Tom Clark

Tom's business skills and successes give him the opportunity to make a lasting impact in the Tulsa Community.

Chapter 01 — 0:57
Introduction

Announcer: Tom Clark graduated from Tulsa's Edison High School in 1959 and from the University of Oklahoma in 1963 with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. After serving as a flight instructor in the Air Force, he joined the family business, Tulsair, in 1968 and in 1986 he became the sole owner and president and chief executive. The company has three aircraft sales and maintenance facilities covering a six-state region. In this interview you will hear how Gale Clark, Tom's father, came to Tulsa in 1945 and on his first day sold 13 airplanes which led to the founding of Tulsair and began a longstanding relationship with Walter Beechcraft. Also listen for Tom's Hollywood connection. Tom Clark's story is made possible by our generous foundations and listeners like you who believe in preserving our state's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 — 14:56
Early Life

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is April 5, 2012. Tom, state your full name, you date of birth and your present age, please.

Tom Clark: Thomas Gale Clark, Jr. I was born 6-6-41 and I'm 70 years old.

JE: Your middle name—any, any...

TC: Well, my father was a Senior and everybody called him Gale Clark, therefore when I was born they gave me Thomas. Until I was in the third grade, I was known as Tommy, Tommy Clark.

JE: And we're recording this interview here in Tulsa in the offices of VoicesOfOklahoma.com. Where were you born?

TC: In Enid, Oklahoma.

JE: Let's talk about your mother first. Your mother's name, maiden name, where she born, where she came from.

TC: That's Leota Groh, G-R-O-H. That's a German name from her father who had emigrated over here from Germany, I'd say probably in 1907, 1908. He and his wife...

JE: Came to Oklahoma?

TC: Well, they originally went to Missouri and he was a Missouri dirt farmer. Why he moved to Enid, Oklahoma, I do not know, but as a young child, I used to go out to his farm. They didn't have a freezer or a refrigerator. They had a box—they poured ice into it, so it truly was an icebox. Milk came from cows. I'd go out and watch them milk the cows. It wasn't homogenized, so I thought it tasted horrible. When they wanted something to eat that night, they'd go out and chop the head off a chicken and we'd have chicken. I watched it one time and I thought I was going to pass out. I guess I can't stand the sight of blood. At least I couldn't then so I never did it again. He had some fields he plowed out there and had two mules. He's plow the fields and plant corn or wheat or something. I'm not for sure what he was planting, but these are thoughts I remember from 1944, '45, '46, '47. So it was a wonderful experience to be at a true farm and watch him work that during that time period.

JE: And his name again was?

TC: Bob Groh. G-R-O-H.

JE: So that's your mother's father.

TC: Right.

JE: Tell us about your mother, then. So then she grew up in Enid.

TC: When they moved from Missouri to Enid, they were farmers as young children, but once she grew into a lady, she lived in Enid and she basically was working at a small companies and selling clothes or something. This was just right before World War II, probably 1935, '36, '37, '38. My father met her in Enid when he was working there.

JE: Your mother's personality and what was she like?

TC: She was a beautiful, beautiful woman. Very loving, very kind, very gentle. I'll tell you, my favorite story is when I eat chili—if you were over at my house and I said "chili", you'd see me put vinegar in it. Now I use Splenda, but I used to put sugar into the chili and people would look at me, "Are you out of your mind? What are you doing?" One of my favorite stories of my mother was in some restaurant in Enid, Oklahoma—they're in the Depression now, so the owner thought that my mother was putting too much ketchup on her chili, so he forbid her to use anymore ketchup without paying for it. My mother was so upset about it that just to make him mad she put sugar and vinegar on it and it really tastes very well. Some of my friends in Oklahoma here have used the recipe I have and they've won every

single time they've used it. So, she was kind of feisty, too. She met my father there. He was working for National Sash and Door Windows, selling windows in Enid, Oklahoma.

JE: So they met there at that company?

TC: No, they just met each other in Enid. Through what process, I don't know.

JE: So, then, your father's name?

TC: Thomas Gale Clark. He was born in Scotts City, Kansas, and was raised there until a young man. His grandfather owned the movie theater. My grandfather, Thomas Harry Clark, they became farmers. For some reason, they moved from Scotts City, Kansas, to Wellington, Kansas, which is a town 30 miles south of Wichita, and there he became a barber. And my father—they got there about when they were starting high school—my father played football for Wellington High School and I have all of the programs from when he played football and he was all-state and that sort of stuff, and so he got a scholarship when he graduated from Wellington to play football for the University of Colorado. One thing very interesting, the person he roomed with at Chi Omega was Wizard White who became Supreme Court Justice, and he roomed with Wizard White, who became a Supreme Court Justice of the United States of America and they served in a Chi Omega house serving them dinner and keeping the house clean. So they did that for two years and then my grandfather came down with—well, they'd had too much iron in their blood. I forget what they call it—disease. He got very sick and so he moved back and finished college at Wichita University. I think he probably got the thought about airplanes because, as you say, Clyde Cessna and Walter Beech were starting to develop airplanes. Beechcraft started in 1932. So here they were just south 30 miles of those towns where the aviation would begin. The birth of aviation, you might call it, manufacturing these airplanes in Wichita, Kansas.

JE: Right.

TC: Which is 30 miles north. I always thought that his love of flying came from being so close and I'm sure that he probably drove up there and saw the planes and saw them test-flying them and I think that's where his desire for aircraft came from while he was taking care of his father just prior to World War II.

Chapter 03 — 5:24
Attraction to Airplanes

John Erling: So, then, how does he get to Oklahoma?

Tom Clark: As the war drew closer and my father saw it coming, he didn't really want to fight on the ground and he saw this aviation was taking place so he decided that he wanted to

fly, so he went and applied as a cadet to the Army Air Corp, which changed in 1941 to the Army Air Force. But he went through that program and he got his wings, the World War II started, the Army made him a flight instructor and a PT—well, it's a PT-19, might have been a PT-16, 17, 19—flew those three different airplanes. There was no glass bubble above them, it was an open cockpit. The student sat in the front and the instructor sat in the back. Those are pretty famous airplanes and he married my mother about 1938, then I was born in '41, six months prior to the war starting. He was in flight instructing and I don't remember any of it because I was so young, but all over Texas and Oklahoma, the military was moving to training schools where he would teach. The military moved him around and throughout World War II, he was a flight instructor. They let him go—released him—in March of 1945 because the war was coming to an end and they didn't want to retrain him to fight overseas. The war was about done. So he left the Army Air Corp in March and got a job with Beechcraft. My mother and father, they moved to Wichita, Kansas, myself and my sister, who's two years younger than I am, and he mainly was working on the manufacturing line. He was in charge of a group of men. He would be kind of the boss of that particular group for putting the wings on or the accessory equipment or something's on, so they were manufacturing aircraft. Then the famous stories. Walter Beech, who started Beech Aircraft in 1932, came walking through the production line. My dad was a very handsome man. Beech had heard that he had all this experience flying from World War II and when he came by, he started talking to him and my dad had this incredible personality. He was so impressed with his personality, he asked him, "Would you like to sell airplanes?" And he said, "Oh, I'd love to!" And then he said, "Well, what town would you like to go to?" And I think two things influenced his dream and that was, one, that he loved football since he had played for Colorado and Wichita, and that year, January 1945, the University of Tulsa played in the Orange Bowl—and I'm trying to remember who they beat—some major school, which I still have, I can find, but it's not on the top of my mind now, but he was so thrilled by Tulsa winning the Orange Bowl that that was just a couple hours' drive from Wellington, so that, "Well, I better go to Tulsa," and secondly, he still wanted to kind of be near home, which was Wellington, where all of his family lived as far as sisters and brothers and his mother and father, and it was only a couple hours from Tulsa to Wellington, which is 30 miles south of Wichita, and so he picked Tulsa, and he could have had Denver, Colorado, get offered any place in the United States, but one thing we were blessed with was that the oil business was just being released. Most of the oil that was produced during World War II went to—most all of it—went to the military. When the war was over, they allowed the people to go out and the people who drilled the oil during that time, the Laughlin Brothers, the Williams Brothers. Their biggest problem was they didn't have a fast mode of transportation to get someplace quickly because the oil was spread every place they went to and so, anyway, the famous story is my dad drove from Wellington, Kansas, to

