Bob Blackburn

Historian, Author & OHS Executive Director Emeritus

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Bob Blackburn, a native Oklahoman, served as executive director of the Oklahoma Historical Society from 1999 until 2021. He joined the OHS in 1980 as editor of The Chronicles of Oklahoma and became deputy director for agency operations in 1990.

Blackburn is a 1973 graduate of Southwestern Oklahoma State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. He earned his M.A. & Ph.D. in history from Oklahoma State University. He grew up in Edmond and graduated from Putnam City High School in 1969.

Blackburn published several articles and his first book while still in graduate school, and has since written or co-authored more than 25 books and numerous articles, journal entries, and screenplays. He is a steady source of historical information for the media and has appeared numerous times on The History Channel.

He was instrumental in planning and building the Oklahoma History Center, a 215,000-square-foot museum and research center.

Listen to Bob talk about his mother and the TV show Romper Room, Killers of the Flower Moon, and how writers shape the image of Oklahoma on the podcast and website of VoicesOfOklahoama.com.

Chapter 2 – 12:50
TV Romper Room

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling, and today's date is May 10, 2023. So, Doctor Blackburn, would you state your full name, please?

Bob Blackburn (BB): Yes, Bob L. Blackburn Junior. I am a junior. My dad was a senior, but I go by Bob Blackburn, or around the history circles, Doctor Bob.

JE: Your birth date and your present age.

BB: I was born September 10th, 1951, in Oklahoma City. Now I am 71, soon to be 72.

JE: And where are we recording this interview?

BB: We're recording this at the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City. This is the headquarters flagship of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

JE: And you may not like this, but I want to say this is the house that Bob built, and we'll talk more about that later, of course. And before we proceed, I should say that I contacted you about 14 years ago when I started this project of oral history. And I have quoted you hundreds of times because when I told you what I'm doing, you said, "You're doing our work for us." And with that it gave me freedom. I wasn't a trained historian, but I knew that voices and stories needed to be recorded. And so I thank you for the inspiration you gave me when I started. It's hard to believe 14 years ago.

BB: Well, and you have far exceeded my expectations. You know, everyone wants to do a project, everyone wants to write a book, do something. Very few people actually accomplish their dreams. You did. And the quality, I've watched so many of your episodes, and those memories are now part of the collections with a capital T, the collections that historians can use in the future to understand the times that you and I have lived through.

JE: Yeah. Where were you born?

BB: I was born here in Oklahoma City. My family's though are from Claremore, my dad's family, long Claremore residents. My dad born there in 1920. Mom, Western Oklahoma with Arkansas roots, from Chickasha, Ninnekah area. But Dad was a highway patrolman, Mom was a teacher, and we were in Oklahoma City at the time I was born.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name and all.

BB: Mom was Ida May Turley. She was born in Ninnekah, 1929. Granddad had come out to pick a cotton crop with a brother-in-law on 160 acres near Norge, Oklahoma, and it was the only good year for cotton in the 1920s. He came out with all he had. At that time he had 7 kids, one an infant, so 6 who could pick.

Granddad sold a little bit of land in Arkansas, bought a Model T25 pickup, took 3 days to get here from Howard County, Arkansas, just across the border from Broken Bow. Took 3 days to get here, and then he would spend all of his time... they'd load the cotton in the pickup, he'd go to the gin, wait to get it ginned. By the time he got back they'd have another load, and he spent days. And I have an exhibit here in the History Center about that cotton picking experience. And I always say I am an Oklahoman because of cotton, and then Mom was born 4 years later.

JE: Wow. Oh, that was your grandfather you were talking about?

BB: That was my grandfather, right.

JE: Right. And your mother, her personality and all, what kind of a person was she?

BB: Well, Mom was the youngest of 8. By the time she was born, her oldest sister, my Aunt Agnes, Aggie Steelman of Duncan, Oklahoma, was out of the home already, so she was the baby. And she was a talented baby. She could sing. She was a pretty little girl, a beautiful woman, and she made a career in television with the beauty and the communication skills. But she was a singer from the earliest days, and so she always had the spotlight on her as a child growing up even in poor, small rural Oklahoma.

But she had that very outgoing personality. She had a little bit of a wild streak in her. She liked men and dating and married my dad, who was a dashing highway patrolman, 10 years or 8 years older than her. But Mom had that energy, and I call them strong women. I've always been an admirer of strong women. I've advocated collecting stories of strong women and putting women in powers of authority. Generally, most things go better when women are in charge, I've noticed. And so I learned that from my mother, who had strong personality at a time when women had that glass ceiling very low. With her talent and energy and ambition and ability, she was able to crack through that glass ceiling at a time when women were supposed to be teachers, secretaries, or housewives. That was about it in the 1940s and 1950s.

And she said, no, divorce, raising two kids, she created a career by being her own producer of a television show and was on air from 1958 to 1975. Did over 3000 live broadcasts representing this community, and she made $50

a week from the show, but she made her money by selling commercial time, by doing commercials. I was a child actor on the stage eating Kitty Clover potato chips. And then she would go to a beauty contest and be a judge and make a little bit of money. She would go to an opening of the world's largest truck stop in 1959 and be the celebrity on site, making enough money to raise us kids. We moved in with an aunt into a little house with two women, one widowed, one divorced, and 5 kids. Best time of my childhood.

JE: Wasn't the television show Romper Room? She was hostess of that?

BB: That was the first. She was teaching at the time, did an open audition. And with her personality, at that time there was no syndication through the airwaves, no satellites at the time, and it was expensive to send out film. The creator of Romper Room wanted a local hostess, educator. It was preschool, and Mom did this open invitation, went to Baltimore for one week training, came back, and KOCO started producing the Romper Room show with Miss Ida as that teacher. And it was a one-camera shoot in a little grocery store in what's now Britton, Oklahoma, because they could do 49% of their production outside of Enid. And she would, looking at the camera teaching the kids, she'd say, OK, now these kids are drinking Borden chocolate milk. Mom, you need to go buy Borden's milk. And so selling that every time.

And she learned to be an entrepreneur through communication, much as you have done through radio through the years. She learned the medium of television and understood that was connecting talent and art and creativity with consumers, and that there was room for business in there. People would pay for airtime to sell their products. She said, well, this Borden milk is good for kids. I like to sell it. And that was her attitude, kind of the way I do history. History is good for people. Let's get out and sell it. You need to give me money. You need to give me your votes because I want to deliver this service to the people. And that's the way Mom approached the television industry.

JE: We could say this is KOCO TV here in Oklahoma City, so she was obviously very charismatic would be the word we put on her, obviously. And then in the magazine type formats for many, many years she did that as well beyond the Romper Room.

BB: She did. She was out of work for a year. They moved Romper Room back to Enid because of FCC rules. She did not want to move to Enid. She was trying to keep her marriage alive at the time. Dad was a highway patrolman on Route 66, so we had to stay in Edmond. So for years she became a promotion person for Dennis Donuts. A local guy named Dennis started opening donut shops, and all of us baby boomers, of course, love donuts. I still do to this day when I indulge. But she promoted that. They bought her a '59 Chevy convertible that was black with a red boot, and she'd go from school to school getting kids to go donate. I was the actual elephant in front of the stores with one hand at the trunk doing this and one hand greeting the kids. But then she got back on television, largely because of leadership. John, Admiral John Kirkpatrick, businessman, oilman, philanthropist here in Oklahoma City whose reputation is legendary, wanted a show that promoted his city. KOCO stands for K, was the call letter for every station west of the Mississippi by that time, but it was Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, KOCO. He wanted a show that promoted his community, would give free airtime to Lyric Theater, to Barton Theaters, to people putting together a fundraiser.

Well, her show, a magazine format, allowed people to come onto the air to sell their services. Jody Miller, who passed away this last year, famous country and western music star. The first Grammy given to a woman was Jody Miller from Blanchard, Oklahoma. Her first appearance in front of an audience was on the Ida B show. That started her career. There were other people like that who used that as an opportunity. Steve Ripley, a common friend that you and I have known and admired so much, Steve played on the Ida B show when he was in a garage band here in Oklahoma City in the 1960s. Well, that was promoting Oklahoma City, and Mom had a talent for reaching out to someone and pulling their story out of them, like you do with radio. In this series she could engage people, and she was just witty enough to keep it lively and to keep it moving, and stayed on that air for the 3000 shows.

JE: You were like 7, 8, 9 years old when you were helping your mother, weren't you? You were introduced and on stage at a very early age.

BB: And I hated it. I did not want to be in the spotlight. I had, my dad was the youngest of 8, the brightest, the big athlete, and so I had superstars as parents who liked the spotlight, the center of attention. I was very willing

to kind of stand to the sideline and watch these two amazing people. So when she wanted me on television, she had to just drag me into the shows to eat the potato chips or whatever it might be. But I was learning about communication skills, and that was her skill set that served her so well. And our family, of course, she knew how to sell, she knew how to engage people, and that salesmanship really came, that I've used in history, selling history through my books, through the exhibits, through fundraising. I think a lot of that came from my mom Ida B.

JE: She started an advertising agency, didn't she?

BB: She did. She married for a fourth time, eventually five times, and the last one lasted more than all the others together. Great guy, Bird Dog Rogers, a Cherokee Indian. But she got widowed, and with, I think it was number 4 if you count my dad twice. And he died, and she wanted, she was not ready to retire to the lake in Puerto Vallarta where they had a place, so she started an ad agency, and it was the first woman-owned advertising agency in the state. And she had a small staff. Her problem was she was a better communicator than a business person. She gave a lot of free time and comps to people. She said, well, I've got a good cause. Would you help us with the Children's Center? She wrote a jingle for the Children's Center. This is a place here in Oklahoma City that if you talk about Christianity, just embrace the Christian ethic, we've got to help these children who were born with no arms or could not see or could not speak or with some kind of problems. But still, these are human beings we've got to take care of. That's the Children's Center. She wrote a jingle for them and did a shirt. I still have it. It's a little pre-infant handprint on the shirt. But she never charged them a penny. That was her way to help. And so of course if you have overhead with staff and office space, you've got to feed the beast. She learned that she was not great at feeding the beast. She was better at the communication skills. But she had the firm and stuck with it for a number of years, probably longer than she should have, and continued doing promotion for different clients. And she'd take on a pet cause and just do her best. And then eventually her fifth husband, Bird Dog Rogers, an old cowboy, rodeo cowboy athlete, became her project. And they were a good pair together.

Chapter 3 – 10:45
Listening to History

John Erling (JE): Then your father, your father's name was?

Bob Blackburn (BB): Bob Blackburn Senior. Bobby, and my name is real Bobby, and he was Bobby Blackburn Senior and he was an Oklahoma Highway patrolman.

JE: But he was also a teacher, wasn't he?

