

## J. Blake Wade

One of Oklahoma's biggest proponents of celebrating our great state's history and culture.

### Chapter 01 - 1:03

#### Introduction

---

**Announcer:** It was during J. Blake Wade's military service which included the Vietnam war that he demonstrated his gift of leadership. When he returned to Oklahoma he dedicated himself to agencies and programs that were for the betterment of Oklahoma.

Blake has served as the Executive Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society and the Director of the Oklahoma Capitol Complex and Centennial Commemoration Commission. He was responsible for overseeing preparations for Oklahoma's centennial commemoration of statehood in 2007. The first three years as Director of the Centennial, the focus was the State Capitol Dome and the Centennial Plaza of the Oklahomans.

In 2011 he was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of the Native American Cultural & Educational Authority developing The American Indian Cultural Center and Museum and the American Indian Cultural Foundation.

Now listen to Blake Wade in his oral history interview talk about Vietnam, Remington Park, the Oklahoma history center and the capitol dome on [\*Voices of Oklahoma\*](#), preserving Oklahoma's history, *one voice at a time*.

### Chapter 02 - 8:14

#### Geronimo and More

---

**John Erling:** My name is John Erling. And today's date is September 30, 2014. Blake, would you state your full name?

**Blake Wade:** My full name is Jarrel Blake Wade.

**JE:** Your date of birth?

**BW:** 11 October 1943.

**JE:** And your present age?

**BW:** My present age is seventy years old.

**JE:** And where are we recording this interview?

**BW:** We're at the Visitor's Center of the American Indian Cultural Center Museum in Oklahoma City.

**JE:** Your name, Jarrel Blake Wade, how did you take Blake as your name?

**BW:** Well, that's interesting you bring that up. My father's name was Jarrel A. Wade and I didn't think I wanted to go by my dad's name, and he named me Jarrel B., and I thought that was kind of interesting. So I went by the name of Blake.

**JE:** So do you ever write it J. Blake Wade, then, I suppose?

**BW:** I do, absolutely, now today. I started that probably twenty years ago just to make sure I remembered my dad. So...

**JE:** Where were you born?

**BW:** I was born in Lawton, Oklahoma.

**JE:** Brothers and sisters?

**BW:** I have two younger brothers and two younger sisters. I'm the oldest of five children.

**JE:** Your mother, her maiden name and where she was born and where she grew up?

**BW:** Right, she was born in Lawton, Oklahoma. Her name was Florence Ellegood. She married Dad right before the war and he headed off, the way the story goes.

Mother and I lived with her mother for three years. I know I was three years old when Mother said, "Go to the door, there's a man at the door."

And I thought that was kind of strange, I'm sure, but when I went to the door there was a man that I'd never seen before. And he said, "Hi, Blake, I'm your father."

And I ran back to my grandmother and I thought, "Who is this guy that's coming in to be with my mother?" So my life kind of started reality at that date.

**JE:** Man, and that's, I mean, a mark in your brain forever, isn't it?

**BW:** It will always be. I was scared of him that day and I was scared of him pretty much all my life.

**JE:** What was your mother's personality like?

**BW:** Oh, she was a lovely lady, a social person. She had tremendous talent. She loved Lawton, Oklahoma. In fact, she went to grade school that we lived by within a seven-block radius where she went to grade school, went to junior high, went to Lawton High. We lived right there all of her life of over eighty-six years, within a six-block radius of where she was born.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**BW:** So we never got too far from Lawton, Oklahoma.

**JE:** Your father then, his name was?

**BW:** Jarrel A. Wade and he was born in Marlow, Oklahoma. My grandfather, J. D. Wade, owned the bank in Marlow and Duncan, and then they had the Wade Ranch between

Marlow and Lawton, and J. D. Wade was his name. He used to sell cattle to Geronimo, so we go back to Lawton a long, long time.

**JE:** Did you ever hear any more specific stories about that?

**BW:** I did, and more importantly, unfortunately, I would see Geronimo down at a bar downtown Lawton signing autographs where he would be paid in, they say, beers. And then they would take him out to Fort Sill and put him back in his jail cell. It was a bad time because the name was so romantic and everything else. But he had a sad time there at the latter part of his life, but everybody knew him back in the early days.

**JE:** And we should say for those who will be listening for years to come, who Geronimo was and what tribe was he with?

**BW:** Well, he was the Apaches and he was in prison at Fort Sill Reservation. He actually died there and is buried out there and it's a beautiful cemetery. And if anybody hadn't been to see where Geronimo is buried they need to go because still to this day there's a tree over his grave. And people, I'm sure mostly American Indians, would bring out trinkets and ribbons and colorful things that are all still hanging over his grave in that tree. I was just there in the last five years and it's still has never changed.

**JE:** What was his crime? Why was he incarcerated?

**BW:** Well, it was back in the days that they were imprisoning American Indians. It's symbolic to what I'm doing today being the director and trying to get this museum in reality.

**JE:** Your father, what his job, what was his profession?

**BW:** His job, he was in real estate and in the banking business. We were also a part of Wade Oldsmobile in Lawton. He was in World War II, served four years and was overseas for those three years until I was three years old.

I do remember at that time, in 1943, so many of the World War II guys were coming back home. They were going back to schools to get law degrees, et cetera, and Dad was put into the banking business in Lawton by cousin Dolph Montgomery that owned the City National Bank. And I remember that's what he stayed a while and then went to work at Wade Oldsmobile.

**JE:** First car you remember?

**BW:** Oh my gosh. First care would have been a station wagon with wood on the side, a 1948, something like that. But I do remember we had a bunch of kids that always had to ride in it.

**JE:** That was tall cotton, one of those cars.

**BW:** Dad and Mother provided us a good life.

**JE:** So it was a car dealership that was his main—

**BW:** Absolutely.

**JE:** ...profession.

**BW:** And real estate.

**JE:** And how about the first house that you remember? Where was that?

**BW:** Oh, I can tell you the address, 1911 Oak, Lawton, Oklahoma. It was really at that time a big home, and yet today we drive by it, it is still there, and it's not very big. But then Mother and Dad had more kids, of course, we had to move into the second home that we still live in to this day. And that's 515 Dearborn in Lawton, Oklahoma.

**JE:** Do you remember names of kids you played with back then?

**BW:** Oh, I do. Ramey Mayhall, I called him Moose Mayhall. He's a doctor in St. Louis. Bill Kilpatrick, and you know what? We were all war babies and our mothers had all of us little kids and they would take us to the park every day and we'd swing and we'd do that. Those are our lifelong friends, as I mentioned, Dr. Mayhall in St. Louis.

Bill Kilpatrick, whose grandfather owned LaSills Milk Company, he was one of the first that had thirty-one different kinds of ice cream. At his store, and because of my connection with Bill, my first job was at LaSills Milk Company dipping ice cream and making milkshakes at the age of thirteen for forty-five cents an hour. And I can go on.

The Wade family is a big family down there. My cousin Joe Wade is the same age and each one of us Wade kids has other cousins that are similar age that we went to school with for the whole twelve years. I still see all of them.

**JE:** Did you hang around or work in the car business?

**BW:** Oh, absolutely. Every had—we started by chamoising cars in the mornings. We always had to charge the batteries every morning to get them running so the salesman wouldn't be embarrassed when they went out to try to sell a car and the car wouldn't start. So that was our morning. And then we'd break for lunch, and then we'd go into the wash rack room. And an African American named Lemey, he ran that for forty-five years and we worked for Lemey washing cars and chamoising and getting them all ready. That was our days. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

We learned how to drive though back in those days.

**JE:** And I was going to say, you learned how to work back in those days.

**BW:** Absolutely. Don't understand how any boy or girl wouldn't want to do those kinds of things to help out, not only for themselves, but in life.

**JE:** Did you get a car early on then because you were—

**BW:** Yeah, I got one. I got one. I saved my money and had one when I was sixteen, a 1949 Chevrolet, black, two-door, and I was the cat's meow.

**JE:** And what year were you in school?

**BW:** Well, fifteen, sixteen, I was probably tenth grade.

**JE:** So then you were probably about the only person at that age that had a car?

**BW:** I was pretty important on picking up my buds and going to Wayne's Drive-In to stroll through there and see everybody.

