

John Williams

Co-founder of Williams Companies and long-term CEO, he's also well-known for his community leadership.

Chapter 1 – 1:28

Introduction

Announcer: John H. Williams founded The Williams Companies in 1949 with his brother Charles and his cousin David, Jr. As the successor to the family-owned Williams Brothers Corporation, founded by his uncles Miller and David Williams, The Williams Companies deepened the Williams name and presence in the energy industry. John Williams graduated from Ruston Academy in Havana, Cuba and Yale University where he majored in civil engineering. He joined the family business in 1940 and worked on projects in North and South America and the Middle East in addition to serving in the Navy Civil Engineering Corps during World War II. At age 31, Williams cofounded the Williams Companies and soon after acquired the Great Lake Pipeline Company, an asset that laid the foundation for the company as it is known today. In this interview, which was conducted in John Williams' home December 15th, 2009, you will hear John talk about his early days in Cuba, his service to his country while in Japan and how he met the enemy. He talks about the presentation he made to acquire Great Lake Pipeline. Downtown Tulsa was changed forever through urban renewal and the building of the Williams Tower. John tells you why it's a 52 story building. The Tulsa Performing Arts Center came about through the leadership of John Williams and John talks about the funding of the award-winning center. We would like to thank the sponsors and funders of Voices of Oklahoma who have made this interview possible. Listen to John H. Williams tell his story on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 7:47**Cuba**

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is December 15th, 2009. John, if you will state your full name please.

John Williams: My name is John Horter Williams.

JE: Your ate of birth?

JW: I was born August 17th, 1918, which makes me 91 years old currently.

JE: And we are recording this interview at your home in Tulsa.

JW: Correct.

JE: Where were you born?

JW: I was born in Havana, Cuba.

JE: Now that prompts a question right there. Why Havana, Cuba?

JW: Well, the obvious answer is that my parents were there, but a better answer is the Williams family is originally from South Carolina, but after the Civil War all of the Southerners sort of got the short end of the stick. My dad looked for a job and finally got a job with the American Tobacco Company at age 21. They sent him down to Tampa to learn the tobacco business for six months. After six months they sent him to Cuba in 1901 as a tobacco buyer. He worked for them in Havana for probably half a dozen years I'm told. He met another American down there and they went into business together and eventually developed quite a successful business. They were the distributors for the island of Cuba for Caterpillar Tractor, John Deere, Mack Truck, Westinghouse, Zenith Radio and a few others. Unfortunately, my father died in 1927. That's the long-winded answer as to why I was born in Cuba.

JE: Let's state your father's name.

JW: Charles Pettigrew Williams.

JE: Then your mother's name?

JW: Alice Dyer Williams. The individual that I mentioned that was my father's partner was named John Horter. John Horter and Charlie Williams married sisters. So that's why I was named after my father's partner.

JE: Where did your mother grow up?

JW: She was born in Bastrop, Louisiana and grew up there.

JE: What was she like?

JW: She was 19 when she was married. She came down to visit her elder sister who had married John Horter. She was a very beautiful young lady I am told and after two or three visits to Havana my father proposed to her and they were married there in 1913. I think she was 19 and my father was 32 years old.

JE: Where was your father born and where did he grow up?

JW: He was born in Camden, South Carolina and he grew up there. He never went to college. He had to go to work because of what I said happened in the South after the Civil War. He pretty much grew up in South Carolina. The family went broke.

JE: You mentioned South Carolina. I am going to come back to your father and brother and uncles and all that in a bit, but let's talk you and your education.

JW: I didn't speak English until I was six years old because I started speaking Spanish and I didn't have to speak English. My family spoke Spanish. I had a Cuban nurse who took care of all of our needs.

JE: What was the first school you attended?

JW: I went to an American school in Havana for elementary school and I went to an American high school there called Ruston Academy. I graduated from Ruston and applied to three universities in the U.S.: Lehigh, MIT and Yale. Fortunately I got admitted to all three, but I chose Yale because my older brother had already gone there.

JE: Any names that came out of Yale with you that you attended school with?

JW: One I remember is Henry Ford, Jr. was there. He was in my class and he was pulled out when his father died to go back and start running the Ford Motor Company. I enjoyed my stay at Yale and I think I was an average student or maybe a little better than average. I remember the adjustment coming from Havana, Cuba to New Haven was really quite something. I remember the first weekend there in the getting acquainted process. I well remember several of my newly acquainted friends there said, "let's go out and get drunk". To me that was unusual. Why would you want to do that? This was 1936 and in Havana, Cuba drinking was not that big a deal—if you wanted a drink you had one. But in New Haven, getting away from home and being able to have a drink apparently was a huge experience for these kids. I went along with them but I don't remember drinking very much, but I enjoyed my four years at Yale. My brother Charles Pettigrew Williams named after our father was born in 1915. He also grew up in Cuba and as I mentioned went to Yale and graduated in 1937. I graduated in 1940. My sister, Alice Dyer Williams was born in Cuba and grew up in Cuba and attended Sweetbriar College in the States. She married a young man that she met while in college who was from Mobile, Alabama named Joseph Mighell. He became a doctor and after the war set up practice in Mobile. They lived there and had four children and lived happily. My sister is still alive—she is 88. My brother Charlie passed away some six or seven years ago at age 87 living here in Tulsa.

JE: After Yale, where did you go and what did you do?

JW: I graduated in 1940 as a civil engineer, which was rather unusual. I rather humorously tell the story that I graduated second in my class—there were four in my class—so I was either second from the top or third from the bottom. (Chuckle) But anyway I went to work as a

civil engineer for a company in Georgia that was building a pipeline from Port Saint Joe, Florida to Chattanooga, Tennessee. I started out as an instrument man in a survey party. Incidentally I started at about \$95 a month. After about three weeks the head of the party went on a two-week drunk. He got fired and they asked me to take over. I got promoted to chief of party to \$135/month and I bought a car. After three months of carrying a transit all the way from Port St. Joe, Florida to Chattanooga we completed the pipeline. After that I went to work for what was then called Williams Brothers Company. They had a project to build a pipeline from Homestead, Florida down to Key West to carry potable water down to Key West.

Chapter 3 – 7:36

Pearl Harbor

John Williams: To put it into context, this was right at the time of Pearl Harbor. I was actually working in Georgia when it happened but then we went down on the Key West job and I worked there for about four months. I volunteered into the Navy Seabees in early 1942. I was 23 years old. I tried to get into the Air Force but I was colorblind. With my civil engineering background I volunteered as an ensign and went into the Seabees, the Naval Civil Engineer Corps. I had a very interesting and unusual Naval career. I remember that I checked into the Navy at Norfolk. In those days the Seabee Battalions were being formed and I later learned that the 30 officers that formed the battalion before my time went to Guadalcanal with the battalion. The 30 officers after my battalion went to the Island in the Alaska Peninsula. Of all places, my group wound up on the Island of Bermuda. I spent 11 months on Bermuda starting in 1942. I had an interesting job there. They gave me a Jeep and a platoon of 20 men and a concrete mixer. I spent 11 months going around looking for every little hilltop and hummock I could find, covering it with concrete and putting a little wall around it and a cistern down on the low end. I was in charge of gathering all of the potable water from the Island of Bermuda from the rainfalls. After that, we came back on leave and we were called the Honeymoon Battalion. After a month's leave our battalion was attached to the 5th Marine Division. We went out to the Island of Hawaii and trained with the Marines crawling around under fire and up and down some of the volcanoes getting toughened up. I landed on Iwo Jima 32 minutes after the first Marine on February 19th, 1945. I went in there to build the airstrip for the B29s to land on after they bombed Japan. I must say that Iwo Jima was about as different from Bermuda as you can possibly imagine.