BB: He was. His career started, of course, born in 1921. My grandma ran the public pool, swimming pool in Claremore, Dad was a lifeguard and he was a big 6 ft 1 guy, well built. He says, I'm 3rd generation Irish American. My granddad was first generation Irish American. Dad was 2. And for genetically, we like beer. And so my granddad would make beer during the years of prohibition, and he'd feed my dad was a little scrawny as a kid, so he'd feed him the foam off the top of the beer that he was scraping off. Dad became kind of this big guy, all-state football player, played at Wyoming University. Hitchhiked back.

He didn't like the winters. Drafted into the Army Air Corps, played, I'll never forget I asked Dad, Dad, what did you do during the war? You know, I played football. You got to the base in Texas, base commander loved football, had a base football team. Dad played football 6 months, softball 6 months. They beat Texas A&M twice. They had those football players. And so Dad comes out, highway patrol had been abandoned, really, created in 1937. Bud Gentry, the first commissioner, gave these guys the opportunity to enforce the law around the state across jurisdiction. All drafted or joined. 45, reorganized that. Dad was one of those first in that first school after the war, became a highway patrolman assigned to Route 66. And he loved the action. He always loved that 3:00 to 7 o'clock shift because that's when the action was there. Stayed a trooper until 59, retired. And then went back, got his master's degree, OSU A&M earlier, and taught Northwest Classing for a couple of years.

Oklahoma Military Academy a couple of years, and then he and a group from Oklahoma Military Academy, basically his Claremore buddies, went

down to Seminole to start Seminole Junior College in the 1960s, and that's where he would end his career as the dean of arts and sciences, teaching government, criminal justice, and US history.

JE: And history. So is that where this is coming from for you maybe, history? Did you learn from him or realize that's a pretty important topic?

BB: I think it's a combination. My earliest memories of really being interested in history comes from my grandmother, my mom's mom, Effi Turley, who lived at 1317 North Dakota in Chickasha, Oklahoma, Castle 43414. I still remember her phone number. She was the rock in my life of Mom with, you know, being Mom and Dad, kind of a distant father. Grandma Turley was my rock and spent a lot of time with her growing up and even all the way through college. If I went home for the holidays in college, it was usually to Chickasha to see my granny. And Granny was the youngest of two families raised by my great grandfather, Andrew C. Young. He was a Civil War veteran. South Carolina, joined in April of '61, believed in the Southern cause, fought, captured at the tree from Gettysburg in what we would call a Yankee POW camp at lookout point or Point Lookout, Maryland.

Well, Granny heard these stories growing up firsthand from her Confederate veteran. She lived to be 98. I grew up sitting on the couch with her, with her arm around me, this comforting blanket of love, with her telling me these stories of the Civil War, of the best meal he ever had was jumping into the Chesapeake and gathering the turnip peelings the Yankees had thrown into the bay and then boiling that down for his meal on Christmas Day. And I heard those stories growing up. I heard about the roots in Arkansas and coming to Oklahoma in 25 and that cotton crop and I don't know, it just made sense to me, and I've always enjoyed listening to stories. Learned to be a good listener, know when to shut up and listen, and I think that's where it started. My Aunt Mary, who was a teacher in Sterling, Oklahoma, lived in Rush Springs, the big town of Rush Springs, where my uncle was a barber.

I would stay a week with aunts and uncles. He kind of farmed out, you know, go out and learned about life. So in Rush Springs, I must have been 12 or 13. I'd gone through all the National Geographics, like us kids looking at the pictures first, but then going back and reading stories, and finally I

got a book out and she came in one day. What are you reading? I says, you have a US history book here. I was just reading the US history book, just starting page one and reading on. She said, That's amazing. Well, that interest was there for some reason.

History always made sense to me. I had great teachers, especially at Putnam City, where I would eventually graduate my last two years. Problems of democracy. I had a great English teacher there, and I wanted to be a writer. I enjoyed writing coming out of all of that with my interest in history and that experience.

JE: All right, so then your education, I think, started actually in Edmond in grade school. And then you moved around a lot back to Edmond for a couple of years and then, as you said, you graduated from Putnam City. I wanted to talk about your interest in writing. Did that come out of high school? Why? Where did that come from, your writing interest?

BB: It really did. I always was a reader. I remember reading, I read a biography of Jim Thorpe when I was in the 7th grade. You know, I'd go to the library and you could check out books. When I'd go to Rush Springs with Aunt Mary, first place we would go would be the library. I'd check out books. So I was always a reader.

And I think to be a good writer, you've got to be a reader, a pro, you have to study structure. You have to understand how people communicate with words. So I always enjoyed that, but by the time I got to high school, I had a great teacher, and people in Oklahoma City will know this name, but David Holt is the mayor. His dad was Stroud Holt, and Stroud had just completed his college degree, was working on his master's part time, but he was teaching at Putnam City, which is one of the more progressive districts in the state, probably paid a little better than Oklahoma City public schools, and Stroud was the English teacher.

And when we moved from Edmond to the north side again and I enrolled, I just enrolled and they called it advanced studies at the time, or I don't remember the exact name, but it would have been advanced placement is what they'd call it today, and they had English and regular English. Well, I took that and Stroud taught that. I didn't know what I was doing. I just, you know, checking boxes. Yeah, I'll take that because I liked it. Well, he had us

reading Shakespeare. And to get us engaged with Shakespeare, he'd bring in a Beatles album. Of course, this is 1967, 1968. He'd bring in a Beatles album and all of us kids knew all the Beatles songs. That if you didn't go through the Beatles era, kids today don't know what being a fan is, but he'd bring in a Beatles and he'd play a couple of songs and we, oh, wow, that's really cool, we'd say. And then he'd give us the lyrics in written form.

He'd say, study the structure. Well, wow, that is poetry. Look at the rhythm. Look at the use of the words and the alliteration and yeah, this is cool. Well then we'd read Shakespeare. Shakespeare was doing the same thing. He was using rhythm and alliteration and imagery and all these rhetorical devices that writers have in their palette. And so I was learning, and we would read out loud because Shakespeare has to be read out loud. For those out there who have not discovered Shakespeare, it'll change your life. But you have to read it out loud. You can't just read it in the words. It's archaic enough or it doesn't quite make, but if you read it out loud, it sings. It's like music.

And so I learned to appreciate Shakespeare, and then, of course, going through all the great American writers. Well, Stroud had us writing one act plays. Or take yourself out of the story and write a play in third person. Wow, OK. And so we'd study structure and I'd write that, you know, we'd write that and then the essays, of course. And so I, when I was graduating, if they have career day in most high schools. Well, my career day, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer because my dad, I wanted to go into law enforcement, but I saw the price that lawmen pay or pay on the front lines, hurts families. They love the action, they're enforcing or they're protecting us, but they pay a price. Just like teachers pay a price for low pay and lack of respect. But anyway, I saw that, I thought, well, I'd like to do that. I thought, well, I'm gonna be a prosecutor and a judge. So I said, I'm gonna get into law.

At career day they said, OK, best thing you can do is English. Learn to communicate, learn to read, learn to reason, learn how to put together a brief. Second, understand your community. Political science or history would be two good options. Ding ding ding. When I go to college, I'm gonna be history and English, which I did all the way through the PhD. So coming out of high school, with those teachers there and my writing, I

made the right choice in college and decided partly for financial reasons. I had very little help.

My dad said, OK, Bobby, here's the deal on college. He says, I'll give you $500 a semester. You stretch that as far as you can, and then work for the rest or find a way to make, OK, and I was comfortable with that. I was appreciative that I had $500 cushion, so I decided instead of OUOSU or going out of state. Southwestern. I had two cousins that had gone through Southwestern, one in pharmacy, one in drama, and knew about it, had my best friend in high school's brother was already there, so it was kind of a natural thing for us to look at Weatherford, Oklahoma, Southwestern State College, as we called it at the time.

JE: I have to circle back because your teacher, Mr. Holt. He took something that he knew you kids would be interested in to teach you. I think that was clever. I don't know if all teachers think that way or not, but I mean, yeah, we want to study the Beatles. He could have taken something else and it would have been real boring to you, but he got you involved at the get go. That was a marvel. That was a marvelous mood.

BB: Well, in salesmanship, he was selling us on what we could learn.

Chapter 4 – 8:45
Carpentry

John Erling (JE): So you get your BA at Southwestern and then your master's at Oklahoma State in 1976. And then why did you go back to get your PhD in history?

Bob Blackburn (BB): Well, when I went to OSU, I wanted to be a writer. In fact, coming out of Southwestern where I had great history professors. I had an English teacher, Doctor Thomas. I'll never forget English usage. We had to learn three different kinds of grammar. There's traditional, structural, and transformational. Most people don't even know there are different kinds of ways to look at the English language and how to dissect it and use it, structure it. Doctor Thomas had us writing 300 words a day. And he, you never knew when he was gonna pick up the journal, so you had to carry it

with you, and you had to keep up, like most of us college students interested in girls and where there's the next beer, and then do it all at the last minute. You had to write 300 words a day.

Well, as I've learned, the 10,000 hour rule, to get good at anything, you do it 10,000 hours, and you can be a baseball player, you can be a musician or a writer. Well, I learned the advantage of practice and writing and analyzing. And so coming out of Southwestern, I had good foundations. But I didn't know what I wanted to do, and this would have been in May of '73 when I graduated Southwestern. I was dating a girl I had met the year before, she was from Woodward. She wanted to be a teacher. I didn't know what I wanted her to do, so I says, I'm gonna take a break. And so I worked a summer job on the Illinois River camp paddle trails as a canoeing instructor right up near the Arkansas border.

Watts Lake is just across the, excuse me, Lake Francis is just across the border, and then you have Watts was the closest little town. And every two weeks, I'd take a group down the Illinois River 75 miles. I just had a great summer. Just a time to relax and rest and read. I took a stack of books and read as much as I could. And coming out of that, I was an old carpenter. I'd learned carpentry from an uncle. And so I started full-time carpentry in the summers at age 16, the minute I could drive. And so this would have been 60s when they were building houses everywhere. So I learned to be a frameman carpenter.

I had a talent for it, but so my uncle made me a cornice carpenter because I was careful, and I could, and redwood at the time was used for fascia, and I could come in and be creative and do carpentry. So I had my carpenter skills. I had my tools, tool belt. And at the time that minimum wage was $1.06 an hour working at selling cameras at Montgomery Ward's, I could make $250 carpenter. So, of course, I want to be a carpenter. Well, that year, I got my tool belt on and did a little work. Well, at some point, I had about $400 in my pocket the days when it was all cash. A cousin who had about 200 bucks.

I said, let's go see the west. OK, so we just quit everything. Our moms heard about it, freaked out, filled up the trunk of my '69 Chevy with food. Fortunately, they did that. We had a pup tent and a little cook stove. We

didn't know where we were going. Let's go till we run out of money. And we spent 6 weeks on the road, literally living in a pup tent, cooking over a stove, except in Las Vegas, $16 a night at a KOA where I could take a shower. Using a bonus buck in the mint, I got a great all you can eat meal for like 2 bucks. With bonus bucks, I won about 16 bucks on the roulette that let us play the slots all night long.

