous financial contracts with the City of Oklahoma City. That wasn't true. I never had a penny. They printed a retraction to that about three inches long on page 38 sometime the next day, but it was too late. I lost by 782 votes.

JE: Wow. But even though you lost, you were promoted to Admiral?

RA: As a matter of fact, I might not have been promoted to Admiral if I would have gotten elected. I had a telegram from the Commanding Officer from the Naval Air Station in Dallas. I was in line to be the air staff commander of all the reserves in Dallas—thousands of sailors. In this telegram, he said something about Oklahoma City's mistake is our good fortune and it said I got the job as staff commander. If I hadn't had that command, which was my second command in addition to being a commanding officer of a fighter squadron, I probably wouldn't have gotten promoted.

JE: It worked out, didn't it?

RA: Yes.

Chapter 18 — 3:00**McQueen**

John Erling: Your agency merged with the 17th-largest ad agency in the world?

Ray Ackerman: Yes.

RA: In 1969 a man named Jack Wyatt walked into my office. He was head of the Wyatt & Williams advertising agency in Dallas, which was an \$8 million shop. We were about \$4 million at that time. He had just become a part of a company out of New York who wanted to build a southwest division. I think they were the 11th or 12th-largest agency in the world at that time. He picked me as the target for Oklahoma City. I got to thinking about it. I had two objectives when I got into the advertising business. One was to build an agency that was big enough to handle the biggest account in the state of Oklahoma, which was at that time Phillips Petroleum Company, which was handled by an agency in Dallas. The second objective was to build an agency that would survive after I was gone. I thought to myself in 1969 that I was not going to meet those objectives by myself, so I thought this was the right thing to do and I did it. Two years later, an order for the newspaper in Los Angeles we had done business with was rejected. That's when I found out we were in financial trouble. So we began the process of trying to buy ourselves back at the bargaining table. We were selling off assets as fast as they could. They were talking to big agencies about merging their company and one of them was the D'Arcy Company, which had a New York office. A man named Marvin McQueen headed up the New York D'Arcy office. He was the guy who was there when the merger talks were happening and he saw D'Arcy was going to merger and he was afraid for his future. He knew this company had an office down here, so that's how we got acquainted. He had a reason—his only daughter was married to a Tulsa doctor. He was from the Midwest originally and went to school in Wisconsin. He went to work for us. He thought he was going to work for us on a small basis, but he became a big factor and he very shortly became head of our Tulsa office. We were about to lose our creative director and we weren't all that good anyhow, and he suggested that I go off and talk to his son Angus. Angus was running the office for Lewis-Unitas in New York. That agency started with a guy named Lewis. Their big account was a ticket counter where you could order event tickets easily. It was a new idea at the time and it was going well. Angus had great creative credentials. He had produced commercials for RC Cola and Lufthansa Airlines and Gerber Foods—big accounts—good stuff. So I went up to talk to him and he came to work on July 1st, 1973.

Chapter 19 – 4:30**Marvin & Angus McQueen**

John Erling: Then in your other career, you became Rear Admiral?

Ray Ackerman: After I became Rear Admiral I stayed in the Navy a little longer. We had a fire at the agency in the Oklahoma City office in 1974. That cut down on my reserve time a little bit. I would have been in the Navy a year or two longer, but that took a lot of time out of my life and I got out a little earlier than I might have.

JE: In 1979 then, Marvin McQueen had grown the Tulsa office quite well and so you became Ackerman McQueen?

RA: Correct, we became Ackerman McQueen.

JE: So business was rolling along and was good. Can you remember the names of people from back then?

RA: In Oklahoma City, some of the top creative people in addition to Angus, there was a fellow named Mark Keller who was talented both as an artist and as a musician. He now makes a living in Hollywood writing big time music and that kind of thing. Gail Daniels was an artist here. Don Bullock, Don Spencer. Two of the most creative writers were Jeanette Elliott and Tim Oden. Over in Tulsa there was Tom Twomey.

JE: Tragedy hit the agency in 1984.

