

Robert J. LaFortune

A native Tulsan and father of six, LaFortune shaped his city through civic leadership and public service.

Chapter 1—1:25

Introduction

Announcer: Tulsa civic leader and oilman Robert “Bob” LaFortune was born at St. John Medical Center in Tulsa, January 24, 1927. In 1920, his father Joseph A. LaFortune and his mother Gertrude Leona LaFortune moved to Tulsa from South Bend, Indiana. Joseph LaFortune worked for Warren Petroleum Company for approximately 30 years, retiring as executive vice president. Before and after retirement, he maintained a significant community presence and funded the development of LaFortune Park in Tulsa. Among his many gifts to the University of Notre Dame, were funds he donated to renovate the Science Hall into the school’s first student center.

Bob LaFortune served as Tulsa’s commissioner of streets and public property from 1964 until 1970 and as mayor from 1970 to 1978. As commissioner, he participated in the development of the Port of Catoosa through purchasing land for the port and working with engineers on its design. As mayor, he played a significant role in developing Tulsa’s freeway system and securing public-private funding for construction of the city’s Performing Arts Center.

Because of the generous donations from foundations and many individuals you can hear Robert LaFortune in this oral history interview on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2—9:30

The LaFortunes

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today’s date is April 6, 2009. Please state your name.

Bob LaFortune: I am Bob LaFortune.

JE: Where were you born?

BL: I am a native Tulsan. I was born here in Tulsa in January 1927.

JE: Tell us about the building where we are right now.

BL: We are having this meeting in my office, which 937 The Philtower Building at 5th & Boston in downtown Tulsa.

JE: Tell us how the LaFortune family came to Tulsa.

BL: My parents moved to Tulsa in 1920, shortly after they were married in South Bend, Indiana. Both of my parents were from South Bend. My mother was from Mishawaka, which is a suburb of South Bend.

JE: And there are names were?

BL: My dad's name was Joseph A. LaFortune and my mother's name was Gertrude Leona LaFortune. Her maiden name was Tremel.

JE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

BL: Yes our family consists of four children. An older sister Jeanne, who is now deceased; I have a brother and a sister who are twins, Mary Ann Wilcox and my brother J.A. LaFortune, Jr.

JE: Can I jump back to your grandfather and grandmother?

BL: Yes. On the maternal side, my grandparents lived in Mishawaka, Indiana. They were Germans. The earlier family name besides Tremel, which is my mother's maiden name, was Wachs. So my mother grew up in a very German community in Mishawaka. Originally, the Wachs emigrated from Europe, from the Alsace-Lorraine area of France and Germany. On the paternal side, the knowledge we have is a little earlier. There was a French soldier who came to the Canadian province in about 1635 as a soldier I'm sure to fight the British, because they were always fighting each other all the time. After his soldiering he settled in an area near Montréal. Successive generations of his family farmed on a river going kind of Northwest from Montréal. The original name of the soldier was not as constituted today. It was at the time Tillier de LaFortune. The name got shortened as the family, I think according to my dad, migrated to South Bend, Indiana just for purposes of writing the name in a payroll, they took off the "Tillier de" and left the "LaFortune". On my mother's side I have all German heritage, so I would be half German. Then on my father's side, because he had an Irish mother and a Canadian-French father, I would be one fourth Irish and one fourth French.

JE: When your father came to Tulsa, what was his job? Why did he come here professionally?

BL: My dad dropped out of school in the 7th grade and that was to support the family he worked. When he was about 19 or 20 years old he took some day courses in journalism at Notre Dame. Then he went into the Naval Air Corps during World War I and served for about a year. He did not go overseas with that. He finished that and then he got a job