But the rest of the time I was sleeping on the side of the road or in a park somewhere. I had a great time, good learning, but I learned. I did not want to be in San Diego the last night we were partying and took some side tracks that I wasn't comfortable with. Next day, I said, Cousin, let's go home, you know, like Dorothy, no place like home.

I had that feeling and that final understanding. You're not gonna be any happier in San Diego or San Francisco than you're gonna be wherever you are. Happiness is where you are at the moment. So, literally, we drove home in 2 days. Fortunately, I had enough money to pay, you know, the 32 cents a gallon of gas to get home. Put on the nail belt, just went out to construction sites, looked at a crew that I thought might look efficient. Hey, I'm a carpenter. I'll work for $3.25 an hour. Yeah, walk on. No unions in Oklahoma, so it was easy. I'd found in California, you couldn't get a job without being a member of the union.

So I could, and I had my tool belt with me there thinking, well, if I end up, I could be a carpenter, come back. Well, I'm working through the fall, into the winter, February of '74. Earlier, you and I were talking about moments in a person's life that changes all of a sudden. I was hanging rafters on a 7-pitch roof, and a 7-pitch roof is a pretty steep roof, and it was a big house. So I had scaffolding. It was a 2-story house, so I was on scaffolding, 2 stories up, grabbing the rafters, putting them up against the ridge, nailing them in before nail guns, and it was so cold that day. I had on like 6 layers, and I had my gloves with the fingers cut out so I could grab the nails.

And I was so cold and I was thinking, you know, every day is kind of the same, few challenges here, but I can't see doing carpentry the rest of my life and I don't want to be cold the rest of my life. What I want to do, so one of those moments, hey, I've got to make a decision. I can't drift and party every night and get that 120 bucks in my pocket on Friday and spend it by

Thursday. Those days are over. So I remembered a professor named Doctor Odie Falk.

Odie had come to Southwestern my senior year. I'd been president of Phi Alpha Theta Group, so I was in charge of corresponding with him to come give a speech to our history group and faculty. Took him out for lunch, had to introduce him, so I read his most recent book from Oxford University Press, History of Tombstone, Arizona. I just fell in love with his style. It was aggressive. It was kind of a Hemingway approach, hard-hitting, declarative sentences, and getting into the story and the world -- it was descriptive writing.

Most historians write a hypothetical. I'm gonna prove a point. Then you get up to the lyrical, the descriptive, and Odie was a descriptive writer. I thought, damn, that's good. So I knew about Odie from that experience, took him to lunch. He was an old marine. I kind of bonded with him. Well, in February, I literally, more than a year later, I call him on the phone. I say, Doctor Falkl, this is Bob Blackburn. You may not remember me as Southwestern.

And he played, he acted like he did. I doubt if he did. I says, I want to do what you do. I want to write books. He says, I'm, I'm, I said, I'm doing carpentry right now, don't have any money, don't have any financial support. Do you have any way that you could help me with financial? He said, No, giving out all my teaching assistantships, all the waivers, I've already gone through that for the next year. He said, but if you will come and enroll next fall, I'll take you on as a provisional student, master's level, see how you do.

And then after a year, we'll evaluate, do you have a future? Do I want you here? Do you want to be here? I says, you're on. So I started saving my money from that point on February of '74. I got my commercial driver's license so I could drive a school bus in Stillwater. So every morning and afternoon, I had to break away. I had to take Spanish. You had to have two languages. So I was taking all my history courses, but fortunately, I had a good professor, Mike Smith, who drove me to Austin because he believed in what I was doing. I was studying a time when US troopers invaded Mexico in 1873 chasing Indians and bandits.

And so I was doing a history of that, but I needed access to some of the Spanish documents down at UT in Austin. He paid for my way, put me up, believed in me. I ran out of money in April of that year, he let me shower in his house, living in my Volkswagen van that I had at the time. And but through all of that, I was selected to read a paper at the Texas State Historical Association, and all of this impressed Odie enough that I was willing to work that hard. He says, OK. You can become a teaching assistant, $360 a month. I remember that figure because all of a sudden I felt like I was rich at $360 a month.

And he says, I'll waive your tuition fees. And I read that paper at Texas State in Galveston. In that year, I started on my master's thesis, which was a History of the Highway Patrol.

Chapter 5 – 6:15
PHD

Bob Blackburn (BB): Fortunately for me, by this time, it's 1976, actually probably late 1975. I get a call from a book publisher who says, we've got a contract with the Department of Public Safety, Roger Webb, you probably know Roger, president at Northeastern and then later UCO, but Roger was commissioner during the David Boren administration. Talk about coincidence. And he says, I've got a contract with him to do a centennial yearbook with a picture of all the troopers, the driver's license examiners, but he wants a history.

He wants a little more substance in it. Can I pay you $500 to write that text? I said, can you? Yes, I can do that. And so I got a contract to write that first manuscript. I had to expand it to the other divisions, the Department of Public Safety, but told Odie. Odie had me give a speech to the other graduate students. Book contract, how'd you do it? So I went in, did that, got my name on it, and that was '76, and I'd say that's my first book out of the 27 that I started with that year. But Odie Falk taught me how to write.

Leroy Fisher, another professor, taught me how to serve the community. The real land grant college mission is to serve the community. Started off

with agriculture when most Americans were farmers and ranchers, but it had changed by the 20th century, but Leroy embraced it. He was on everything. Well, I would tag along with Leroy Fisher to all these different groups. That started my networking in the 1970s. I was a bit of an entrepreneur and hustler like my mom, and so I was getting contracts.

Historic preservation was brand new, so they needed people. So I got a contract with the State Historical Society, another turning point. Pulled it off, did a good job. They liked it. I was working for entrepreneur Bricktown here in Oklahoma City started with a guy named Neil Horton. Neil had an idea, needed a young architect that turned out to be Don Beck, and he needed a historian to put 10 buildings on the National Register for 10% tax credits on these old buildings. Hired me, PhD candidate.

Again, I don't know why $500 kept recurring, but for $500 I put 10 buildings on the National Register. Then others started calling me to do the same thing, and that's what OSU did for me, the networking, learning how to write, learning how to work with people, how to survive the politics of campus, where as Odie would always say, the fights are so bitter because the stakes are so petty. But they're gonna fight over it anyway, and I know you had had some of that experience. Well, I learned how to survive that and deal with it. So that was a great learning experience for me in college.

John Erling (JE): Yeah. So then we bring you to getting your PhD from OSU. In '79, I believe it was. Didn't you get married about at the same time?

BB: A bit of a sidebar here is that I thought I was gonna finish the dissertation in June of '78, and that would have been very quick. That would have been quicker than any PhD student had ever, but I couldn't resist taking on these contracts. And so I was doing that and that was diverting my attention, but I kept writing and I. At that time, my goal was 10 pages a day, and now it's 5 pages a day. I just don't have to force myself, but 10 pages a day and I was making pretty good progress living in a trailer out in rural Payne County.

So I was doing that, but Debbie and I said, well, we're going to get married in June of '78. I thought, I'll have my PhD, I'll know what I want to do by then. And I lacked 3 or 4 chapters at that point. And I said, let's go ahead

and get married. Let's go ahead and jump off into the unknown and get married. She was teaching at Althus at the time. She was willing to give up that job. We were gonna move to Oklahoma City, where I would continue my consulting. I thought, well, I can probably support us while I finish the dissertation.

We get married in June down at the Wichita Wildlife Refuge in the chapel there at the Holy City because I'm a hiker. Wichita Mountains to me, that's the most magical place in all of Oklahoma. So we got married there.

JE: And her name?

BB: Debbie Stevens from Woodward, Oklahoma, teacher, has been the rock for me all these years, whereas I'm, you know, I'm the dog that sees a squirrel. Oh, I'm gonna where he's going. I'm gonna go follow. She's a rock. She's very steady, very structured, very a true Christian. She believes in these universal truths. Well, that was good for me at a time, still is. And so we got married, happily married. In those years everything else is secondary, including my dissertation.

So, marriage first. Consulting second, trying to pay the bills to stay in an apartment. Finally, an intervention, two of my good friends, Paul Lambert, Kenny Franks, did an intervention, called me and they said, OK, Bob. You haven't done anything on your dissertation in almost a year. You've got to finish this thing. Too many ABDs out there, all but dissertations, floating around. People say, oh, I'm gonna finish that someday. And you only have a limit. You have to get extensions if you don't meet it. They said, you got to beat that limit. You cannot put this off. And so they supported me financially. But I think it was like 4 weeks or something. This is, you got to finish those 4 chapters in 4 weeks. I said, I can do that.

So I sat in Paul Lambert's house on 19th Street in Heritage Hills and worked day and night and knocked out those last 4 chapters. It was accepted. Leroy Fisher helped me get and graduate then in '79. And by that time, part of the consulting was back at the Oklahoma Historical Society where people here thought I was working for the Historical Society when I was just doing contract work in and out, get whatever my duty was, go out and do the work. In the meantime, making all my contacts in Oklahoma City.

I got into a group called Westerners International, the Indian Territory Posse, what they call themselves, a group that had started out of Chicago in the 60s. Earl Gibson was the first president of that and all these historians, John Kirkpatrick was in that, Doug Richardson, Byron Gambulus of Byron's Liquor Store.

I got to meet these people in the community, learning from the Jack Conns and the way that all works. So this is all kind of a learning experience for me.

Chapter 6 – 4:55
State Rep. Debbie Blackburn

John Erling (JE): But wasn't -- didn't Debbie run for office? Wasn't she elected to the state House of Representatives?

Bob Blackburn (BB): She was. She was working a variety of jobs until our son was born in '82, so July 18th, Beau was born and she decided she needed to stay home, so she quits her job with Southwestern Bell.

She had had a job at OETA for a short time with education, but working in Southwestern Bell during the boom years before the bust there in July of '85. And so we have the child, she stays home for 4 years until he can get into kindergarten. And then coming out of that, we were living in Heritage Hills, which is a historic neighborhood, and she really gets involved with neighborhood. She's a great organizer, leader, and she's involved.

Well, she gets a job at this struggling organization called Neighborhood Alliance is what we call it today. Then had the sexy name of something like Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation. But it was a nonprofit with some city funding, raising money, trying to encourage strong neighborhoods, inner city redevelopment, diversity would have been a big thing, affordable housing. Well, that became her passion.

And in '88, city leaders asked her to team with Bob Macy, who is the district attorney at the time, to try to get a public sales tax initiative passed by the

voters. People in Oklahoma City turned down every bond issue since the crash in '82–'85, and so they set about having a dedicated fund for police and fire protection, and it passes, and Debbie was the main spokesperson, willing to take a risk. It passes, so suddenly she's in the political world of getting things done.