RA: Yes, with Marvin's untimely death. It was a one-man automobile accident in Superior, Wisconsin. He was on the Board of Directors for the University of Wisconsin at Superior. He was up there for a regular board meeting and a dinner. When he left the meeting to drive back to the hotel (pause) there was a driveway into the hotel and then right before you got to that driveway there was another driveway. He mistook that driveway for the one going to the hotel and it took him right into Lake Superior. His car was submerged up to about 10 inches of roof in the rear of the car. He couldn't get out, you know. He didn't have anything to break the windows with and he couldn't open the doors. It was a terrible thing—just terrible. Marvin was born in 1913, so that would have made him 71.

JE: What kind of a person was Marvin McQueen?

RA: (Chuckle) He was a delightful guy. He was a hard-nosed guy—let me say that. He liked telling me about his early days in the agency business at D'Arcy. He said there were six or eight of these young account execs and they were all trying to get something on the other guy. He said they were mean and they were tough. They would take credit for anything they could take credit for. He would say, "I want to say I was kind of like a barracuda."

JE: (Chuckle)

RA: Well, he was. You had to get to know Marvin, but he had a great sense of humor. He was a great guy to smoke cigars with and have a glass of Scotch. He knew the business and we were a pretty good team. He ran this agency like a three-headed monster. (Chuckle) By the time we brought Angus in until Marvin died and then Angus took over—but Marvin and I, if he were sitting here right now, we would tell you that Angus really ran the agency from the time he came. He is a brilliant man. He is a genius. He is a creative Superman. But the three of us every Saturday would sit down with our cigars and our cigarettes and smoke the day away while we ran the agency. We always ran the shop as if we were all together in one building. When we opened in Dallas and when we opened in Washington, D.C., it was all still like we were one, simple agency. I don't think generally speaking that an agency grows very much if they just start out with let's say with a handful of college graduates from the best school in the world. You've got to bring in some people with some experience. Those accounts that you really want don't want to touch you unless you can show them something you've already done. Our beginning here with Angus was the Nocona Boot Company.

JE: And that grew to be a big account. You actually changed the image of that?

RA: Yes, one thing that wasn't mentioned in connection with the agency moving into Tulsa is that I did buy a small agency in the 1960s and in the 1970s I brought in the remnants of another ad agency here in OKC called Humphrey Williamson Gibson.

Chapter 20 – 5:40

Ad Campaigns

Ray Ackerman: Williams had made a call one time on the Nocona Boot Company with respect to them wanting a jingle. In 1973 right after Angus came, the guy who was the ad manager of Nocona came to town for the National Finals Rodeo and brought that jingle looking for Mitch Williams' company and its creative. He had gone out of business, but was with us. So we went down to Nocona and got the account and that was the first one here that Angus got excited about. He created a campaign called "Let's rodeo." with some guys who developed ads, the first one being what they called the famous rattlesnake ad. It was a series of 12 ads that won the number one prize for advertising in the men's market on year. It was just a fabulous success. The two biggest killer boot companies at the time were Justin Boot Company and Tony Lama and under Angus' leadership we brought Nocona right up there with them. Then we got the Resistol Hat Company and we were in the western wear business.

John Erling: Angus drove all that and so you knew when he hit that home run with Nocona, that this was big-time stuff, wasn't it?

RA: It really was.

JE: Was that the first national campaign for the agency?

RA: Well, we had some smaller industrial accounts that were national and some were even international. I think the funny thing about the Nocona and I always like to tell this story. A craze came along in the late 1970s where every man in America wanted a pair of western boots. You didn't have to be associated with the West, you could be on Madison Avenue, but you had to have western boots. We got a call one day from a Frenchman who wanted to talk to us about the creative people on the Nocona boot campaign and writing the advertising for Food and Wines from France, which I always thought was just very bizarre. We wanted to talk of course. We found out that they wanted just to buy the creative. We told them no, that we wouldn't sell them just the creative. We told them that they would have to make us their advertising agency. We fought them on a few things and we won. For eight years we handled Food & Wines from France. Every two years they brought in a new guy from France and we had to bring him down and show him we weren't operating out of teepees down here. I always loved the story that boot advertising got us Food & Wines from France.