**JE:** In beautiful downtown Lawton, right?

**BW:** Hmm (sound of appreciation), downtown Lawton.

## Chapter 03 - 8:38

### Education and Military

---

**John Erling:** The base was there in Lawton.

**Blake Wade:** Always.

**JE:** You think that had any significance on your life as you became a soldier?

**BW:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely it did. I didn't realize it at the time. All the Lawton people used to go out to the Officer's Club at Fort Sill for our social events. I mean, you know, when you had people from around the world coming into Lawton it was real interesting.

I just thought of an example of that was when I was a young guy, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, we would come up and watch OU play football. But after Billy Vessels, Johnnie Latiner, and Leon Heath and all of them graduated they all went in the military and they all played on the military bases. And on Sunday afternoon at Fort Sill you could go out there and watch Billy Vessels and Leon Heath and Johnnie Latiner and all of them playing for the military bases and it would be cars lined up forever to get in there. It was quite an affair in Fort Sill to see that.

And then you had polo. We had a polo field where I watched people who rode horses. And so there was a class of people that I absolutely admired from around the world that actually were stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

**JE:** So there was a seed planted, no question, back then?

**BW:** Seed planted that I didn't realize that I'd ever take at all.

**JE:** First school you attended?

**BW:** St. Mary's, grade school, junior high and high school, twelve years of Catholicism. I had three cousins in first grade that all graduated their senior year with thirteen of us graduating from St. Mary's High School.

**JE:** Wow. What activities in high school were you involved in?

**BW:** Basketball primarily. I played a lot of tennis and golf. They were not that big back in my day but Mother always wanted me to play tennis, so I did. But basketball was it, and, you know, football, for a small Catholic school, they had what they call eight-man football and it was not very popular. But basketball was primarily it, going around Catholic schools all over the state of Oklahoma. Mount St. Mary's, Cascia Hall, it was really kind of an exciting period of my life.

**JE:** With OU football so big, was that on the minds of everybody who wanted to be a football player?

**BW:** Oh, absolutely. Dad loved the Sooners. They all went to the OU football games on Saturday. It was kind of an event. As I look back on it, you always knew Dad and Mother were going to be going off to the football games at Norman on Saturday so what are we going to do, guys? This is the time for us to go out to the mountains and do things as we got into junior high and high school, if I remember.

**JE:** What year did you graduate then from St. Mary's High School?

**BW:** In 1961, I believe.

**JE:** And then you're on to where?

**BW:** Went to Louisiana State University down at Baton Rouge. And the reason for that is, as Mother tells me, that she felt like she wanted me to find a Catholic girl and that down and south that it might be it. I did date a Catholic girl at LSU but my uncle Don Ellegood was a publisher of the *Press*. So I remember having a job working at the *Press* at LSU and that provided me funds.

But I got a big lesson in life when my roommate was a man named Phil Gatoosa and he lived in New Orleans and his father was part of the New Orleans mafia. I got an eye-opening that I'll never forget going down there and going into the bars of Bourbon Street, which Mr. Gatoosa owned and I found out, man, what a life there is New Orleans, Louisiana.

**JE:** What kind of life was that?

**BW:** Well, I'll tell you, we walked into one of his bars and Phil, his son, everybody knew him, he was eighteen, nineteen years of age. They'd push a button and open a door in the back. And when you opened the door in the back you went into a room with all the bookie type things with horse racing going on, and you had football betting and all of that. The track in New Orleans was wide open and I was just amazed to see all of these things were going on in life. You know, that was very exciting to me at that time.

**JE:** Did it make you feel like, man, I'd like to be a part of this?

**BW:** I kind of did, I mean, I ran with Phil. Mardi Gras would come and we would stay down there. You know, I was not an academic kind of guy anyway, so it was very, very important for me to learn everything I could about people in life, and I really did learn a lot down there that I look back on.

**JE:** So your mother sent you down there to meet a girl and instead you met the mafia.

**BW:** Met the wild side of life in Louisiana, LSU. I lived in the football stadium; all freshman and sophomores lived in the football stadium. Paul Deitzel was a coach and he was getting ready to leave.

My first company commander was a man named Jerry Stovall, who was an All-American football player at LSU, and I was so impressed with him that I stayed in ROTC. And I guess that's probably how we're leading up to my first career.

**JE:** How long were you there at LSU?

**BW:** I was there two years and then it was time for me to come back home.

**JE:** And then you finished off your college work?

**BW:** At the University of Oklahoma.

**JE:** In what year?

**BW:** In 1964.

**JE:** What was your degree in?

**BW:** Journalism, education.

**JE:** Was it there then that you joined what we call Rotcee, Reserved Officers Training Course?

**BW:** Well, I hadn't heard that word in a long time. It is Rotcee, exactly. I stayed in ROTC all the way through LSU and through OU. And the Vietnam War was booming. To be perfectly honest, you could go into the military—you had to go in back in those days—you could go in as a private or you could go in as a lieutenant. It just made sense to me to go in as a lieutenant, and that's what I did.

**JE:** Did you take to that training like duck to water? Was that fun for you?

**BW:** No, not really. You know, I enjoyed being a part of the military, and again, I knew the significance of being from Lawton, Fort Sill. I think I had some kind of history on what it was to be in the military. Everything I saw was very nice and it continued to be as I went on in to the military.

My first assignment, again, I was thinking Vietnam and all of a sudden I got my orders for—I remember like it was yesterday—APO New York 09109, and I thought it must be Germany, until we got down to figuring out there was a place called Pisa, Italy. My first assignment was on the Riviera with marble floors overlooking the Mediterranean. I'm telling you, it was absolutely wonderful as an assignment, as a twenty-one-year-old freshman second lieutenant and I never looked back.

**JE:** As we say in the military, what was your MOS, what was your job?

**BW:** My job at that time was signal corps and I was in communications. We shot communications over the Alps into Germany, so we did play a strategic role, but primarily I was a company commander at a very young age because all the majors and everybody were over in Vietnam. We had a real shortage of officers so I became a company commander with 120 men. You know, back then you were a second lieutenant for only one year and then you became a first lieutenant the second year. So when I got there my second year I became a company commander.

**JE:** Well, was that a big challenge? Was that difficult?

**BW:** John, we're going to talk about probably the only equality I think I possess is people. I learned it then, I felt for people, I liked people, I knew that if we could do things together it was going to work. It was six days a week. But I got to learn how to deal with all kinds of different personalities from all over the United States.

I think about some of my soldiers from the East, from New Jersey, New York, the way they wore their pants high and their beautiful black hair, Italians, and how I, a little old Oklahoma boy, could get their confidence that, yeah, I was young but I really cared about them and I wanted to take care of them. Things like Red Cross calling you at two in the morning when private so-and-so's mother or grandmother died and get him up and get him back to the States, those were memories.

You know, I still see those people to this day. I just buried a lieutenant that worked for me in Italy, in Alexandria, Virginia, and it just breaks my heart because, you know, these are people that I've always been strong with all my life. And so it's memorable.

## Chapter 04 - 8:00

### Vietnam

---

**John Erling:** You were cast into leadership, somebody saw something. There could have been some other second lieutenant they would have put there too. You've proven yourself somewhere along the line. Do you think you saw yourself in leadership back in college?

**Blake Wade:** I don't think of it that way.

**JE:** No? Okay, so this would have been the first you really were put in a leadership role and you embraced it. Did you enjoy it?

**BW:** Yeah, I grew to love helping people.

**JE:** Yeah.

**BW:** That's it.

**JE:** How long were you there in Italy?

**BW:** I was there three years.

**JE:** But then you were not finished.

**BW:** No, in fact, I can remember like it was yesterday, I was married and had one son, Patrick, who was born in Italy, baptized at the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He was one year old, it was 1969, and what were we going to do? We had a lovely time in Italy. I had great ratings on my job performance. Did I want to go back to Lawton? Really, no. So I thought about it a while and I said to Kathy, who I was married to at the time, "Would you mind if I stayed in the military for a little while longer?"