Kind of go a few years forward. She's still working Neighborhood Alliance, doing some other things, had helped create Pasillo Redevelopment Corporation for inner city redevelopment. And suddenly our state representative, Linda Larison in Central Oklahoma City, says, I don't have the fire in the belly to fight it anymore. Politics are changing. Debbie, Democrat, Linda, Democrat, saw the tidal wave coming in '94. Linda says, I don't have the fire in the belly. Debbie, would you run? Last minute she gets in. I'll never forget we raised $11,000 for that campaign. Today, $11,000 would not even pay for the first poll, much less, I think $200,000 is what they say now is minimum to run a race, but raised 11. I did her computer. I designed her brochures. I walked, put up signs. Won by 31 votes in '94. That was the year Frank Keating was elected. The first year that more Republicans elected to the legislature than Democrats. It was the beginning of that shift that you see.

But Debbie gets in and she asked me once, she said, Husband, do you think that I should run for the legislature? I says, I'm not gonna recommend because if I tell you the wrong thing and you don't like it later then I'm to blame. I'm not gonna be the bad guy here. So I says, you do what you want to do. And I says, I'll tell you one thing, Debbie sees the world in black and white, right or wrong. There's very little gray area in her. You're either right or you're wrong, and I've learned those lessons over the years. But I says, you will not like the legislature. It's all about compromise. It's all about doing this because you see something that you might get done in 2 more years, and you have to swallow deeply and say, yeah, I'll vote for that bad bill that's gonna hurt people. Because I can help them later. That's the way of the world. You know that world. And your gifted wife who's out there and understands that system. I says, you won't like it. Because they're gonna ask you to compromise, and you're gonna have to, you will say no, I have no doubt.

Well, the first person who recognized the strength of that was Larry Adair,

who became Speaker, and Larry Adair needed a junkyard dog. Debbie, 98 pounds, a woman in a world dominated by men. Debbie is that. So he said, OK, you're gonna be in charge of appropriation for education. And that was the front line of the fight. This is the time when charter schools are just being mentioned. This is a fight where rural and urban Oklahoma, which is the real fight, Democrat–Republican is what most people think. It was really a rural–urban fight. So you're gonna be on that front line. You've got to navigate this. And she was there and for 4 years was his appropriation junkyard dog. If he said, we need to make Votech a little more accountable, he just had the guts to do it. And of course, at the end, when the guys up in the top room would compromise, she'd grit her teeth and say, oh blah blah, but she was there doing what she could and she served her 12 years and term limits finally got her out.

JE: What a proud time that was for her and still is, obviously, yeah.

Chapter 7 – 7:45
Chronicles

John Erling (JE): Let's bring you here to the Oklahoma History Center. Did you come on as an assistant director, Comprehensive Historic Site Survey '77–'78? Is that true?

Bob Blackburn (BB): That was one of the consulting projects, but it was with the Oklahoma Historical Society Historic Preservation Office. Doctor Howard Meredith was the staff member for Historic Preservation, but Oklahoma, typical of a lot of national trends, was late coming to the table saying, yeah, we need preservation. Urban renewal had gutted Oklahoma City, had damaged Tulsa. We have highways cutting through neighborhoods doing what happened in New York City, you know, in the old days. What's happening here? Well, historic preservation was, we can do better. Well, they didn't have staff. Melvena Heisch was the assistant. No more staff, so they were having to contract out. Well, I was able to get one of the contracts to do a survey of downtown Oklahoma City. South 7th to the Santa Fe tracks on the east to Walker on the west, looking at every building, determining its value. Architecturally significant, did something

happen there that should be significant, that we should be aware of, and it was really for the review process. A lot of people think preservation is to tell people no, it's not. It's to make good decisions. If it's federal funds involved, let's make a good decision on how they're used. That's what preservation is at its fundamental level.

So if someone wants a 40% tax credit, I've fought the political battles. We should do what we want. We should be able to put a bar here on top of the roof with spotlights. No, if the federal funds and 40% of it is us taxpayers, taxpayers have a right to say you can't do that because it's not good. So anyway, preservation, so I'm getting in on preservation and while I'm doing that contract, I get a contract to catch the Chronicles up. There had been a change. The assistant editor couldn't handle it, got it behind issues, so they hired my little company and me, largely to go in. And of course I've got the work ethic. I knocked out 4 issues of Chronicles in like 6 months.

JE: And the Chronicles are?

BB: I'm sorry, the Chronicles of Oklahoma, which is the professional journal, the academic journal of the Historical Society that had been published since 1921. It is the repository of Oklahoma history.

If you're going back to study the history of radio, you go to the Chronicles to find out who has written about radio. When I do a book on Sonic America's drive-ins, I go back and find out who's done something on 1950s in rural Oklahoma and why Troy Smith wanted to create that company. So the Chronicles, it was a great learning experience. I could use my English background, my history background, got them out, doing the survey. Everyone thought I worked here. And then there was an opening. The board finally said we were gonna fill that editor's position full time. I says, I want in. And so I applied for it, got the job in '89, sometime in '89. I think officially it's, they say that I started working in '90 because I was hired as a seasonal or something just to get hired and then started full time, but it was in the fall of '79 when I become editor.

And for 10 years, it's the greatest postdoctoral fellowship I could have had. If I had gone to Chicago for a fellowship or to Pasadena and the Huntington Foundation and done these fellowships, I could not have learned what I did in those 10 years of reading 100 manuscripts a year. So as you'd send in

a story about radio, I would read it and if I chose the 20 to be, I would read them 10 times before they ever came out in print. So I'd check the footnotes. Where did they find that information? Well, I'd say, well, that's a pretty creative place to find information. How did they use oral history? How did they structure it? What's this combination of rhythm? Some were good writers, some were not, but I might find a topic. I'll never forget that one on the swinging bridges over the Red River at a time before government could build bridges, entrepreneurs would build these bridges across, and it was a good topic. I said, I love it, but it was crazy organized and writing was marginal. So I'd rewrite these things. So I would do that, and I was learning in those 10 years at the same time, networking, still doing consulting, writing books, trying to make a living with my Debbie off work at home with the kid, renovating houses, trying to add some value there, using the cash from books and my consulting to buy the next lot of supplies to keep working on homes.

But those 10 years from ’79 to ’89 were critical. Plus, I survived 5 executive directors hired and fired. Schizophrenic organization. Do we keep things as they always have been, where a few people get to play in their little sandbox and collect and enjoy, or do we really become an outreach organization trying to sell history to the public? Some board members wanted it, some didn't. Fighting. Several executive directors could not survive those fights and went down. I was observing and I was learning and learning about the community and local politics because we had well over 30 museums and sites scattered around the state. Some in Little Dixie, some in the Cherokee Outlet, some in Cherokee country. So I was learning through working with those groups. What are the dynamics here? What are the shifting sands? And so by ’89, I was in a good position of having learned both history and the community and the nature of politics and government.

JE: So you worked your way on then as the deputy executive director.

BB: Right. I applied for that. They hired a new executive director who had been the deputy director, so he's elevated.

JE: And who was that?

BB: Blake Wade, and Blake was career military, journalism background, strong personality, and an outgoing personality. He could have made a million

dollars as a salesperson. He just had that ability and would later do that with the Centennial. When he would eventually leave, he would go to be the staff person for the Centennial and then for the First American Families Museum. But Blake was the director, he was there, and we talked and they hired me to be his deputy. He did not have a history degree, but he understood how to do the politics because the army is the greatest bureaucracy in the world. And you have to deal with bureaucracy in government. It's there for a reason, is to protect public resources, is to serve. So Blake understood that. He understood how to do that and he was jovial. People loved him, liked being with him. Well, the board and he understood we need a history guy too. What are the collections we go for? How do we structure this? How do we improve our museums? How do we engage the public? Needed a salesman/historian.

Well, that was me, so I apply and so I'm bumped up into the administration. I retained the title of editor for another 10 years, even though I had great assistant editors, and I eventually called them associate editor because they were doing most of the work. Mary Ann Blochowiak was the great one. And others. But I'm trying to keep my foot in the world of history as well as government and administration collections, and I'm still doing books so I'm still writing a book about on the average of every 2 years, and that's at night, weekends, and holidays.

JE: I should say that I've interviewed Blake Wade for Voices of Oklahoma, and you can search his remarkable life on our website.

Chapter 8 – 10:19
Oklahoma History Center

John Erling (JE): So then you became the executive director. And how long were you the executive director?

Bob Blackburn (BB): In ’98, the centennial fever is starting and we had a governor at the time who said, yeah, we need to do something on our centennial. Frank Keating. He's the one that led the effort to get the dome. The dome would not be there today, and in my opinion, without the dome,

we don't do the renovation. Two hundred and some million dollars invested. Frank Keating saw the potential of the dome doing something in the house, the people's house. And so they create Centennial Commission with funding. Blake says that's what I want to do. So Blake leaves. He supports me and I apply for it and others apply for the job, but I'm hired in ’98 to be the executive director.

Well, the timing is good because the legislature had just approved a multifaceted bond issue to clean up Lincoln Boulevard, which was kind of a red light district at the time, to get state agencies back into better facilities, a bond issue to start the American Indian Museum, and a bond issue for the Supreme Court to move into the old historical building. Well, if you do that, what's gonna happen to the Historical Society? We get a new building. So I do the brief. In fact, I'd done that in last year's Blake was there, so I started on the brief probably in ’97. But I say we need $46 million and so many acres, and here's—it's a two volume architectural brief. I love working on that.

So that was all there at the time. And then they passed the bond issue, but instead of the $46 million I get $35 million. So the board has to make a decision. I go to them, I'm director, and I say, OK, board, we have to make a decision, we turn this down because it's not enough to do it right or do we start. Well, Frank Keating, of course, he's gung ho. Hopefully you'll have Frank on one. You have.

JE: I do have him, yes.

BB: He's one of the great salesmen and optimists of all time. You know, his motto should be, why can't we? You know, why aren't we better than Texas, not just how can we get close? Why aren't we better? And so Frank was there.

I went to see him. He was governor, and I said, Governor, we've got this big decision. Do we go for this without all the money? Or do we dumb it down? He said, no, let's go for it. I'll help you get more money. We'll get another bond issue before I'm out. So I go to the board and I say, governor says this, a few legislators say it. If you told me, no, don't do it, dumb it down. And I said, we've got the Smithsonian National Archives model here that we developed that's gonna make us better than Texas, not just as

good at, but better at the time. And they say, let's go for it, unanimous, let's go.

So I'm walking out on this thin limb knowing that I'm gonna start a $46 million project with $35 million. In fact, now I say that it was $32 million. Thirty-two million and Blake had started acquiring the site. Instead of a million dollars in my business plan, it cost $4 million, willing seller only. Everyone who lost a house on this site came out 10 times better than they were. So I've got a $3 million deficit on a project that's already 32 million when I need 46.