Tulsa, Oklahoma, on September 1, 1945, spent the night in his car because he didn't have any money. He did have a little bit. He borrowed fifty dollars from his father. He stopped in Wellington on the way down and borrowed fifty dollars. My grandfather was cutting hair at fifteen cents a head at that particular time. And he woke up the next morning (chuckles), went to a service station, brushed his teeth and shaved and combed his hair and said, "I'm going to go sell an airplane." He started walking around downtown Tulsa and that, by the way, was Labor Day, but for some reason Tulsa didn't celebrate Labor Day on September 2, 1945. I have no idea why. So everybody was at work even on Labor Day and he said, "There's got to be somebody and I wonder where they would be," and he looked around and he said, "They've got to be in the tallest building here," because that shows they've a lot of money or something and it was the Philtower, so he goes over there and he said, "They must be at the top." People that had the most money would be at the top of that building, so he got on the elevator and rode to the top of the Philtower, and it just so happens that it was Stanolind Oil and Gas, which eventually became Pan American Oil and Gas which was here in Tulsa, and then Standard of Indiana bought them out and then Amoco and they were bought out by, really now, ExxonMobil. But at that time it was Stanolind Oil and Gas. He went in there and they bought thirteen airplanes.

JE: On that visit?

TC: On that visit. They actually—they had a lease. It really was a lease with an option to purchase. They were so desperate for airplanes and that's exactly what they wanted. This was the first time they could now buy civilian airplanes and they wanted to get their hands on the first that they could so they could beat the competition to the drilling sites. He couldn't have walked into a better deal at a better time. So they signed a deal. He went there with fifty dollars borrowed from his dad. By the time he got his money from Beech Aircraft, it was $100,000, which was a fortune. That's a lot of money even in today's world. But he's twenty-five years old, so he thought about retiring. Thought about it deeply—he thought, "I have enough money to last the rest of my life," and actually if he would have put it in the bank and draw on it, he probably would have made more money than being in aviation, but he wanted to be in aviation, so he went out and started an office in Hangar Number 5 and started selling airplanes and the oil companies from all over came in and bought airplane after airplane after airplane. The finally, by 1947, he'd made enough money and built a very spectacular hangar, which was Hangar Number 8 at Tulsa International, which was torn down last year to make room for a clear zone—the east/west runway. It's a mandatory clear zone because of what happened in Chicago and Little Rock when planes skid off the runway and hit some obstructions, so all of the obstructions have to go, so they bought Hangar 8 from us and they also bought Hangar Number 10, which was built in 1928 when the Tula International Airport was built. But anyway, he did that and was very

successful. That was really the start of Tulsair—at that time was called Tulsa Air, Inc. Later on in his career he changed the name to Tulsair Beechcraft. And I had the original document from Walter Beechcraft assigning him—by the time he got the paperwork, it was December of 1945, giving the distributorship to Tulsa Air, Inc., which was my father's company, and that was the birth. The only other aviation at that time was over at Spartan Aviation.

JE: Bill Skelly owned Spartan.

TC: Skelly sold that to the gentleman that...

JE: J. Paul Getty.

TC: J. Paul Getty. That's exactly correct.

JE: And then J. Paul Getty operated Spartan.

TC: Really, to be honest with you, Skelly was mainly flight training. They weren't really selling aircraft as I remember. They had a few things that they tried to sell, but they weren't really into airplane sales like Beechcraft was and like Cessna was. So far as the first really true aviation there for aircraft sales, maintenance, parts, storage, fuel sales, was my dad's company, Tulsa Air, Inc. as it was then.

JE: And then Getty kept the plant running at full capacity and subcontracts with major aircraft firms and through most of 1945, Spartan workers turned out wings, bomb bay doors, fuselages and other parts for companies like Grumman, Curtis Wright, Lockheed, Boeing and Martin. Well, can you imagine the phone call, I suspect, or however your dad told Walter Beech, "Hey, I just sold thirteen airplanes."

TC: It must have been incredible. (Chuckles)

JE: And give Walter Beech credit, because he walks down in the plant and sees this man with a personality—a salesman's personality—and he was able to spot that.

Chapter 04 — 10:55
Tom Learns to Fly

John Erling: So let's get back to you, then, in your growing-up years. How about the first house you remember. Where was that?

Tom Clark: My first house was in March of 1945—might have been renting it for all I know. He had a big old charcoal boiler in the center of it. I can remember my dad opening it up and throwing that charcoal in there and that was the only heat we had in the house.

JE: And where was that?

TC: That was in Wichita when he was working down there on the line in March of '45. He was given that position in June of '45, so he'd go down and start meeting people in Tulsa and

hitting the ground, and he left my mother and my sister at that time with his parents—my grandmother and grandfather—in Wellington, and I spent the summer of 1945, and then I found out we were going to move then to Tulsa, Oklahoma, and so I remember driving down there with my grandfather—first time arriving in Tulsa.

JE: And you're four years old about that time, then, 1945.

TC: In June I was five.

JE: Okay.

TC: My grandfather usually used to like to tease me and he'd always say, "Tommy, we're lost. I don't know how to get home," and I'd start crying. Oh, gosh. I couldn't stand the thought I'd never see my home again or my parents or anything like that. I remember when we got into Tulsa, he started teasing me about being lost. But anyway, my dad bought a really nice home down there. It was $12,000.

JE: Here in Tulsa.

TC: Here in Tulsa. Twenty-Ninth Place just to the west of Peoria and 29th Place. A really nice home. It seemed like a mansion to us.

JE: For $12,000.

TC: He bought this brick home, which was a two-story brick home, on 29th Place, so we pull in there and the first thing I wanted to do was go out in the neighborhood and see if there were any kids and so they released me. You wouldn't do that nowadays, but—so I run over to this other house. I heard they said they had a son over there and he was my age, his name was Bundy Hammond, and I've known him all my life and still are good friends with him. I went to Lee School to kindergarten starting in September '45.

JE: Lee Elementary is your first school.

TC: I spent all seven years, kindergarten and six years at Lee School, named after General Lee. So the seventh grade I went to Horace Mann, which was quite an experience.

JE: Why do you say that?

TC: (Laughs) Well, they had this deal where if you were in the seventh grade like we were, that when you got there, the boys in eighth grade and ninth grade, they would come along and pull your pants down on you.

JE: Yeah.

TC: Boys will be boys, I guess.

JE: Yeah.

TC: And I didn't like that. (Chuckle) So I said, "I'm not going to ride the bus anymore. I'm going to start walking and it was quite a long walk from Horace Mann to 29th Place, it really was, and I said, "I'm not going to let that happen to me." They did that the first couple of days I was on the bus, so I didn't do it anymore. But anyway, it was quite interesting. A lot of my good friends there and I met other friends that were friends of mine the rest of my life.

And then at that particular time, my father had done so well he sold the home there and we moved to Bolewood Acres, 45th Place which is just to the west of Lewis, and then in 1955 I started the eighth grade in a new high school, at Edison High School.

JE: And then that's where you graduated from—Edison.

TC: I graduated.

JE: During those years and your father in aviation and the airline business, were you interested in planes and flying?