with the YMCA kind of in bodybuilding and physical training. Someone in that interest suggested to him that he should look at Oklahoma as a place to move—that it was kind of a new frontier obviously in the oil business. So that's what he decided he would try. Other than that, he worked for the Indiana Water and Gas Company in South Bend for a while. Then when he was about 25 he decided to come to Tulsa. He came down here first and looked for work. There's an interesting story about how he looked for work that he always used to tell us. Since he didn't really know anybody or have any contacts here, he just went to the tallest building in Tulsa, which I think at the time was the Kennedy Building or one of those. He said, "I just went to the top floor and just started going in all the offices and worked my way down the street floor." Because he had had a little work in journalism and that was his interest, he went to the Tulsa World. He got a job there as a reporter, which didn't last very long. He always told us that they eventually let him go. He got a job with Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, and then he developed his own business of writing house bulletins for small oil and gas companies. That eventually led him to meet W.K. Warren. This was after they were married obviously. I can go back to that in a minute. He met W.K. Warren and he and his wife had a business marketing natural gasoline products. My dad wrote this house bulletin for his company for a while. Eventually Mr. Warren offered him a job. My dad took the job but also required that he received some kind of stock interest in this little company. So rather than putting all of his earnings in a salary, he took this stock interest in a company, which eventually, of course had a lot to do with the wealth that he was able to build. Going back now maybe a little to my mother and dad. They were married in 1920. My dad moved mother down to Tulsa. The first place they lived was what they called the library apartments. If you remember, Carnegie's library for Tulsa was at 3rd & Cheyenne and there was a three-story apartment building next door to that on the west side and that's where they lived for the early years of their marriage. Then, within a few years they had their first daughter, my sister Jeanne, who deceased in about 1987. And then they had my twin brother and sister Mary Ann and Buddy in 1925 and then I was born in 1927.

JE: So then that was Warren Petroleum that your father worked for?

BL: Yes, it was Warren Petroleum. That was a very unique business in that day, because Bill Warren had established a business of recovering liquid products from the gas stream that came out of the oil fields. If you remember in the early days of oil field production—all over, Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana was that a lot of gas was flared. A lot of the historical pictures have huge gas flares. Well, that's because people didn't have any end-use of that natural gas that was coming up as the oil was being produced. Companies however, were beginning to look at that gas as a resource. They also learned that there were a lot of liquid products that were flared with that gas. So businesses

were established that recovered the natural gas through what they called gasoline plants. Gasoline plants would recover the different fractions of the natural gas—the highest fractions being like an ethane or then a propane, or then a butane and then a lower fraction which was called natural gasoline. The Warren Petroleum Company had a motto, which was on all of their logos in the early days, it said, “just natural gasoline.” Because they went around to all the oil producers who were flaring this gas and they would write up a contract to take the gas. Then they would market it through a gasoline plant. The liquid products would come off. They would sell the higher products, the butane and propane for chemicals and for household heating. And the lower products like the natural gasoline was recycled back into the crude oil streams to the refiners. Obviously, being a product like that, it upgraded the quality of the crude oil, so it was a very valuable product in the refining process. That’s why that company thrived during the 1920s and even the 1930s, when the Great Depression was on, that company was thriving because of the capture of these and products.

JE: Over the years your father moved up in rank within the company?

BL: My dad was always the number two person behind Bill Warren. The company bought and built natural gasoline plants. They had small natural gas gathering systems and they gradually established themselves as a public company. They went on the New York Stock Exchange in the late 1940s I think. Of course my dad had this interest that he had acquired in the very earliest days with Bill Warren, so that maintained a substantial stock ownership for our family, so to speak, in the company. Warren Petroleum then eventually sold to the Gulf Oil Company initially and then Gulf sold to Chevron and so on, so that was a very beneficial thing for our family and probably one of the reasons that my dad found the wealth that he did.

Chapter 3—5:24

LaFortune Park

John Erling: He was very involved in the community.

Bob LaFortune: My dad was always involved in something in the community. He was the leader of one of the United Way campaigns here. He was involved in a lot of the Catholic organizations for fund raising principally. He was also very much involved in the natural gas industry as a leader there. He retired from Warren Petroleum in the very

early 1950s. He had had 30 years with the Warren Petroleum Company. He took a job during the Korean War with the Secretary of Commerce as the assistant director of energy for President Eisenhower. And he served it was like a dollar a year job that he took on. He and mother moved to Washington, D.C., while he did that. They were mainly concerned about the ability of the country to move liquid products through pipelines and through tankers from the Gulf Coast to the East Coast to supply, obviously warships on the East Coast. So that was his job, was to ensure that the country was adequately providing fuel and liquid products for our Navy in particular of the Armed Forces during the Korean War.