So we start. Manhattan Construction—I would later write their centennial history—Manhattan at the time gets the contract. I say, OK, we got enough money to get it to the walls are up. But nothing inside the walls. I thought, OK. And so I'm learning. I worked with the legislature at the time. And it's unfortunately a revenue shortfall year. This is 2002 and 3. Governor Keating is gone. Brad Henry is the new governor. I go to Brad, I knew him. I say, Governor, here's the deal. We're getting ready to put plywood up on the windows here because we can't finish this building. We really have no tradition of raising money. But I think I can do that. And oil patch was already improving. ’98–’99, you see the changes in the oil patch. Here in Oklahoma City, largely with Chesapeake, Devon, Continental, and a few others. I says, things are pretty good right now. I think I can raise this money, but I need another bond issue.

So I go, governor says, yeah, I'll support it. So I go to Cal Hobson, president pro tem at the time, never forget Senator Morgan, chair of appropriation. I said, gentlemen, I've got to have more money to finish this thing. I need $18 million. And they said, oh, we've got a revenue shortfall. We're furloughing teachers. This is really—if I could have picked the worst time in financial history of the state, it would have been in 2002 and 3 and been turned down every year during Keating's last years. And so they say, sorry, we can't help.

I literally go home that day. I was a runner, still run some, but I go home, I think, I'm sort of, I said, what's my next career gonna be? Because I'm failing. And so I make my run. Sitting on the porch, drinking a beer thinking, now what, oh yeah, I can go back into academia. Maybe I can

write, make enough money as a consultant. So I'm sitting there having these kind of deep thoughts. And I had a cell phone. Cell phones were already around by this time. Cell phone rang and it's Senator Morgan.

He said, Bob, Cal and I talked about this. We want you to be successful. We want this thing to work. He says, but here's the deal, we will support a bond issue if there's no log rolling. The minute someone adds anything to that legislation, it's dead. He said, you've got to raise $12 million in private money to match it. And he said, third, you've got to get two-thirds of the legislature, both House and Senate, to sign a card saying they will vote for it. This can't be partisan. This is history. This is state. This is not Democrat–Republican. We can't let the Republicans bash us as big spending. You've got to get enough. At that time I had to get a bunch of Republicans.

I don't know why. One of those moments that will go to my grave with me. I thought, yes, I can do this. And I put down the phone. Debbie gets home. I said, well, yay. She, wait a minute, you've got to get two-thirds of them to sign up? You've got to keep them from log rolling? These are still the days of Billy Mickle, Kelly Haney, and professional log rolling. How can you raise $12 million? I don't know. I can do this.

And so basically the end of the story is I got the votes and I work the hallways and I put my roll call sheets in the archives. They're here today. And with a lot of them, it says, no, soft no, firm no. And then the next one will say, soft no, soft yes, yes, and then I circle it. And I started and I was chasing people to the bathrooms, and I would stand out. I got to know Clem McSpadden really well that year because he was always in the Senate lounge up front. And of course, I was doing my wheeling and dealing for the Historical Society anyway, so I was making some side deals, doing what I could, finally get a few votes more because I know some will change at the last minute, take cover. I understand that process.

So I take it back to Cal Hobson and Senator Morgan, and I say, I got the votes. They looked at each other and just started laughing. They said, we never thought you could do that. We didn't think we were really gonna have to do this. He says, how are you doing on fundraising? He says, oh, I've already got $500,000 commitments from Aubrey McClendon at

Chesapeake. I've got $500,000 from ONEOK in Tulsa. I got $500,000 from these other foundations, Kerr McGee. And I said, I'm working on a plan to get 1000 people to give us $1000 a year to sustain. Wow.

And there was no log rolling at that time.

JE: Tell us what log rolling is.

BB: Oh, I'm sorry; log rolling in the legislative speak is that someone sees a bill that's going to survive and succeed, they'll attach something with an amendment. Oh, well, if you're gonna get a bond issue for this, well, I want a bond issue for this project over here in Tahlequah or Guthrie or whatever. That's log rolling. So I had to prevent that working with my key legislators.

And then at the very end, I'll never forget, we're working on the actual legislation to do this bond issue. And the session's coming to—it's the last week, and that's nutty time. You've lived through enough of those nutty times the last week of a session. And the director of Central Services who's in charge of the bond writing tells the Senate bill writers in the Senate, you can't do this bond issue. It's not right.

Well, I'm literally sitting there when she's telling this bill writer, you can't do this. I said—and I use some foul language that I use sparingly. I was mad. So I called the bond underwriter at the time, and I said, Gary. This lady over here is telling us we can't do this, and you've told me we can because I had to understand advertising bond interest payments. So by this time I'm learning about—but I said, you told me I could advertise bond payments and they only need to do this. He said, yeah. I said tell this to the bill writer. He hands the phone to the bill, huh, uh-huh, OK, write the bill. It goes forward with it. Passes.

This thing could have failed so many ways, and that's the beginning. And then we raised $12 million in private funds, finished it out, opened in November 16th, 2005.

JE: This has to be one of the nicest in the nation. You've been on a bunch of them I'll bet. I bet this is one of the nicest.

BB: It is. In terms of now, the Texas, they would build a Bullock Center later, but the quality is not there, especially if you go square footage. Now, they've

got some great artifacts now, but I based it on the Minnesota History Center, the Atlanta History Center. I had, you know, I traveled all over the country looking on this brief. And we were able to win Smithsonian affiliation, and we're an affiliate of the National Archives. It's the only organization in the country that has affiliation with both, so we meet and exceed their standards.

Chapter 9 – 5:40
Route 66

John Erling (JE): You have many, many exhibits that you've produced down through the years. I remember one of them, the sit-ins, and I interviewed two people here in your permanent exhibit. You have the bar and the stools of the restaurant. I interviewed the daughter of Clara Luper, Marilyn, and Joyce Henderson in that exhibit, and it felt really unique to be there. How many museums are part of the Historical Society?

Bob Blackburn (BB): Well, that's always been a good question because we've always had a hybrid mix of museums. Some, we ran it all, we owned it, the title, we had the staff, we did operations, and then you get all the way to those that were owned by a local group or a nonprofit, and we might have a staff member there depending on politics. It's just, it's kind of messy business. But we really got down to about 30 by the time the History Center is up and running, and by that time I'd come up with a new structure.

We had 3 levels. We had our main line museums where we owned the building, we owned the collections, we had the staff, we did the operations. And then we had those that were a hybrid and then those we just supported with no staff, no ownership, but we supported. And so we had this structure, but I was always a believer in partnerships, that if we're gonna succeed in anything, History Center or Fort Gibson or Sequoyah Home site, we had to have partners. So I had always kind of excelled at that. I could go out and sell Cherokee Nation, you gotta be our partner, help us out. I'd go to communities and say, OK, we need something here in Kingfisher County for the Chisholm Trail Museum.

And so we've been developing these partner 501c3 support groups. We have one here at the History Center, Friends of the History Center, so we had support groups that was the local buy-in, the partnership that what they're doing for their community while we're doing it as the Oklahoma State community, here's our investment. So if these people from Cimarron County are putting money into our treasury to do our part, it's got to be statewide significance, and you got to show your support because you're getting most of the benefit here in the town.

Well, that was working pretty well and by raising standards. My learning process started with the Route 66 Museum in Clinton. I was still deputy, but I had to put together an 18% budget cut plan in the early 90s. And I was, it affected 14 museums, closing either totally or partially. Talk about a hornet's nest with the legislature. How can you cut this in my district? I can't lose these two jobs. I'm gonna have these people who supported me coming down my throat. I'm gonna get you fired if you do this. I said, sir, do what you gotta do. This is what I gotta do.

So I was learning, and so coming out of that, we closed a little museum in Clinton. It's called the Western Trails Museum, good location on Route 66 on Highway 40. No local support, staff members who weren't doing anything, no collections, a building that had been built during the Raymond Gary administration, underserving. So I went to, I'll never forget, Representative Winer and Senator Kerr. They still live in my memory. I say, gentlemen, believe in me. I'm not going to abandon your community, but I got to close this museum. It's a drain on taxpayer expenses, it's not giving us any value. They said, OK.

And so there's a new federal grant program at the time, eventually called Iced Tea. It had just been passed. I learned about it. I think I can get some money if we change the concept from Western Trails to transportation with largely highway transportation, specifically Route 66. Michael Wallis's book, The Mother Road, had just come out ’92. And so I see it coming together. So I apply for the funds, get over a million dollars, get a little bit of state money. We go back in, hire Rand Elliott, a gifted architect who was struggling at the time and really trying to build a reputation, comes up with a wonderful design. Michael Wallis is a consultant. That's when Michael and I become friends.

We pull all that together and working with the highway department, Gary Ridley was the district manager, later director of ODOT. We pull it off, we open, and I told the legislature, if you guys will believe in this, I'm not gonna come back to you for operating expenses. I think we can generate cash. Let's be more entrepreneurial. And I call it our entrepreneurial business plan for a state agency. Had to explain it to everyone.

But we opened that first year, we generate almost $300,000 in revenue in that little museum because Route 66 is hot and we're getting—I love the German tourists, that was our number one group. I love the Japanese tour buses because they're gonna spend more money in the gift shop. We had a gifted manager, Pat Smith, who's still there today, who became this guru of how to sell stuff to tourists. And it works.

And we've since gone through two more generations of expanding the museum, new exhibits, collections, supporting a strong friends group, great volunteers. The name of the museum is on the water tower in the community. The Chamber of Commerce pays for the billboards. It's a public–private partnership that I saw could work in the early 90s. We used here at the History Center, that we would use at Enid, that we would use at Sequoyah Home site and on and on. It just became the way that we could do business and improve all of our facilities.

Chapter 10 – 12:25
OKPOP

John Erling (JE): We need to talk a bit about OKPOP and Tulsa because you are the architect of that, not necessarily of the building, but the idea.

Bob Blackburn (BB): I can talk more about the early days of it. Of course I've been gone 2 years and 3 months now, so I'm a little bit removed from it, from what's going on right now, but it really started with an exhibit that we did here at the History Center on the history of rock and roll in Oklahoma. And I think we probably interviewed you. I don't know, you may have been at the opening, but we reached out to the radio community of the disc jockeys who helped bring rock and roll to Oklahoma.

JE: Let me just tell you, you put the album -- the Tulsa Mountain song album -- in your exhibit. And you don't know how proud I have been to stand and look at that through the glass window and tell people in Tulsa that we are in your exhibit.

BB: I forgot about that conversation. I called you to interview you and you told me about that very creative program. I said that is too good. That is too cool. I cannot finish this museum without that. Thank you. And you even gave me one of the albums with covers

JE: But I digressed a moment there. So, anyway, you did this on radio, and then the journey began for OKPOP.