TC: Absolutely. They had this jet they brought over from France in, like, '48-'49. It was a twin-engine jet airplane that Beechcraft was thinking about selling. And as a young child, I got to go up in a jet and fly around in it in the late forties, which was incredible. Beech decided not to buy it. My dad was flying all the time. He bought trainers and he'd sell those in addition to the first airplane that came out with the B-Tail Bonanza in 1947. That was, like, unbelievable to have an airplane with a B-Tail on it. From '45 to '47 he was mainly selling Twin Beech aircraft. That's what the oil companies celled them, I'm jumping around a little bit, but from '45 to '47, selling Twin Beeches which was used to in World War II to haul four or five, seven to eight people—the higher-ranking people to fly someplace. It had two Indians on it, the tail was down, it didn't have a nose gear on it and the Army used them during World War II—Army Air Force. Then they made a commercial version of it and it was pretty much the same but they just made it look pretty and nice inside, and so he sold a lot of those to the oil company. In 1947, the Bonanza came out. That was an extremely popular airplane. That was a plane that you could buy for $7,000. It went 180 miles an hour. My dad sold a lot of those aircraft. And then the Twin Bonanza came out in 1950.

JE: Since he was a pilot, was he flying these planes as he sold them?

TC: Yes.

JE: So, what a combination of being a salesman, a pilot, and loving planes. So, then, did you as a family, did you fly to destinations?

TC: Oh, that's funny. The plane was called a Howard. It was made during World War II and it had double wings on it. It was a staggered-wing Beech because one of the wings was forward of the second wing. We sold one in Buffalo, New York, so we flew that airplane up there and I was, I guess, nine years old or ten years old. We landed, sold the airplane, and then we rode a train down to Washington, D.C. and he took me to the Capitol and went by the White House and all the monuments that you see, and I remember as a young man, I was highly impressed. One of our cousins was there and he was a captain in the Navy and he took us around also. That was a memory I will not forget. Every place we went until I was old enough to fly myself, we'd fly in the airplane. We'd fly to Colorado some and go fishing in Colorado. Certainly in business deals he wouldn't take me because I was a kid, but as far as family vacations, he always had a demonstrator available. We would fly to see

family in Wellington. Fly over to Enid to see family. We'd go down to Dallas quite a bit and so I grew up doing that and most of the times he'd put me on his lap and let me fly until I finally got old enough to start getting my license which was in 1957 when I was sixteen.

JE: So did you get your license at sixteen?

TC: I soloed but you couldn't get your private license until you were seventeen. I got it when I was seventeen and I flew continuously through high school. You know, I'd get my buddies and we'd fly someplace. When I was in college I could also use the airplane. I was a Phi Gamma Delta and I'd get all my Phi Gamma friends in my Bonanza and we'd fly down to Shreveport and have a big party with rushies in trying to get them, so I flew all my life. And when I went to OU, they had other upgrades like getting a commercial rating, instructor rating and instrument rating. I received all those ratings at the University of Oklahoma using their airplanes.

JE: Well, I suppose everybody wanted to be the friend of Tom Clark.

TC: I had a lot of friends. I don't know why, but I'll say I had a lot of friends. I had a great time. I'll tell you what, the most interesting thing that—you got me thinking about this—is that I was always very independent and my dad was always gone a lot doing business, so I wanted to kind of be on my own. So I was fourteen years old. My uncle has a small defense plant up there where they make parts for defense and everything for the airplanes and I didn't think much about it. I had been throwing newspapers since eleven. I had about sixty, seventy dollars. I went out and rode a bus by myself—now I'm fourteen years old—to Wellington, Kansas, up there and get off and go out and going to buy me a car. You could drive in Kansas at fourteen. I bought a Model A Ford and I found a shack over a garage. I got the job in a defense plant in Wichita working up there. I was making a dollar, a nickel an hour. I was fourteen years old and I had a car, my own apartment, and I had money, which is a dollar-a nickel an hour, 40-hour week. I was having the time of my life. That was just during the summer. School starts, I'd come back to Tulsa. At fifteen, I'd go back up there and I bought a '47 Ford, same scenario. Then when I was sixteen, my dad gave me a job in Tulsa because I could now drive up there and I delivered parts for Tulsair. Also, he had me painting the hangars out there. I'd go out and paint the hangars and so he gave me a dollar twenty-five, I think.

JE: Who were you delivering parts to?

TC: For example, there was an expert in avionics. He had special testing equipment. They'd want me to deliver the avionics over to him. Well, he'd fix them and when they were done, I'd go back and get them. And if they needed particular tires from a tire distributor, I'd go get the tires from them and stuff like that. I'll never forget that first summer. I was over there and I was walking out. I had dropped one of the avionics part and I picked it back up and went in and I told this guy that I dropped it and told him I was afraid it might

be broken so he should look at it and he said, "That's amazing. Most young men like you would cover that up," and he said, "I'm gonna call Gale Clark and tell him what happened." He said, "You won't be in any trouble. I'm gonna take care of you," because he didn't realize that was my dad. But I didn't have the heart to tell him, so...(chuckles) he called over there and he said, "Don't fire this kid. He was honest." And he said, "Well, that's my son, so I assure you, I'm not going to fire him, but I'm glad he did that." I just ran errands for him when I was sixteen. When I was seventeen, I started flying to get towards my license, which you had to be seventeen. I got that on my birthday, June 6th, '59.

JE: As a young pilot at seventeen, did you ever have any harrowing experiences?

TC: That's really a good question. I really was a good pilot and I say that as humbly as I can. I was really an excellent pilot. I don't remember ever being scared or worried or—always felt I was confident and I knew what I was doing and I was in control. You can tell from my experience going up to fourteen years old, living by myself, working, that I was very independent. The hangar and the guys up there that were eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and we'd go to a bar and have a drink and I felt like I was a grownup. I really wasn't, but I learned a lot from dealing with people and talking to people. And, of course, when I got to OU, then I majored in BBA, Bachelor of Business Administration and learned all of the accounting, finance and sales and all that sort of stuff.

JE: Because you were intending, then, to be in your father's business?

TC: From day one.

JE: From early on as a child?

TC: That's exactly right.

JE: You knew you were going to fly, you wanted to be in the business and you wanted to sell airplanes.

TC: And make money.

JE: (Chuckles)

TC: I became attached to making money when I was young like that. It really allowed me to do things I liked to do. That sounds greedy, doesn't it? I don't know.

JE: Well, no, because people work to make money and that's what....

TC: Well, a lot of people do, but at fourteen it sounds a little weird, doesn't it?

JE: But you had the thrill of being in an industry that you enjoyed anyway.

TC: Just loved it.

JE: So it just made sense that you would want to continue and make money doing that.

Chapter 05 — 6:00
Air Force

John Erling: At OU, your experience there? At the time, football was big and Bud Wilkinson and all that?

Tom Clark: Yes, it was, and then Bud went out. I'm trying to remember what it was. I think he ran for Senate in '63, if I'm correct. He quit but Harris beat him, you remember?

JE: Yes.

TC: So he quit and they let his assistant come in and coach and he was terrible. I forget his name. It didn't work out too well. Anyway, so I went to all of the OU games and I was a Phi Gamma Delta. That was a wonderful experience for me, and I went to ROTC. Came out as a second lieutenant in the Air Force in May of 1963. They didn't have a slot for me until October of '63, so the last summer I was home I did the things that I've always done—chase girls and drive around in my car and drink with my buddies. I mean, that's just kind of what we did. But in October I reported to Phoenix, Arizona, to the Air Force base there—Williams Air Force Base. I went through pilot training there. Six months in the T-37 and six months in a super-sonic T-38. Incredible experience. The T-37 was a two-engine training, but I flew that very well. I mean, it was almost like flying a Bonanza or something. The 38 was a different animal. It could hit 40,000 feet in two minutes with the afterburner. It would go Mach 1 in 1.3.

