

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

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**Announcer:** Joe Robson grew up on a cattle ranch east of Tulsa. After graduating from SMU, Joe came home to start his real estate career. In 1986, he formed the Robson Companies and began to develop part of the family ranch into the master-planned community of Forest Ridge.

Joe promoted infrastructure improvements in the Tulsa metro area—roads, water, and sewer. He helped in the efforts to widen the Broken Arrow Expressway, the extension of the Creek Turnpike, and the breakup of the old University Center at Tulsa in favor of the now stand-alone satellite universities.

Joe joined the local home builders association, which led to two terms as President of the Tulsa Home Builders Association, President of the Oklahoma Home Builders, and, in 2009, Chairman of the National Association of Home Builders. Joe was also Chairman of the Board of RCB Bank.

Listen to Joe talk about Sam and Helen Walton, the family ranch, and the Forest Ridge development on the podcast and oral history website [VoicesOfOklahoma.com](http://VoicesOfOklahoma.com).

## Chapter 2 – 10:50 Helen and Sam Walton

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**John Erling (JE):** My name is John Erling, and today's date is August 25, 2021.  
So, Joe, would you state your full name, please?

**Joe Robson (JR):** John Joseph Robson.

**JE:** All right, so John comes from where?

**JR:** Well, my dad's name was John. There are a lot of Johns in the family, so it was probably more from my dad. Too many Johns in the family. I had two cousins and another uncle, so that's why they call me Joe.

**JE:** Right. And your date of birth?

**JR:** September 7th, 1954.

**JE:** Your present age?

**JR:** Almost 67.

**JE:** And where were you born?

**JR:** Tulsa, Oklahoma, Saint John's.

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

**JR:** This is at the ranch headquarters, Robson Ranch headquarters. Technically, it's in the town of Fair Oaks.

**JE:** So we're gonna tell the story of this ranch, but it brings in the lives of some very interesting people

**JR:** Right.

**JE:** So let's shake the family tree here a little bit, OK?

**JR:** All right.

**JE:** Your grandfather's name was...?

**JR:** Leland Stanford, went by LS, from Georgia, Sandersville, Georgia, and moved here in 1910.

**JE:** What do you remember about him? You knew him, didn't you?

**JR:** Oh yeah, yeah. No, he would come down all the time and taught me to hunt, taught me to fish. We'd go driving in pastures together, and then as I got older, I was able to drive and what have you. I'd go up to Claremore and listen to all of his stories. He was a great storyteller, so I got all the family history from him—history of the ranch, his journey in life, which is pretty amazing. So it was a wonderful time. He was a great man.

**JE:** So then LS, as you call him, he is the father of—

**JR:** My father, Nick. Actually, there were four children. First was Stan, Stanford Robson, then Helen, who in the late '40s, right after the war, married Sam Walton. Then my father was next, married my mother, Alma White, from

Nowata. Her side of the family has a pretty amazing history as well. And then finally, my uncle Frank, Frank Robson.

**JE:** All right, and we have his interview here on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com). Let's talk about your dad, Nick. What was he like? What was his personality like?

**JR:** You know, he was the most easygoing, lovable guy around, very unassuming, and all of them to a certain extent had what I call the Will Rogers syndrome. I mean, they grew up in Claremore. My grandfather knew Will Rogers, who, when he came back to visit, didn't know him well, but, you know, and I think that's maybe something that we've lost—"I've never met a man I didn't like," and how you treat people, and being unassuming. And that was my dad to a T. He would help anybody out of anything—very intelligent and very unassuming.

**JE:** What did he do? Did he work here on the ranch?

**JR:** He managed the ranch, right. My grandfather had kind of a path for each one of his kids. Stan was gonna be the lawyer and follow in his footsteps, my grandfather's footsteps. Helen was gonna be a financier and actually got a financial degree from the University of Oklahoma. My dad was in accounting; he was gonna be the banker. Frank, he was gonna be the rancher, and that all got switched around. Frank became the banker, my dad became the rancher, and Stan moved down to Florida, got in the real estate business. Helen was a big part with Sam in the early days, keeping books and that sort of thing for what would become Walmart.

**JE:** She married Sam Walton, and they actually met in a bowling alley.

**JR:** They did, in Claremore. It was early on during World War II. He had not been inducted into the army, so he was finding some place to work and was working at the armament plant over in Pryor, which now is MidAmerica Industrial Park. They didn't have enough places to live in Pryor, so he got an apartment in Claremore and drove back and forth, commuted to Pryor, and the bowling alley was the hot place to be, and that's where they met. I guess it was love at first sight.

**JE:** You were around them, weren't you? You remember them?

**JR:** Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, all the family—we'd have every Father's Day, every Mother's Day, Christmas—we had a lot of family time and then ranch meetings as well. We would have ranch meetings all the time.

**JE:** So what was Sam like? Did he come out here to the ranch?

**JR:** Yeah, because actually my grandfather was a huge quail hunter, and we had lots of quail here on the ranch back then. We don't have any today, hardly. So Sam would come over with his dogs and hunt and all of his kids. He was Uncle Sam to me. My big deal with him was finding out locations of new quail coveys. Every new quail covey, it was a way to get me a milkshake. If I found a new quail covey, he'd buy me a milkshake, even though he really knew where all of them were anyway. You know, again, he turned out to be larger than life, but he was very unassuming as well.