JE: Angus is kind of an unusual person because he is obviously so creative, but he was also a manager—you didn't always find that in one person.

RA: You don't find that. That's right. He's a leader.

JE: You were involved in other things. You directed the Let's Race Oklahoma County Campaign, which paved the way for Remington Park.

RA: Yes, we used to handle issues—issue advertising. We used to handle a few cabinets for office, but we were not what you would call a political agency at all. We handled bond issues for the Chamber of Commerce. We handled two back-to-back ones in 1960 and 1961 and we passed them both. We thought that the way you pass a bond issue was to tell them what you would do with the money. For example, if this is a street and sewer issue—where are the streets and sewers that you are going to build? They had never done that, so we had a record of being successful in passing issues.

JE: Let's Race Oklahoma County did pass as you directed it?

RA: That's right.

JE: It must have pleased you then when Remington Park came online?

RA: Yes, it was great. It's exciting—to this day it's exciting.

JE: In 1986 you led a campaign to keep the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City?

RA: Yes.

JE: What's the story behind that?

RA: There's not much to tell about that. It was just a mail campaign. We had the heavy support of Edward L. Gaylord on that issue. We found out—everybody didn't know for a long time that the man who had been running the Cowboy Hall of Fame was the enemy and we had to change the guard so to speak. We had directors from all over the country and they finally found out what was happening and we put things back together.

JE: In 1989, the U.S. Olympic Festival came to Oklahoma City.

RA: That was the work of the Chamber of Commerce and particularly Lee Allan Smith and Clay Bennett. The agency designed the graphics and everything for that, but we did not participate in the solicitation process.

JE: But it was a big boon for Oklahoma City to bring that in.

RA: I'll tell you how that happened. In the early 1980s, Oklahoma City decided to have a World's Fair in 1989 on the 100th anniversary of the Land Run in 1889. In fact, the date was cleared with the international organization that runs the World's Fair. The executive director of the Chamber at that time was instructed to write the plan and he was in the process of doing that. Penn Square Bank happened (failed). The oil industry went to hell in a hand basket. New Orleans opened a World's Fair and I think lost \$150 million. The City's fathers decided not to have a World's Fair, but we knew we had to do something. So that solicitation went to get the Olympics—that's where that came from.

JE: And it involved a lot of private dollars and Lee Allan Smith was the man who raised the money for that.

RA: Oh yeah. That's exactly right.

Chapter 21 – 2:45

Governor Henry Bellmon

John Erling: As we sit here on September 30th, 2009, we've heard of the passing of former governor Henry Bellmon. It's interesting, according to notes on you, in 1989 he suggested among other taxes a tax on advertising, and you led the opposition to that tax?

Ray Ackerman: That's right. There was a guy running the Oklahoma Press Association by the name of Ben Blackstock. He was a very savvy, political guy. That particular issue, we had business in here bringing dollars into Oklahoma City because we were doing their advertising. We had pretty conclusive evidence that they would leave us if there would be a tax on advertising because it was going to cost them. We couldn't absorb it. We got that in front of Mr. Gaylord. I wrote the opposition and Ben Blackstock had it in the

box of every legislator overnight and the next day on this thing. That morning *The Daily Oklahoman* came in with a front-page editorial about jobs leaving Oklahoma with the passing of this tax. I went to the American Association of Advertisers Annual Meeting at The Greenbrier. They had a program about taxing advertising. There were four states that were fighting it and I was the one that had fought it in Oklahoma. Our presentation was a sensation because it all happened so fast. Once it got going, (telling people how it would cost the state jobs) in two weeks it was over. I've never enjoyed making a presentation so much as telling them how fast we'd shot that thing down. I had a little note from Ben Blackstock the other day and I sent him a little postcard back. I told him that I will always remember that one. (Chuckle)

JE: Do you have any other remembrances of Governor Bellmon or do you have any other thoughts about him?