JE: This, we should say, in '63 was while Vietnam was on.

TC: Vietnam was just getting started. The first American was killed December 22, 1962 and it was just starting, so up to '64 we were supplying guns and equipment and we weren't supposed to be fighting, but we were. They kept briefing us there at Williams as to what's going on and I said, "I wonder if this could be a full-blown war." So at the end of one year I wanted to be a fighter pilot because that's my dream. I mean, that's the ultimate. A fighter pilot in the Air Force was everything. Every training command, which I had gone through as a pilot, controlled where you went. (Chuckles) They said, "We're not going to let you do that. You're so good, we're going to keep you in Air Training Command." I had no control over it.

JE: Wow.

TC: They were putting a new base in at Del Rio, Texas, so at the end of one year in December of '64 when I got my wings, I was then assigned to Del Rio, Texas, which is on the border, to be a T-38 flight instructor, and that was really a big deal, because very seldom do they take a brand new guy like me and put him in a T-38.

JE: And you would have been how old?

TC: Twenty-three.

JE: So you were the youngest or of the youngest to be a flight instructor there, then.

TC: Yeah, they only pick so many. I got that and I really wanted to go fly an F-105 or Tandem 4 super-sonic fighter. Just because I grew up that way. There was one year of that, then four year's commitment thereafter. We did acrobatics. We did instrument flying, cross-country flying. We also did just basic formation flying. All sorts of different type of flying, and it was just wonderful to do, and then during April of '65 they started the war and, bang, the next thing we knew they wanted more fighter pilots. I was frozen where I was. They said, "You can't go. We need you here." I wanted to go fight, so they said, "Alright, we're going to really start training combat maneuvers, and they only chose about four or five of us out of the entire squadron and said, "You guys are so good, we're going to have you teach military combat maneuvers," and stuff. We would take the best students, train them up, or as we called it, rat-racing. Going and flying around and chasing each other and trying to escape an invasion. He gets on my tail and I get on his tail. There were no guns or bullets, but if you get behind a guy, then you won. (Chuckles) So I did that the last two years of my career there, but on the weekends they were afraid that pilots like me were getting enough stick time, that the students were doing all of the flying, so they said, "If you want to, you can take a T-38 on Friday and you bring it back on Sunday. You go anyplace you want to in the United States." But most guys, they just would maybe do one. I said, "This is a dream come true for me," so except for Christmas when I'd go home, I'd check out a plane, that T-38, every weekend and I went and explored America. I don't know if you remember the '60s, but I believe America was coming alive with a different culture. The kids were different. And you remember all the stuff that was happening in the '60's. So I'd fly into an Air Force base, go in the Officer's Club, meet people and talk to people, and I went everywhere, and it was quite an experience for me.

JE: Were you by yourself when you did that?

TC: I would usually take a buddy of mine if I could find one. Sometimes I would go by myself, but most of the time I would find another friend that wanted to go and so we'd do that.

JE: Name some places.

TC: Golly. I went to Jackson Naval Air Station down there which was wonderful. New Orleans, two fighter bases out in California, naval bases, and a naval base there in San Diego, Chicago—we'd fly into there. Fly into Denver. They had a National Guard base and we'd fly into that. Down to Miami, obviously. And one of my favorite places, down in the Panhandle there, Elgin Air Force Base where they planned the attack on Tokyo in April of '42. We loved going down in that Panhandle. It was so nice down there. And Destin and so on.

JE: What an experience!

TC: Oh, I went to Vegas twenty-seven times. (Chuckles)

JE: Wow.

TC: When it was really coming up and things were going on there.

JE: And you were twenty-three, four, five?

TC: Twenty-three, twenty-four or twenty-five, twenty-six. Let's see. I got out in '68, so I was twenty-seven when I got out. I grew a vest.

JE: Yeah.

TC: But I started when I was fourteen.

JE: Your father must have been proud of the fact that you were a good pilot and you really took to this naturally.

TC: Oh, yeah, extremely. Yeah.

JE: So you ended up doing a whole lot more flying than he ever did.

TC: Oh, yes. I had about 28,000 hours of flying. He probably stopped when he was, maybe, four or five thousand, I guess. I don't know.

Chapter 06 — 8:33
Death of Son

John Erling: Back to Walter Beech.

Tom Clark: Well, Walter Beech died in '49, and I have pictures of him and my dad. My dad took me out there and introduced me to him and I was very young. Most of it is just from what my dad told me about it. Walter Beech was very smart, very powerful, a good man, and did wonderful things for Beech Aircraft. His daughter, Susan, married a fraternity brother of mine. They sent me a book last year saying, "We remember you and all that you did." They're younger than I am but he'd bring their daughters down and I'd play with them, you know. We still have a relationship. I see them every once in a while. And then his wife, Olive Ann Beech, I became very good friends with her. Met many times with her. She died seven or eight years ago.

JE: Why do you think Beech became so successful?

TC: They had a cousin—maybe it was a nephew—who took over. He led that company from when Walter died. Mrs. Beech owned it but he ran the company until he retired in '81. They sold that company to Raytheon and I think they had great leaders, so it's the leadership that makes you successful. You get the wrong leader, you can't make a mountain out of molehill or vice versa. You've got to have the right people.

JE: So, at the same time, was Cessna a competition at that time?

TC: Yes.

JE: So, were they the two main brands, probably?

TC: Well, the other one was Piper Aircraft. Yeah, I think Bill Piper. Those were the three. Piper, Cessna and Beech.

JE: We talk about Clyde Cessna. He was actually an automobile dealer in Enid, had built an airplane from plans. In so doing began to form his own ideas as to how airplanes should be designed and he couldn't get any Enid investors in air manufacturing, so he returned to his native Kansas to found the company that would be the majority of aircraft flown in the Western world. So, here it is Kansas as a Walter Beech and a Clyde Cessna. Was Clyde quite a bit older? He would have been older than Walter, wouldn't he?

TC: Yes. Yeah.

JE: And that company was actually in existence, probably, before Walter started his business?

TC: I don't know that as a fact, but it wouldn't surprise me.

JE: But, regardless, they then became competitors along with Piper.

TC: Right.

JE: So, were Cessna planes also being sold here in Tulsa? Did they have a representative here?

TC: They finally moved somebody down here. They didn't make it. Then they had somebody else come and try it and they didn't make it. But there's a guy right now down at Riverside that sells the small Cessnas. Bill Christianson.

JE: He's a Cessna dealer?

TC: Cessna dealer for the small airplanes, not for the jets or the jet props or anything like that.

JE: Bill Christianson at the present is a city councilor for Tulsa.

TC: Right. Exactly. And a good friend of mine.

JE: Were there features about Beech that were better than Cessna back then—back and forth?

TC: (Laughs) I'm prejudiced as I can possibly can be and so we think that the—I believe with all my heart that the Beech was a superior product, but on the other hand, I think the Cessnas were less expensive, so I think the people bought that. They bought what they could afford. So they were good airplanes. I'm not trying to run down the Cessna.

JE: Right.

TC: But the Bonanza was something like from outer space. I mean, it was unbelievable.

JE: So the Bonanza—we're talking back in the '40's?

TC: Mm hmm.

JE: What would that be selling for?

TC: Today?

JE: No, back then.

TC: Oh, $7,000.

JE: That was big money, wasn't it, back then?

TC: You run it out, time value and money, you'd be surprised what it's worth today.

JE: And then a Cessna would have come in underneath that kind of dollar. You could have bought a Cessna for a few thousand less?

TC: They were probably like two or three or four thousand dollars, I guess. I mean, it's a long time ago. We weren't buying them, but that makes sense to me. They had fixed gears with a Banana at a retractable gear and they had a fixed pitch prop which kept it at the same rpm, where the Banana, you could vary the rpm rounds per minute than the Bonanza. Much faster airplanes. It was like a rocket from outer space or something.