Interesting that at all those meetings and family dinners and that sort of thing, I didn't know it at the time, but they would talk business and that sort of thing. So I kind of grew up listening at the dinner table and ranch meetings—operations of the ranch, the bank (which RCB Bank is now; my grandfather started that in '36), and the early days of Walmart and what he was doing back when he was doing Ben Franklin franchises. We still have an annual family reunion, and it's coming up here in a couple of weeks—we'll have 60 people.

**JE:** Will that be both the Robson and Walton sides of the family? They'll all get together?

**JR:** Yes, yup. Have every year for as long as I can remember.

**JE:** So then Sam would be described—was he real outgoing or kind of quiet? And you had no idea you were around history.

**JR:** I didn't, no. I mean, he was Uncle Sam. He was very nice, certainly outgoing. You just look at the video of him in front of stockholders—he really believed in serving people. And frankly, that's—and customer service—he believed it. And I think that was a big success of Walmart: they took his personality of trying to do good for others, giving people less expensive ways to buy things, and he was obviously one of the great visionaries and merchandisers in the world. He was Uncle Sam to me—a really great guy.

**JE:** And then Helen, her personality—what was she like?

**JR:** They kind of fit hand in glove. She worked in the business early on, keeping books and that sort of thing, but keeping kids—she had a handful. They had four children. She had a lot of causes that she was able to take on, big in education. My grandfather kind of drilled that into all of his children's minds, that education is the key to future success, and she helped a lot of people get educated. Very involved with the University of the Ozarks, which brought a lot of people from other countries—just any number of causes. A lot of times she didn't get credit for it, and I think that's the thing with all four of them—my dad and his three siblings—they never really looked for credit. It was a matter of, "This is the right thing to do."

**JE:** You're talking about your grandfather and education. He was a lawyer, wasn't he?

**JR:** He was a lawyer, went to the University of Georgia. Started there in 1900, played football. He was a little guy. He was what they called the scatterback back then, and that was before helmets and pads. They'd send him in on short yardage downs, and they'd hike the ball and have two big fullbacks that would grab the handles that were sewn on his uniform and throw him over the line. So he was a tough cookie. (Laughing)

**JE:** When there's a will, right? (Laughing) Right, right.

**JE:** So then let's name the children of Helen and Sam.

**JR:** Rob is the oldest, then John, then Alice, and Jim.

**JE:** And John, he died in a plane crash.

**JR:** He did, he did. That was very tragic. He loved to fly. All of them fly. Actually, I'm not sure Alice did; I'm sure she did at one point in time. He was a tinkerer and that sort of thing. He had a little ultralight. He was living up in Jackson Hole and coming in for a landing, and something happened on the plane, and he wasn't able to survive.

**JE:** He was in his 50s, wasn't he? He was 58 or something when he died.

**JR:** Yes, I believe so.

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**Chapter 3 – 7:43**  
**Chrystal Bridges**

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**John Erling (JE):** Rob Walton, he's involved with Walmart.

**Joe Robson (JR):** Right. He was an attorney, actually was here in Tulsa at Conner & Winters for a long time, and in the mid, well, late '70s I guess, early '80s, went over to Walmart full-time as their in-house attorney.

**JE:** And is he the chairman?

**JR:** He was. His son-in-law now, Greg Penner, is now chairman, but he's still on the board.

**JE:** You know, we should talk a little bit about Alice, who is your cousin?

**JR:** Right.

**JE:** And she's the one who founded Crystal Bridges in Bentonville.

**JR:** Right.

**JE:** And as I understand, she and her mother would often paint watercolors on camping trips, and her interest in art kind of came out of that relationship with her mother and art.

**JR:** It was a passion, and I think everybody has tried to make this part of the country better. Actually, Jim Walton's family—his kids—have really been the impetus of Bentonville being turned around. You've got to have lifestyle in order to attract really good people to this part of the world, and Alice saw that as an opportunity. She loved art. She wanted to create a center for art in middle America. She did, and it's an amazing museum.

**JE:** It is, and we've been over there several times. What I enjoyed was when she, at auction I suppose, or otherwise, would buy major pieces of art that the Eastern museums were interested in. Either she outbid them or moved faster than they did, and they couldn't understand how you're going to take this piece of art from out East and put it in middle America.

**JR:** Yeah, everybody scratched their head going, "You're gonna do what?" But it's been successful, and a huge component of Crystal Bridges is, again, the education part. They've got free art education classes, they deal with a lot

of kids over there in Northwest Arkansas, learning about art and doing artwork. It really is a gem for the whole area.

**JE:** And I think it's interesting because as of May of this year, she was the second richest woman in the world.

**JR:** OK, I didn't realize that.

**JE:** And that's recent.

**JR:** Yeah.

**JE:** Isn't that amazing?

**JR:** Yeah.

**JE:** She had a net worth of \$61 billion, making her the 20th richest person in the world.

**JR:** OK.

**JE:** And you didn't know that?

**JR:** No.

**JE:** "I didn't know my cousin was that wealthy!"

**JR:** Well, I mean, I don't follow the rankings.

**JE:** No, no, no. And then your uncle Frank, he had a tie to Walmart. Did he lease land for Walmart? So how did that work?

**JR:** Right, yeah. Everybody kind of did a little different thing. Of course, Sam didn't have a whole lot of money personally. The ranch was kind of collateral early on, but he financed himself through family and friends. It went store by store, and he got partners. Frank got into the real estate development business, and he would build the Walmart stores for him and then develop the centers around that.