RA: Yes, Governor Bellmon was very interested in the Kirkpatrick Center, which is now known as the Oklahoma Science Museum. He came to a meeting one day and I loved Henry Bellmon—he was my kind of guy. Henry had been behind a campaign to put welcoming outdoor boards around and they said: “Oklahoma—Discover the Excellence”. I asked Henry that day, I said, “Henry, you know when you drive across the border, it's kind of hard to really see the excellence.” (Laughter) Anyhow, that's a little, facetious thing. I didn't have bad relations with Henry. I supported him. It's in the paper this morning—I borrowed his answer to when you get older and they tell you the three stages of life: you're young, you're middle-aged and boy you look good! (Laughter)

JE: (Laughter)

Chapter 22 – 13:20

Old Man River

John Erling: There's a body of water known as the North Canadian River coming into Oklahoma City. I think about this time you were named President of the Chamber of Commerce in 1990.

Ray Ackerman: Yes, I was the incoming chairman for the year 1990-1991.

JE: They say there was a big meeting and years from now people looking back would look on the meeting of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors as a turning point in the city's history.

RA: That's right.

JE: Talk to us about that meeting.

RA: The Chamber board meeting was held in Seminole, Oklahoma in October 1990. We all went into that meeting with our nose a little out of joint frankly because we had lost this opportunity to have the World's Fair in 1989. That looked like the thing that would have lifted us up from where we were. We decided we were going to come up with a very ambitious plan—something that might take 10 or 15 or 20 years to execute. Everybody had a pet thing to talk about. Most people supported most all of the issues, but there would be somebody pushing for the new baseball park, a new sports arena, the state fairgrounds, a new civic center music hall, a new library and a new transit system. My drive was to put water in the river and build a canal from Bricktown to Myriad Gardens. Before going to that meeting, I knew I was going to have a problem with the river because we still didn't really know if that river would really hold water. That started back in 1890 that it didn't hold water and nobody knew for sure. So a fellow named Pat Downs who was the secretary of something at that time—it's a bigger title now but—the Oklahoma City Riverfront Water Development Authority that had been formed a few years earlier for the development of the river. They came up with a plan called String of Pearls, which was a series of little lakes. Nobody really liked that idea very much, plus it cost \$110 million, so that wasn't going anywhere. I asked Pat, "Where can we find some money to prove that the river will hold water before I go to this meeting?" He said, "The Riverfront Authority Trust has money in the bank. They have oil and gas operating properties on the North Canadian." I said, "Can you get enough money to get this study done?" So we did. I think it cost half a million bucks, but that was peanuts compared to the cost of the project. We got it done and it proved conclusively that it would hold water. So I had that in my briefcase when I went to the meeting in Seminole. Anyhow, I had a little bit of a battle getting the river to be considered an issue because people had not really thought of it that way. But the main battle also was the canal—we needed a canal. Years later, I remember walking over to see the canal right after it opened. They put bluing in it to make it pretty. I passed this guy named Steve Collier who was the head of the Convention and Tourism Division. I said, "How does it look?" He said, "Fantastic! I remember you bring this idea to Seminole and I thought that silly SOB." Anyhow, as a result of that we got it on the ballot. The next year Mayor Norick came to our meeting at Lake Murray and bought off on the plan and properly renamed the project MAPS.

JE: Then it all took off, but you planted the seed in that meeting in Seminole.

RA: Yes. I got it into the package that became MAPS.

JE: Then in 1999 the canal actually opened.

RA: That's right, 10 years later.

JE: Some wanted to name it the Ackerman Canal or the Ackerman Bricktown Canal.

RA: That's right. I didn't want either of those names because I thought it should be called the Bricktown OK Canal, but anyway it goes by Bricktown Canal, which is fine.

JE: In April 1999 you attended the groundbreaking of the Eastern Avenue Dam of the river.

RA: It had rained every day of that whole week before that Friday. And on that Friday there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a beautiful day. There was a big crowd there for the groundbreaking. There was enough water in the river that a fellow named Mike Knopp who was an attorney the FAA and the president of the Oklahoma Rowing Association was smart enough to have a few rowing shells in that water that rowed back and forth. I'll tell you what, the people really got excited to think that we could have rowing on the river. I came back to my office and I called Oklahoma City University and I said that they should immediately get into the rowing business and be the first school here to get into the sport of rowing big time, which they did.