JE: Tell us about the landing on Iwo Jima.

JW: By the time we landed there I was a company commander. Incidentally, I learned later that Henry Bellmon landed right next to me with the Marine division that was next door to us. That was a common bond that Henry and I developed after I invited him to come on our board many years later at Williams Companies. On the ship going out there were three battalions of Seabees that were going into Iwo were headed up by a commodore. I got to know the commodore pretty well. I actually played a lot of bridge with him on the ship. He had to go in early to give an order of how the three battalions would be deployed. He asked me if I would go in as his aide, so the commodore and I after being 54 days practicing on the ship going from Hawaii to Iwo, we got into one of these landing crafts. We went in on the 16th wave of Marines. A wave was landing every two minutes, so that's where I for the figure we landed 32 minutes after the first Marine. When we landed, there was sort of a sand dune strip that was 20 or 30 feet high and about 30 yards from the waterline. The front line was about 30 yards from the water when we landed there. The Japanese were doing a very wise thing. They were dropping mortars on the landing craft as we were going in, but mainly they wanted to get us on land where they could bombard us and kill us off on land more readily than in the water. I remember the first night there we were dug in on the beach. It was February and it was cold—about 40 degrees, but you got down about 20 inches in the sand and it got so hot in there that you almost had to strip your clothes off, but you surely wanted a deep hole to get into. Each division had 500 yards of beach that they were responsible for. Our whole 500 yards of beach was totally blocked by our landing craft that had been hit, sunk or turned over, so nothing else could be landed. We were in seriously jeopardy of not being able to get more troops in or ammunition or supplies of any kind. One of our very first jobs was to assist in blowing up whatever ships we could on the beach to clear a path for new landing craft to come in. It was pretty hectic. The first couple of nights there were sort of Russian roulette as they went up and down the beach landing mortars as to whether you were going to get hit or not. It turned out it wasn't my turn, but I must say there were a lot of people being killed and wounded.

JE: And near you too?

JW: Right. Closer than you and I are.

JE: Can you remember what was going through your mind?

JW: I can. I wondered, is it my turn? Finally you say hell, if it is, it is, but you come away from it pretty much a fatalist. Eventually after three weeks we were able to get started on building the airstrip for the B29s. Our first job after about five or six days was to improve a little landing strip that the Japanese fighter were using. We got some bulldozers on shore and we were trying to fill in the holes in that landing strip and we'd start digging up our

own shells that were dug. Some of them were duds and you would get an unexploded shell on the end of a 16-inch bulldozer and it's pretty scary. You wonder what to do next. One of the vivid things that you remember, are our battleships, which were about a half a mile offshore the first day sending 16-inch shells over our head bombarding the Japanese positions. The amazing thing is when you are there on the beach looking out at your own ship firing at you—you can actually see a 16-inch shell leave the muzzle of the cannon. They would come in about 75 yards over your head and the noise was like 1,500 banshees screaming—it was an incredible noise—they are very impressive. Yes, I did see the flag go up on Mount Suribachi—actually the two flags. They had the little one that went up first and then the one that got all of the publicity was put up later.

JE: How close were you to that?

JW: We were at the 500 yards that was right at the base of Mount Suribachi. We were right next to it. We were the closest troops to the Mount.

JE: Was there cheering?

JW: Yes, absolutely, there was cheering. After a month our battalion was assigned the job of taking some dozers and building a road up to the top of Suribachi. I was company commander of company A and my company built the road up to the top of Mount Suribachi.

Chapter 4 – 4:00

John Meets The Enemy

John Erling: Your duty there extended how long?

John Williams: I was there until V-J Day. I had enough points to come home right after the war, well two or three things...I remember seeing the plans for the landing in Japan, which would have been really murderous. Then, our battalion was assigned to go to Japan to take over a Japanese airfield to clean it up for U.S. Marine Air Corps to use as a base. So my commanding officer sent me up to Japan to make all of the arrangements for the battalion. I remember flying up with some high-priority orders from Iwo to Tokyo in what they call a C54. It was a very impressive plane. Later on, I flew in them a lot. They were the old DC4s, but that was the first DC4 that ever landed on Iwo Jima. I landed on Tokyo two weeks after V-J Day. Then I had to go down to the Island of Kyushu, which is the southernmost island. I had some good priority orders and got an interpreter and flew down. I vividly remember walking into this Japanese encampment, an airstrip down on the Island of Kyushu with the interpreter marching up to the headquarters. Here we were

just the two of us demanding to see the Colonel and telling him that we had come over to tell him how to dispose of things for our battalion, which was going to be moving in. There were 1,500 Japanese troops standing around looking at the two of us marching in there looking as if we knew what the hell we were doing. On hindsight it was amazing, nobody gave us a bit of a problem.

JE: So then, how were you received?

JW: We were received not with much love, but there were no threats or no overtures against us. It was very “yes sir” or “no sir”. They did just what we told them we wanted.

JE: How confident were you feeling walking into that scene?

JW: I was not very confident. (Laughter) We wondered how it would go. I was told that the Japanese had accepted the surrender and it was not a problem, but when you are the only American there and there are 1,500 Japanese troops all staring at you—you wonder. (Laughter) One of the very interesting things, this base was about 20 miles from Nagasaki, so when we finally got there we of course wanted to go over to Nagasaki and see what the bomb had done there. I commandeered a Jeep and two or three of the guys drove up there with me. Nagasaki is in a valley with hills about two miles apart. The entire city had really been flattened or burned down from the bomb. One building was standing—it was a five-story hospital made out of reinforced concrete. Of course, all of the windows were blown out, but being reinforced concrete, it had been built strongly enough so that it did not collapse, but it was certainly all burned out and that was the only building standing there. One of the anecdotal reactions there—we heard that atomic bombs were very dangerous and you had to be very careful or you might get all kinds of problems from them, so we were tippy toeing around there trying to avoid getting radiation.

JE: Help us see that sea of nothing.

JW: Just one tall building and the rest was rubble.

JE: And nothing live at all?

JW: It was very dramatic.

JE: That’s a picture you will have forever.

JW: Yes. The point of the whole story is the difference between Bermuda and Iwo Jima, Japan was noticeable.

JE: Yes. So then coming out the military...

JW: Well, I got back in December of 1945. The war was over in August. At that time, after taking leave I went to work for my uncles at Williams Brothers.

Chapter 5 – 9:38**Williams Brothers**

John Erling: Let's talk about your grandfather Stephen Miller Williams.

John Williams: Stephen Miller Williams was my grandfather and his three sons were Charles, David and Miller. My father was the oldest of the three boys. My grandfather was born in South Carolina, but he retired in Arkansas. He was the one that grew up during the Civil war. I think he was 16 after the Civil War. One of the family stories is that he was 16 years old at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) Robert E. Lee died and was buried there and he was one of the student pallbearers for Robert E. Lee—time-wise I think this was about 1870. But back to Arkansas, my grandfather retired and he had his two younger sons with him in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

JE: You were around your grandfather?

JW: No, we were in Cuba. I didn't meet my grandfather until after the war.

JE: So you were in your 20s obviously then?

JW: Yes.

JE: He was a businessman wasn't he?