The problem was that if I did stay I knew that I had to go to Vietnam. So once I decided that that was going to be what I wanted to do, I did receive orders to go to Vietnam and we accepted that. Kathy went to Honolulu with Patrick to live and I went to Vietnam.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**BW:** I was sent to school after Italy to Information Officers School, which was at Fort Ben Harrison. Extensive protocol sessions and also getting ready for things like general officers, writing newspaper articles for a brigade, which was a thousand men. I was then a captain, got promoted a captain, went to that school and then headed off.

**JE:** What was your first assignment in Vietnam?

**BW:** My first job in Vietnam was an Information officer for the first signal brigade. It was covering stories all over the country over the battalions. I was also the general's briefer. Every morning at six thirty I had to get up and go over to the general's headquarters and brief him and all staff—there'd be twenty or thirty staff people—on how many casualties we had in the last twenty-four hours, where our men were, where our problems were, and all that. I'd get through with that at seven thirty in the morning and start getting ready for the next briefing the next day for that whole rest of the day.

I remember Sam Donaldson being over there.

**JE:** The *ABC* reporter.

**BW:** The *ABC* reporter. Sam was pretty negative back in those days. He wanted to cover stories about all the problems with drugs and why we shouldn't have been there. At that time, my job was to escort him around our units.

Not long ago, Sam was here and I think he was the host of *Cathy Keating* when she became a Hall of Fame. I saw Sam after thirty, forty years and, frankly, looks quite the same.

But I learned a lot about the news media and all of that. Then I went back in to being a company commander, back out in the boonies. And all of a sudden, got a call one day, they sent a helicopter out to get me and I didn't understand why but at the time the commanding general of the first signal brigade was looking for an aide-de-camp. He needed somebody that could stay with him. What an aide does is, I'm telling you the truth, every day after lunch we played tennis. So that tennis that Mother got me into years and years ago with the general's mess where there would be generals that would be visiting that would play tennis, General Foster and so many other generals liked to play tennis. And that was what my job was as an aide was to get the games together and do that.

And in the evening at six o'clock at the general's mess, exactly thirty-six generals from the various units would come together to eat dinner. And it was five knives and five forks, I mean, it was protocol all the way. At a certain time they would ring the bell and everybody would sit by rank. The aide-de-camps would be at a certain table.

I learned then that there was a quality that I would never see again. General Barry McCaffrey's father—General McCaffrey was the commanding general of Long Binh, Vietnam. He was a four star general. Barry would come in, he was a captain at the time, so I watched how their sons would all go to West Point, and how they would become a part of the military and the close comradeship. The honesty still rings out in me on how honest

our military people are about how important it is to be truthful and to never, ever sway. So those qualities stayed with me all the time.

I then left Vietnam, and that same general went on to Chièvres Belgium and I went to the advanced course at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey for captains. And I got a call, would I please come on back to Chièvres, Belgium and take over as his aide.

And I, at the time, said, "General, I've had that. I've got to stay home." At that time, I wanted to go home to Oklahoma to kind of get a feel should I stay in the military or not.

**JE:** This makes it sound pretty easy for you. Played tennis and an aide and all that kind of thing, but you did receive two bronze stars and they don't give those for playing tennis.

**BW:** No, they don't, and those bronze stars were given to me during the time as a company commander. You have to be in actual combat when you receive those. By the grace of God, I made it through. I lost some men during that time that kind of haunted me for a long time in my life. But I tried to make amends by going to see their families in small little towns in Texas and Missouri.

You know, at twenty-two, twenty-three years of age to be a company commander in a war zone, I was just too young. I did not fully have all the combat experience that I needed to have during that time. I did the best I could but I still lost some men.

**JE:** You think you were pushed along too fast?

**BW:** I think we were such dire need back in those days. What I worry about so much today are these young officers going over two and three and four times over there. People in the United States don't understand what that does to a human being's mind. So I do say that it's tragic that we didn't have more time and more experience at that young age.

**JE:** You led a company in battle.

**BW:** Yes sir.

**JE:** You lost men and were you wounded?

**BW:** No, I was never wounded.

**JE:** You saw battle?

**BW:** Yes, it was called Khe Sanh. It was a major operation and my company was to take a certain area in that battle. And we did fine, but actually, I did lose some people and so I was awarded one bronze star on that deal. And then another bronze star on another combat operation.

**JE:** But you also were awarded three Vietnam service medals and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

**BW:** Yeah, well, that was for those two times. In fact, I still wear my little bronze star deal just to remind myself of how important it is.

**JE:** This would have been '60—

**BW:** This was '69, '70, and the war was coming to a close in '71, as far as people leaving. But my aide-de-camp time extended me some to stay over there for the general aide-de-camp.

**Chapter 05 - 3:00****Anti-Vietnam Sentiment**

---

**John Erling:** Obviously, Vietnam was a very controversial war, a lot of discussion of it back home. You people were aware of that and discussed it among yourselves?

**Blake Wade:** I've never talked about this much but I'll tell you how bad it was for me. When it got time for me to leave there was a departing area that they put you into to kind of get you ready to go, it was things like this, "Captain Wade, you will go to Travis Air Base in California with this plane load of men. And once you get there you're going to find there's anti people that will just spit and throw things at you for wearing your uniform."

And that was so scary to me to think, "What were we doing so wrong?" Yes, we talked about all that and what was going on in the United States. It was just a terrible time. Kristofferson used to, you know, play "Five Hundred Miles," and so many songs that we would listen to.

**JE:** Kris Kristofferson the musician.

**BW:** Kris Kristofferson, yeah.

**JE:** Right.

**BW:** Kris was over there too, and so many others. But I'll tell you the saddest story that I ever had and I've never talked too much about it, but we got to Travis Air Base and we were all excited. And when we landed, and I remember getting down and touching the ground, and I was told that we would take off our uniforms there and not wear them off base into San Francisco. And I had about six of my men, three or four of them were African American and I took them with us. We were going to have a great time there that night before we left the next day.

And I'll never forget, I took them to a hotel and they would not let them into that hotel. They just did not want African Americans to be in their hotel room, and yet, they'd fought for their country. There was such a comradeship so I wouldn't accept that. They stayed in my room and I'll never forget the next day we all hugged and went out to the airport. It was just a real point of what was about to happen in this country that I'll never understand.

And that's why today I worry so much. There was no parades, there was no anything. You were really terrible to ever even serve over there. And I didn't understand that and still to this day don't. Why would you ever put an American kid in a war zone if you weren't there to protect him?

**JE:** Did you ever wear that uniform again?

**BW:** Oh yeah, I stayed in the military.

**JE:** And so then, were you ever denigrated because you wore it in public?

**BW:** I was questioned quite a few times by friends even that said, “Why did you serve there?” I didn’t have a choice. You know, when our government calls you to serve you got to go. I never did think differently about it.

**JE:** And what year did you finish?

**BW:** Nineteen eighty-four.

**JE:** And your rank then when you retired?

**BW:** Major. And I could have stayed in. I was on the lieutenant colonel list but I, at that time, would have had to put in another five to six years. And I knew that I had to make my break, so I got out with twenty as a major in the United States Army.

## Chapter 06 - 5:00

### Remington Park

---

**John Erling:** That wasn’t a difficult decision, you knew it was coming to an end.

**Blake Wade:** I knew I had to. And there was a man named Jack Kahn, who was from Ada. He was a partner with Senator Kerr who owned the Fidelity Bank. Jack married my aunt, and when I asked him what did he think I ought to do, he said, and I still stand by this, his words were, “Blake, if I had to do it over I’d come back and be a service to Oklahoma.”

And I said, “Man, that sounds like a good idea.” I came back, right here in Oklahoma City. At that time, there was a deal that they were trying to do called Pari-Mutuel Horse Racing. And that was my first job.

**JE:** First job you applied for, I suppose, and accepted. Obviously, you didn’t have horse racing experience?

**BW:** Not any at all.

**JE:** So why do you think you got the job?

**BW:** Well, I think probably I had a little inside. But one of the things that was said was I cannot receive a paycheck. Mr. Gaylord, at the time, was real concerned about who these people were that were bringing horse racing in.

**JE:** You talking about Eddie?

**BW:** Yeah, especially Gaylord, at the time, there was a big strong push in the press not to allow Pari-Mutuel horse racing to come to Oklahoma.