JE: The University of Tulsa and OSU both had rowing teams. As a matter of fact, I believe TU donated some shells to help spur the rowing program at OCU.

RA: They did and I think OSU did too.

JE: Then a boathouse was built?

RA: Thank God for Chesapeake. Mike Knopp has turned out to be a valuable jewel and asset for Oklahoma City.

JE: Tell us about him.

RA: Well, he now is head of the Oklahoma Boathouse Trust and he still has involvement with OCU. We have a second boathouse that's already been dedicated. Devon spent \$10 for Oklahoma City University. The University of Central Oklahoma has a boathouse plan, as does the University of Oklahoma.

JE: What about some Olympic tryouts?

RA: For kayak and canoe, we have been designated an official site—the only river in the United States of America that has the designation of being an official Olympic Training Site. Partially by luck and a lot by planning, this river is much more than anybody could have ever dreamed about. In the first place, when the Corps of Engineers dug that drainage ditch, they didn't know that they were designing a world-class rowing venue. Although you wouldn't normally think of this, most rowing venues are a long way out of town and a long way from hotels and entertainment. We've got it all in one neat little package down there. The river is already known internationally.

JE: The river was known as the North Canadian River and I guess people had a problem with that name?

RA: Even before we voted on MAPS in December 1993, I thought that if we got that name changed from North Canadian to the Oklahoma River before that vote in December 1993 it might help pass the issue. So I had Mary Fallin and Charlie Gray and another couple

Democrats and a couple Republicans introduce a bill at the state thinking it was going to be would be like shooting fish in a barrel, and it went down in defeat. I couldn't stand the thought of an ABC sportscaster, down the road apiece, talking about this race in Oklahoma City on the banks of the beautiful North Canadian River? Anyhow, that was the beginning of my effort and it took 11 1/2 years. I kept after it all the time and the couple of bills that got introduced always got shut down primarily with the leadership of the rural community in Canadian County. Canadian County. They just couldn't see further than the end of their nose, you know?

JE: Why was it named the North Canadian River in the first place?

RA: It was called that when French trappers were here in the 1700s. They didn't know where the heck where the rivers started and went so why not claim it started in Canada and went all the way to Oklahoma?

JE: So the folks in Canadian County wanted to keep that name?

RA: Sure. The rural people all banded together so—

JE: It took you 11 1/2 years to change that name?

RA: That's right.

JE: And it took a legislative action and every year you would go back and lobby for this?

RA: Not every year, but two or three times. I kept the pressure on any way I could, but I didn't get bills introduced every year. 2004 was the year I think we got it changed. I got the bill introduced and it was assigned to a subcommittee in the Senate. I was invited to come out and pitch it on a given day. Fortunately, I took Blake Wade with me.

JE: Blake Wade, was the former director of the Oklahoma Historical Society and then he was named chairman at the Oklahoma Centennial Commission by Gov. Frank Keating.

RA: Right, that's whom I took with me. It was a blessing because I was so wound up with the subject—I was talking and I was overshooting. You know that whole load of garbage kind of thing? Blake could see that I was losing my audience. He cut me up and he said, "Let me interrupt and tell them something." He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is about economic development." It was about 30 seconds later that it passed. (Laughter) Then it went through a House subcommittee. Before Blake and I went out there, Lee Allan was the one that suggested the seven miles—just take what you can get—it never occurred to me—but that's where that came from. Take the seven miles, that's all we need. Now we are down to the toughest of all and it's a full house. Leonard Sullivan is the guy who introduced the bill. He was at that time a term limit Congressman. Leonard said to me, "You know, when you're a term limit Congressman, they give you the opportunity if you want to, to honor a person or two from your district. I am going to honor you because I want to do something so that we pass this vote on the river. I am going to eulogize you and I need you to come out there while I eulogize you and present this thing." I said, "Come on Leonard!" Finally he convinced me. I