JW: He was a civil engineer. He made a living going around the country and building plants for different companies. He built several manufacturing plants for Procter & Gamble. I think he retired about age 65 with his two younger sons in Fort Smith. That's where the story starts about where Dave and Miller started the Williams Brothers. My father was in Cuba and he loaned them the money to get started. Their first contract was three blocks of sidewalk in Fort Smith in 1908. That's why last year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Williams. I think that Dave was 23 and Miller was 21.

JE: Is it true that Miller had saved \$600 from working at Procter & Gamble and he asked his brother to join him as they did some concrete work in Fort Smith, Arkansas?

JW: Yes, that's the three blocks of sidewalk.

JE: Okay. Then they got a loan of \$1,000 from their father's assistant, and they bought some tools and then they were in business?

JW: Right. Then they borrowed money from their older brother to expand the business. I think they got into the pipeline business about 1914 or 1915 when they built their first short pipeline.

JE: So your grandfather was in his late 50s when his two sons started the Williams Brothers Companies?

JW: Yes and he was never in the business.

JE: But he served as counsel to them?

JW: I assume as most fathers would.

JE: Right.

JW: My father was never in the business except to help them financially.

JE: Then they formed the Williams Construction Company?

JW: Yes, then they started building mainly concrete structures and I think they built some bridges also.

JE: And in 1916 they built their first pipeline?

JW: I think it was 1914 or 1915—then I believe they moved to Tulsa about 1921 or 1922.

JE: Then in 1923 I believe I read that Williams became an international pipeline builder?

JW: By international, I think they built a job in Canada. The first job in South America was in 1939. I was a junior in college then and I went and worked that summer in Venezuela on that pipeline, which at the time was a joint venture between Bechtel Corporation and Williams Brothers.

JE: You were talking about while you were in the war, but during WWII Williams built pipelines known as big inch and little-big inch?

JW: They built parts of it. One of them was a crude oil line and one of them was a gasoline pipeline. The German subs were sinking tankers that were going from the refineries on the Gulf Coast up to the East Coast. So they hurried up to build a pipeline from Texas up to the East Coast and that was the little inch and the big inch.

JE: The brothers eventually ended up in Tulsa because of the oil business.

JW: Exactly, because Tulsa was the world headquarters of the oil business, or we claimed to be.

JE: As I understand back in that time 1918 or 1920 in there were 700 producers, 431 oil and gas companies and there was not one pipeline company, so...

JW: We weren't a pipeline company like we are today. We were a pipeline builder, a contractor. But this is where the action was I'm told. At that time, remember I was three years old, so I wouldn't know.

JE: No. Of course it wasn't always easy—I mean, they went broke several times.

JW: They certainly did, particularly in the Depression of the 1930s. One thing that you may not know, on Riverside Drive, the railroad pass at about 30th Street, Williams Brothers built that pass over Riverside and it's still there. They were looking for any kind of work they could find. So that project came up to build that railroad overpass over Riverside Drive, so they bid on it and were the low bidder and they built it in 1937.

JE: And it stands today. We move along here. In 1949 Dave and Miller retired and sold part of the company to Dave's son, David Williams, Jr. and their nephews, Charles P. Williams Jr. and to you John Williams, is that the way that happened?

JW: Not quite. After the war I went to work for Williams Brothers as did my brother Charlie. My brother Charlie spoke Spanish as I did. He was down in Venezuela pretty much

overseeing the business there. David who was younger, to put it in context, in 1949 when the change took place my brother was 34 and I was 31, and David was 28. My brother Charlie was a captain in the Army Engineers and stationed over in India. He was mainly working on the pipeline taking gasoline into China. David, who was the son of David Williams, was a fighter pilot and he flew B51s over in Germany. Anyway, in 1949, Truman announced that our Korean War effort was going to be paid for as we went. He announces six months ahead of time that on November 1st, 1949 the tax rate would go up to 95% to pay for the war as long as the Korean War lasted. My two uncles decided that they didn't want to carry on, on that basis. They were in their 60s, and they wanted to retire and liquidate their company but they didn't have anybody to sell it to. They had jobs in progress and they couldn't really liquidate, so my brother Charlie, David and I formed a company, the new company that's now called Williams Companies to take over the existing business and to carry on the business effort. We organized the company so that we would take over everything on October 31st, the day before the new tax deal went into effect in 1949. Of course my uncles, particularly Uncle Miller who was the head of Williams Brothers, helped organize this whole thing and I became CEO of it at age 31 and Charlie and David became executive vice presidents. Each of us was going to get 20 percent of the new company we organized and \$25,000 capital. We each put in \$5,000. I remember I had \$3,000 and I had to borrow \$2,000 to put my \$5,000 in. The other 40 percent was distributed among some of the senior people in the old company that stayed with us.

JE: You were 31—were you saving through the years to come up with \$3,000?

JW: I had been in the Navy and I was working. I had worked remember after I got out of the Navy.

JE: You were a saver?

JW: Well, I had saved \$3,000 and maybe a little poker winnings...(Laughter) The uncles decided who was going to run the company and fortunately for me they decided that I should be the one to run it.

JE: Why do you think they choose you?

JW: I always wondered. I perhaps was more aggressive than some of the others. Of course, in those days you didn't know how little you didn't know, so you had the whole world by the tail. It was simple financing too. We had all the \$25,000 and we bought all of the equipment from them on a slow note at 4 percent interest. The sellers helped us very much. They allowed us to go to the bank and borrow \$1 million and pledge the equipment as collateral—we didn't own it, we had just bought it, but we hadn't paid for it. That gave us the capital to start it.

JE: Which bank was that?

JW: First National Bank here in Tulsa.

JE: Who was president of the bank at the time?

JW: Otis McClintock.

JE: So in family, this was not just handed to you guys, you had to buy your way in?

JW: Yes, we did.

Chapter 6 – 6:41

John in Jail

John Williams: Our first job, we bid on a pipeline from Baton Rouge, Louisiana to Charlotte. It as called looping—building a parallel pipeline to something called Plantation Pipeline. We lost \$800,000 on that job, which really woke us up. Fortunately, we had two jobs going in Venezuela and one in Bolivia where we made a better profit combined to offset the \$800,000—so that kept us in business.

JE: Didn't you have this issue going—you had the oldsters and the youngsters?

JW: Yes. All of the people out in the field—the superintendents, tractor drivers and welders—most of them were older than I was. When I went to work I was called Johnny.

JE: Your uncles who sold you the business were older and I suppose you were obviously concerned about proving yourself, so here you are jumping into your first project and you are losing \$800,000. So how did that go over? Did they comment to you about it?

JW: Yes, of course they did. But don't forget, we made more than that on other projects we were doing at the same time. So at the end of the year we made a profit.

JE: Okay.

JW: But it was pretty scary. In those days \$800,000 was a lot of money, particularly when you didn't have it. The bankers were a little concerned about it too, but as it turned out it was a wonderful time to start a business because there was a lot of work to do. In four years we paid them off for the equipment and we repaid the bank.

JE: So you had days and nights when that first happened wondering are we ever going to make this work?

JW: We certainly did.

JE: Full of self-doubt I am sure.

JW: Yes, but you know the difference now growing up in those days and just having come back from the war—in wartime we were thrown a lot more responsibility early, than some of the youngsters that are growing up today. I became a company commander at age 24. I think the two experience made me grow up a little faster too.

JE: Isn't there a story about how you spent some time in jail on a pipeline project back in 1941 building a pipeline from Florida to Tennessee?