**JE:** So the initial money for Sam to get started actually came as collateral on this ranch.

**JR:** To a certain extent, yes. And then RCB—what was then Rogers County Bank—loaned it, and then my dad and others actually invested in some of those stores and became partners with him.

**JE:** All because he married Helen.

**JR:** All because he married Helen. Yeah. It was an interesting marriage.

**JE:** Now, your uncle Frank told this part of the story on how your grandfather actually started receiving acreage in this ranch.

**JR:** We bought the ranch from John Bilby—or from his family, John Bilby's family. He's the one that actually assembled all the land. He died in 1915, and my grandfather was his attorney and handled his estate. The estate tax went in in 1913, and so he handled all of his estate for 10 years without really being paid much. That actually got him the opportunity to buy the ranch. Part of it, at least according to my grandfather, it came from attorney's fees. It was a way to kind of repay him for all the time and effort that he did. He bought half of it, and then he bought the second half two or three years later.

**JE:** OK, we haven't established how many acres we're talking about here.

**JR:** 18,000, or really about 20,000 originally.

**JE:** So LS picked up the first half.

**JR:** Right, and then three years later took a note on the rest of it, and then about three years later bought the second half of it.

**JE:** There you have it. The story of LS is the one who's responsible for this.

**JR:** Right. Well, and it was interesting because the story around how he got John Bilby as a client was—Mr. Wills actually was his attorney, and Mr. Bilby came in and said, "I've got an issue," and Mr. Wills said, "Hey, I've already taken the other side on this case." He didn't realize who it was that they were having a legal issue with, and he said, "But there's a really good attorney down the road. He's good, he's hungry, and I'm sure he'd do you a good job."

**JE:** And that was LS.

**JR:** And that was LS. But it really doesn't stop there, because LS had to make contact with him, because he was here, there, and yonder—Mr. Bilby was. He actually went all the way to Coweta to catch a train so that he could meet with John Bilby. The rest is kind of history, as you say. He did a good



job. I think my grandfather prevailed in the lawsuit, and he became John Bilby's attorney.

**JE:** You lived on this ranch.

**JR:** I did, and my family is really the only one that actually lived on the ranch. But Dad, after World War II, decided he wanted to take the ranch, and he loved ranching. His true passion was farming. But yeah, I grew up here. It was an amazing, amazing place to grow up.

**JE:** So these 20,000 acres, were they both farm and ranch—cattle and crops?

**JR:** In the late '50s, early '60s, we had some farming here on the ranch, but we had a lot of land down in the Verdigris bottom. So we cleared that land, and that's the bulk of our farming operation now.

## **Chapter 4 – 4:30**

### **Mustangs**

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**John Erling (JE):** In addition to you, let's talk about -- name your siblings.

**Joe Robson (JR):** Oldest is Ed, then Bruce, then myself, and then Sybil.

**JE:** So they all grew up—

**JR:** They all grew up here, yeah.

**JE:** You were riding horses at a very early age.

**JR:** I was riding horses as long as I can remember.

**JE:** 5-6 years old, I'm sure.

**JR:** Actually, 6 years old. I did big cattle drives. We would start at the south end of the ranch, bring them halfway up here the first day, and then we'd gather everything around here the second day and then move north. So we'd have a couple thousand head of cattle, and we'd take them over to Catoosa to the railhead and load them up on rail. At 6 years old, I was on those cattle drives.

**JE:** How about that? You know, we should kind of, if we can, place the ranch because we can see some of it on the Creek Express—

**JR:** If people were driving up the Creek Turnpike and they see the horses, those are wild mustangs. So we're an old folks' home for wild mustangs. That's Robson Ranch.

**JE:** And as long as you mention those mustangs, tell us what's behind all that.

**JR:** Tulsa has kind of come out to greet us to a certain extent. Running a cattle operation with as many neighbors as we have creates problems. Nobody really wanted to operate a cattle ranch—it's an urban cattle ranch, which is just very difficult to do. Hard to get them from one pasture to another, to feed them, all that. The Mustang leasing by the federal government was kicking in at that time. We actually don't have that contract—we lease it to Hughes Cattle Company out of Bartlesville, and they had gotten into it. You don't have to worry about markets. We get land rental, grazing lease—it pays the taxes, and then the farming makes a little income. And that's how we're able to kind of hold on to everything.

**JE:** So that's a big portion of it, isn't it? These Mustang horses, though—why are they here?

**JR:** They're part of our American heritage. They're overpopulated out in Nevada and Utah and out west, the desert west, and they don't have the water or the feed, so a lot of them are just starving to death. So it's a program the Interior Department started several years ago. They round them up—you can actually adopt one at an early age—but the ones that come here are six or seven years or older, and they've just been in the wild too long and they're really unbreakable. So they bring them here as part of the American heritage, and they've got plenty of grass and water.

**JE:** They don't need tending to at all, do they?

**JR:** That is the real key.

**JE:** So you've had many foremen here on the ranch.

**JR:** We have, we have.

**JE:** And they become a big part of your life, don't they?

**JR:** They do, they do. Really about the only one I knew well was Bill Sharp—one of the greatest guys I've ever known. He was just salt of the earth, very pragmatic, and had great common sense.

**JE:** Were you expected to work? I mean, did you, did say Ed, Bruce—I don't know about Sybil—did they take to wanting to work and be on the ranch as much as apparently you did?