JE: To use a car analogy, a Beech was like a Cadillac and maybe a Cessna was like a Ford or a Chevy.

TC: Exactly.

JE: And then the Piper—where did that come in?

TC: Well, I think Piper and Cessna pretty much competed with each other.

JE: Okay. Beech was known as top of the line and the finest from the get-go.

TC: At that particular time.

JE: Okay, so I have you in the Air Force. You're a flight instructor, and then you finish your finish your duty in 1968.

TC: Yeah, I finished in December of '68.

JE: Are you married along that way in here?

TC: Yeah, I married a lady when I was a junior in college. We were married for twenty-one years and then we got divorced. I had a son who died from Duchenne's muscular dystrophy.

JE: How old was he?

TC: He was twenty-four when he died.

JE: And what was his name?

TC: Thomas Gale Clark III, but we called him Gale after my father.

JE: Was that a disease that he was born with?

TC: Yes. It's the Jerry Lewis disease. They can't find a cure for it because it's genetic. For some reason it's transferred only from women. From mothers. If a woman has it and has a daughter, then she's a carrier of it. But if she has a son, it just deteriorates all of your muscles, everything, until the last thing it gets is your heart, which is a muscle, and your lungs, which is a muscle. When we realized he had it, they said he'll be dead at nine or ten, but we spent zillions of dollars and made him live until he was twenty-four. I have a daughter who is forty-nine.

JE: And what's her name?

TC: Carolyn. This coming May the 11th, is going to be recognized by the University of Oklahoma as an honored regent.

JE: What did she do?

TC: Well, the first thing she did, she married a billionaire. That was a smart thing to do. (Chuckles)

JE: And what was his name?

TC: Bill Powers. Because of that, she was able to do things. She ran the Kennedy Center for three years. She now is on the Board of Directors for the Museum of the Grammys. Her bio is just unbelievable. However, she's forty-nine and I have three grandsons. I did remarry August of '86, Hillary. We've been married for twenty-six years. I was divorced and I called my sister who lives in Enid. I said, "Are there any pretty ladies over there?" "I know this gorgeous lady." So I went over there and picked her up in my airplane, flew to Oklahoma City, bought her dinner and (chuckles)....

JE: Hillary?

TC: Hillary, yeah, and the rest is history. (Chuckles) And we're very happily married and been married for twenty-six years.

JE: First date on a plane.

TC: Took her on an airplane. You don't take them down there on a cow, I want to tell you that. (Laughs)

JE: Back to your son. When did you realize he had something wrong with him?

TC: I was up at Grand Lake, parked my boat. They had these steep stairs going up to where the cabin was. He's four years old and we're walking up the steps and he puts one foot down and then pushes himself up and then brings the other foot up and he puts the other foot down and all of a sudden this little three-year old kid comes along and he just "shoom" zooms up. I said, "There's something wrong with this kid. There's something wrong." I said, "We need to go see a doctor." And so we went to see somebody they recommended, you know, a nerve doctor or something, I forget what it was, and he said, "I think he has Duchenne's muscular dystrophy. I said, "What do you have to do, some exercise, workout, what does he have to do?" And he said, "No." He looked at me and he said, "He's going to die." He chilled me. I mean, I started crying. I mean, I couldn't hardly stand it. So we took him—Harold Stewart—best friend of my father, and Harold pulled every string that we ever wanted and got him the very best that could be offered in America. One reason he lasted until he was twenty-four years old. That's probably one of the reasons that we divorced—my first wife. Tremendous pressure on our marriage watching him fade away into oblivion. Very painful. And it caused problems. I'll take all the blame, but anyway.

JE: Tremendous stress.

TC: Yeah, it really is.

JE: And we should say, Harold Stewart was a big name here in Tulsa.

TC: Big name.

JE: Owned KVOO radio.

TC: Right.

JE: His money came from oil? Harold Stewart?

TC: He married President Skelly's daughter. Bill Skelly's daughter. That's who Harold married.

JE: Your father and Harold were good friends.

TC: I could never get in Southern Hills—I was out in the Air Force. Dad said, "Hey, Harold's president this year. You want to be a member of Southern Hills?" I said, "Yeah!" There was no meeting, no talking to anybody, it was just done. Harold was a powerhouse. Powerhouse. Great guy. Everybody in Tulsa loved him. Great personality. Loved to party and have a good time. Loved to hunt, fish. Wonderful man.

JE: And you were around him a fair amount?

TC: Through my dad. Harold and I were friends, but, I mean, mainly through my dad.

JE: And then his son, who was adopted, John Stewart....

TC: On the Board of Regent with me at OU.

JE: How interesting that that comes together.

TC: We're good friends. We like each other very much. We talk about our dads all the time.

JE: Good relationship.

TC: Very good. He had a lot of other friends, too, but Harold was probably one of his best friends.

Chapter 07 — 11:22
Hollywood

John Erling: Then you're out of the military and then you decide it's time to go to work for the family business.

Tom Clark: Well, they wanted to assign me at that point to be in the fighter, which I wanted five years sooner, badly. So they said, "We have your assignment here," and this and that, "but you have one little window here you can get out." It was a one-year tour and it's all the guys that had left my training squadron and went over and applied and came back in one year. So I went around and talked to them. I said, "What do you think?" They said, "Tom, don't go." They said, "We're not fighting to win. We're fighting with our hands tied behind us and guys are dying for nothing." They all said, "Get out." Some of them at the end there, they were so worthless, so rather than drop their bombs, they would just go out over the ocean and pick them off and come back, because every day they flew the same route, the same altitude at the same time and they knew exactly what they were approved, they were just shooting them out of the air. They said, "We're fodder." Target

fodder is what they called them. And they said one day they were finally approved. They waited four years to bomb this bridge between Hanoi and the town there to the west of them. I can't think of it now. Hai Phong or somewhere where they brought all of the supplies in from China. They wanted to knock that bridge out so they'd slow down those supplies coming into Hanoi, and so finally they got permission from McNamara. So they went in there. In those days, they didn't have all the electric equipment so you'd break down any anti-aircraft fire and break out from the cloud and you'd have about two seconds to spot the bridge, zero in on it, pick the bomb and pull up and go. So, they went in there and instead of hitting the fifth arch, they hit the second. The bridge went "boom", down in the water and they lost two planes and lost two men. Fighter pilots are like, you know, my brothers. They depend on each other for life. Flying the wing, fighting the migs, caring for everybody, rescuing, all that sort of thing. But they were excited even though they lost two comrades, they were thrilled that they accomplished the mission. The squadron commander walked in, a colonel, and read a letter from McNamara. A letter of accommodation for hitting the wrong arch. And he said, "Tom, if he had been in the room, they would have killed him." When I heard that story, I said, "Well, that's not for me. If I'm going to fight, I'm going to fight to win. I'm not going to sacrifice myself for nothing."

JE: But they destroyed the bridge!