said, “You know what you are doing and I don’t, so I will come out there.” So on a given day I went out there and fortunately, (chuckle) he had run into Clem McSpadden in the hall and told Clem what was going on. I had worked with Clem those 20 years on the National Finals Rodeo. So I’m sitting there and Clem gets up and does a number on me about how I am the greatest guy in the world. Then Leonard presents me with this thing that makes me the greatest guy in the world twice over. I responded to those nice things by saying how much I appreciated it. The vote was, I want to say, like 70–20 in favor of the change and that was it. Of course now I’m working on getting the rest of the river to change its name.

JE: The rest of the river as it is in Oklahoma?

RA: The whole state. The river lies entirely in the state of Oklahoma except it originates in the northeast corner of New Mexico. Every place else but here it is still called the North Canadian, except for the seven miles through Oklahoma City. From what we wanted to accomplish in Oklahoma City, it is okay the way it is, but I would like to get the rest of it done too.

JE: Are you still working on that?

RA: Yeah.

JE: Where does it go? Where does it end up?

RA: Lake Eufaula. What happened was, the bigger river is what they call the South Canadian. The history is the French trappers named the South Canadian River the Canadian River. Some years later because it had this fork above it, so close to it, they put the North Canadian label on it at which point they put the South Canadian label on the Canadian River. (Chuckle)

JE: And, I think as a result of all of that, you’ve been given the handle “Old Man River”.

RA: That’s right. And Mr. Gaylord, Edward L. Gaylord is the guy that that hung that on me, which I appreciate. I’ll tell you the reason that happened. The day that the canal opened in 1989, he was out at lunch with a fellow at Gaillardia and I was having lunch with somebody else out there at the time. On the front page of *The Daily Oklahoman* on the day the canal opened was a beautiful color picture of the canal. As I was leaving the lunchroom, I passed Ed Gaylord’s table. He looked up at me and smiled and said, “Old Man River.” That was his way of telling me he was wrong about the canal and wrong about the river. He is quoted as saying that the canal is the silliest idea he had ever heard of. (Laughter)

JE: Did he rail against it in editorials?

RA: Not extensively, that’s about as far as it went when he said that it was the silliest idea he had never heard of.

JE: When you got the river into the MAPS package, how many dollars were they earmarking for the river and canal?

RA: It was somewhere around \$50 million.

Chapter 23 – 5:40**Ray—Civic Work**

John Erling: Then lo and behold in 1993 you were inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of fame.

Ray Ackerman: Yes, that was a great, flattering experience. Coming here from Pennsylvania and being adopted as a state's son.

JE: What a great honor. There are projects like the world's longest sculpture?

RA: Well, in 1980 and 1981 when we were planning on a World's Fair, Stanley Draper Jr. and I were standing in the lobby of the Chamber offices when they were in the Santa Fe parking garage. On the wall in the reception area was a bronze relief of the Run of '89. It was about 6 feet across and about 2 feet up and down. Stanley looked at that and he said, "You know, we need to think of a leave behind piece for our fair. What do you think of a big wall like that at the corner of I-35 and I-40?" I said, "The corner of I-35 and I-40 is perfect, but what we need are about 4 dozen heroic sized figures—horses and covered wagons and animals and a big bronze relief wall behind it showing hundreds more coming." So, that's where the idea came from. The city was tapped out. We had to get that intersection right there and get the land razed. We had to build a mesa there so that the bronze heroic sized figures could be at eye level with traffic coming from any direction. They promised to do that. They sent us a little sample sculpture of the thing. It wasn't one of his best ideas, but anyhow that was how we were going to show what we were going to do when we went to get support for it. Everybody loved the idea and we were proceeding on schedule except all of a sudden there was no World's Fair. So the little model just set on a shelf at the Chamber office. Lee Allan Smith saw it and he was trying to sell the idea that let's get it done anyhow and he tried to sell the idea to Mr. Gaylord. Stanley Draper and I were trying to sell it to other wealthy people. We offered to put their name on it or their company name on it. One of our calls was on Syl Goldman, the retired founder of folding carts for supermarkets. He was a very wealthy man and very well respected man. We told him, "Sylvie, you can put your family on this thing." We were kind of kidding around. We said, "We will bury you underneath it if you want to. We'll put your name tag like in the military on the lead horse. We'll even make him look like you." Unbeknownst to us, Syl was senile. His family had people listening to any visitors talking to him. They thought we were a couple of con men trying to fleece him out of his money. Anyhow we failed, I failed, everybody failed, and here this model sat in the corner of the Chamber. Then came the announcement of Blake Wade getting this job to head up the Centennial. I called Stanley Draper Jr. and I said, "Stanley, get Leonard to dust off that thing and glue the arms and legs back on that have fallen off."