**JR:** Well, I'm not sure "want" was necessarily the key way back when. It was just part of life. There was not a choice.

**JE:** You had a job to do.

**JR:** So yeah, I mean, we did a little bit of everything—painted fence, worked cattle when we got new cattle in, helped round them up, helped doctor them, helped feed them, chopped ice when it got real, real cold so they could get a drink of water—did a little of everything.

**JE:** Well, when you were doing all this, did you think, "I want this to be my future," or did you think, "I need to get out of here as fast as I can"?

**JR:** Well, I didn't want to be a farmer. I kind of ended up being that way.

## **Chapter 5 – 6:46**

### **Real Estate**

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**Joe Robson (JR):** I grew up listening to all the family meetings about how Tulsa's gonna come out and this will all develop at some point in time. So that is really kind of where I entered the picture—the development of the ranch.

**John Erling (JE):** Okay, and I want to get into that, but while you were here working on the ranch, you had interaction with what was going on in Tulsa. I think your mother gave you many different lessons.

**JR:** We had to be very careful in what we said that we might want to try, because we'd be in a lesson in it the next week.

**JE:** Like, what lessons did you get into?

**JR:** Oh, piano, art, speech. We were competitive swimmers, drove to downtown Tulsa for workouts—before any expressways.

**JE:** Because of the YMCA, the pool?

**JR:** YMCA was really where we started. It was the only swim team in town. Yeah, it was -- trumpet, just a little bit of everything—golf, tennis.

**JE:** She gave you lessons for all that, including, I think, a bit of history—your speech lessons.

**JR:** Right. Isabel Ronan.

**JE:** And she also taught Paul Harvey.

**JR:** She did, and Tony Randall.

**JE:** Right. And so she must have been in her upper 80s or something when she was—

**JR:** She was. And Isabel Ronan was the speech teacher at Central High School, one of the great speech teachers. We kind of ran into her because my mother wanted to give my oldest brother some math tutoring lessons, and her sister was the math teacher at Central High School. She realized, well, he can do math, and I can give them speech lessons at the same time. And so we did. They lived in a little house on Elgin about two blocks from Central High School. We did plays, we had recitals, had to do poems and the Gettysburg Address. I mean, it was very, very interesting.

**JE:** That was driven by your mother. So then—but you went to the rural schools here.

**JR:** I went to Broken Arrow up through 8th grade.

**JE:** OK.

**JR:** And we were actually in the Catoosa School District, but we never went there because they didn't have a bus that came out this far. And, actually, right across the street is the Broken Arrow Public School, and they had buses that came out here. So yeah, we went to school in Broken Arrow early on and then transferred into Tulsa at a later age, really because Broken Arrow didn't have a swim team. So we transferred in in order to be swimmers, too.

**JE:** Which high school?

**JR:** Memorial.

**JE:** All right. You said “we”—all of your—

**JR:** All of us. Yeah, my brother Ed, Bruce, all of us transferred into Tulsa.

**JE:** So are you all a year or two apart?

**JR:** Ed’s older—eight years older than I am—and then Bruce, Sybil, and I are three years apart.

**JE:** OK. So then, I mean, you were an accomplished swimmer there at Memorial.

**JR:** I was. Had a good swim team.

**JE:** I think you were a state champion.

**JR:** State champion, all-American, yeah. And then went on to SMU and swam for SMU my freshman year, and then had a shoulder injury that ended my career.

**JE:** Right, yeah. Do you swim now?

**JR:** I do, yeah, I try. I’ve got arthritis in my shoulder, but I paddle around.

**JE:** You indicated earlier about the development of the ranch. Real estate really was more interesting to you than becoming a rancher or a farmer

**JR:** Correct.

**JE:** And so you chose SMU because of their real estate program.

**JR:** Right.

**JR:** They were one of the three schools in the country at the time that had a real estate program, and they also had a good swim team. So it was the best of both worlds.

**JE:** So then you’re deciding what you’re gonna do. What it is you’ll do after you graduate from SMU?

**JR:** I worked for Whiteside & Grant, a commercial real estate company. I worked with Bob Grant—Whiteside & Grant—and primarily focused on development land. Some commercial stuff, did a lot of site selection work for some of the fast-food companies and different things, but then also development land and investment land. So I started kind of getting into what it took to develop—the utilities, the infrastructure that you need in order to do that—and worked hand in hand with a lot of developers in town, finding them new sites to develop.

**JE:** Where was the seed planted, you think? While listening to your—

**JR:** Yeah, it was always fascinating to me at family dinners that we would have, because after dinner it would all turn to talking about business and the ranch and various things. I kind of followed my dad here because he was working on some of that. I always had that kind of in the back of my mind, that we've got this piece of land out here that Tulsa's gonna come out and meet. And then when I was at SMU, Las Colinas was just starting. There were a number of ranches in North Dallas that had developed—where NorthPark is, that area there was an old family ranch that was divided up. But then you saw what Las Colinas became—that was the old Carpenter Ranch. That is really what I wanted to do. And so that was really kind of the inspiration for getting into the real estate business.

**JE:** And didn't your family have a development company?

**JR:** We did. We started one in the early '70s. We did one development and had a second phase ready to go, and then they just pulled the plug on it, and it sat there for a long time.

## **Chapter 6 – 4:54**

### **Hanna Robson**

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**John Erling (JE):** Somewhere in here you were married.