BB: Yeah, we did a history of rock and roll. That's, you know, we had all the stars. That's when I meet the Steve Ripleys of the world and the Wanda Jacksons. It turned out beautifully. Jim Halsey from Tulsa became a good friend during all that. He pulled in the Roy Clarks of the world and Jana Jay. My list of friends really grew in the entertainment industry, on both sides, the creative side, the production side, even the promotional side. So learning about all this, we then do an exhibit on country and Hee Haw. That's when I met a different set of friends. Gailard Sartain, one of the most gifted people come out of Oklahoma, and eventually got to meet with him in his house and help transcribe all of his video collections that go back in his career.

But we do this exhibit, creative exhibit on rock and roll, country western, Hee Haw. As we're doing all, wait, there's something here, people are really responding to this story of pop culture. So we start incubating this idea of pop culture.

Well, on a parallel track as I'm working at the Historical Society as a historian, administrator, politician, one of the weaknesses we had is I could not go to anybody in Tulsa to get their support, because, as I call it at the time, the state of Tulsa kind of feels like they're really not part of this alien state of Oklahoma. It's different, and it is. I've got an entire lecture about the state of Tulsa, and at one point, people wanted to annex themselves to Kansas, you know, you get out of this crazy state of Oklahoma. But we had nothing in Tulsa all around it. We had Phillips home in Bartlesville. I have Fort Gibson to the south. We have a site in the Osage I'm working on,

Cherokee Nation. But there's a black hole in terms of support and collections. Collections drive me.

So I thought I'd always wanted to do something in Tulsa. I'd reached out to the head of the Tulsa County Historical Society. They not only did not help, they kept us out. I found out later from others. I said, yeah, I want to come in. Oh no. Well, finally, Clayton Vaughn, who you know, longtime broadcaster in Tulsa, is named executive director of the Tulsa Historical Society. And they want to get out of the old Gilcrease home and do something better so they get a contract, they get enough support in the community to get the old Travis Mansion there on Peoria and start working on it. Well, of course, they reach out to me. Can you help? Yeah, I want to help.

The only thing I want out of this other than you to be successful, I want offices there. I want to have a place to serve the people of Tulsa with historic preservation, with how to do oral history, with how to tell your family story and publish books and do research. I says, I need a home base to reach out to the people of Tulsa and to serve them better than we are now. We're serving the rest of the state. I'm underserving this, and of course, I'd said that in the legislature for years.

Well, so that's part of this idea. I need to be in Tulsa with some kind of institutional base, pivot point. And I want something on pop culture. Well, those two things came together, and by this time I'd done enough with the legislature. I understand the political process. I know the collectors. You know, I'm meeting these people in Tulsa, you say, we need to do a museum in Tulsa. Well, I get a call one day from Ken Levit. I said, Ken Levit, who are you? Well, he said, well, I work for the Kaiser Family Foundation, and my boss George Kaiser wants to get the Woody Guthrie archives for Tulsa. I said, really? That's curious because I'd worked with the Woody Guthrie family. We did an exhibit in the old historical building with the Smithsonian with the Woody Guthrie. So that's when I met Woody Guthrie's surviving sister, who later passed away. I got to know Nora, got to know, you know, the entire family.

So Ken calls me and says, we know you did this exhibit, and the family's talked about what they did with you. Would you help us? I said, sure, I'll

help. We need that in Oklahoma. So Ken and I meet and we meet in a restaurant there right off of Archer, and we sit at a table. I've told Ken I'm gonna put a plaque on. It's where all this begins, and he says, I need your help. And I said, I need your help. And he says, what can you do?

So we start working on the Woody Guthrie idea of collections coming to Tulsa. And I had already worked, I was chairman of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, as we called it then in ’98 and ’99, so I got to know the community somewhat. I'd done enough projects there where I knew it. My family's from Claremore, so I knew that I could always introduce myself, I'm from the Tulsa area, you know, everyone starts every speech with, oh yeah, I've got a brother who lives here. I'm from here. But anyway, I'd been doing all those speeches and we get to the point and I say, I need the museum. You want us here, we start working together on the idea. It elevates to George Kaiser.

I'll never forget the first meeting with him. We walk into his office, I've got two staff members, and I know body language, so I know George is gonna sit here, so I sit down, so I'll be right next to him. So we're just right here, face to face. And I need to be able to keep my staff out of it because I'm a salesman. I, you know, how do you close the deal and avoid a no. I always learned in sales. And so we're sitting there, he's got a map of Tulsa with probably 200 yellow stickies everywhere. And I'd already talked to Burns Hargis, a friend of mine, you know, I'm gonna be meeting with your boss. Help me understand. And so Burns helped, and I was studying a little bit.

Well, first, Mr. Kaiser comes in, sits down. And he said, OK, Doctor Blackburn, I've kind of looked into what you've done. How many museums have you got in the state? I said 30 some. He said, how many in Tulsa? It's like a drip, you know, let's put on the boxing gloves. I say 0 and let me tell you why, Mr. Kaiser, the state of Tulsa has kept us out of Tulsa. I've tried and I mentioned off some of the things I tried to do to serve the people of Tulsa better. I said I'm over there all the time giving speeches and helping with groups. And Ed Lawson, name just came to me, the kind of the godfather raising money. I says, I've told Ed I want to be here and it just hasn't worked out.

I said, you want a museum here? I need a museum on popular culture. If

we pull this off, we're doing what each of us want. You get a state facility in Tulsa, I get a museum on popular culture. Tulsa is the epicenter of the entertainment industry in Oklahoma. It's a place that's gotta be, and so we agree that day we're gonna move forward. And then the rest of the story is we took several years to get a bond issue, which we finally did. Speaker Hickman is the one who let the blood, Pro Tem Bingman bled all over this, but they got it through. We got the bond issue, but again, like the History Center, not what we needed. We needed 40-some million, we got 25. And it turned out that 25 came from the fact that they were trying to get rid of the Indian Center funding through the state, that's now a Chickasaw project, and that was 25. So they say, hey, if we're doing 25 there, we'll do 25 here, Oklahoma City and Tulsa. It's that old turnpike rivalry that drives me nuts.

So we had 25 for a, oh I think I was late or high 30s in millions, or can we do it? Another decision. Do we start without the money or not? We said we got to get started. And we got a corporate sponsor. We think we can raise the money. So, we, the bond issue is authorized. I hire the director, Geoff Moore, and we start working out of Oklahoma City, but then rent space for collection. Steve Ripley is our guru. I love Steve Ripley. He passed away before we could open, but Steve was this radio genie. He wanted to be a radio disc jockey like you, probably about the same generation.

JE: We have his story on Voices of Oklahoma.

BB: Good, and Steve and I had already produced a multi-part history of rock and roll in Oklahoma that aired on PBS and it ran a couple of times. It was so popular, just brilliant work. So we've got the folks and we're building collections and making progress, hire the architects. But we run into recession, we run into people saying, well, if Mr. Kaiser's behind it, you don't need us, and the fundraising effort really falters and the pandemic hits. And that just sets us back on our heels. We could keep the construction going with the help of really good firms like Manhattan, but the fundraising failed and I retire just after all this begins, and we lose some momentum.

But Trait Thompson, a director, he took my place, and Geoff Moore and a new group and Vince Gill's help, I'm very optimistic that we will raise the money that will match some more state funds. We need, we as taxpayers

in all parts of the state need to invest in the store of Roger Miller from Western Oklahoma. We need to invest in the story of Gailard Sartain from Tulsa. We need to do these things, so all the taxpayers should involve, but Tulsa's gonna get the main benefit, so Tulsa will match.

We'll raise some money outside, but I'm sure that this thing will open. It will be a good example of the partnership is that the Bob Wills family. I was with Carolyn, his daughter, and Andrea, granddaughter, just a couple of weeks ago at the Cowboy Hall, found I'm driving to Fort Worth tomorrow to meet with Andrea. They've stuck with us for 12 years since they said the OKPOP will be the home of the Bob Wills legacy, not just the music, but the memory of Bob Wills the man. His roots in Red River culture, cowboy culture, folk music, jazz, blues, of the importance of the radio stations, the importance of movies.

And they said, you're the people that can do it best. They committed to me personally and the Historical Society 12 years ago. Here we are, no museum. We have his bus, his touring bus. We have his collection, but no building yet. We've got to finish the building. Trait and Geoff can do that and get this thing open here, hopefully in a couple of years.

JE: It's right now built right across from Cain's, which is a perfect place for it to be.

BB: The History Center allowed us to rebrand the Oklahoma Historical Society. We were the hysterical society. Before 2005, the minute this opens, most people introduced me as the director of the Oklahoma History Center. I didn't correct them. This is our new brand. This is our new image. This is what we can do, public–private partnerships reaching out, higher standards. We can do that and we can do that with OKPOP.

JE: So you have Oklahoma Historical Society, which is the umbrella then over the Oklahoma Center that we're sitting in right now and then all the museums.

Chapter 11 – 13:50
Killers of the Flower Moon

John Erling (JE): All right, I could talk to you about many, many pieces of history of Oklahoma. I know that. But right now, very interesting. Let's talk about Killers of the Flower Moon. This is the reign of terror that lasted from 1921 to 1926. It was written by David Grann. Do you know David?

Bob Blackburn (BB): I do. We've had him in to speak a couple of times.

JE: All right, and he used the Oklahoma History Center as a source in his research. I have read the book. I'm reading it again. Bringing you into this story, the White Hair Memorial in Fairfax, you had an involvement with that White Hair Memorial, I believe it's a learning center and it's actually located in the former home of Lily Morrell Burkett, an Osage Indian and descendant of Chief Pahuska. Now why don't you pick up from there. Lily was married to Byron Burkhart. Byron's brother was Ernest. At the behest of William Hale, his uncle, he marries Molly, who Ernest tried to poison. That's part of the story, but what was your involvement with that memorial?

BB: Mrs. Burkhart, Lilly, when she passed away, she had headrights, in fact, a couple of headrights. She had farmland. And she was a big supporter of Inlonshka. And among the Osages, you don't dare call it a powwow, it's a religious ceremony, one in each of the three districts, so they may start in Gray Horse and then go to Hominy and then to Pahuska, but they have, every June, Osages come back together for this huge reunion of Osage people, and they meet in their home districts wherever they settled when they came from Kansas to Oklahoma and they have Inlonshka. And it's very expensive because they have, it goes on for a full week and I've been to Inlonshka many times -- moving experience.

So I was learning Osage culture at the time, had a great tutor named Louis Burns, who was an Osage who lived in Southern California, who gave us his collections. So I was learning and he was my guide. I'd go to Inlonshka with him and, what's happening? What's going on? Well, this is the symbolism, this is the meaning to the Osage people. So I was trying to learn, but Lily had supported Inlonshka. She'd bring groceries out in the back of her

Cadillac, and they'd make a big meal.