**JE:** Was he against it?

**BW:** He was against it at the time. But one of the things was, I never did accept a paycheck, and that was my way, I think, of saying how honest things were. Quite frankly, the religions of Oklahoma were not for Pari-Mutuel, they thought maybe this was gambling. Which I understood, but I found out the horse industry in Oklahoma was the third biggest in the

state, the third biggest industry. And yet, when I was growing up, we'd all go out to Eagle's Nest and Red River and Taos; everybody that had a horse in Oklahoma were all running out there. And I thought, "Why are they all going out there? Why don't we have a track here?"

And a guy, Ralph Sylvester, up at Fraternity up in Sallisaw had that little track. He was running horses. Bob Moore Cadillac, Melvin Hatley, and many of the other horse people wanted me to get Pari-Mutuel passed in Oklahoma.

**JE:** Pari-Mutuel betting was legalized after a 1982 election—

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** ...approved the initiative authorizing the system.

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** So that was already done and you came along in '84.

**BW:** Yes, and it was bringing in the DeBartolos to Oklahoma.

**JE:** You had a board then, a nine-member board?

**BW:** Nine-member board of people, Bob Moore, many of the leaders around Oklahoma City.

**JE:** You didn't receive a paycheck. Did you not need an income?

**BW:** I had my military retirement.

**JE:** Okay.

**BW:** And at the time, you know, I felt like I had to get my beginning here and that was what was happening back in those days.

**JE:** So everything was falling into place. You could support your family and still do this—

**BW:** Right, exactly.

**JE:** ...at the same time. Counties would vote on this.

**BW:** That's right.

**JE:** As to whether they would authorize it or not. Many counties went for it but I think a couple of counties voted it out, they were against it.

**BW:** That's right. And Oklahoma County, at that time, voted it in.

**JE:** Then the big break through came and you said DeBartolo, Eddie DeBartolo.

**BW:** He owned the San Francisco 49ers. He came in and wanted to put in a racetrack. The way the story goes, he asked Mr. Gaylord did he want to go in on it. And Mr. Gaylord said, "No," he said, "you go ahead and do that." And that's how DeBartolo came in.

**JE:** Eddie Gaylord, of course, had the *Daily Oklahoman*.

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** And could use that for or against, and probably just sat on the sideline on it, or did he promote it?

**BW:** Well, back in those days I think you went to Mr. Gaylord to get permission for a lot of things. I mean, later on, I remember going to Mr. Gaylord about we were going to do the dome on the capitol. He didn't like that one either, so...

**JE:** Then Remington Park came in—

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** ...and that was a huge success, wasn't it?

**BW:** At the time, at the beginning, it was really hot. Everybody in the horse business, Frank Merrill and all of them, Frank Merrill, I can remember seeing all of them. It was a big success at the beginning. Then later, Mr. DeBartolo died and his son came in who was, quite frankly, not very ethical. They got rid of David Vance who was the manager there. It just started going downhill, and it went downhill for a long time. I think until the Chickasaw Nation came in and put in the casino business.

**JE:** So today at Remington Park they have a casino and they race as well.

**BW:** That's right. Believe me, Governor Bill Anoatubby saw the wisdom of keeping the horse industry going. And because of the casino business the horse industry has just boomed. And I can tell you, I was just out there the other day, the place was packed for the Oklahoma Derby and, I mean, it was just the way it was always supposed to be.

**JE:** And the way it perhaps was because when it first opened it was the thing to do.

**BW:** Oh boy.

**JE:** It was the place to be and to go. The shine was on it.

**BW:** That's right. You had to have a reservation to even have lunch there.

**JE:** Correct.

**BW:** That type of stuff.

**JE:** Right, right, and you'd see Mr. DeBartolo walking—

**BW:** Oh, everybody.

**JE:** ...and you'd say, "Oh, man, there he is."

**BW:** Oh, it was a great thing and I think that's the way it's going back to being. And I'm real excited for them.

## Chapter 07 - 5:30

### Oklahoma History Center

---

**John Erling:** You were with the horse commission then for how long?

**Blake Wade:** I was asked to come out and interview for the job of deputy director of the Oklahoma Historical Society, and that would have been probably '86.

**JE:** Yes.

**BW:** I stayed there and fell in love with the history of our great state. As I mentioned earlier, being a layman and not an academic, they just needed management, they needed people in

leadership that cared. I can remember saying to some of the staff that were researchers and professionals, "Guys, we have a very small membership, but if you would allow me to go out around the state and tell what wonderful things you all are doing to get lay people like me interested in the Historical Society history of our great state I believe we can get members."

And we went from, I think, 780 members to 7,000 members over a couple of years. It showed me that they believed that, "Okay, he might not be a PhD but he really cares about me." And I did care about every employee at the Historical Society. And I did care about the thirty-two museums and sites around the state. There were twenty-five board members around the state. I can remember going up to Bartlesville and interviewing with Denny Garrison and Dr. Fisher over in Stillwater. These were people that cared about Oklahoma. And it was just truly, truly one of the blessings of my life to be able to go in and every day learn about our great state. I was actually learning as I was working, so it was new to me every day.

We had two or three directors from around the United States who would come in, but learning Oklahoma politics was not their forte, so I would get them in as deputy director and we would work them trying to get them into how things work in Oklahoma. And they'd always have to leave because of the way our politics are and our politicians.

So the day came when they said, "Blake, you know, we're running out hiring these people, would you mind being the director?"

And I said, "If the staff wanted me to be the director I'd be glad to do it. Bottom line." And I asked, the one thing I'd have to have is Dr. Bob Blackburn be my deputy because I needed that PhD academic in there.

**JE:** What was Dr. Blackburn doing at that time?

**BW:** He was in charge of the magazine and research. He worked there at the time and I felt like he needed to be the deputy director if I'm going to be the director.

**JE:** So you gave him that position then?

**BW:** I gave him the position in 1990—

**JE:** Right.

**BW:** ...somewhere in there. So from that day on, he and I were partners in making the Oklahoma Historical Society, I believe, one of the best there is now in the United States. And he certainly has gone on to really come through.

The one thing we did get though, was the beginning of the new history center before I left there. And I can tell you the toughest job I ever had was they wanted to put the history center across from the Governor's Mansion and that took buying forty homes of African Americans that had lived there all their lives.

So we took off meeting with them and talking with them every week, month, because we had to buy all forty of them. The *Tulsa World* wanted me to condemn and I said, "No,

I'm not going to do that because these homes represent the same thing I feel, and that is it might be a twenty-three thousand dollar home but it's been their home all their life and no one should condemn their house. If we can't pay them retail and insure them that we'll even move their home over and even to include their neighbor. If they want to live next door to a neighbor we'll buy and put them in a different area." But I had to have that feeling that if one of them did not want to sell then we could not do it at all.

The day came, and I remember it like yesterday, her name was Mrs. Johnson. She lived right across from the Governor's Mansion. She had a sofa out in her yard, and she said to me. "Mr. Wade, if you can get Governor Keating and Ms. Keating to invite me over to lunch on Sunday afternoon I will then precede to talk about selling my home and all my neighbors will be real happy."

I remember running to Governor Keating's office. I said, "Governor, we've got one chance." And he said, "What is it?"

And I said, "The last remaining lady, Mrs. Johnson, wants you to invite her over for lunch on Sunday with Mrs. Keating."

He said, "Do it."

That Sunday came and I went over and she was in her best dress, sitting in that sofa in the front yard with her purse, waiting for me to escort her across the street. She went in and it was at twelve noon, and I guarantee you, I waited outside till two, three. Finally about four o'clock, Mrs. Johnson came out with the signature that we'd all been waiting for and all of her neighbors were so ecstatic because now they were going to make all this money.

Now that's history. That's how the history center is there to this day.

**JE:** Yeah, that's a great story. Eighteen acres right across from the capitol building.

## Chapter 08 - 6:15

### Fund Raising

---

**John Erling:** Your fundraising would have come about probably as a deputy there at the Historical Society. Would that be your first opportunity to get into that business?