TC: Yeah! They accomplished it, but he wanted to (indiscernible) because he was afraid of (indiscernible) for the people living on the edge of the river. (Chuckles) Anyway, I leave the Air Force in December of '68, I come back, my dad says, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to start at the bottom. I want to understand this place. I want to work line service. I want to understand the fuel business and how that works. And so, I put on a uniform and everything and I'm standing there and this T-38 goes by and this pilot's standing there and I'd been fueling airplanes and stuff and I said, "Golly, last month I was flying one of those." And he just, "Oh, yeah! Sure! Here you are sweeping floors and last month you're telling me you were flying a super-sonic T-38." And I didn't have the heart to tell him how I got there. I spent six months on the line service and then I went to parts and spent about nine months there and then I wanted to get in the sales. They didn't have any charter departments. I'm going to start a charter department, so I started charter. Went and got the plane and went and got the plane and got the pilots and put it together. Pretty soon, I was making more money than just about the company from the very first charter deals there ever was at Tulsa International and one of the first in the country that just came out where you could fly the charter like that where it was legal and you had to get all these licenses and stuff like that. So I did that from '68 until '76. That's a long time. That's eight years. But I started getting burned out. I wanted to go into sales, but my dad has these salesmen and he couldn't just fire them. I'm getting really jittery. I said, "It's time for me

to move on here." So a friend of mine was making movies in Hollywood as an actor, and he came into town and he had a script and he says, "Tom, can you help me raise some money?" So I went out and raised $100,000 just like that. I said, "You know, I'm going to do this, but you know what? I'm going to produce this thing. I want to be in charge." Sounds like an egomaniac, but you can get more done when you're at the top and so I went to Hollywood in '76, and I produced a film. Well, prior to that in '75, I put money into a film called *Macon County Line*, with this guy and made a ton of money.

JE: He was a friend of yours?

TC: He starred in *Macon County Line*. He was the top actor in it.

JE: And what's his name?

TC: Jesse Vint III.

JE: And how did you know him?

TC: I grew up with him in high school. He was in Lancers. I was a Lancer at the social club at high school.

JE: At Edison.

TC: At Edison. He went to Hollywood just as soon as he got out of the Army. He had to serve two years in the Army.

JE: So he comes back and he gets you involved.

TC: It's '75, '74 for Macon County Line. Max Baer, Jr. produced Macon County Line. His dad was the World Champion, remember—boxing? This is junior, played Jethro. Beverly Hillbillies?

JE: Yeah.

TC: That's Max Baer, Jr. So I go to Hollywood out there. You know, I'm hanging out in this mansion and we're having a grand old time. So then I said, "I'm going to produce my own film. I'm going to show you that I can do something else besides make a charter department." My dad said, "Go do it." And he furnished money. Half I raised from other people and he furnished the other half, now that I think about it. So I go out there and made the movie called *The Black Oak Conspiracy*. It was a good film. I broke even. In fact, I made about $300,000 now that I think about it. But what happened was, he owed me lots more money. The distributor, which is a very famous guy. Roger Korman. He made all the B-movies back then and he found some of the major movie stars. Roger Korman was keen to make this movie and so he bought my film and gave me $300,000 but there was another $300,000 coming on top of that and he wouldn't pay it to me. He had the bucks, said "I've never been sued, I've been honest." That's a lie. I sued him. By the time you hire the attorneys, the time you have to do the auditing of the books, I got it all back, but by the time I spent with him, I broke even, so I said, You know what, I worked my tail off. I broke even. I had a wonderful time. Took two years to make and get it going and everything. The

theatrical release all over the United States, all around the world. I saw it everywhere. But this is not the business for me, so I'm going back to Tulsa. So I come back to Tulsa. About that time a guy named Frank Lowery, a salesman, he wanted to go out on his own. He quit. Dad said, "There's your chance. Go sell airplanes." I broke every record. I got trophies everywhere. I'd sold '78, '79, '80, '81, '82. Four years and I made a ton of money. And in '82, my father, I think, was starting to fade. He said, "Tom, I'm thinking about selling." Finally, by 1985, I said, "Let me tell you something." Either I buy majority control of this company or I'm going. So, my sisters—we worked out a deal where my dad had enough money to live on, I got majority control of Tulsair in 1985. That continued until 1992 when I bought my sisters out, and everybody, and I own a hundred percent. We made a lot of money from the King Air when it came out. They called it the King Air 200—1974 up to 1982. A very popular airplane. We made about ten million dollars and I said, "Dad, you and my sisters, you all divide the money up like you want. You take every dime of it. All I want is Tulsa Air and their assets here. And by the way, I don't know if you remember this in '82. Remember, we had the crash in '81, '82, '83, '84, '85, '86 were lean years. I bought it at the bottom. People said, "You'll lose your ass." Word for word. I said, "Well, that's mine to lose." "Take your money and be happy." So I took it and by 1987 I had turned it around and I was back in the black and making money. My poor sister, one of them, gave it to her husband and he bought that oil refinery down in Duncan, Halliburton's, which they abandoned. Paid two and half million dollars for it or three million. I forget what they paid. I said, "Are you out of your mind? This thing is worthless. What are you doing? Don't come moaning to me if it doesn't work." And my sister—now, her husband is a very smart guy in real estate and has a company over there—but she gives it to him and they went out in the country and were going to develop all of this land for a development in Enid and, of course, Enid crashed, too, and he lost every dime of it. And so they've always bugged me. "You're living like King Farouk, Tom, and we have nothing." You know, I said, "You had it all and if you had given to me, I could have put it in a Cub Scout savings account and you'd still have it and you'd be making money on it." (Chuckles) "Why didn't you come talk to me?" I was being funny, but finally we've kind of gotten over that after all the years and we're back to being friendly. But they were bitter at me, somehow because I'd made the money and they were broke. They couldn't understand it, but I said, "It's simple economics. You gave your money to your husbands, they wasted it. I used mine as I knew how to do it in the business I know very well."

JE: Your sisters. Were they older or younger than you?

TC: Both younger.

JE: And so today in 2012, all families are....

TC: Neither one was easy to come back and I think her husband finally said, "Hey, don't blame

Tom," you know, and so we get along fine and for the first time in however long it was, finally my sister called me the other day and said she wants to get with me.

JE: That recent?

TC: Yeah, in the last four or five months.

JE: That had to make you....

TC: I had not talked to her from '85 until just a couple of weeks ago.

JE: In 2012?

TC: Yeah.

JE: Well, that had to make you feel good.

TC: Yeah, because they took that money. I mean, they were really in better shape than I was. I took a hell of a risk and they were blaming me for being successful.

JE: You've taken the phone call and haven't gotten together personally yet, but will....

TC: I shall.

JE: Because they have children, too. Nieces and nephews, I suppose.

TC: Right.

JE: That you've never met.

TC: Well, I haven't seen in a long time. I probably won't recognize them.

JE: But that's a great story. In the movie *Black Oak Conspiracy*, who starred in that?

TC: Jesse Vint. He also was the leader in *Macon County Line*, Karen Carlson. Goll, she was Miss Arkansas, she was runner-up number two in Miss America. In fact, you know, when we were doing the post production on the film, she let me live in the house with her. Jesse Vint was living with her at that time. They got together on the set and so they let me stay there while we were doing post production. We had a really good cast and a well written story. Max helped us a little bit. Max Baer, Jr. gave us some advice on how to do things and supported us. He didn't make any money, but just for the fun of it, you know.

JE: Were you involved in watching the actual making of the movie yourself?

TC: Oh, yeah.

JE: Did you enjoy that process?

TC: Oh, unbelievable. Outside of Sacramento there's a little town. I can't think of the name of it now, but it's beautiful. They found gold—that river up there. Well, they put a dam up in front of the lake. It was beautiful and the scenery was beautiful and, of course, I hadn't ever made a film, but I learned fast. So I was involved and then pretty soon I had to really just take some of it over, not maybe as far as directing but as far as the story style and making things happen and showing up and everybody doing everything. I mean, I ran the show. Said I could do it. I did a little cameo in it.

JE: Oh, really?

TC: (Chuckles) Yeah, just for the fun of it.

JE: And are there copies out there today of *Black Oak*?

TC: Yeah. If you want, I'll give you a CD to it.

JE: What did you do in it?

TC: My friend, Jesse Vint, got in a fight with a guy who was bothering his girlfriend or something and I got a hat on from a little hamburger place. They're fighting out there and I run out and I get them and I shout, "Hey, stop it, stop it. You guys quit fighting here! What are you doing? God, you can't do this at my place!" And I look down and I see the guy's name in the movie, Jingo, who is from this town. I said, "Hey, Jingo, good seeing ya. How long you been here?" He said, "Oh, about five minutes." (Chuckles) And then cut to the next scene.