Well, Lily, for various reasons in her will, gave all of her resources to the Oklahoma Historical Society at the time. This is before tribal sovereignty when you have elected governments and bureaucracies and government that is going to survive. She didn't trust tribal leadership at the time. The sacred drums are passed on. So you have the drum keepers are gonna always evolve. There's no one group, there's no solid committee. It's part of the elders that is not real structured and not a financial entity. So she put in her will that all comes to the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Well, you can imagine. With people chasing headrights and murdering people for headrights all those years, it kind of, well, lawsuits, all these so-called common law husbands come out of the woodwork. People start making claims, gets into district court, drags on for a number of years. I'm in the Historical Society kind of following it. Finally a judge says, OK, here's the ruling, we're going to respect her wish. Oklahoma Historical Society will be the owner, title, but we're gonna set up a trust and it'll be administered through the courts and Historical Society will hire a person to move out to her house to work with the community, supporting Inlonshka, doing what she wanted, doing a memorial to Chief Pahuska, her ancestor.

So that's about the time I get involved and we make a good hire, Doctor Dan Swan, who would finish his PhD while he was working there, but people are not real happy. The Historical Society is in the middle of this tribal controversy. To them it's white people again coming in and exploiting their resources, so you have this mindset in the community. But Dan Swan is the right person. He reaches out. He eventually becomes a member of the Native American Church. He reaches out to two of the elders and say we need to do a language retention program before the government ever does anything. So we start recording. We have classes to teach young people Osage language using some of these elders to come in. So we're gaining support in the community.

But typical of the community, once we're working with these elders, there are other elders who say, wait a minute, why aren't you working with us? Why aren't we getting some of these fees or honoraria or something? So it's combustible and Dan has his dogs killed and hung up on the

clothesline, personal threats, very difficult time, but we survived those. Dan leaves to go into academia. Billie -- Billie Ponca -- just came to me and it was my hire. I hired Billie Ponca, a young Osage woman who is a descendant of Lily Burkhart, I think natural. We got a descendant, she is Osage.

Well, Billy had been raised in a non-Indian family. Orphaned, raised kind of outside of tribal. Well, she's learning tribal culture as I'm learning tribal culture, learning about the big picture. Of course, I've read the books and I understand, you know, the grievances and all, and we get involved and there are people in other communities. I'm having dinners, we're having. And Louis Burns says, I'll give you my entire book collection, and this is literally about like 5,000 books. His wife was a librarian. She'll set it up. All I needed was space.

I go back to our state senator from Osage County. I wish I could think of his name. He's great. He said, I'm gonna work with you. And so I get some state money, raise a little money, we build an addition to the old home. It's just a small, I would guess 1200 square feet home out there on her place, not far from Blackburn, Oklahoma. It's halfway between Hominy and Fairfax, on the road to nowhere. It's on the road to Blackburn, which I always thought was ironic at the time. But we expand, we get the collections, we're doing more genealogy, we're trying to convince people as they come to Inlonshka every June, come to the White Hair Memorial, learn more about your families, learn about your tribal people.

And so as I'm learning and things are changing, well, we have a new chief, Geoff Standing Bear, and I had worked with Chief Standing Bear back in the days of Dan Swan. They became very close friends. Chief Standing Bear is an attorney. They had some experiences in Native American Church, so I, and I had known Geoff back in those days, so he knew I was sincere. I want to help. Historical Society wants to help. What can we do? And so from the very first we're working together and along comes a movie idea and David's book is out, becomes a hit, someone buys the movie rights, and I get a call one day from Geoff Standing Bear.

He said, Bob, he said, you know what's going on up here in Osage County with this new movie? I said, no, sir. He said, they sent in a crew into my

library, into my staff and started Xeroxing and taking things and never came to see me, never told us what. How many Osages are there in the movie? When are they gonna come and show me the due respect? And I said, sir, I know nothing about it, I promise you, but I'm gonna look into it.

So I know the folks at the film commission, Tava at the time was head of the, I'd worked with the film commission for 20 years, part of my networking like the Arts Council, Humanities Foundation. I called and said, Tava, what the heck's going on here? I've got one mad Osage. And she said, oh no. And so I say, OK, we need to reboot. I'm gonna set up a meeting in my office and I'm gonna ask the chief to come down for this meeting. You come. You sit there and you take it, cause there's gonna be a tongue lashing. The guy's mad. They didn't do the right thing. So I said, you take it. I'll kind of use body language to let you know when you can talk, but just sit there. And I've learned enough about Indian country.

And I said, so I set up the meeting, and here comes Geoff, and Geoff is about 6'4, imposing, articulate litigator who uses words like a sword. And so he comes in, Tava, inexperienced in Indian tribal lands, sitting here to my left and I'm kind of sitting ahead of my little conference table, and boy, he starts, he's mad and he goes through the whole thing. No respect. What are they doing for my people? What are they doing about bringing resources to us? You say they're bringing all this stuff to Oklahoma. I haven't seen it. I haven't been included. And Tava's sitting there and taking it, and he goes on and on. And probably after 20 or 30 minutes, I figured it was out of his system, and I say, Chief, I said, I know Tava. She's got a good heart. She knows movie industry. She doesn't know Indian country yet, she will. She wants to learn. I said, I know you, I know what you need. I believe that you two can find common ground. I want to stay involved in this through the White Hair Memorial.

And suddenly they started talking and then the next thing you know, Scorsese himself is coming to Osage County saying, sorry, I didn't start right, and the production crews come through and work with tribal people. They agreed and the Chief is throwing all these assets out there. We will build you sets, we will let you use our land, we will provide the caterers, but you need to hire Osages. You need to come in and make sure that those extras are not gonna be Comanches and Navajo, that those are

Osages. We need to comment on the scripts because there's always a transition from a novel, I mean not a novel, but a historical to a script. He says, we just want to be involved, protect our people, protect our image.

And there were some, I met again several times and there was a group of family members who said, how are you gonna treat? These are our family stories, we own them. In Indian country, you give a gift. If you're asking someone to give you an oral history, you don't just say, do it because it's a good cause. You take groceries or you take tobacco or you do an honorarium. And so these are their stories. And they're figuring all of this out to make this production work. So my years of White Hair Memorial, Dan, Renee, the current director out there, Billie Ponca in the middle, helping us understand to make something work a little better. And I think Chief Standing Bear will be very proud of this when it's released.

JE: Well, he is because I've interviewed him and he talks highly fondly of it, and he has seen screenings in New York and so yeah, they're well, well pleased. I'm just gonna say a little bit. First of all, we talked about Lily and then I said she was married to Byron Burkhart. Byron's brother was Ernest. And at the behest of William Hale, his uncle, he married Molly, who Ernest tried to poison. Then Ernest pleads guilty, receives a life sentence of life imprisonment for the murder of William Smith. And you followed that story yourself. You know this story. The thing that stood out for me, that Governor Bellmon pardoned Ernest in 1966. Do you know why he pardoned him?

BB: I'm not sure why Governor Bellmon knew the pardon, but I do know Henry Bellmon. I did an exhibit on governors in Oklahoma, and when I interviewed him and really wanted to know the theme of each governor, there were seven living governors at the time I did this exhibit in '07. What drove Henry Bellmon in his public service was peace and reconciliation. He was a Marine on Iwo Jima. He saw the blood. He saw those Japanese basically just giving their lives for their cause. He saw his fellow Marines losing their lives for a cause. He says, how do we get so far apart that we're willing to kill each other?

The rest of his career was, we cannot stay in the Panama Canal. This is gonna lead to bloodshed. When two people think they're right, come to conflict. We've got to avoid conflict, and I believe that he thought we need

to understand each other better and peace and reconciliation. We've got to heal the old wounds, we've got to talk, we've got to do things together and prove that we will respect. Still not done, you still see that in state politics and tribal politics, but I believe that Henry Bellmon was on the right track with peace and reconciliation and respect.

JE: Yeah. And we have his story also on VoicesOfOklahoma.com, but this whole story is in real time because Osages are living side by side with those who killed their ancestors. That's still going on to this very day, isn't it?

BB: It is.

JE: I mean, it's so interesting that this story comes along, Killers of the Flower Moon by David Grann.

Chapter 12 – 8:35
Writer's Influence

John Erling (JE): Back to exhibits, many have closed, but many of them have been archived on your site, haven't they? I just happened to pick the writer's exhibit. I picked this because you were a writer, and Teresa Miller wrote about the two images we have of Oklahoma from the song of Oklahoma, wind sweeping down the plains. We belong to the land, and then John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath, and so she talks about the writers having this unique responsibility in presenting Oklahoma in a different way, which I'm sure you definitely agree with.

Bob Blackburn (BB): Yes, one of our conferences after we did this exhibit on writers in Oklahoma, how they have shaped not only the nature of Oklahoma, and writers generally understand people, but shaped the brand and the image of Oklahoma, and I've long dealt with the image of Oklahoma. Well, I pulled them together -- had John Wooley, SE Hinton, Teresa Miller was involved with all of this. She was one of our consultants, but we talked about this whole thing, and I like going back into literature all the way to Edna Ferber and Cimarron about the frontier ethics of Indian–white relationships, and Edna Ferber in the 1930s was writing about that then just as David Grann would write about it much later.

And then you go through fiction and then the popular writers and the writers from Oklahoma. We've got such a tradition. Tony Hillerman, who wrote all the Navajo mysteries, born right out here at Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, not far from Oklahoma City. And we go with the SE Hintons and the John Wooleys writing still to this day. This rich body of literature, both fiction and nonfiction, to me is part of our education. We've got to read the fiction just like we need to read the nonfiction to really understand the nature.

And so I just finished a biography of Ralph Ellison, who wrote this great novel, The Invisible Man, where his experiences growing up in Deep Deuce in Oklahoma City and then going off to college and then going to Harlem and the grants and the intellectual community of New York City, and then writing what most people consider one of the 10 greatest novels of all time. Moby Dick is right there with The Invisible Man. An African American from Oklahoma. By reading The Invisible Man, you're learning about race relations through the symbolism used by Ralph Ellison. If you read Edna Ferber and her using this strong-willed woman on the frontier and surviving when her husband goes off chasing these adventures, that's teaching you about women on the frontier.

By reading SE Hinton, the changes after World War II in our communities with the greasers and the silkies or whatever she called it, to me it helps me as a historian understand our state, the nature, and so looking into writers who have this perception and ability to take multiple input and to throw it into a cohesive story is an amazing process that I enjoy as a writer and then I know that the Teresa Millers of the world, the John Wooleys of the world are doing us a service.

JE: And then we have to remember Angie Debo and all that she did for our state and the Native Americans.

BB: Well, one of my heroes in Oklahoma history, both as a historian and a writer, which I want to be both, was Angie Debo. Angie Debo, a frontier, a child of the frontier who grew up on a farm, smart, goes off, get a degree, teaches, gets her degree eventually, Oklahoma A&M, and has a hard time, that glass ceiling for women at the time. She does not get a professorship, has to make a living as a special collections archivist, a specialist in maps, but she wanted to be a writer as well.