**Blake Wade:** Yeah. You know, fundraising is a very interesting subject matter. And you know, I see how many people can go to school and all that. In fact, Dr. Ann Morgan and the Kirkpatrick Foundation sent me down to a fundraising school down in Dallas, Texas, for two weeks.

And I thought to myself, "That's interesting." But I fell in love with it. And bottom line, I'll never forget leaving there saying, "My motto will be, 'If it's good for Oklahoma then

you can raise the money.' Let's start with that. If it's not good for Oklahoma, don't get into fundraising."

The first example was the USS Oklahoma punch bowl, which is priceless, was being utilized at every event, putting orange-aid, Gatorade, and all that. Well, my professionals were telling me it was deteriorating the silver that was in there. Now this was precious because this came off our ship, USS Oklahoma.

**JE:** Okay, explain that punch bowl. What do you mean?

**BW:** The punch bowl was made by Gorem in New York. This was a punch bowl for our dedications and all social ceremonies. It was part of the Oklahoma Historical Society and they asked to have it sent over to the capitol and it was being used for the last fifteen or twenty years but deteriorating. We got ahold of Gorem up there and, "How can you make a replica so we can get everybody to quit using the exact one?"

And they told us it would cost about seventy thousand dollars.

I said, "Okay, we've got to figure out how to raise it." The veterans thought we ought to put out a cup at all the vet deals.

Well, there was a lady in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, Mrs. Bowman, Edna Bowman was her name. She stopped me and she said, "Blake, come over here, I want to talk to you. I want you to know I don't want you taking any more money from those vets. My husband served on that ship and I want you to come over and get a check and I'll pay for it."

I thought, "Okay, now we're seeing it."

And here this young little lady, she's ninety years old at the time, she wrote a check with her financial people there and said, "I don't want any other vets paying for this punch bowl." And it's the one that's right now in the Governor's Mansion right as you go in the entrance way, the replica is. Now the real one is still over at the Historical Society.

**JE:** Huh (amazement). So you're four years as a deputy director and then you served how many years as executive director of the Oklahoma Historical—

**BW:** Nine years.

**JE:** Nine years?

**BW:** Yeah.

**JE:** During that time, was the building of the Oklahoma History Center.

**BW:** At the very end of my time we were awarding the design of it when Frank Keating called and asked me to come over. And he said, "Blake, I'm about to leave and I've got one thing that I want to do before I leave."

I said, "What is it?"

And he said, "I want to put the dome on the capitol."

**JE:** So then Dr. Blackburn, Bob Blackburn, he was the one then that oversaw the actual building—

**BW:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**JE:** ...of the History Center.

**BW:** And did a great job.

**JE:** Right. Were you frustrated with the Oklahoma legislators when it came to funding?  
I'm sure you wanted more money than you received.

**BW:** I can tell who it was, Senator Enoch Kelly Haney was the head of the senate appropriations, an American Indian here in Oklahoma. And he said, "Blake, we're going to give you half the money for you to start buying those houses."

So we did get half the appropriation before I left and we did get the approval from the board of directors on the design of it and the approval to take that land. So that's basically when I left was at that time.

**JE:** You saw in nine years there a lot of growth in the Historical Society—

**BW:** Oh.

**JE:** ...and awareness for the public.

**BW:** Absolutely. That was my job was to tell the people of Oklahoma what we had and the hidden secret. Academics in research, they loved really not to be too public. They loved to get in there and do their history and all that stuff yet they finally, I think, understood that in order to pay their salary they needed to let other people out there know in the state of Oklahoma of how important of jobs they're doing. That was so important to me was to tell these stories of professionals that were doing wonderful jobs about how they're keeping the history of Oklahoma. And that was what I primarily did and I cared that much about it.

**JE:** Well, you had state money but you were looking for private money too. So you had to be a good fundraiser.

**BW:** Oh, we raised a bunch of private dollars. If it was good for Oklahoma, that's what we did. And any project of the thirty-two museum and historic sites around the state.

I'll give you an example. The White House of the Chickasaws who's down in southern Oklahoma, and it was just a dilapidated place. Now today it is a prominent piece of the Chickasaw history. We got the Chickasaws to pay to get it all refurbished. And that was the kind of thing we did.

**JE:** You would travel the state and speak then, I suppose, at every kind of rubber chicken event and all that?

**BW:** Everything, everything Bob and I, we called ourselves Mutt and Jeff. We had to do a lot of things, cost cuttings, but he and I got along real well. We did a good job. He likes to tell the story about the one time we were going into appropriations. I got in and knelt before them, I knew that they had me anyway so I just knelt and said, "Whatever you guys want to do I'm all for it." And everybody laughed. But what we did, we got our appropriations that time. So, you know, whatever it took to get the job done, is what he was doing.

**JE:** This is a point for young people listening, apparently when you're a good leader you can walk into areas that you basically don't know much about but you can still lead the people in the direction and then you learn it as you be in it. Because you did that several times here.

**BW:** Oh.

**JE:** I mean, I know you've had an affinity for horses but you didn't know a whole lot about the business.

**BW:** No.

**JE:** And you were a leader there. History, you didn't know, maybe but what you were taught in high school history—

**BW:** That's right, that's right, that's right.

**JE:** You know, and you walked in and there was the leadership there as well. So you don't have to know the topic, you just have to be good with people and be a leader.

**BW:** And you got to care. You've got to really, genuinely care, and people understand when you're false.

## Chapter 09 - 4:00

### Capitol Dome

---

**John Erling:** Let's talk about the Oklahoma Capitol Complex.

**Blake Wade:** Okay.

**JE:** Because that was your next assignment.

**BW:** That's correct.

**JE:** And as you said, the governor said, "This was—"

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** "...one of the last things I want to do during my administration." Take us from that moment, because you had to really sell that and so did the governor and many others. The building was near completion as the United States was entering World War I. Materials that were slated for the capitol were then diverted to the war effort. Given the then current state of events and projected dome costs of \$250 thousand, that was just not to be. So that's why we didn't have a dome.

Then eighty-plus years later, you prevailed. Okay, he says, "Wade, I want a dome." What happens?

**BW:** Governor Keating knew that he was not going to be re-elected because he was in his second term. So if he was going to do anything kind of risky this would be the time to do

it is in your second term. Governor Keating wanted very much to leave with some legacy and he did with, of course, the dome.

I can remember going out to Fairview, Oklahoma, because we had to raise twenty million dollars. That was something that Governor Keating felt needed to happen. At Fairview, my first talk was at the feed lot. I remember it just like it was yesterday. I went in there and I said, "I'm here representing Governor Keating with the greatest news you're ever going to hear, and that is, Governor Keating wants to finally put the dome on the capitol."

And all of a sudden, they started leaving. They were walking out on me. They thought it was the dumbest thing they'd ever heard in their life.

I'll never forget calling Howard Barnett, who was Governor Keating's chief of staff and saying, "Howard, I'm going to tell you this is not as popular a deal as we think it is." And it really was not. There was people not wanting us to touch it. The politicians didn't deserve it; that it was fine the way it was. In fact, it had gotten kind of unique as being the only capitol that didn't have a dome that was supposed to. All of those gimmicks, and there's something about Oklahoma mentality that they say no and you got to fight through it. I know because I'm in another one of these.

But from that time on it was convincing donors. Governor Keating was one of the best at it and he helped. We put together the twenty million. In fact, many of the names are in the dome rotunda that people today want to take down, but they were the ones that put the money up to do this. And so today, that's history.

One of the other things I've wanted and I've kept with, it has to be built by Oklahomans. And at the time, Flintco in Manhattan had the capabilities to join together and they're called the Centennial Builders. They joined together to do this famous historical dome on the capitol. And did a tremendous job.

**JE:** How long did it take you to raise the twenty-one million dollars?

**BW:** About a year. 'Cause we dedicated in 2002. It was the first of the one thousand centennial projects that we did in the centennial.

**JE:** November of 2002. And now you see that dome from miles around and especially at night. The lighting of that dome had to be a big thing because you just don't put a spotlight on that, that's an architecture firm that obviously did that good job.