We'll take it out to Blake." We did. Lee Allan executed it. He's the guy that raised the money to get it done.

JE: Yes.

RA: It's still being done. It's going to be a hell of a show.

JE: When will that be installed?

RA: Well, it's being worked on right along. I don't know how many figures we have—maybe half of them? Paul Moore down in Norman is the sculptor and he's doing them as fast as he can.

JE: With Lee Allan and Blake Wade and you—the community was fortunate to have people like you in this town. I mean just outstanding talent. It wasn't good enough just to run a very successful advertising agency—but you enjoyed civic work as well.

RA: I loved it. I think if I were starting my career over again I might be hard-pressed to decide between an advertising agency and Chamber of Commerce work. I can't imagine anybody living in a city who would have the opportunities that I have had to make that city a better place to live and who wouldn't enjoy doing it. You can see the results of your efforts.

JE: Yes.

RA: I can go down and see that river and see that canal. I can see people enjoying it. I can see the Run of '89 sculptures and it's exciting.

JE: You naturally were interested in these civic projects, but then as an advertising person too, it also probably brought business to your agency?

RA: I don't know that it directly ever did John, except I know that we enjoyed an awfully good reputation for our business. People knew our campaigns too. The current ones running are just superior—Integrus Health and The State of Oklahoma (Tourism). People know we did them and we have performed well for the Chamber.

JE: And the fact though that here is Ray Ackerman constantly in the news and involved in projects and so forth—they also knew you were attached to that so it seems like Ackerman McQueen the agency was everywhere.

RA: Yes, that's right.

JE: When people walked in to clients and prospective clients they all knew—

RA: As far as I know, we are the only company in the state with three people who were past chairmen of the Chamber of Commerce.

JE: And they are?

RA: Me, Lee Allan Smith and Ed Martin.

JE: I think you already talked about this, but I read where you had obviously many health issues. You replaced a heart valve and you had a hip replacement?

RA: Five knees, three hips, two backs, an artificial heart valve and a pacemaker.

JE: And here you are at 87 and still holding hardy.

Chapter 24 – 6:35**Never Give Up**

John Erling: As you look back on your life, you have your family of course. How many grandchildren do you have now?

Ray Ackerman: Eleven grandchildren and our first great-grandchild is half-way here.

JE: You have your advertising career and your civic charitable work—it's got to make you feel good as you look back?

RA: I do. When I was reading all these things about Henry Bellmon today, I thought I had been a pimple. I haven't done anything really significant, but I've done a lot of little things.

JE: That is often the case of humble men who will dismiss great things they have done and that's what you just did. Because there's no question in the city life of Oklahoma City you've been a major-leaguer. Tell us your advice to the generations who come to listen to your life story. There will be students listening to this—advertising students or potential civic leaders—what would you say to them?

RA: I would say several things. One would be, don't ever accept that you've done the best you can do on something until it's too late to change it. Keep thinking about the project right up until the time when there's no more time to think about it. You can always improve on what your first thoughts are. Secondly, I would say, don't give up too easily. If you've got something that you think is important that you want to get done—stick with it. Stick with it. Naming the river is an example of sticking with something.

JE: You said something about being able to always improve upon your original idea until the very last. Isn't there a story about Nocona Boots, where Angus—?