**Joe Robson (JR):** That would have been in '82.

**JE:** 1982. And who did you marry?

**JR:** Hannah Davis. We were born at Saint John's four days apart. I married an older woman by four days, and for 4 days, every year, I remind her of that. (Laughing)

**JE:** (Laughing) And so your children?

**JR:** We have two. Davis, our oldest, actually is working with me. That's fun. And our daughter Callie is in Fort Lauderdale. She's married, has three little girls, but she was a professional ballet dancer and grew up—that was one of the other lessons I took, was ballet.

**JE:** You too?

**JR:** Oh, yeah -- anything to get us all out of the car at the same time. From Roman Jasinski and Mosel and Larkin.

**JE:** Oh, really? You took lessons from them?

**JR:** Yes.

**JE:** And what happened to your ballet career, anyway?

**JR:** Swimming took over. (Laughing)

**JE:** But Callie—

**JR:** At six years old, she started going to class at six years old. They said, "You guys are gonna have a hard decision to make at some point in time, because she's really, really good."

**JE:** Let's go back to Hannah again. Jim Inhofe is Hannah's uncle.

**JR:** Hannah's mother was Marilyn Inhofe. So her mother and Jim are brother and sister. Marilyn, my mother-in-law, is probably Jim's closest confidant. And they don't talk politics, if you can imagine that. They talk family and all the things that brothers and sisters do.

**JE:** Hannah—she went on and had her own career too, didn't she? Williams Companies. Managing director of the foundation?

**JR:** Yes, and director of corporate communications. Yeah, she was there for 20 years and retired, but then also was very involved with Tulsa Ballet, kind of saw the growth of that, was on the committee to hire Marcello Angelini. So

she's been very passionate about arts and different things through the years.

**JE:** Was she a private investigator?

**JR:** When she retired from Williams, a big part was taking care of the kids because they were in middle school at that time, and we thought it was very important at that age to be home. But then when they left, she was trying to kind of figure out what she wanted to do. She was a journalism major at the University of Tulsa, so she always liked to write and she liked to investigate. She likes to say she thinks her son made her a very good PI in his teenage years. But yeah, she went and got her PI license, primarily specialized in finding missing people—especially on adoptions and that sort of thing, where people were trying to find their... And that's a very tricky deal because there are a lot of emotions and what have you involved.

**JE:** Interesting story in itself, and so she found some people then?

**JR:** She did. Some of them were really, really good. Her first one was a woman here in Tulsa. She knew she was adopted and wanted to find out, and turns out, long story short, she found her. The mother denied her, but she was in her 70s when she started searching, and her mother was in her 90s living up in Kansas. As it turns out, it ended fine, but it had been a date rape back in the '20s. The mother was ashamed and went off, had the baby, wasn't married, gave her up for adoption, and never told anybody—none of her siblings or anything else. But she finally came around, the mother did, and she had a whole other family that she met at 70 years old.

**JE:** So Hannah was in on the reunion then, and she was around?

**JR:** No. She got pictures.

**JE:** She'd just put it together and make it happen, but that had to bring her a lot of satisfaction.

**JR:** You know, others maybe weren't quite as happy reunions, because there's a reason somebody put somebody up for adoption. It's a gut-wrenching decision that people have to make.



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**Chapter 7 – 11:30**  
**Forest Ridge**

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**John Erling (JE):** About the ranch—20,000 acres. Some of the ranch was sold for a hunting lodge.

**Joe Robson (JR):** Right. That was in the '30s. LS bought the ranch in '28. The Depression hit in '29, and he had borrowed all sorts of money in order to make it happen, both for the land and for cattle to operate, and prices plummeted to nothing. We had a piece over in Rogers County that overlooked the Verdigris River. There was nothing but trees—you couldn't graze anything on it. And W.G. Skelly came in and bought about 2,500 or 3,000 acres for a hunting lodge. It was unusual to LS. That's where Fin and Feather was. They built a lodge that's actually still there today. I'm not sure—it was a little B&B there for a while, but I'm not sure where it is. I know it's still standing.

**JE:** Places for Mr. Skelly and his buddies to get away, right?

**JR:** Right.

**JE:** And that would be W.G. Skelly, as in KWGS Radio.

**JR:** Correct.

**JE:** So you had this development idea—you saw what was happening in the Dallas area, and you thought, "Hmm, maybe we can do that with our ranch." And somehow you came up with the name Forest Ridge.

**JR:** Right.

**JE:** And so that's a major story too, because how many acres did you dedicate to that? And kind of talk about how that originated for you.

**JR:** In '82 I married Hannah, and I knew I wanted to be in the development business. The oil boom was going crazy, and I'd been dealing with a lot of builders and developers to start with. I took the next phase of the development that they had started some 10 years before and said, "I'm going to develop that." So I talked to the family and asked them to let me take it and run with it. I had it sold out—actually, it was all pre-sold.

**JE:** OK, tell us what that means.

**JR:** All the lots were committed by builders—actually one builder. We were gonna do it in phases. They committed for everything. It was a national builder. And so we started construction, we were ready to go, and then the oil bust hit. They folded their tent, left town, and I had a new development in the worst real estate market we've ever had. I hung on. There were some other issues we had to deal with on infrastructure. What I thought was—we had infrastructure, but we didn't. We had some road issues that we had to get resolved. 71st Street, we had been working on for some time to get it four-lane. You know, it was a tough time.