JW: (Chuckle) Yes. You have done some research. Yes, I've been in jail twice. The first time—this is an anecdote—this was in 1940 when I was running the survey party from Port St. Joe, Florida to Chattanooga. You know, pipelines had eminent domain, which means they could condemn property, but you had to be able to describe the property before you could be able to go to the court and have the judge condemn it. This farmer down near Americus, Georgia wouldn't let us get on his property. But we had to have a map of it to describe it so that it could be condemned. I was chief of the survey party then and the lawyer in Atlanta said, "Can't you sneak on the land there and do it?" I said, "Sure, we can try." It was summertime and it was light about 4:30am or 5am and I thought we could get across there in about 45 minutes. So we organized and got up really early and got out there and the moment we could see we started surveying 1.5 miles across this farm. We got within 100 yards of the last fence we had to cross and there the farmer stood chewing on a piece of hay with his shotgun under his arm like this (motioning). He said, "I done told you boys not to come across my land here." We told him how sorry we were and that we would never do it again and that surely we could make amends with him, but he said, "I done called the Sheriff and you stay where you are." We started walking off and he raised the shotgun and we stopped. The sheriff came and put us in jail. We stayed in jail all day and about 10 o'clock that night we had finally gotten word to headquarters in Atlanta and they bailed us out. And as it happens in Georgia, they kept extending it and extending and then the war came along and they finally dropped the whole thing. The other time was back when we started moving in to Iraq. I would sort of stop a conversation at a cocktail party by saying, "Well, I'm probably the only one here that's ever spent the night in jail in Iraq." That would get everybody's attention. The fact is I did spend a night in jail in Iraq but it was in 1947. I was working for Williams Brothers then. I was invited to bid on a pipeline job from Chercook to the Mediterranean from the oilfields there. They sent me over to take a look at it to prepare a bid on the proposed pipeline. I went over and got a crew together and we went out. That part of Iraq is just like this dining room table here—a perfectly flat desert. We got a Jeep and went out and investigated all of the problems. We were out there for a couple of days. On the second day we decided that we were almost finished and if we worked hard we would get through before dark. We had a compass with us and we knew which way Baghdad was, so we worked until dark and got our study done. We were probably about 70 miles from Baghdad. We just took off on a compass bearing across the desert toward Baghdad. Finally when we were about 50 miles away we could see the lights up in the clouds dimly and it was Baghdad. All of a sudden a couple of 6 x 6 Army trucks came up, one on each side of our Jeep with some

young soldiers in them with their guns pointing down at us. We didn't speak Farsi and they didn't speak English, but we knew what they wanted. We stopped and they hauled us out of the Jeep and threw us in the truck and drove off to their headquarters and dumped us in their jail, which is sort of like a dungeon underground. We spent the night there. About six o'clock in the morning this Iraqi major came in and all he spoke was French, but I spoke fluent Spanish and a little French. The gist of it was they wanted to know what in the hell we were doing there. We said, "We don't know. Whatever we did we are sure as hell sorry and we will never ever do it again." It turned out that in the dark we had driven right across an emergency landing field that the Iraqi Air Force had laid out in the desert that if need be they could turn the lights on for a plane to land on and we didn't even know it was there. These Iraqi Army kids had been stationed out there guarding that for months. We were the first ones who had ever attacked the field and they were delighted to catch us and have some action. They were right and we were wrong. We were friends with the Iraqis and so the major let us go and we came home and that was it.

Chapter 7 – 8:31

Great Lakes Pipeline

John Erling: Is it true that that the company in 1966 bought its first pipeline system?

John Williams: We started in 1949 and worked as a contractor and did engineering and had built up a pretty good company. I think the whole company by about 1965 was worth about \$23 or \$24 million, which is pretty good having started with \$25,000.

JE: We should mention in the 1940s and 1950s your work impacted South American countries?

JW: Yes and also the Middle East. Joe Williams, who came along, David's younger brother, did a lot of work in the Middle East and in Iraq and Iran. We did quite a bit of work in Iran we had quite an operation in Tehran.

JE: That's the first time we've mentioned Joe Williams and he was obviously your cousin.

JW: He was David's younger brother. We had been engineers and builders up until 1965 and then in 1965 the opportunity came along to prepare a bid on an operating Pipeline, Great Lakes Pipeline. We took a chance and put together a bid. It was a very complicated, unusual transaction. Even Harvard business school made it into a case study for their students. We paid \$287.6 million for this pipeline. We borrowed \$286 million and put in \$1.6 million of our own money. I say borrowed it, but we borrowed it—we issued new stock, we forced the sellers to take a note, insurance companies loaned us money and we sold the interest to the public, but it was all new money except the \$1.6 we put into

it. That's what changed the whole company completely. Instead of being a builder, where we were always looking for new work, we were trying to make investments and we did all kinds of things.

JE: That was on your insistence I think. You were the one that guided the company into that model.

JW: I was CEO for 29 years and that was totally my insistence, yes. That was a fascinating time.

JE: There were times during that, that you must have thought that it was never going to work—you must have had many challenges and roadblocks along the way?

JW: I'll tell you one of them. We were cutting new accounting principles that were at least from the old-time accountants considered revolutionary. We have to have one accounting for the bookkeeping that had to be agreed to by the SEC. We submitted it to the SEC staff—it had to do with depreciation. There was conflict between the SEC rules and the ICC rules and we found a little niche we could wiggle through. It was all according to open book standards, but it was something that the two different agencies hadn't really coordinated between themselves. We discovered that we could use it. Anyway, the accounting staff at the SEC when we submitted this turned us down flat. They said, "Absolutely, you cannot use it." We said, "Well, that kills the deal." So I went to our lawyers and I said, "What can we do now?" They said, "Well, there's one last thing, you can appeal to the SEC for an emergency hearing directly with the five SEC commissioners. So we appealed and said there had to be an emergency meeting and the rules said they would answer within five days. On the third day they told us that they would give us five minutes to present the case and that the CEO had to present the case with no accountants or lawyers, I had to do it all by myself with five SEC commissioners. For two days, all of the lawyers and the auditors and the accountants had me up and down sideways briefing me on everything. I was a little scared when I went in there but I went in with the five SEC commissioners.

JE: Where was this?

JW: In Washington, D.C. at their headquarters. What I presented was so novel and so unusual to them, that instead of five minutes they listened to me for 46 minutes. At the end of that they said, "Mr. Williams, we have never heard anything like this before. It is novel, but you make a case and if you go ahead we will not object."

JE: Wow.

JW: That was one of the most interesting times I ever had.

JE: Can you give us a little quick synopsis of what you told them?

JW: It had to do generally with how you tax the income on the pipeline. The tax is affected by the amount of depreciation you can charge into the project and since the pipeline that we acquired was an old pipeline that had been fully depreciated, you couldn't get much

basis to depreciate it, but the ICC, the Intrastate Commerce Commission had passed a ruling that if you actually paid cash or if you actually paid for a property, you could reinstate the value up to the amount you paid for it and that let us then develop quite a bit of annual depreciation. But the SEC didn't realize that the ICC had done that and the SEC had never approved what the ICC had done, but they were both laws of the land that we wriggled through. Once we got that done and the Commission approved it, the next year, the SEC passed a regulation that never again could this ever be done. (Chuckle) We were the only ones that ever did it. That was the turning point and that's what made the company.

JE: As you were standing there talking and you knew you had five minutes and it does on and on, you must have been thinking to yourself...

JW: Yes, I was thinking, where are we going?

JE: So you figured as long as they didn't stop you...(laughter)

JW: I kept going...(laughter). That was 1965 and I was 47 years old.