RA: Yes, there's a story about that. It was time for a new campaign and the agency developed one and it was in the briefcase ready to go. Mark Keller and Angus McQueen were getting ready to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning. We used to have early morning meetings down in Nocona, Texas to present the new campaign. At 10 o'clock the night before, Angus had a different idea for what I call the rattlesnake series. He called Mark Keller and they did a sample ad sometime between 10pm and midnight. They went down and presented it instead of the campaign that was planned. It shows a man with his foot on a rattlesnake, holding his head away from striking distance with a long knife in his hand. You don't know whether he's on a rattlesnake hunt or if he is protecting himself—but that all came at 10pm one night and was presented the next morning.

JE: Wow. Then you told the students to never give up. We've already talked about it, but the fact that you never gave up and for 11 1/2 years you promoted the river and finally got the

name changed to Oklahoma River, so not only do you give advice, you stand behind it with examples from your life.

RA: That's right. I stand behind both of them. In my family life—let me tell you what this is all about first—(motions to a book on a nearby table) it began with a Father's Day card that came from my daughter Susan—my first thought was that it was custom made about my family growing up in our house on a lake in Oklahoma City. It brought back such wonderful memories. I suggested to my daughter Annie that she do a montage of memories of life on the lake for Lou and me and each of her siblings to hang on the wall in each of our homes. Luckily she misunderstood and produced this heartwarming book instead. I have to read you a letter from one of the children—the very first one. Each one of the kids wrote a letter for this book. This is from my youngest daughter Amy.

Our Lake. I don't remember how old I was when I learned our lake had another name Broadlawn, still I always called it our lake because it was ours and it was always going to be ours forever. What a great place to grow up. We had a little piece of paradise in the middle of a busy, moving, growing city. It was a place of refuge. Before the lake, time stood still and nothing else existed. When I was growing up, the lake, like the Giving Tree said, "Come little girl and splash in my water. Walk along my shoreline. Come exploring and look for my treasures. Come feed my ducks and my fish and go for a boat ride. Watch the sunlight sparkle and dance in my water. Come and sit on my shoreline and rest. Feel my cold breeze and my warm sunshine and listen to the gentle movement of my water." Ah, Paradise. Our land and our home were beautiful too. It was a home with a view—a view of our lake, which seemed to surround us and form us. It made our work, our play, our greatest joys and our unforgettable memories. Like the 4th of July picnic and Ray rescuing a poor little duck, which I still have an instant replay of in my mind. The lake was and still is and forever will be a giving lake. To this day my favorite place to be is before a big, beautiful body of water. I love to watch the spectacular sunsets and feel the gentle breeze and warm sunshine where time stands still and nothing else exists—our lake. That's a picture of her on the front at the lake. (Motioning) If you think that book isn't a treasure...

JE: It sure is. What a beautiful piece. And so everyone in the family got one?

RA: Yes.

JE: That is beautiful. And the lake she was talking about is known as?

RA: Broadlawn Lake.

JE: Well, you've done so many things, what would you like to be best known for?

RA: The guy that wanted the river and the canal.

JE: The seed that you planted back at that meeting—I don't know that you can always point back to certain events—but that's where it all started. So then MAPS and Bricktown and all that activity—the baseball park and everything came out of that meeting.

RA: It sure did. There's a realtor here by the name of Harrison Levy who is such a dear friend of mine. Harrison had a little plaque honoring me put down by the dancing fountains that are part of the canal—presented to me by the Oklahoma City Chamber. (Chuckle) He said he remembered the meeting in Seminole. He said every time someone would say something about something else he would say, "What about the river and the canal?" He said he just kept pushing until he got it in there. (Laughter)

JE: Thank you so much.

RA: Thank you!

JE: This was fun.

Chapter 25 – 0:22

Conclusion

Announcer: Thank you for listening to the Ray Ackerman story. The interviews you hear on this Oklahoma oral history website are underwritten by foundations who believe in preserving our state's history one voice at a time. We also rely on our listeners' donations to underwrite the expensive production costs. Thank you for your support of VoicesofOklahoma.com.