Fast forward to 1986—I realized during that whole time that a little development out in Wagoner County, kind of off the beaten track if you wanted to call it that, wasn't gonna work. We needed to do something bigger and make a statement. And the area had really started to deteriorate during that time. It was rural development. There wasn't any planning and zoning in Wagoner County at the time. We made the decision to come into the city of Broken Arrow, and that was a whole political controversy at the time anyway, because they had put a fence line around 25 square miles from Wagoner County, and the council was divided as to whether they wanted to go into Wagoner County or not.

**JE:** Broken Arrow?

**JR:** Yup. We came up, and I started working on the idea of a master-planned community.

Similar—not certainly the size of Las Colinas—but nobody had done a master-planned community in Oklahoma. We started working on that in the mid-'80s just because we needed to have something besides a handful of lots out here in Wagoner County. So we worked on different ways of doing it and came out at the time when golf was king as far as master-planned communities. So we started developing plans for the golf course and laid out a whole master plan.

The family didn't want to do it—the bigger family—because all four families were involved.

**JE:** All four?

**JR:** Stan, Helen, my dad, and Frank. They were involved with the development, and when it crashed, they sold me the development land. So I was able to get that, and we actually did some trades around different things. I was able to assemble about 600 acres, and then we've added to it since then. So Forest Ridge now is about 1,000 acres. We opened the golf course in 1989.

**JE:** You had to do a lot of schmoozing, didn't you?

**JR:** There were a lot of meetings.

**JE:** Working with councilors and all.

**JR:** And governors.

**JE:** Governors—why governors?

**JR:** Well, roads really up until the '80s—71st Street, which Forest Ridge is located on (Kenosha in Broken Arrow)—was a two-lane pothole mess. We had been trying to get it four-laned because it was really heavily trafficked, and there's a whole history behind why there's so much development along there. Basically, it was Broken Arrow's water line that spurred all that development, because in the late '60s, they went off spring water—that was their source of water, springs at 81st and 145th. That was not sustainable, so they built a water plant on the Verdigris River, and their main line came down 71st Street. But there was not a paved county road in Wagoner County, even into the '80s. 71st Street would have been probably the first county road.

Right after college, they made me chairman of the trustees of the 71st Street Improvement Committee. I was 21 years old and wasn't sure what I was doing, but we gathered probably 80% of the land donated for right-of-way to expand the road. But the funding was impossible. The '80 election was the presidential election, so it would have been the '78 gubernatorial election when George Nigh won. But he was in a three-way race for governor—it was George Nigh, Bob Funston (who was a state senator from Broken Arrow), and one other. Bob Funston lost, but he carried northeast Oklahoma.

We had worked with him on trying to get funding for 71st Street. It was kind of a backroom, smoke-filled meeting with George Nigh after the

primary, at the Midway Café on Highway 51. And Bob Funston said, “I will support you, but you’ve got to commit to four-laning 71st Street.” And that’s how we got 71st Street. George Nigh became governor, and he followed through on four-laning 71st Street.

**JE:** So that was huge to your development.

**JR:** Oh, it was huge. It was the only way we could. I mean, you couldn’t do it on the roads that were out there.

**JE:** OK, so that piece is in place. So then when do we start building?

**JR:** We started houses early on in 1986. Partnered with some builders—just having lots out there wasn’t gonna work, because there were so many lots that had been built, and builders were buying for ten cents on the dollar from the banks. You can’t do that and have full boats. So we thought what we needed to do was actually have product on the ground.

It was slow. In 1988, we wanted to bring attention to us, so we gave a house away—a \$100,000 house—with 99.5 FM station, Magic 99.

**JE:** That brought a lot of attention to your development.

**JR:** It did, it did. They gave 99 keys away—or at least the chance to draw. We had a big fishbowl, and I think we made it to like number 73. So we dragged it out for a long time, and of course they were doing the on-air key drawing and what have you. Yeah, it was exciting, but right at that time is when we announced Forest Ridge, and we actually started the golf course in 1988. So it was kind of twofold—we were able to announce Forest Ridge.

**JE:** And now of course it’s fully developed, and it must bring a source of pride to you after all those years when you probably thought nothing was gonna work.

**JR:** There were a few years, yeah. You know, the oil bust lasted into the ’90s from a housing standpoint. I think in Oklahoma we didn’t get pre-bust employment levels until about ’93. So that’s a huge dip.

**JE:** I’m just thinking about you, though, on a daily basis. Nothing was happening—nothing, nothing, nothing. You had to get depressed about it, or think, “Do I give up?” You must have had a lot of thoughts.

**JR:** I wasn't gonna let it fail. You just do what you have to do. I didn't have any employees. I did the books, I sat on the houses, did a little bit of everything. You just do what you gotta do.

**JE:** So then when was it that you felt, "Ah, it's taking off"? What year about?

**JR:** You know, there are always ups and downs in the development business. It would have been mid-'90s probably, when it really kind of took off—because you had to have a big enough presence as far as number of houses and residents, and that sort of thing, that it really became a community. That would have been mid-'90s, because we had a piece over here and a piece over there, and when we connected them all, then we really had a community at that point.

**JE:** LS had no idea what he started, did he?

**JR:** No. (Laughing)

## **Chapter 8 – 7:00 Creek Turnpike**

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**John Erling (JE):** You know, near your ranch was the proposed site for the nuclear power plant, known as Black Fox, and this is PSO that wanted to build that.