JE: One of the big footprints that he placed in Tulsa was LaFortune Park. Do you remember and his thought process how that all developed?

BL: Well, it's very interesting because my dad had always been interested in physical activity. He played a lot of golf. He didn't do other strenuous sports, but he certainly was an avid golfer. One of the things that was happening in Tulsa at the time, was that they had what I'll call a County poor farm, because that's where the County could place indigent families who were unable otherwise to support themselves. Remember, this was during the 1930s and during the Depression and maybe even into the 1940s, before the welfare system was really developed at the federal level. So families would be housed at the County farm. The County farm happened to be a half section, 320 acres of land between 51st and 61st Street on Yale. With the advent of the welfare system coming down from the federal government and through the County who actually managed it, the land at the County farm was no longer useful for the county to have. So they were considering disposing of it, actually selling it. Even that part of Tulsa was getting some development in those days. I remember, this would be like in mid-1950s—so when some of the people in the Chamber of Commerce heard that the county was thinking of selling this, they approached the County Commission and suggested that this would make a nice park for Tulsa. So the County Commission consented to having something proposed—then they went to my dad. Harvey Heller was one of the key persons. He was an oil and gas broker. He and some other people from the chamber approached my dad to develop this property as a County Park. He took to the idea very quickly. He agreed to put up the funds to develop a golf course, a swimming pool, some tennis courts and I think some softball fields. All of that was put together as LaFortune Park and probably the greatest delight of his life was the completion of that park.

JE: It was named LaFortune Park because of his enormous donation to it obviously?

BL: Yes. Actually, the land was donated to Tulsa. They carved out 20 acres on the east side of the park for Memorial High School and the rest of the land was considered for LaFortune Park.

- JE:** Those who were used to the center of town where it is, that was miles and miles away.
- BL:** It was way out, but the city didn't have any parks of its own in that area. They were always having trouble finding open land priced right for them to be able to buy—so this was almost like a windfall to be able to have the County do this and not require it to be sold.
- JE:** That is a County Park as you pointed out. A lot of people think LaFortune Park is a city park, but it's a County Park and now we know why.
- BL:** Right. You have to remember that the County, having three commissioners, they are all obviously very protective of their own Commissioner District—so eventually it led to Chandler Park being developed for that particular district, District 1. Then O'Brien Park on the north side for District 2, and LaFortune Park for District 3. So each of the commissioners so to speak, has a parochial interest in the park system and a major park in their Commissioner District.
- JE:** Is there anything else that you think about that your father delighted in regarding his involvement in the city of Tulsa?
- BL:** His other interests were the University of Tulsa, St. John Hospital, Cascia Hall School and Monte Cassino School. He was very generous with his donations to those entities.
- JE:** He passed away in what year?
- BL:** My dad died in 1975 and my mother died in 1987.

Chapter 4—4:30

Bob's Professional Start

- John Erling:** Going back to you then, you were in fact born at St. John Hospital?
- Bob LaFortune:** Yes. I was born the year after St. John opened. I was one of the earlier babies born there.
- JE:** Then you attended elementary school?
- BL:** Yes, my schooling here in Tulsa was at Marquette through 6th grade and then I went to Cascia Hall through graduation. Then before and after my service I attended TU. Then in 1948, I was just about halfway through college and I transferred to Purdue University as a chemical engineer and I graduated from there in 1951.
- JE:** After high school though, your military service, what was that?
- BL:** It was called the Merchant Marines Cadet Corps. They had a cadet-training program, which led to both an ensign's degree and a maritime license. So I joined that in 1945. I

went through their basic training in San Mateo, California for three months and then I went to sea for a year. The war was just ending. The week that I first went out to sea on this cargo ship that I was on was V-J Day. So I was in San Francisco for V-J Day and that was a unique experience. I saw all of the things that you see pictures about today, as an 18-year-old guy. I was at sea for a year and had a wonderful experience in the Western Pacific. We traveled back through the canal and up to New York and down to South America, and North Africa and Europe and then home to New York. Then I went to school at the Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York.