So eventually she says, OK, if the academic community doesn't want me, I'm just gonna go do what I want, which is write, moves home to the frontier, is working at OSU part time with a little bit, but from that PhD she did with EE Dale at OU, the manuscript was on the way, the majority culture, the white culture exploited the Indians at a time when Indians were considered a natural resource. You still see that in natural history museums, they still look at Indians as if they're like fossils or the climate around. It's a natural history when it's not, it's part of history.

And so Angie Debo understood it, wrote this story about that exploitation. OU Press would not publish it. She had to go outside of the state to get it published. Well, she becomes a voice, for we have got to understand this and let's get to peace and reconciliation, and she starts writing other books. And she would write a novel, Prairie City, that when people call me they say, I've got a friend coming in from the Netherlands and I want to have two books that help them understand our state, Prairie City, start with that. It's easy to read, it's historical fiction, but it takes this family in rural Oklahoma and it's their story, and to me it's better than Edna Ferber's book Cimarron. I said read Prairie City and then read one of her books on Indian history and how Indians were exploited and not respected and treated as a natural resource.

To understand tribal sovereignty today in 2023, we have to understand the exploitation of 1923 and how far we've come, that we have got to prove ourselves, we have to show respect, we have to deal with tribal sovereignty because it is here in the reality of the law, and that we're gonna work as partners, not as subservient groups that can be exploited for somebody else. Angie Debo was a champion for Indians at the individual level and at the communal level, and she helped open our eyes to the abuse and what can be done if we are good citizens and reach out and say we with respect want to work with you, not against you.

JE: Help me with historical fiction. Because if I read one of those, I get lost in thinking, well, what's real and what isn't. Maybe I'm not understanding, but you're promoting it. So how do we, how do we read through that, say, hmm, did that really happen?

BB: Well, if it's fiction, of course I'm enough of a salesman. How do you get your foot in the door? You know, I had one board member who said, when

his son, a smart young guy, he said, before you go to college, you're gonna spend a year selling pots and pans door to door, or it could have been Fuller brushes, whatever it was, you got to learn to sell. And that's what we as historians have got to do and we've done a poor job through the years. We love the collections, getting them in, we like writing our books, we like doing the exhibits as if this is a separate community where we're talking to each other.

How do we reach out to that guy in Arcadia, Oklahoma who never got out of high school? How do we talk to this Vietnamese person who's another hero who escaped communism that came here in 1975? How do we reach them? Well, as a salesman, how do you get your foot in the door? A good way to get your foot in the door is through fiction. And then once they see this excitement, see it on, OK, now you see, here's a book. Understand the story of farmers and ranchers, understand the story of race relationships in Oklahoma. Learn more. It's a way to get people interested, to get your foot in the door, then you get the door open, then you give them the pitch.

This is going to enhance your life experience. You will understand this community around you. You'll be a better citizen, you'll feel better about yourself when you go to your grave, you're gonna be able to say I did my part to make this a better community, and it starts with understanding what has happened so we can make good decision on what is happening and what might happen so we're prepared for all of that. So fiction is a good place to start, but it shouldn't stop there.

Chapter 13 – 5:50
Interest in History

John Erling (JE): Some people are naturally interested in history. Many will go their entire lives not interested, but many become interested as they grow older for some reason. You probably have noticed that.

Bob Blackburn (BB): Well, I say that, and that was our traditional constituency. If I could describe the OHS board of directors and constituents who elected those board members back in 1970, I'd say senior citizens, people

my age, color of my hair, gray. We had to change that. Well, we need to show others that you need to start learning, and how can we expand out of that demographic? But the reason that we have our interest in history is that we've got perspective. We've seen the changes since the 1950s. We've lived it, we've been part of it. We may have changed that little course of history in small ways, sometimes bigger ways, but we have this perspective looking back and say, dang, that's interesting.

But where I always like to start the story with everybody, and almost every speech I'll start here, every book starts back with family, because all of us walk onto the stage of history with this cultural baggage that comes from our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our cousins. This family baggage comes with us as we're newborn and we're looking around the world and thinking, what am I going to do? How can I change things? How can I make them better? And this family heritage is part of every one of those.

I like people to start with their own family story. Don't just learn about your parents, learn about your grandparents. You really have to go back three generations. Learn about your great-grandparents. So with me, it's like I never met them, but I know my great-grandparents. Of course I knew and I studied. And my aunts and uncles, each one of them, I can take out parts of my story and say, oh, that's Uncle Buddy, my educator, that's my Uncle Zane, the corporate executive, that's Uncle Tad, my love of being outdoors and hunting and fishing. That's the way all of us are. So let's study the family.

So the Historical Society probably does more research on family history. If someone is interested in their family history, the Oklahoma Historical Society is a place to go. And now that we have the Gateway to Oklahoma History, it's online. We're digitizing newspapers at a clip. Right now we're well over 10 million pages of newspapers. Chad Williams tells me by ’24 it'll be something like 14 million pages of newspapers. So we've been collecting every newspaper published every day in every community since 1893. And so over 35 million pages of newspapers. Well, that's the story of every Oklahoma community one day at a time, sometimes one week at a time for a weekly, of course, but we need to make that accessible. That's digitization.

Someone can get on right now and go back and look. So if you're from Kingfisher, find out when your parents got out of high school, that affected their lives. That will help you understand your parents. Go back another generation to your grandparents. Understand where your families came from. So for me it's a little bit of South Carolina, a lot of Arkansas, a little bit of Texas, a lot of Irish, a lot of eastern Oklahoma, a lot of western Oklahoma. That's Bob Blackburn. To me that is history. And then I go from there to the impact of cotton, to the impact of television, the impact of farming and ranching, of highways, and it goes on and on. You start building these stories layer by layer.

JE: We always say know whose you are, and there it is. And when you go back in your family history, then that should make you feel really, really proud. I have grandparents on both sides. I'm a grandson of four immigrants who came from Norway and settled land in North Dakota, and I'm here because of my grandfather. It's a great story and makes me feel proud, and I only say that because everybody could find somebody and that they feel proud of and gives them confidence perhaps as they even go out and meet the world.

BB: Well, it helps us really hold on to our courage. And making decisions comes back to courage. You've got the courage to put everything on the line. Yeah, I'm gonna move from the Midwest to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Yeah, I'm gonna go and spend four years working on a degree and starving, living on beans and rice. It takes courage to do that, to think that tomorrow is better than today.

And if you look at Oklahoma history in general, it's boom and bust. Part of it's economic, of course, but part of it is hope that this generation feels like, well, if I'll do this and if I'll sacrifice, if I'll have the courage, there's hope that it'll be better for my kids, better for my grandkids. And so your ancestors come to America. Think about the courage that took, the courage to pull out of the home in Arkansas in Bluff Springs, Arkansas, in the hill country down the Saline River Valley, move out here to pick a gun. That's courage.

And then each of these decisions, well, that encourages me. Well, if Granddad could do that, I can do that. I'm gonna go ahead and sacrifice. I'm gonna build because I want life to be better for my son, my grandchildren. That's the history of Oklahoma, of all these families, all

these individuals coming together in this mixture, the melting pot of the melting pot, and how this has all come together to create what you and I know as Oklahoma today.

JE: I'm very proud to say that this is my little collection here of Voices because the History Center has thousands and thousands of oral history interviews. I know you do, but these I am now in a partnership with the Oklahoma Historical Society and we're very proud to have that relationship.

Chapter 14 – 5:05
CHAPTER_TITLE

John Erling (JE): You're leaving a very impressive legacy in our state. How would you like to be remembered?

Bob Blackburn (BB): Well, that's a great question. Of course, I always have to start my response with, I've been part of a team. I'm a team player. I've had these people around me that are gifted. I've had the mentors ahead of me showing me how to do the politics, how to do the history, how to do the writing, how to be a good citizen of the state. Then I've had my colleagues who were willing to go through the fire with me. And then I've got the younger people who are willing to say, I'm a lifer, I want to be there. Doctor Blackburn, choose me to do this. So, you know, I've got that continuum of friends and partners, team members. So I always have to give credit to so many of those team members who showed me the right thing to do or did the right thing.

But if, if there's a legacy here at the Historical Society, it's probably going to be in accessibility to collections that we can continue to learn, that we need your collections. Well you're developing your own oral history collection, but your family story needs to be here. So if you sit down someday in the last two months of your life, say I'm gonna write out my family story, then that's gotta be here. People 50 years from now need to look back at the late 20th century, early 21st century, and say what was happening with tribal sovereignty, what was happening with race relations, what was happening with economic development. Well,

hopefully there will be accessible channels to get to that information, to see the story of John Erling or the story of a Bob Blackburn or the story of a William T. Payne or Walt Helmerich, some people you've interviewed over the years. How can we understand them? How can we be better citizens in 2021, 23? Let's go 100 years out.

And so hopefully my legacy is, as I added another layer of collections to the story started by William Campbell that was carried on by Joseph Thoburn, that was pushed forward by the EE Dale, that was carried on by the people whose shoulders I'm standing on. Hopefully people will come and they'll say, oh yeah, Bob and his team, his partners, did this in these years, and we're standing on those shoulders to go to the next level, to improve the quality, to serve the people of the state even more effectively than we have found out so far and having hope that the future is gonna be better than it is today.

And as a historian you've studied our history, even with the things like slavery and exploitation of American Indians and the glass ceiling on women. Studying all that, I'm still very hopeful. I'm an optimist, not just naturally, but I'm an optimist through application, of studying history, of writing about history. I really believe that most people want to do good things. They want to take care of their neighbor. They want to be good citizens. I really believe that. And I believe if we can harness this energy and this Oklahoma spirit with this diversity, we're the mongrel dog of state bodies. How can we use that energy of respecting this diversity but then using that to go to the next level?

And so I, I have a lot of hope and very optimistic about the future, and I want them to understand where we were, how we are dealing with the legacy of slavery. We've got to understand we cannot take that out of our schools. We have to understand the impact of slavery and it is still with us today. We have to understand the anger in the Indian community from exploitation. We have to deal with respect. We have to go a little farther. It's not always done. Hopefully in the future our leaders will be better educated, more empathetic, and be able to say I can do better and we can be better people.

JE: Well, you've received many, many awards and recognition, but on behalf of the entire state of Oklahoma, let me say how fortunate we are to have you

in our state and all you've done for this great state that we love. And I thank you for this interview. I have been thoroughly entertained. You're such a great public speaker as well, and I can hardly wait to get this on our website. Thank you, Doctor Bob.

BB: Well, thank you for reaching out to me so many years ago, and I'll, I remember that phone call and I remember thinking, yes, we've got a champion out there, someone who's willing to invest their time and energies and talents and connections to your network. And you've made it happen. That career in radio gave you the chance. Without that you would have been swimming against the stream. You were swimming with the stream and what you've been able to pull off is spectacular, and I can think of no other example of pulling together the oral traditions of the state than what you've done in the last decade and a half.

JE: All right, thank you for our time, Bob.

BB: Thank you.

JE: I appreciate it very much.