**Joe Robson (JR):** Right. I went to all those hearings.

**JE:** And we had a lady by the name of Carrie Dickerson...

**JR:** Yes.

**JE:** And they ought to build a statue to her someplace. We have her interview—her daughter gave us the story about her mother Carrie—on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com). You remember Carrie in those meetings, I would imagine.

**JR:** Oh, I do. I met her numerous times. Yeah, she was a bulldog. She was adamant. And we went to the meetings. I mean, our farmland was right across the river, so it was concerning to us. Didn't help PSO's cause that

Three Mile Island happened right about that time. There are always challenges.

**JE:** But Carrie is the one who carried the ball on this whole thing and carried the water, as we say. Even her hometown newspaper, the Claremore paper, was against her. And then I think in meetings they would say, “Well, how do you know any of this? You’re just a farm wife or something.” And she had done all her work, and I have to tell you, she knew what she was talking about.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah. No, she was passionate, and you know, that’s how you get things done. You’ve got to have passionate people, and you’ve got to believe in what you’re doing. She knew how to do it and do it correctly. There wasn’t the animosity that you see today in disagreeing with somebody. You state your case, you do it well, your facts are right, and at the end of the day, she won.

**JE:** I think PSO had sent people out when she had meetings—they’d sit in the back just to monitor what she was saying. Then of course it went to the Corporation Commission, and she sat in that meeting and they ruled in her favor. So that was—it’s a great story, and yes, there should be a statue to Carrie somewhere.

**JR:** I agree, I agree.

**JE:** So then also next, the Creek Turnpike used part of the ranch. Tell us about that.

**JR:** I did a kind of whitepaper, I guess, in 1982 on development of the ranch, and transportation is key. You’ve got to have roads. In ’82, again, we only had one paved Wagoner County road, and that was 71st Street. Everything else was dirt roads. I was on the transportation committee with the Broken Arrow Chamber, and at the time in the early ’80s, Terry Young became mayor of the city of Tulsa.

You had what would be the south leg of Tulsa—the Creek Turnpike—but that was going to be just a loop around Tulsa, and it would not go any further east or south or anything else. Mayor Crawford, when he came in, said, “No, we need this.” So they started doing studies on how they might fund it, and that’s really kind of when the turnpike idea came in, because it had been on the books since 1954—hadn’t been built yet and hadn’t been

funded.

So the Turnpike Authority came in and did regional traffic studies, and I was on the committee that kind of oversaw that. At the end of the day, I was on the committee, and they were doing all these lines on a map. I said, “Well, if you put it here, we’ll give you the right-of-way—this much right-of-way.” So we donated about six miles of right-of-way to the Turnpike Authority.

**JE:** In the state of Oklahoma, kind of like bingo—that just gave it that energy, didn’t it?

**JR:** It gave it the energy, and then Frank Keating came into office about 10 years later and built it. It had to be, for a new road such as that, probably the shortest time from when it went on paper to when it was built than anybody. And Stratton Taylor out of Claremore was the pro tem of the Senate—he really wanted to see it because he wanted to have access to south Tulsa from his district, and he was the one at the end to really make it go a whole loop and create the loop.

So it was him, and there were—you know, I was a cog in the wheel—but there were a lot of people really pushing for it. Guy Berry over in Sapulpa was huge in getting it because he wanted Sapulpa connected with the rest of the city. And any number—Ted Fisher, Jed Wright, who was minority leader of the Senate. If it wasn’t for the leadership that we had in the Tulsa area—I mean, you had Frank, the governor, who had ties to Tulsa, you had the pro tem of the Senate, the minority leader of the Senate, a lot of great state representatives that were in leadership positions—it never would have happened. Having leaders in your community in the statehouse is very important.

**JE:** Right. But you also helped to widen the Broken Arrow Expressway.

**JR:** I did. We were pushing the Creek, but that was the number one goal for the Broken Arrow Chamber for a long time—to widen the Broken Arrow Expressway. It was four-lane, it was outdated, way too much traffic, and that happened about two years before they funded the Creek Turnpike. That was a lot of negotiations as well.

There were a lot of roads that were built in western Oklahoma because

that's where the speaker was, in order to get that funded. So there was a lot of trading. I mean, I was in the background of that, but yeah, there were a lot of trades.

**JE:** You said western Oklahoma. I mean, if the trading went on—tell us what you meant.

**JR:** Well, I mean, you've got a statewide road system. So if they spend money in Broken Arrow or in Tulsa, then you've got to have money spent elsewhere. So western Oklahoma at the time was a big beneficiary of the Broken Arrow Expressway getting paved. (Laughing)

**JE:** That's interesting. (Laughing)

## **Chapter 9 – 4:50**

### **Northeastern State U**

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**John Erling (JE):** You also, I mean, you've served the community in many capacities, and you were in on the breakup of the old University Center at Tulsa in favor of the now standalone satellite universities. How did you get involved in that?

**Joe Robson (JR):** Broken Arrow had always wanted to have a university. I think they felt like it was stolen from them because they actually had one at statehood called Haskell College, and that was the site of the old high school. It was there all the time while I was growing up—the site of the old Haskell College. I think it was 1917 when they were consolidating and got rid of it.