JE: It wasn't thrown away on the cutting room floor. It made it into the....

TC: Well, if they wanted a paycheck.

(Chuckles)

JE: Right.

TC: They wanted me to buy all the stuff I did.

JE: So how did that do box office-wise?

TC: Well, like I said, now that I get my money back, made three hundred thousand dollars and I had to sue Roger Korman.

JE: Yeah.

TC: And look at Roger Korman—he's quite a guy. Quite a buy on him now. By the time I got through suing him, I broke even. I said that's enough. If I can't trust people to keep from cheating me. And it's still the major problem in Hollywood.

JE: Did you look back thinking you'd want to do anything more in Hollywood even after you earned, you made....

TC: Well, yeah. If somebody would come up and give me, you know, five hundred million dollars or something, I don't know, and I didn't have any idea, I'd love to go make another movie. I mean, I know where all those people are and I'd love to do it. It was fun. I enjoyed it. It was creative and I met great people and famous people. Not that I care about that thing, but when I was hanging out with them, Jesse Vint and them and all of those, they were like buddies. They weren't, like, you're a Hollywood guy, I'm thrilled, give me your autograph. I got to know some of the top actors.

JE: But it still fascinates you and if somebody said today, you'd even get involved in something in Hollywood today.

TC: Well, I might get involved, but the big thing I have going for me right now is I have a grandson who's a senior at OU. He's taking all of the flying lessons and getting a business degree. My goal is, before I turn into a vegetable someday, is to try to teach him this business. I'd like to see the business carry on. I told my daughter, I said, "Look, I will give

the company to my grandson—or your son—if you'll pay the death tax. We're going to try to mitigate that minimum, so it's an emotional thing for Tulsair. But I could probably do both.

JE: Your grandson. His name is?

TC: Tom Cleger.

JE: Is he interested in the business? Have you talked to him about it?

TC: Yes, I have, and he's taking all of the flying lessons, getting his business degree, and doing....

JE: Doing the same thing you did.

TC: Yeah. I think, yeah, I set the mold and it seems like he's there and he's a handsome-looking guy and I just love him to death.

Chapter 08 — 4:14
Competition

John Erling: Is the competition today in 2012 a lot stronger than it was back '70's, 80's?

Tom Clark: Sure, because there's way more manufacturing. I mean, look at this deal we've got going on with Brazil. If you sell an American-made airplane in Brazil, there's a twenty-nine percent tax to bring it into the country. They're bringing these airplanes up here, making them with cheap labor, dumping them in America, and they're called Phenom 100 and it's just killing us. In fact, Hawker Beechcraft is supposed to get the military award for their plane—it's a jet prop airplane for close air combat and they thought they had it for sure and they give it to the Brazilian company. Now they're suing and they may be able to turn that around, but my point is, we're full of people who don't have jobs. Why in the world are we bringing planes up from Brazil for? I mean, it's crazy. So, what's happened is, they come in here and they've got these airplanes, the Phenom 100, 300, 600—I'm just using an example—dump them up here and it makes it really tough to compete. I'm worried about America. At some point, America has got to get back to work. I tell you what I'm doing. It looks to me like it's all moving overseas and so I'm going to Farnborough, which is a key oil deal. The State of Oklahoma, we're, you know, going to have that deal over there for products we sell, which are aircraft parts and airplanes and stuff like that. Sending a guy to eBase, which is in Geneva in May. I've got a deals with Bombardier and so on for selling those products overseas. I also do all I can for America. If I could sell planes here, it would sure be better, but if something doesn't change, I see a limited future for me and my company and possibly for the whole United States. You just can't be shoving people out there drawing paychecks and not finding them jobs and doing things like that, and I'm concerned.

JE: So, it's really tough to compete, then, pricewise against these planes that are made overseas.

TC: Well, you're dealing with a guy that works for a dollar fifty an hour—and I'm not anti-union or anything like that—but the deal for retirement and dollars that you get for this and that and so on, it's an unfair balance. And you saw that thing about American Airlines. You saw it finally happen to them. I hate it, but we're competing on a global scale and you got to learn how to compete in that. We can only borrow so much money someday and, of course, you see what's happening in inflation. The more you borrow—the dollar is going down and down—so things are getting more and more expensive. I'm mortified, almost terrified, as to the long-term future if something doesn't change. And that's not politics to me, that's just dollars in and dollars out.

JE: Are you in Tennessee, also? Millington Municipal Airport?

TC: Yeah, we had a heck of a deal. The Navy decided to shut down their training base down there in 1995. It was a training base for years and years and years and years. And I cannot believe this, but a guy—a representative—talked the Navy into moving headquarters personnel, Navy, to Millington, Tennessee. Every Navy personnel has to meet a personnel board in there twice a year where they go in and go over their career in the navy and where they're going, so they have to meet twice a year. And why they moved it, I don't know you ever did from Washington, D.C., but that's where headquarters for navy personnel is, right there in Millington, Tennessee. So I got to thinking about it and I said, you know what? If they have to meet a board twice a year, all these pilots are going to fly in here, land at the old Millington Airport, which they gave to the City of Millington, and then they're going to go across the road and meet their boards and then come back and jump in their jets. They'll call it a training flight, but it will really be for them to check their records. And, you know, they get some training. And then off they'll go. So I went around and leased all the property there of Millington Airport. Sure enough, these pilots started just pouring in there. I'm making really good money. And I have a monopoly, so now I can charge what I want to because I leased everything up. Went along just fine until the war got hot in Afghanistan. Planes go over there. Now they're not coming in. I keep thinking Afghanistan's about over with, I'm losing money down there now, but if they'll come back, that process will start again. They'll come back and fly in there and meet their boards and buy fuel from us. We have a maintenance facility there. And it's okay, but that's not where the money is.

JE: It's in the fuel.

TC: Yeah. Why did Dillinger rob banks? Because that's where the money is.

JE: Right.

(Chuckles)

Chapter 09 — 6:30
OU Regent

John Erling: Your school, Oklahoma University, you were very good to it, and today you are a member of the Board of Regents.

Tom Clark: I am.

JE: That's got to make you feel good that you've been able....

TC: I've been very, very proud of that, one, and two, there isn't anything I wouldn't do to try to make that school a better place. And I do all that I can.

JE: Here we are in 2012. How many years have you been a regent?

TC: Eleven. I have three to go. I may get a historic third term. We'll see. I'll be the first person to go for a third term if I get it and I'm working it already.

JE: Just for historical sake here, you've been there for eleven. President David Boren has been there. You've been able to see him work wonders on the campus raising funds and all that kind of thing.

TC: I have.

JE: You've been an eye-witness to all of that.

TC: I have.

JE: Comment on that.

TC: I've been part of it. Well, not just me. I have six other fellow regents.

JE: I realize that.

TC: I'm not taking all of the glory here or anything like that.

JE: No, no. It's just the fact that you were there to witness it.

TC: It was more than witness. As you know, a board has final power. We could fire Boren, four of us in an open meeting, act within twenty-four hours. That's a lot of power.

JE: What are issues facing the university today that you might just comment on? What is it you're dealing with?