**BW:** Absolutely. You know, I couldn't have asked for better people than we had to do that.

**JE:** That had to make you feel good when you had dedicated that—

**BW:** Oh—

**JE:** ...and you were given the assignment from the governor.

**BW:** ...that's right.

**JE:** And I know you got a lot of people but it started with you.

- BW:** But you're exactly right, I mean, it takes all kind of people to make anything work. Harry Truman says it best, I kept with him all the way, "Anything is possible as long as you don't care who gets the credit." And man, is that the secret to everything Blake Wade is about.
- JE:** It's just like all of this was supposed to happen, wasn't it? Because it tied in to the centennial celebration of 2007.

## Chapter 10 - 2:20

### Oklahoma Centennial

---

**John Erling:** So when your job was completed for the dome, what next?

**Blake Wade:** I went right into being the director of the Oklahoma Centennial for 2007, where the state would be a hundred years old. It was a job that I look back on and now I realize how difficult it was convincing the legislators that we needed to start early, that we couldn't wait like other states to the year before because it would not be the greatest thing that we wanted for Oklahoma.

**JE:** So what year was that?

**BW:** Two thousand. They saw a little bit of the way we did it with raising money for the dome. And then we had that great dedication of the capitol dome, which led us into every town in this state was asked to come up with, "What would their dream be, what would they like to have in their town?"

After taking that list and going out and talking to the leaders of every little community we started building this master plan, which became over a thousand projects. It was just shocking to see. And I can say to you in 2003 and '04, it was like, "Who cares? That's so far away, 2007."

But I kept saying, "We have to have money now." And they slowly started giving me appropriations to do things and they just kept building and building.

There's one that I'm going to next month, December 7, Pearl Harbor, the USS Oklahoma that we talked about on that punch bowl. We found out that there had never been any kind of memorial for them. After sixty, seventy years why is it that Oklahomans can't finish these things?

So one of the centennial projects was, "Let's go over to Pearl Harbor and dedicate to the eighteen-, nineteen-year-old men that died on that ship on Pearl Harbor day. And today there's this beautiful memorial. We used to take twenty and thirty of the guys that were on the ship over to the dedication on December 7. Now we're down to about three. You know, it's going to end. I'm so glad that we did in the centennial years do this

memorial and dedicate to each one by their name for that particular time in their life. So now we can say, “Hey, we did that. We put that one away.”

## Chapter 11 - 7:40

### Alcoholism

---

**John Erling:** Are you constantly optimistic? I mean, you’ve been putting projects in front of the legislators and the general public—let’s use this example, the centennial in 2000. You’re trying to get somebody excited about something that’s going to happen in 2007, seven years later. And it falls on deaf ears. And you go home at night, what do you say? How do you handle that?

**Blake Wade:** I’m going to tell you a story. I am a recovering alcoholic and I knew that if I were going to try to do this kind of work that I had to quit drinking because it was a very frustrating time, as you can see. One of the things that I did do, by a lot of grace, was I said, “I don’t need to be mixing alcohol with all this stuff.”

So September 1 of 1983, I took my last drink and I’ve never looked back. I think if there’s a secret about me it’s in the recovery of a human being’s life that once you’ve been to the battlefield everything else should be just fun and wonderful. And I’ve tried to do that since that time, that if it’s important to Oklahoma I want to give my best shot to do these things. I don’t want anything to be mixed up in it.

So recovery plays a giant role in what I do in the evenings. And I have a thing about trying to help other people to make sure that they can live the best life that they can.

**JE:** Help other alcoholics, is what you’re saying?

**BW:** No, drug addicts, alcoholics that are ruining their lives, their families, and all that. When you get into helping somebody else you don’t think about yourself.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**BW:** And that’s the secret to getting through all these things. Because if I sat and worried about this every night, it would drive me to drink, probably. We don’t want to do that.

**JE:** Somebody’s listening to this and maybe they have an alcohol problem, what would you be saying to them?

**BW:** Oh, you’re touching my heart now. Surrender to win. You surrender to the alcohol and drugs you will understand what I’m saying that from that day on you’re going to be a winner regardless. You’ll get your dignity. You’ll understand what the word *hope* is. That life is okay. There’s plenty of us that have gone before you and we will be there to help

you through your time. Alcohol and drugs are taking a lot of younger people and I'm scared for them and I want to be there to help them.

**JE:** What point in your life did you realize that you had a drinking problem? Was it pointed out to you or did you figure it out that something's wrong here?

**BW:** Well, no, I had it pointed out to me by that wife that I talk about, Kathy. She told me in 1976. I was so upset about my military—you know, they call it PTSD now, but you talk about worrying at night, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't do anything. So alcohol was my savior. I can remember a time that is so significant because you go across a fine line into alcoholism. I can tell you when it exactly was, it was in Vietnam and it was out there in the damn woods. I had two old crusty warrant officers that the night before I drank heavy with, and that next morning they were whistling and dancing down to the area that we shaved. And they were carrying a hot six-pack of beer. And I said, "Chief, what are you doing there?"

And he said, "What do you mean? Haven't you ever had one in the morning?"

And I said, "What are you talking about?" Because I always thought that if you drank the night before you had to get up and go to work you had to pay for your sins. And here I learned the secret to alcoholism is when you get up and you take another drink to get rid of all the pain and suffering. That morning when he handed me a hot can of beer and I took it and I saw, "Hey, I don't have that hangover any longer. The answer to everything is more alcohol."

And that destroyed my first marriage and it didn't help my career any. But certainly in those days, all my bosses were alcoholics. I mean, booze in the military during that period was—I got to tell you a story about how naïve I was. Company commander in Italy, my first sergeant, we were playing for the base championship in flag football. It was Friday afternoon and the first sergeant said to me, "Captain, I'm going to go and get beer. You think out of our 120 men anybody doesn't drink?"

And I said, "I hope that they don't."

He said, "I'll get one six-pack of Coca-Cola in case we have somebody that doesn't drink beer."

But that was our comradeship. I want to tell a story about Martin Luther King dying while I was in Italy, company commander. All of a sudden, the base commander called me and he said, "Captain Wade, all of our African Americans are down at the NCO club. They just found out Martin Luther King died."

And I said, "Colonel, how about me going down and seeing if I can't try to help their situation by getting at least out of there." 'Cause they started drinking that morning.

I remember knocking on the NCO club door and they said, "What do you want?"

And I said, "I need to get in there and talk to my first sergeant," which was African American, and they let me in. That day I ended up staying with them all because all we did

was drink and we were all together. It was a comradeship again that something tragic in the United States has happened.

That was how alcohol worked for me. But then when it turns and you go over that fine line it never works again. And you keep trying to capture that the way it was. So when my wife talked to me about drinking or leaving, I said I could not quit drinking. I was obsessed with at night drinking.

So that day, 1 September 1983, I'm telling you, it was, "I'll die before I take another drink of whiskey." That was my turning point.

**JE:** Did your wife leave you?

**BW:** Yes. My first wife left me, and my two children. I regret it to this day.

**JE:** How long did you continue drinking after she left?

**BW:** Oh, 1976 to 1983, I remember it very clearly. And in that time, if you haven't been in trouble yet, you get in trouble when you're by yourself in an alcoholic world. Those things all happened all the way until the time that I got out of the military and was ready to go with my new life.

**JE:** What led to your final drink?

**BW:** I haven't shared this with very many people but I can tell you it was in Lawton, Oklahoma, in an alley where I spent the night. And a sergeant was making me Tang and honey. He was mixing it and I remember looking out the window and I said, "If there is a God, please help me." I couldn't eat and he was making something just to get down my throat.

And I remember drinking that and walking up through an alley into a church that I grew up in, and for the first time in years I cried. When I left there I said, "I'll die before I take another drink."

**JE:** Did you go to Alcoholics Anonymous?

**BW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** Immediately?

**BW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** Was that your first step?

**BW:** Oh yeah. I'd been there before but I didn't think I needed it. But I started then and I've gone four or five times a week for the last thirty-one years.

**JE:** And now have helped numerous other alcoholics.

**BW:** Well, I—

**JE:** Down through the years. You never know when your story is going to be embraced and help others.

**BW:** Right.

---

**Chapter 12 - 4:00**  
**Centennial Projects**

---

**John Erling:** You worked for seven years then on the centennial and then that year of 2007 was a big year for the entire state. This is the point here where you and Lee Allen Smith got to know each other better. And you worked together.