So it was more from an economic development standpoint. That was before the breakup of UCAT. We wanted to start having talks. NSU had opened a campus in Muskogee, and we went over and looked at that. So it was really about getting a satellite university campus to locate there.

Then the breakup of UCAT happened, and we went and talked to all the players and said, "Hey, Broken Arrow could be an option for you if y'all are gonna split up." OSU decided to stay there at the site of the old UCAT. NSU



actually had the largest enrollment base of any school at UCAT, and they said, “You know, being out in the growth area—the southeast part of the metro—that would be a great place to go.”

David Gordon, who is a developer, was actually on the Regents for the colleges, and he helped with that. We were able to site them in Broken Arrow. Broken Arrow had to do a special tax for four or five years to help fund the first buildings out there, but it’s worked out great.

**JE:** Yes, it’s a wonderful place, a wonderful facility, and a nice addition to Broken Arrow for sure. Nationally, you’ve served as the National Association of Home Builders president. Tell us about that experience—how that came about and what was your job?

**JR:** Well, it kind of goes back a long time. I guess in any of those trade associations, you never really realize you’re gonna be the national chairman at some point in time. It started out on the local level, and you know, we lost a whole generation of builders during the oil bust. They left town, they went out of business, and they were really hurting for people to serve.

So I was recruited because I was one of the last people breathing that was in the business. I served actually for two years in a row—’91 and ’92. Got involved with the state, so I became state president in ’93. That also got me involved with the national, because as the local leader, you went and participated in the national stuff.

I’ve always been involved with politics—in the real estate business and land business, politics is a big part of the game—and I liked what they were doing. So I got involved with their political action committee to start with. Once you kind of get plugged in—and I’ve always said, whether it’s local or anything else, if you just show up to meetings, committee meetings 98% of the time, and if you ever utter something that makes sense, you’ll be chairman before too long.

So yeah, after 20 years, you run for that.

**JE:** Oh, so It’s an elected office?

**JR:** It's an elected office and I'd never fared very well in elections before, but this one, I was the only one that ran, so I felt pretty good about it.  
(Laughing)

**JE:** You said, did you run for office any other time?

**JR:** Oh, high school.

**JE:** Oh, OK. So it was part of your job to lobby Congress and our representatives, and nationally you were lobbying.

**JR:** Yeah, with the leadership of Congress and trying to work on appraisals.

## **Chapter 10 – 3:50**

### **Banking**

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**John Erling (JE):** Then you talked about banking. Today you're chairman of the board of RCB Bank.

**Joe Robson (JR):** Well, in 1936, LS was one of the founders of RCB Bank, what was then Rogers County Bank. Of course, he had money borrowed and various things. He needed a cattle loan and went into the First National Bank at Claremore—it was the only bank in town—and said, "I need a loan." He had other collateral, marketable securities he was going to put up in addition to the collateral of the cattle. It was probably \$10,000 worth of collateral, and they would only lend him \$500.

And he said, "You know what this town needs is another bank, because Claremore is not gonna grow. None of us are gonna get out of the Depression if we don't do it." So he went around to his friends, and they agreed. They raised the capital—I think they raised \$10,000 of capital—and they were the only bank chartered in 1936 in the state of Oklahoma. Everybody else was closing their doors.

So they had competition, and during the '80s, during an acquisition, they bought the old First National Bank of Claremore. So my grandfather had to be happy in his grave.

**JE:** He did. Look at all the things that spun off—Arvest Bank. Where is that?

**JR:** Well, Arvest—Sam was the beneficiary of RCB loans, or Rogers County Bank loans. He was making some money, and he saw that the banking business would be a good place to park some of it and to invest in. I think their first bank was the Bank of Pea Ridge, Arkansas. Then they started one in Rogers, then one in Bentonville, and they just grew it. They grew it into another business.

**JE:** Yeah, and we have Arvest Bank in Tulsa.

**JR:** Right, right.

**JE:** So here we end up—RCB Bank and Arvest could be competing.

**JR:** They are competing.

**JE:** OK, they are competing, which is interesting, isn't it?

**JR:** Yeah, and the Waltons own part of RCB. That was all divided up in stock.

**JE:** So this must be friendly family competition.

**JR:** Oh sure. I don't know how much competition there is—I mean, I guess there is. Obviously, we talk about how the other bank's doing and what have you.

**JE:** The golf course, Forest Ridge—is that owned by you?

**JR:** Yes.

**JE:** Okay. So you're in the real estate business, you're in the banking business, and the golfing business, aren't you?

**JR:** And the golfing business and restaurant business, because you've got to run a restaurant out of it. And then we've just opened a social club that has fitness, tennis, pickleball, pool—

**JE:** That's all part of Forest Ridge.

**JR:** It's all part of Forest Ridge.

**JE:** So this is under the umbrella of Robson—

**JR:** Robson Companies.

**JE:** OK, all right. So you've got a lot of hats to wear every day.

**JR:** I've got a lot of hats to wear.

**JE:** I know you're proud of your family heritage, and you should be. And by the way, those values that were taught by your seniors, I'm sure you're passing on to your children. And how many grandchildren do you have now?

**JR:** I have five. Yeah, Davis has two, and then our daughter and her husband have three—4 and under.

**JE:** Well, I want to thank you, Joe, for this. We've bumped into each other off and on down through the years, but it's fun to sit across the desk from you here on that ranch, which is such a legendary place. I appreciate it very much. Thank you for your time.

**JR:** Well, thank you. Yeah.

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