TC: There's one group of people that say, "Hey, you need to spend less dollars." And I say, well, I understand that, but you know if things are really that bad, we have forty thousand students, the maximum we've ever had. People are pouring over the border from Texas to our school. If we were to lower the price any for attending the University of Oklahoma, we couldn't handle any more students, and they're thrilled to have that. We have the highest number of merit scholars in the nation. So I think what we really need is a better accounting to the legislature as to how these dollars are being spent and where they have greater input—and not control, but input—and that they are talked to by people they can have faith in as to what's going on, what needs to be changed. There are some things that

need to be changed—what's good about the university, what's not good—so that they can have somewhat the same faith that I do in the university, so it's a tough position for me in that there's a lot of different ways that people see things. I've been lucky in that I gained a lot of faith in a lot of people there that are willing to talk to me. I'm talking about people who work for the University of Oklahoma in every aspect. I think I have a good feeling as to what needs to be done, but I'm just one person. There are six other regents that have a lot of say and, of course, David has a tremendous say. So I think some changes need to occur, but at the same time, there's got to be a lot of recognition for the things that David Boren and his staff have accomplished.

JE: Yeah. As a regent, do people reach out to you to complain?

TC: Quite a bit. Some of them are kooks, which I don't talk to too long. Some of them are people I feel like I need to talk to and help them with their problem. I'm quite active in that and I get a lot of calls.

JE: That is a real powerful position, isn't it, the Regent of the University of Oklahoma? OSU, too, has their power of their regents as well, but we're talking about this school.

TC: Well, from past history, it's been that, but, you know, OSU—I love the school, I like the people, the president and all that they're doing, they're coming on strong and someday they'll be a very strong competition between the two universities. I have very, very good friends over there, and this stuff about disliking each other because of football or basketball is crazy to me. You know, when I see them do well, I want the State of Oklahoma to do well. My true love is the State of Oklahoma. I'm born, raised and everything that's happened good to me has happened here in this state, but I have a particular pride for the University of Oklahoma. And it's the same battle we have going on right now between Oklahoma City and Tulsa. I mean, the thing is, Tulsa in the '50s was the king. We had the Oil Capitol of the World. Oklahoma City—the big joke was then, you take away the legislature and you have Enid, and that was ho, ho, ho, ho. But for some reason, they had tremendous more foresight than we did, because what's happened is, they took their city limits and they moved it out, you know, a hundred miles so they could control their destiny. Here in Tulsa, you have Jenks and Broken Arrow and Catoosa and Bixby and so on. Well, we're locked in. Honestly, to have a great city it takes dollars. So you have West Tulsa, you wouldn't call that a wealthy community, and North Tulsa is not a wealthy community, and the Spanish are starting to come into East Tulsa, and at some point I hope they'll make the dollars, and so really, you have South Tulsa, where most of the dollars are, and some of them are saying, "We can't afford the tax" and they're leaving to go into the other small towns and Tulsa's hurting. And then we had the rules that came down where the votes had to be separated out and this and that, so Oklahoma City's not going through that right now. Because of that, they've really

drawn some very, very large industries as far as oil. As you know, Boeing shut down in Wichita and came to Oklahoma City. American Airlines, where (indiscernible) bought most of the airplanes, they didn't come to Tulsa, they went to Oklahoma City. I could just go on and on and on. And the way they put that thing together now is incredible. They are really the powerhouse in the State of Oklahoma now, but a lot of people in Oklahoma City are very bitter about the bad days of the '50s, the '60s and the early '70s when Tulsa really didn't pay them much attention. It's a battle I have trying to say, "Hey, guys, we're not going to cut Tulsa off and let it flow out to sea. They have a lot of wonderful people up there. We still have votes up there. Somehow we've got to learn to have faith and trust in each other and believe in each other and try to help and maybe we won't be in Oklahoma City, but I think we still bring a lot to the table. But OU's doing fine, or economics are under control, we're able to borrow money to the maximum when we have, but still it's under control.

Chapter 10 — 4:35
Student Advice

John Erling: Just briefly, then, advice maybe you give to students coming out into the world—OU students, OSU students that are coming out into the world. Maybe they choose your profession. Do you have any word for them in the business world or what have you?

Tom Clark: I'm very proud of the students now. It's quite varied throughout the University of Oklahoma. We have a lot of different programs. You know, the '60s and '70s were wild and you weren't for sure exactly what the young people were going to do or where they were going to end up. I think that they have really grown quite a bit. I think their parents grew up from being wild people to say here's a better way to live, be independent, do your thing, but at the same, realize that you have a responsibility to be committed to this United States, to your state, to anything that's of value to you, you need to be able to stand up for it. I think the students, when I see the things going on down there, I'm very pleased. If we had a problem, I tell you, I really would, if we had a problem—and I'm a straightforward guy in a conversation like this—I'm very pleased and the values that they have. They're not exactly the same as mine, but we weren't raised at the same time. But you need to get your degree. If you're thinking about going on, a Master's Degree is wonderful, obviously, and the Doctorate if you're going into a particular profession that requires it, that's something to consider, but a lot of people are staying over there. Some people stay in for their Masters and others go someplace else just to meet different people and see how

they think at a different school and different approaches to it. But I think they're on the right track. I really do.

JE: Did you have any mentors or heroes that you looked up to in your early years in life? Anybody that you wanted to emulate?

TC: My father. He's the one that drove me to this thing. The thing I feel bad about—I loved my mother, but I never paid much attention to her. He died way before she did and getting to know my mother was a wonderful thing and what a good and decent person she was. I always felt bad that I didn't show her more love and respect and kindness and feelings. I always was driven towards my father and they had the main influence on me. And then there were these young guys I ran around with. I mean, some of them were bad guys, but some of them were good guys. Some were smart people and they taught me a lot also in growing up and so on. I've learned to operate my way and how to make things happen, to make things work and not lose on a situation.

JE: Were these friends out of the school here or at OU?

TC: High school, OU, Air Force. I loved meeting good people that I liked and I could do things with and they understand me and I understand them.

JE: How old was your father when he died?

TC: Seventy-five.

JE: Why did he die?

TC: He had a stroke when he was sixty-seven. He was too heavy, too fat, but the worst thing, he smoked continuously his entire life. He died of lung cancer when he was seventy-five. Heavy smoker. Heavy, heavy smoker. I'm surprised he lasted until he was seventy-five.

JE: Hmm.

TC: And I've never smoked.

JE: He gave you this life, didn't he, and then you took it and ran with it. You were talented enough to do that, but it goes back to him. It goes back to Walter Beech. All that, as you think about your life, how it played out.

TC: I think life is an experience, but it depends how you use that experience. I tried to learn from it, I'd set goals in it, I said this is where I want to go. You zip, sometimes zag to your right and zag to your left when it's necessary, but my thought process was where am I headed and why and how do I get there and what do I have to do to make that happen. I've had some failures, too. My first marriage—that was a failure, so I don't walk on water.

JE: And I'm sure in your business there have been sleepless nights as the oil boom went away in Oklahoma....

TC: Absolutely.

JE: In the '80s and so forth. You wondered, "What am I going to do next?"

TC: It's not all gravy. You just to bed at nights—what am I going to do? You feel terrible, you're

upset. How am I going to make this work? Some part of it may just be pure luck. A lot of it's my own skills. Maybe some of it's a blessing if you're a religious person. I don't know. And I'm not the greatest person or guy that's done this before. A lot of people have done it. We were talking about Chester the other day, and his son, Chet, is a booming success. Just booming.

JE: Chester Cadieux of Quik Trip?

TC: Yeah. There's way more successful people than I am, but I'm proud of what I've done, very proud, and I'm sorry for the things I've failed at or hurt somebody or something like that.

JE: And everybody has that in their background. You're not alone.

TC: I would assume so.

JE: (Chuckles) Well, I want to thank you for this time. You've been very giving. It's very interesting. I've known you for some time and I didn't know all this about you, so I'm sure those who listen will find it fascinating. I appreciate it and then, of course, the great work you're doing for OU and for Tulsa.

TC: I'm trying. (Chuckles)

JE: All right.

TC: Thank you.

JE: Thank you.

Chapter 11 — 0:29
Conclusion

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