JE: There must have been some high-fives or parties after that?

JW: That was in October of 1965 and we actually closed in March of 1966, because after that, then we had to go out and raise money. It was really quite a tight time because that was just when the interest rates were starting to go up. We got in just under the wire because in 1966 interest rates kept going up and up and up. The insurance companies and the banks didn't renege—they stayed with our original deal and that's what made it possible to acquire it. But after Great Lakes we got in a whole bunch of different businesses. We got in the steel business, the fertilizer business and the coal business.

JE: But again, back to that pipeline, that was where the modern-day Williams Companies really set a foundation and you grew from there?

JW: Exactly. That was in 1966. We continued with our construction business and our engineering business. In 1973 we got the contract to build the northernmost two sections of the Alyeska Pipeline, which we did build and finish in 1975. In 1975 we committed some of the employees of the construction company to fall under a separate company and they bought the construction business. At the end of '75 we got out of the construction business and the separate company went off by itself and continued on its own. That has now evolved into a company listed on the NYSE called Willbros.

JE: Williams Companies went public in 1967?

JW: Williams Companies went public in 1959 on the American Stock Exchange and then in 1967 it went public on the New York Stock Exchange, which was different. I think the American Stock Exchange was in existence back in those days and that was a smaller exchange, but in 1967 it went on the New York Stock Exchange.

Chapter 8 – 8:40**Mapco and More**

John Erling: You know, family members don't often get along in business. Apparently you and your cousin Joe and your brother Charles and your cousin David, Jr. all got along?

JW: We got along, but David, in the early 1960s left the company and went off and started a separate engineering business of his own. Then 10 years later he came back as a director in the company. But after the early 1960s he was not an officer at the company. There was a 10-year hiatus there that he was out.

JE: How long did your brother Charles stay?

JW: He retired in the early 1970s and I retired in 1978.

JE: And that's when Joe came in?

JW: Yes.

JE: Talk about MAPCO, Mid American Pipeline Company and its beginnings.

JW: A lot of times you've got to create your own opportunities. So I started in our own engineering business with a group of young engineers to develop concepts of where pipelines might be needed to see if we could develop an interest in somebody financing them and owning them. We created this idea of the Mid America Pipeline. We got one of the railroad companies and then they got New York Central interested in it. Finally, that's where Bob Thomas came in. We had the pipeline all conceived and we finally went through Bob Thomas and the railroad company and his sources there, they arranged the financing, but we worked out a deal and this was about 1960 I guess. We designed it and bought all of the right-of-way and bought all of the materials and supervised the construction, which I think was about 1,100 miles and a bunch of pumping stations. It was a total turnkey job. Then we turned it over to Bob who became the CEO of it. Of course, he ran it successfully and then eventually we bought the company in about 1998.

JE: Weren't cross-country pipeline companies scarce? The margin was very thin on that kind of work.

JW: Yes, it was. We did another one that I developed in Las Vegas. It was growing like mad and they were getting all of their gasoline from tank cars. We thought that was silly and that they needed a pipeline—so we designed one. We never could get it financed so I went to the chairman of Union Pacific and told him that we wanted to build this pipeline and cut them out of hauling gasoline on their tank cars. I said, "You ought to own this pipeline." He didn't know anything about pipelines. We finally struck a deal with them. They would own 35 percent and we would own 65 percent and they would put up all of the money. We built it and we ran it for about seven or eight years and then we sold them the

other 65 percent. They own 100 percent of it now and it's called the Calnev Pipeline for California Nevada Pipeline.

JE: You've already referenced this—the final pipeline job was in Alaska and was the Trans-Alaska Pipeline?

JW: Yes, it's the Alyeska Pipeline. It is Trans-Alaska but it's from the Prudhoe Bay down to the coast.

JE: And you had two sections of that?

JW: Yes. There were five sections and we built the northernmost two sections from Prudhoe Bay across the Brooks Range.

JE: Was that profitable for the company?

JW: Yes, it was such a complicated job. It was what you call a fee job. It was cost plus a fixed fee. You never knew what was going to happen—weather-wise and changes and other unknown conditions, muskeg and whatnot. You would have to price it so high to cover yourself for contingencies that everybody agreed it was better to do it on a cost-plus basis where you bid it on the size of the fee that you charge and all you did was manage it.

JE: Why did you take that job? Was it lucrative?

JW: Yes. It was a job that of course had good visibility and yes, we made a good fee out of it. We did an earlier pipeline job up in Alaska, which was really quite fascinating. We built a pipeline from Haines, Alaska, which is the northernmost ice-free port up to Fairbanks, Alaska to the air base up there. That was 800 miles of pipeline. It was really a fascinating thing working up in the muskeg. We had to develop ditching machines that were almost like an ice pick. We had to dig through ice to dig a ditch and I remember how cold it would get up there. It was unbelievable.

JE: You were in your 40s and you were set to be on the cover of *Time* Magazine in 1966?

JE: Why didn't you make the cover of *Time*?

JW: The acquisition of Great Lakes and how it was done with the leverage—it was called the largest for cash transaction that had been done in business with the highest leverage ever. I spent 10 days with all the reporters and photographers up in New York being interviewed and going over all the details of the project. It was going to be the feature story in *Time*. As I told you earlier, the \$287 million was the value of the transaction. A week before *Time* was to be published, Howard Hughes sold TWA for \$440 million in cash and we got a little half-page article in *Time* and Howard Hughes got the cover, but it was interesting.

JE: Did you ever meet him?

JW: I never did. Not many people did I don't think.

JE: It sounds that way.

JE: Then your uncle Miller dies at 72 and Dave dies at 83.

JW: Yes.

JE: What were their qualities? What did they bring as you think about them?

JW: Curiously enough, Miller was the younger brother. He was the CEO and he was the financial man and the planner. Dave liked to be out in the field and overseeing the construction work. That same parallel happened—I was the younger brother and I liked to be out in the field too, but I also liked the financial planning side of it. Perhaps I was a little bit more aggressive than some of the others, yet we worked as a family and as a team very well, so...

JE: Did you draw qualities from Miller and Dave?

JW: I think so—absolutely. It was very unusual that we took over at our early age, but as it happened—what really caused it all is when President Truman decided to make this dramatic change in the tax law, they didn't have anybody to put together the change and who could do it swiftly. So, as luck would have it, almost again fatalistic, we were the only ones available to take over the business. So we conceived this idea that I explained to you earlier.

JE: Did you ever meet Truman?

JW: I never did.

JE: Did you ever meet any presidents?

JW: The only one I ever met was Jerry Ford. He went to Yale you know. I did visit with him in the Oval Office—a very delightful gentleman.

JE: In 1973, *Businessweek* called you “a polished and adroit financier on the prowl again hunting for a new acquisition. It is part of John Williams’ trademark to move into an industry before anyone else spots its potential.” Is that probably accurate?

JW: In a sense, in the fertilizer business, I got the idea of going into that—I scouted around through networking as to who was the brightest individual in the business. I worked around to get to know him. I did and made a deal with him and persuaded him to leave what he was doing and join the company before we had one dollar’s worth of fertilizer activity. So before going into the business, I knew I didn’t know anything about it except what I thought about it, but we had our leader in place before we got there.

JE: And who was that?

JW: A fellow named Kenneth Lundberg and he was very successful in running it. We combined the Gulf Oil fertilizer activity with the Conoco-Continental Oil Company fertilizer business. Conoco had the Agrico and when we got that, we renamed everything Agrico.