**Blake Wade:** Two thousand I asked Lee Allen and I to join together to do the dedication on the dome that was about to happen. And it took him a while to prepare. As you well know, he does everything so beautifully. From then on he was my project manager on all centennial things. We just kept on going and he was a big asset.

If I ever had a big brother, that was him. He not only gave me the wisdom of the same thing he dreamed about, Oklahoma was deserving of all these wonderful things. He always believed that we ought to think big and do big. If I could help him fulfill his dreams then I was doing the right things.

Going around to these towns and finding the leaders and what they wanted, you know, was just an amazing thing for me to do. And if somebody had said in 2000, "If you do fifty or a hundred projects, would you be happy?" I'd of said, "Yeah." But to think about after the fact, after we had done it and for Ackerman McQueen to do a history book on this is just shocking to me to see how many things. Like two floats in the Rose Bowl, going to Macy's parade in New York. The PR that we got from all of these things that were happening, couldn't have been better, and I see the best of times are coming though. This is all building up to what will be coming up in the near future.

**JE:** You and Lee Allen, both of you then were fundraisers and he's known for that.

**BW:** Absolutely. Everything I learned I learned from Lee Allen Smith. That's for sure.

**JE:** Yeah. Well, you were a great team, maybe Oklahoma City people know that but Oklahomans ought to know that, that the two of you worked so well together and made this all happen. And what a joy it was then that celebration in 2007, and we felt it in Tulsa, we had a big celebration there, of course.

**BW:** Oh, well, I love that.

**JE:** And that big video that was on one of the buildings there, it was great.

**BW:** Shocking to me to see it. And an Enid company, remember, we never went outside of Oklahoma. You had to be an Oklahoma company to do anything, and an Enid company that did that fireworks display in Tulsa to kick it off was just amazing. I'll never forget all of that.

**JE:** Did, do you feel a coming together of the state like you'd never felt before? Because let's face it, there's always this fight between Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

**BW:** Yeah.

**JE:** And it shouldn't be that way but it is. It may be that way forever, I don't know why it is. But don't you think in all that time there, there was a cohesiveness that developed?

**BW:** Absolutely, and I could feel it because the one thing that I realized was you have to get the people within that area. And once I got to Tulsa and I got the people of Tulsa to decide what they wanted to do then I knew that it was the right thing to do. I didn't want Oklahoma City people coming in and tell Tulsa people what to do. Nor did I want them in Norman or Shaddock. You know, you had to go to where those people are and that's what it was is Tulsa people got involved in this deal.

**JE:** Then you move on from the commemoration, the parties were done, now what?

**BW:** Two thousand eight came, we finished up everything. A hundred and twenty-five of those fabulous clocks. To this day, I still see clocks all over the state of Oklahoma.

**JE:** I see one every time I go downtown Tulsa.

**BW:** Yeah.

**JE:** By the way, you mentioned Ackerman McQueen, that's Ackerman McQueen Advertising Agency, they were so involved and worked hand-in-glove with you.

**BW:** They were right there with us the entire centennial time.

**JE:** And I was there when I saw Lee Allen and the dedication of that clock, right down there in the Williams Tower Green, as a matter of fact.

**BW:** That's exactly right, I remember. We even had a band there that I remember that day. It was fabulous.

**JE:** Right.

## **Chapter 13 - 2:30**

### **Business Round Table**

---

**John Erling:** So the dedications are over and all, what does Blake Wade do then?

**Blake Wade:** Well, I'm doing just great. The governor at the time said, "How about you coming over and running the Business Round Table out of Commerce?" And this was at the time, a group of about eighty-six CEOs around the state that gave five thousand dollars to be a member of the Business Round Table. And what that money was for is for the governor of the state of Oklahoma to be able to utilize when he or she could not use it for appropriations. We grew it to about 160, 165 CEOs of companies that believed in what we were doing, helping our governor bring in economic development. To bring in companies, et cetera.

**JE:** Yes, you would take on projects to bring business to Oklahoma, and you were a nonprofit organization. But you had to do fundraising to support all that.

**BW:** Oh, absolutely.

**JE:** So that was a big part of your job as well.

**BW:** Also very important part of the job is to get a CEO who is very busy to understand how important it is to help our governor in these stages. It ended up we had it at Southern Hills one time a year and we had it here in Oklahoma City. And so CEOs could get away to see the governor without having to go through all of the bureaucratic system.

**JE:** So they would pay for that opportunity?

**BW:** They'd pay five thousand dollars a year. That money would grow into a fund in order to help the governor do things that she could not use state appropriations. Or he.

**JE:** Frank Keating meant a lot to this state at that time, because there is a charisma about the governor when he speaks that was very helpful in selling these projects.

**BW:** Absolutely. Frank Keating was a big positive promotional guy of Oklahoma.

**JE:** Your executive director of the Oklahoma Business Round Table 2008 to 2011, as long as we're talking about business, was it not of any interest of you to go into business on your own? You came out of a family that was a business family.

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** A car dealership. Was that not interesting to you?

**BW:** I never even thought about it because of the words, again, Mr. Kahn said, "Be of service to Oklahoma." And that's been my best asset for all these years. And will continue until I retire.

**JE:** Did you ever think about running for office?

**BW:** No! No, no.

**JE:** Okay.

**BW:** No way.

**JE:** I'm sure you were asked.

**BW:** But I would not accept.

**JE:** And why not?

**BW:** I've dealt with politicians for the last twenty years and it's just a real difficult job that they have. And you know, I just didn't feel like I needed to be on that side.

**Chapter 14 - 11:10****American Indian Cultural Center**

---

**John Erling:** We're here, as we stated earlier, in the Native American Cultural Center.

**Blake Wade:** Right.

**JE:** Which is not completed. Let's start from the beginning, who suggested this and how did this come about and how did you get involved?

**BW:** During the centennial years Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallon and I went to Honolulu to see the Indian Cultural Center in Honolulu. She liked the idea to bring home something like this, a cultural type thing.

At the time, I was running the centennial but we did make this a centennial project so I was involved. This is the only project still left out of that thousand projects that's not been completed. That meant a lot to me. Too, we gave it two million dollars of centennial funds to help. But where it all came to reality for me was when Governor Fallon came out here to the site and she said two things. One is that this had been going on for, at the time, about twelve, fourteen years. Now it's eighteen years that this has been going on. Two, that the politicians felt like there was not enough public people giving money to it. Oklahoma City was not giving money to it. "Blake, if you and Lee Allen would go out and raise forty million dollars I'll match that forty million with state funds and we'll have this thing completed."

I said, "Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

So Lee Allen and I took off and we raised three years ago forty million dollars in pledges in less than four months. Unbelievable to this day. And what's even more amazing is now we're in our third year and they've stayed with us. We were unable to get the forty million match in the state by one vote, one senate vote, three years ago. Two years ago, we were ready to get it and the Moore disaster came through and they needed the money to match federal dollars.

And Governor Anoatubby's words were, "Our people come first."

And then this last year, which was more devastating, they got it passed all the way through to the House but they would not let me go on the floor of the House. So we're in a real predicament now and our donors are staying with us one more time to figure out how to do this. And whether the state does it or it will be reverted back to Oklahoma City, so be it, but we've got to get it completed one way or the other.

**JE:** This is your biggest challenge of your life.

**BW:** The biggest one I now understand that I've ever felt. You know, Oklahoma is Indian country. I want to use a comment that I really believe in and that was, "Here comes the Thunder." And they just take Oklahoma and the world by just a positiveness for all of Oklahoma.

**JE:** Let me just say, you say the Thunder, that's the professional basketball team in the NBA.

**BW:** Right.

**JE:** Which has been such an enormous success.

**BW:** That's right. All the world media came the first or second year we were in the NBA finals. And the question came to me was, "Blake, media from around the world want to know where the Indians are. Where can they go to learn about our American Indians?"

I thought of Anadarko where there's three teepees, I mean, I was scared to death that we have lost all these people finally coming. You got to remember when this American Indian Cultural Center was first given this land there was no water in the river. Ray Ackerman was the man who asked me, "Blake, how do we get this river named Oklahoma?"