Chapter 9 – 9:30**Williams Tower**

John Erling: Williams pioneered many firsts in the pipeline construction business like the backhoe, which was a first for the company?

John Williams: That was before my time, but that's true and that was in my uncle's day.

JE: And various rotary machines came from that as well used to clean and coat pipelines?

JW: Yes, ditching machines and coating machines.

JE: And superchargers allowing engines to work at higher altitudes all came from your uncles.

JW: Yes. That came from a pipeline job down in Bolivia where you had to have superchargers because they were working up at 14,000 and 15,000 feet elevation.

JE: You, Charlie and David started the company with \$25,000 in cash and \$3 million in a note and at the end of 1978 the company's assets totaled about \$2 billion, would that be accurate?

JW: (Pause) In the end of 1978, I don't really know whether that was true at the end of 1978. Today the market value of the company is \$24 billion. There are 600 million shares and they are worth \$12 million.

JE: You retired in what year?

JW: I retired at the end of 1978.

JE: It's interesting, when you were laying all of this pipeline, you never knew what you were doing—but then in the mid-'80s the company adds communication to its business plan and places fiber optic cables inside old pipelines.

JW: Yes.

JE: That was WilTel. You never know when you're preparing for the future do you?

JW: That's right, but of course I retired long before that.

JE: Right. In Tulsa, your company and you had such a major impact. I would like to talk a little bit about this urban renewal project in Tulsa. It covered about nine blocks downtown from Cincinnati to Cheyenne, from First to Third Street. Then we come to the 52-story Williams Tower.

JW: Yes. I've told that story before but I will tell it again. In those days we were in the NBT Building, which is now called the 320 Building. I think it would be better if I told you this first. In 1967, we had the chance to acquire 21 percent of the NBT stock. Mr. Chapman had passed away and he used to own 21 percent of it and it came on the market. We did acquire it, so in 1967 we became 21-percent owner of NBT (National Bank of Tulsa). We were in the NBT building and we had offices across the street in the Kennedy Building and several other buildings in town and we were really running out of space. We knew

that we really should do something about getting a central space. There was one group that thought we ought to move down to Houston, but we were reluctant to do that. We looked at the idea, but we liked Tulsa and we still like it. My friend Murray McCune, who was an architect here, he had been taking advantage of a government activity called urban renewal where you can borrow money almost very cheaply and almost can condemn downtown property as long as you were going to do something to create jobs and activity downtown. In thinking about the nine square blocks which are from Cincinnati to Boulder and from Third Street down to across the railroad tracks...Murray had acquired about nine of those blocks and he was going to put sort of a master warehouse center there where you would come in with the railroad and sort of bring stuff and store it and break it up into lots for retail and wholesale in this nine block area. He was telling me about it and he had acquired it very cheaply. Being next door, I got to thinking and after lots of conversations I talked him into selling us what he had acquired. Then with urban renewal we got another third of the land. I think the last pieces we had to pay for, but we acquired and did in fact develop the nine square blocks. Then we started talking about what to build there. Our original plan was to build two buildings, one on each side of Boston Avenue at about 2nd Street, where the present building is located. We were going to have Boston Avenue continue through there. We hired Minoru Yamasaki as our architect. As you know, he was the one that did the World Trade Center and of course our building ended up looking like a miniature World Trade Center. He was going along with this idea of building these two buildings, and like all architects, they prepare a model to put out on a table and look at and move things around. We were talking about a hotel and other buildings. That's when I got to look at these two model buildings with Boston Avenue running through them. I said, "Why do we want two buildings?" I picked up one of the buildings and put it in the middle of Boston Avenue and put the other one on top of it. Yamasaki's eyes lit up and he said, "Well, Mr. Williams, if you put those together you get the same number of usable square feet with 52 stories. And I think that's even better." That's when I called up Bobby LaFortune who was mayor and someone I knew well. I told him I had an idea that I wanted to speak with him about. I went over to visit with him in his office. I told him, "I would like to close Boston Avenue." He said, "What do you mean?" When I showed him and to his credit he thought it was a great idea and it could be done. The interesting thing is we investigated and Boston Avenue really had nothing underground. Main Street is full of sewers and power lines, water lines, gas lines and telephone lines and everything. But we were able to dig an 80-foot hole at the site of our present building for all of the underground stuff and there was not a darn thing to stop us from doing it.

JE: So the mayor could say, yes you could block Boston, but then he obviously had to go to city planners or commissioners?

JW: Oh yes.

JE: Was there any opposition to this?

JW: No, there was none at all and there really shouldn't have been. There was really no reason for it because that part of downtown was a slum. Downtown was really dying. It gave it such a shot in the arm to have this whole development come there and bring that part of downtown back to life. I have an anecdote to all that. In this whole transaction we wound up owning the Depot. You probably never came to Tulsa by railroad?

JE: Not on the railroad, no.

JW: Back in the 1940s passenger trains were coming in to Tulsa. But anyway, we acquired the Depot and we were going to tear it down but we found that the walls were 18 inches thick and reinforced concrete and it would be a mess and very, very difficult to tear it down and keep the railroad open. So we decided instead to rehabilitate it and make it into usable office space. When we got on that kick, (chuckle) I got a call from the Chief of Police. I think his name was Purdy. I happened to know him pretty well. He said, "You so-and-so." He happened to use a little stronger language. He said, "You are causing me just one hell of a problem—you've got to help me." I said, "What in the world is the problem?" He said, "I've got to talk to you." I said, "Come on over and tell me what's on your mind." So he came over and said, "You have turned 29 derelicts loose on me here in town. I don't know what in the hell to do with them. They had been living in your Depot there." He was right, that place stank to high heaven. We had to evict them and now look what's happened to it it's the Jazz Hall of Fame. I never imagined then it would go into that.

JE: So the tallest building then in Oklahoma at that time was the 52-story Williams Tower.

JW: Yes.

JE: Was it all occupied when you moved in?

JW: Yes.

JE: So you needed 52 stories.

JW: NBT, which became the Bank of Oklahoma took 25 percent of the building and we took the 75 percent.

JE: Then of course you built the Forum?

JW: We built the Forum and we built the two black buildings and the hotel and then we raised the private money to build the Performing Arts Center.

JE: Yes. That's a story in itself and I want to come to that in a minute here. But the Forum with the ice rink with the shops and restaurants around it—it was a gift to Tulsa is what it was. It really was a beautiful place.

JW: It was and we started out owning the hotel, but now it's Crowne Plaza I believe.

JE: It's changed hands many times down the years.

JW: Yes.

Chapter 10 — 2:48**PAC**

John Erling: So then there was a strategy session in Tulsa and they were discussing a new theater or performing arts center and your cousin Joe attended that meeting I am told. I am getting this from Mayor Bob LaFortune. Joe brings the idea to you and Charles Norman was the chair of the session.

John Williams: Yes.

JE: It was going to take \$14 million to build the Performing Arts Center.

JW: That was the estimate, yes.

JE: So how were you going to come up with this money? And at first did you buy into it right away? Was that a project that you wanted to support?

JW: I was sort of busy on other things at that time (chuckle). But, it got to be more and more intriguing. Bob LaFortune was very much interested in it and wanted to help. We finally came up with the idea let's try this and see if we can do it 50-50, with 50% private money and 50% public financing—\$7 million each. What really made it possible was when I talked to Mrs. Chapman and told her what we were trying to do. She financed \$3.5 million—half of the \$7 million. I put up \$1 million—so we had \$4.5 million out of the \$7 million. Then I had to go out and raise the other \$2.5 million. Bob agreed that the city would put out a bond issue, which was done very wisely. It came out in August 1973 and it was the only issue on the ballot. I think it passed by 65% or 67% in favor of it. Yamasaki became the architect of it and it was a rather small space. Williams gave them the land for the building in we got the two theaters in there in conjunction with the parking garage—so it worked out very nicely.

JE: You had your \$14 million raised, but then the bid came in at \$18 million?

JW: Well, I think it ended up more than that. The west side of the building was going to be clad in marble and whatnot, but we couldn't get it down below the \$18 million. So we had to go back and raise another \$4 million. The city put up \$2 out of the sales tax revenue and I went out and raised another \$2 million. We finally had \$800,000 left over and with that we find the Performing Arts Center Trust, which is the entity that sort of manages the operation. It is now up over \$2 million in the income from that helps subsidize some of the programming. It's been a very successful operation and I am quite proud of the way that it's worked out.

Chapter 11 – 5:16**Advice and Reflection**

John Erling: As you look back on your career, you're 91 and here we are in 2009, are there any top things that really stand out businesswise or in our city that you are really proud of? The PAC must be one of them.

John Williams: And of course Williams Center is certainly one of them. I've also been involved in building The Golf Club of Oklahoma in the southeast part of town and the Kensington shopping center, which was not too successful.

JE: That's an interesting story and probably not a lot of people know that you were involved in the Kensington shopping center, which was at 71st and Lewis. Who was your partner on that?

JW: Oral Roberts University.

JE: Sakowitz was the anchor tenant?

JW: Yes, and then he went bankrupt.

JE: But Oral and you both had to put in a significant amount of money.

JW: Yes we did—a tremendous amount of money.

JE: What kind of money? Do you remember?

JW: (Pause) Too much. (Chuckle) That's as far as I can remember. (Laughter)

JE: I understand. Oral was trying to invest obviously money that he had raised and I don't know if he invested in other properties—I suppose that he did, but that was the only venture for you and Oral.

JW: Yes.

JE: You know, students will be listening to this. What would you like to say to students now and those who will listen in years to come? They might be interested in business after leaving college. What advice can you give them?

JW: There are so darn many platitudes that come out. I guess the overriding one is that you have to earn the respect and the opportunities. I find so many people demand recognition and compensation. If you really dedicate yourself to what you're doing and work hard at it...So many people expect to have things given to them. Life isn't that way. If you sort of work harder and give more than you are expected to do, then it will come to you. What I am trying to say is that the opportunities will develop if you've earned them instead of demand them.

JE: Wouldn't you say that in your career—some of it was by fate— or by luck that you were in a certain time? But once you were given the opportunity—it's not luck then—you were able to take advantage of those opportunities.

JW: Yes.

JE: So when luck comes along we'd better be darn ready.

JW: Luck and fate and opportunity and timing—they are all tied together. It's not all gravy. It's your health. I don't like being blind, it's not fun, but that's part of fate. I have a lot of other things that offset it.

JE: You've had this deterioration (in eyesight) for the last seven years I believe?

JW: Yes.

JE: How do you cope with that?

JW: You do the best you can. My brother had it much worse and my mother had it, so it's not surprising. Of course, my sons are pretty fearful—they are watching it pretty carefully.

JE: I do always ask people how they would like to be remembered—how would you like to be remembered?

JW: I am proud of what I've been able to do here in Tulsa. I don't brag on it, but I'm glad the name Williams is going to be around for a while. It's an old, corny thing—it's a different thing when your name's on the door. It's quite a different responsibility. You want to be very careful that that name is preserved. I am proud that Williams is I think a better-known name in Tulsa today than it was before I came here 60 years ago.

JE: Yes, and your \$25,000 that you started with—today, with thousands and thousands of employees and their families and probably grand children and all that have come from that investment—it's got to make you feel good today.

JW: It does. Williams is a very common name. In Ripley's once, I saw where the most common name in America is Johnson and Williams is second followed by Jones, Smith and Brown. Did you know that?

JE: I didn't know that.

JW: I think the Williams name is hopefully respected in Oklahoma and in Tulsa. We certainly left a mark downtown. An interesting thing, when we built the building we agreed with the bank and called it the Bank of Oklahoma Tower—but we called it One William Center—so we both were happy. (Chuckle)

JE: Yes. I would imagine, as I sit here I could represent all of Tulsa in saying thank you, because that phrase doesn't always come back. I know you've received many honors, but it's got to make you feel good that so many people are proud of this town because of Williams and what it's done to our community. So on behalf of everybody I simply say, thank you, thank you, thank you.

JW: I think for downtown—I don't know what would've happened if we hadn't of done that thing. We get it for our own sake, but downtown certainly would have been different if we hadn't have built that North part of downtown.

JE: There's no doubt about it.

Chapter 12 – 6:34**The Jay Walker**

John Erling: Are there any famous people that you were with? You were famous yourself, that sometimes we think of Hollywood and we think of politics. You weren't politically active were you?

JW: No, I never was.

JE: Like Sen. Robert Kerr—were you around him at all?

JW: I was around him a few times. I got to know Henry Bellmon very well.

JE: Because he was on your board?

JW: Yes. I really got to know Henry. One anecdote about Henry—(chuckle), Henry was governor, senator, and then governor again, wasn't he?

JE: Yes.

JW: After he was governor we invited him to come on the board. Then he became a senator. Then he came back and we invited him to come back on the board. Then he started running for governor again. He kept coming to the meetings and finally I cornered him and said, "Henry, when are you going to resign from the board?" He said, "Resign from the board? Don't you like me? I'm not going to resign." I said, "Well Henry, you are running for office—you can't still be on the board and be governor and you are probably going to win." He said, "Oh, I don't want to get off the board." I said, "Well, you'd better get off." He totally ignored me—he wanted to stay on the board.

JE: Was he a contributor at your board meetings?

JW: He was at first quite good—toward the end, and this of course—he slept through most of them. (Laughter) But he couldn't help it. That's not a criticism, that's just the fact—as we get older we do go to sleep. (Chuckle)

JE: Bill Skelly, were you around him at all?

JW: I have met him. Back in those days—I remember when I moved to town it was Bill Skelly, Bill Warren, Otis McClintock and Jay Walker—they sort of ran Tulsa. This was in 1950 and they were all pretty darn impressive people. I will tell you one funny little story. Back I guess it was in the 1980s, I was walking from my building going over to the Tulsa Club—walking across the green. I got on the west side of Boston on the southwest corner of 3rd and Boston and there was a policeman there. He stopped me and he said, "You were jaywalking." I said, "Well sir, I guess I was. I did walk across the light but I looked all three ways and there were no cars anywhere." He said, "The law says you can't walk against a red light and you were jaywalking." I said, "I'm not going to show you my license, I wasn't driving I was walking." He said, "Now don't give me any more of your lip, either show me

your license or I'm going to cuff you." I said, "Yes sir." I pulled out my license and showed it to him. He took it in his hand and he looked at the license and he looked up at me and then he looked over my shoulder at the building. Then he looked at the license and then looked at me and then looked over my shoulder. He said, "Is that your building?" I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Don't do it again." (Laughter) The other story, which I wasn't involved in—you probably never knew the individual named Jay Walker, who was the head of National Tank Company and a great guy—but he was very active in the 1950s. He had an office in the old First National Bank building and he of course would walk over to the Tulsa Club. He damn near got put in jail because he would walk against the light. A cop stopped him and said, "What's your name?" He said, "Jay Walker." It went downhill from there. (Chuckle) the cop said, "Don't give me any of your damn lip bud, what's your name?" He said, "Jay Walker." It went on and on.