I said, "Ray, come on, we can do this. We might not do the whole thing, we can certainly do seven miles."

And so Ray and I went out to the legislators and got them to name seven miles of the Canadian River the Oklahoma River because of all the PR that's coming. Ray had the inspiration on all that.

**JE:** I've interviewed him and you can hear him elsewhere on our website about that story, he talks about that.

**BW:** I thought, "Man alive, if this American Indian Cultural Center was up and going and I can have the dancers and everybody out here, the collections from the Smithsonian and everything, we would have been what I call a wow factor." This is truly what Oklahoma is. We have Route 66, we have the Cowboy Hall of Fame, we've got Gilcrease, Philbrook, we've got everything and why not finish it up with this American Indian Cultural Center and Museum?

**JE:** The Tribal Nations, are they all sold on this?

**BW:** To be honest, not really. I do want you to know that we were not getting sufficient support from all of our tribes in this from a money standpoint. We got every tribe, thirty-nine tribes, to provide some funds for the American Indian Cultural Center. That was a big deal. We've had a groundbreaking where the tribes came together.

It's just like the USS Oklahoma, it's just like the dome on the capitol, it's just like the History Center, it will be a negative until it's built and they will come and they will love it. It will be shown how important it is for all thirty-nine tribes and how they'll go from here to the specific tribes around Oklahoma that are building cultural centers now. And they'll go, "Gosh, I'm glad we got that built."

**JE:** Here we are in 2014, let's talk a little bit about the discussion amongst the legislators because you have this project here. Tulsa has a project known as the Pops Museum, which is a very worthy project and I know you signed on to that.

**BW:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**JE:** And there's times you've tried to promote them both and they've tried to promote them separately. But then, I suppose, there's legislators who say, "Well, we're from the rural area and we want money out here in our towns too." We're all fighting for that same money.

**BW:** Absolutely.

**JE:** And that's where you've been caught in this.

**BW:** I understand their thinking, and if I'm from a small town, you know, I want to know what you're going to do for that. It's kind of like the Oklahoma City Thunder, the Thunder is not here for just Oklahoma City, it's here for the whole state. International Airport is here, not for Oklahoma City but for the whole state.

The same way with this museum here, we have an agreement with the Smithsonian to put collections from the thirty-nine tribes here because this is Smithsonian quality museum. They couldn't give it out because the individual tribes maybe did not have a place to put these things. So this was going to be a place to the collections from the Smithsonian that are going to be so valuable, not only for the Indian tribes but for all of us in Oklahoma.

You know, what an education it will be. I know the frustrating parts and the big one is we don't have enough money to do all these things. So I've got to be a realist and say, "What can we do to make it work? Should we give it back to Oklahoma City and let the city put it into a trust like the Zoo Trust, the State Fairboard Trust, the Airport Trust, and let us work from there?"

Whatever it takes to get this thing done we've got to do it. And I'm going to stay until we get it done.

**JE:** We're sitting here, what percentage has been built?

**BW:** Fifty percent. I've got the structure built. I've got the air, heat, and everything in here. We have about ninety million dollars. They ask, "How are you going to operate it?"

I don't want any more money from the state. I want to be able to build it and be on our own. I've got three hundred acres around here. I want us to go and lease this land around it for hotels, restaurants, business development of our various tribes, our art.

I had a guy, James Pepper Henry here from the Heard Museum in Arizona who is an American Indian from Oklahoma. He had an Indian art festival that made five and a half million dollars in ten days and he said, "Blake, that's nothing compared to the Santa Fe Art Indian Market that makes twelve to fifteen million in twenty days. And

all these American Indians are coming from Oklahoma. The day comes when you have your own Indian market in Oklahoma, you'll be able to house and pay for your operations and maintenance."

And then when I say the hotels and the business development, I have the Choctaws wanting twenty acres to put business development. I've got an Otoe-Missouria that wants twenty-seven hundred square feet.

All these tribes are looking for business development. This will be the hub of Indian territory for business development in the state of Oklahoma. It will work for them. It will pay back to the state a hundred and fifty million dollars in tax revenue, so every penny that they've given to this will be paid back over the next twenty years. But we've got to get open.

It's cost me seven hundred thousand dollars a year to keep it mothball like we have it today.

**JE:** When did the construction stop?

**BW:** I stopped it two years ago in 2012. I said, "This has got to stop. We cannot piecemeal anymore."

**JE:** How much money would it take now to complete it?

**BW:** Eighty million. Forty million I've raised in pledges and forty million from the state or whatever's going to happen and we finish this thing in two years and we'll be open and dedicating this thing. In fact, Lee Allen Smith has already been handed the job of putting an opening on to this thing. So...

**JE:** Too much to ask for you to start raising more money for this?

**BW:** If we have to do it we're going to do it, whatever it takes.

**JE:** Another—could you see raising another forty million and you wouldn't need the state money?

**BW:** It would be very difficult to do. You know what? We went out to our donors and they gave us forty million on one promise: the state will match dollar for dollar.

**JE:** Yeah.

**BW:** And if they don't do that, well, then the city's got to take it back and the state will have reneged on what they promised.

**JE:** So how do you think about this during the day, during the night? You are the executive director, you come out here, it's obvious that you make presentations out here.

**BW:** All the time.

**JE:** Here we're taking a snapshot of our time here in Oklahoma 2014, and we are about to enter October. There's an election in November and the state legislature convenes in February. So is this election coming up in November important to this institution?

**BW:** Absolutely. I've already gone to work on all the new people that will be elected in November and finding out how many of them can be on my side to get this thing done.

We've met with Speaker Hickman, we've met with the governor, we've met with the senate pro tem. They all know how important it is. Publicity has been always there.

You know, we want Tulsa Pops, we want for Oklahoma City this museum, both of them will fit for the whole state. We'll do good for all of Oklahoma.

**JE:** Are you going to be involved in races or even today involved in races of those who are supporting this project?

**BW:** Absolutely. You know, I've got people that I'd like to see get into position and I know that there's others that are fighting against me. But that's the way politics is.

**JE:** You've had a fight for a long time.

**BW:** Been fighting all my life and I love every bit of it.

## Chapter 15 - 2:25

### In Reflection

---

**John Erling:** In reflection, who do you think has been the biggest influence in your life?

**Blake Wade:** Oh, as I mentioned, Jack Kahn was, my dad. See, my dad was an alcoholic too, so...

**JE:** Did he ever take hold of that?

**BW:** Yeah, he did, the same time I did in '83. I left that day one September and told Dad that I couldn't ever come back because it was too tough for me to try to beat this deal if he was going to keep on drinking. We didn't see each other for six months, and I got a call from him, could he come up to the city?

And I said, "Sure." When I met him he told me that he hadn't had a drink since that day that I left. And the sad part about it, we were able to forgive each other for everything but he died about three months later.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**BW:** He was a great man.

**JE:** Yeah. Well, you learned a lot from him, didn't you?

**BW:** Oh, absolutely. And we got to forgive each other for everything before he died.

**JE:** So that was a good feeling.

**BW:** That's vital.

**JE:** How's your life been different from what you would have imagined?

**BW:** My life is so much better than I ever dreamed it would be. I'm serious about that. In '83, I'd of said, "Well, if I was able to do two things I would be very happy," but as you can tell, it just keeps going on and on. For the first time in my life I really hate to be getting old because I really love what I've been able to do.

**JE:** Would you like to go on to another project from this?

**BW:** Not really, not really. I really would like this to be my last one.

**JE:** How would you like to be remembered?

**BW:** As a good man, a sober man. Bottom line, loved Oklahoma.

**JE:** Yeah, that's great. Well, thank you—

**BW:** Thank you, John.

**JE:** ...for this wonderful time we've spent here with you. And now generations can look back and they'll understand the thinking that you were going through. And one day they will be coming through this facility. But it's nice for them to know, "Hey, it was a struggle." And you overcame. Oklahomans overcame, and you made this happen. They'll be able to listen to this years from now.

**BW:** Beautifully said, John.

**JE:** All right.

**BW:** I hope that's the case.

**JE:** Thank you.

**BW:** Thank you, sir.

## Chapter 16 - 0:33

### Conclusion

---

**Announcer:** This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).