JE: Did he have to prove his identity?

JW: (chuckle) he did—he had to prove it. I think his name was James Walker but everybody called him Jay.

JE: What did you do for stress relief? Were you a golfer?

JW: I was a golfer—yes.

JE: That was a good getaway for you?

JW: Yes, I was a member at Augusta. I still am a member at Augusta.

JE: When did you become a member of Augusta?

JW: I became a member in 1967. I have been a member for 42 years.

JE: What privileges come with that?

JW: You get to go there and play golf.

JE: Is that an annual dues type of thing?

JW: Yes. It's a very private club. It's a privilege to be a member there.

JE: So you played there with other executives from other companies I suppose?

JW: Yes.

JE: It was a great way to entertain too wasn't it?

JW: Marvelous.

JE: Did you do deals there?

JW: We took a lot of guests there. You know, like you take customers on trips hunting and fishing. A trip to Augusta is a very rare privilege because not many people get to go there. Do you play golf?

JE: I don't. I gave it up years ago. I decided I didn't need to walk around and be depressed all the time—so... (Chuckle) I can drive a boat straighter than I can a golf ball so I did that. Do you think about the world today? Do you stay up with the news?

JW: I am delighted that I grew up in the time that I did, and I am fearful of what the world

is going to be like in the next 100 years. It's such a different world now, with the instant communication and instant, so-called information, but it's just chatter. We thought in building pipelines—it was one of the greatest things in the world when after the war there were Jeeps that let us get around cross-country. When we would send people out on a pipeline we were building in Saudi Arabia or in Bolivia, one of the greatest attractions that a prospective employee presented to us was that he was a ham radio operator, because somebody that knew how to operate a ham radio we'd send down to Bolivia. The superintendent down there could get this guy with a short wave radio and contact somebody in the U.S. and then they would patch through to our office and that was the only way we could talk to our people. Now, you can dial Bolivia and it's just like talking to somebody in Sapulpa. It's incredible the difference in what you can do. We made a big living at the toughest and most remote jobs you could find in the Middle East and South America and Australia and Africa. It was pretty primitive, wild West type of planning.

JE: Which you enjoyed?

JW: Which we thoroughly enjoyed. (Chuckle) You see, I grew up totally bilingual. So working in South America—and we did a lot of work for South American governments—talking to them in their language and thinking like them, it was really very, very helpful.

Chapter 13 – 6:41

Back to Cuba

John Erling: Did you ever go back to Cuba?

John Williams: In 1994, back in the days of WilTel they got a contract to build a fiber-optic cable from Key West to Havana. At that time the only way you could communicate with Cuba was to go via Italy by wireless radio from there. So a delegation went down there and they invited me to go and sort of wave the flag—having grown up in Cuba. Incidentally, they checked me out very carefully before they let me in the country. They wanted to make sure that I didn't have any claims against them. It was really fascinating. It was very depressing. I didn't know what communism was until I went down there, but literally they had taken everything—they had taken over all of the homes, automobiles, buildings, businesses—nobody owned anything. We were guests of the government. We had a driver and a Mercedes car to take us around. You know what an 18 wheeler is—a bus down there was a tractor-trailer flatbed trailer with a railing around it and a little circular staircase in the back and a sign that said capacity 246 people standing up—that was a bus.

JE: Wow.

JW: We had an interpreter that was assigned to the negotiations. She was an attractive lady about 45 years old and she was well dressed. I had tried to talk to her during the breaks in the meetings and she would do (motioning) like we were being monitored. Later we would go out in the garden and talk. She was paid \$4 a month. She got food stamps and rice and beans and three chickens a month. She said, "Do you see these clothes I have on?" She was a well-dressed woman. She said, "They are not mine. They were just issued to me for this meeting and when you all leave I have to hand them back in." It was like they were in a concentration camp. It was quite pathetic.

JE: You obviously didn't meet Fidel Castro?

JW: No, I did not.

JE: But you were a guest of the government so he probably knew you were there.

JW: Oh definitely—they knew all about us, yes. Interestingly enough, we didn't need passports or anything to go down there. We also went down with the full approval of our U.S. government because they wanted the system to go in. It never got built because they got in a fight with them as to what would happen to the collect calls. Castro knew that most of the calls out of Cuba would be collect calls and the money would be collected by the U.S. He wanted 100% of it remitted to Cuba and the government refused to do that, so they never settled it.

JW: Do you have any thoughts about when Castro passes on what will happen to Cuba? Will it become a democracy?

JW: Eventually I think it will, yes. It's going to take forever. The problem, this year it's almost 51 years now since Castro took over in 1959 and what has happened is that everybody has a claim against Cuba. People who lost their houses and the people that lost their businesses... Whenever the government changes they are going to try to recapture what was taken away. This happened 60 years ago, so those claims have largely gotten confused because Castro has sold those properties to somebody else. He didn't have title to them, but Europeans and Canadians are all down there, so when it changes there's going to be great confusion for several years. But eventually time will cure it. Eventually it will become a tourist attraction. I think that what we should do is make it the 51st state, but I don't think that that will ever happen.

JE: When you went back in 1994 were you able to go back to your house and see where you lived?

JW: I did. I went back there and our home had been converted to a children's school for grades 1 through 4. I went up to the front door and knocked on the door and the headmistress came and in Spanish I talked to her and told her that this used to be where I lived and I was down here on this project and I would love to come in and look around and visit. She was very, very suspicious about the whole thing and wouldn't let me in but I kept

talking and sweet talking her. Finally, I guess I persuaded her and she let me in and we got along fine. Then there were 8 classrooms in the house there and she insisted I go to each one and make a little speech in Spanish to the students. Most of the students were between 5 and 8 years old. I told him who I was and that used to be our home and that I grew up here and I told them what was in each room. It was a lot of fun.

JE: I bet it was. It seemed mighty strange I suppose because the house seemed much bigger to you as a six year old.

JW: It did. The house didn't seem nearly that big (chuckle). But every bedroom was a classroom and the living room had been broken up into two classrooms. When we lived there you had to boil all of the water you drank because it was not sanitized. We had iceboxes—we didn't have refrigerators. This was in the 1920s, so Cuba was fairly primitive then, but it was a wonderful place to live. I was there living in Cuba during the 1930s during the Depression and we didn't know there was a depression going on. We didn't have to stay warm—we already were warm.

JE: Were your friends mostly Cuban?

JW: Yes. Then these same friends later on wound up in Palm Beach and Miami and Fort Lauderdale—they were driving taxis or as waiters. A lot of them were just barely able to keep a shirt on the back—it was pretty sad.

JE: Did you ever connect with them as they came over and you were living here?

JW: Yes, I connected with several.

JE: Can you speak some Spanish right now?

JW: Todavía habla español bastante bien si.

JE: Which means?

JW: Yes, I still speak enough Spanish to get along pretty well.

JE: How would you wrap this up in your experience of doing this as you recollect your life, and say it in Spanish?

JW: (Speaks in Spanish.)

JE: Can you tell me what that meant?

JW: It's been a great pleasure for me to spend these last two hours with you telling about my past experiences and I hope that I have a few years left.

JE: I'm sure you will. Thank you John, very much. That was wonderful.

Chapter 14 – 0:29**Conclusion**

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