JE: Were you required to join or were you drafted? The war was winding down did you have to go into the military?

BL: I was either going to go in the draft or I had this option to enlist in this program.

JE: You finished that and you finished your degree at Purdue—whom did you go to work for?

BL: When I left Purdue, I got a job with a chemical company based out of Indianapolis as a salesman here in Tulsa. I worked with them for about 5 years. I covered all of Oklahoma, West Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas, selling pipeline coating. They produced a coal tar enamel pipeline coating that was very much the standard for pipeline coatings at the time. Since then, it has fallen out of favor because of the environmental effects of coal tar smoke and the difficulty in applying it and protecting the workers. Those kinds of things just kind of happened with different products obviously. But that was a good job that I had and I learned a lot about the sales business at that time. I left that to go into the drilling business with a friend of mine.

JE: What company was that?

BL: Our drilling company that we established with Bob Reed, who married a neighbor of our family's. He was also a friend of our family's—his father-in-law was Dr. Weatherby, a well-known seismologist with Amerada. He and my dad were good friends. They saw an opportunity to help me get into the drilling business, so I bought some stock in it along with Dewey Bartlett who later became the governor and senator of Oklahoma and his brother David Bartlett who is a well-known Republican here in Tulsa, and Lockwoods, Bob Lockwood and Ned Lockwood—well-known insurance people here in Tulsa. I went into that business in 1953. I was an investor in it for several years and not an active worker in it. In 1958, when I left the chemical sales business, I went full-time with the drilling company. I was involved mainly in contact work, writing up contracts and getting wells drilled.

JE: How long did that association continue?

BL: That went on about five years. Then in late 1963, I was approached to run for office at the city level as a Commissioner.

JE: So then you maintained your interest in the business Reed Drilling?

BL: No, actually Reed Drilling was being dissolved. Drilling prices kind of hit the tank. We just decided that it wasn't a profitable thing for either of us. We split the company up. I took the production that we had—the oil and gas production—and my partner took the equipment. He was still interested in doing that. That was probably a fortuitous thing as far as I was concerned, to not have to worry about the iron that went with it.

Chapter 5—11:30

Riverside Expressway

John Erling: So then you decided to run for elected office?

Bob LaFortune: Yes.

JE: What office did you run for?

BL: I was first approached to run for mayor. A good friend of mine Mary Dunn was very active in our local Republican politics and was married to an old family friend of ours, the Dunn family. She approached me about running for mayor. I didn't know one thing about city government at that time. I had very little awareness about what the issues were and all of that. I knew that Jim Maxwell had been the mayor for several years before then and was very well-liked as mayor, so I finally told her that I didn't know enough about it to want to get into a campaign about it. They said, "Well, you're an engineer why don't you run for the commissioner of streets and public property? That's an engineering job overseeing public buildings and building codes and over all of the construction of new roads and things." That seemed to be more amenable to me so that's what I did.

JE: That would've been in 1964?

BL: Yes.

JE: One of the big projects that you worked on was the building of the Port of Catoosa.

BL: Yes. I was elected in 1964 and right away we began to put together some building projects. You have to remember that the interstate highway system was coming on and had already been somewhat funded in Tulsa. The Broken Arrow Expressway was in completion when I went into office in 1964. In 1965, the city had a bond issue for not only streets but also for the Port of Catoosa. We approved \$20 million from Tulsa for the Port. I think Rogers County but up \$1 million. Of that \$20 million, several million were purchasing the land at the Port. That job was assigned to my office—the street commissioner's office. We had a very limited budget of maybe \$1 million or a little more. We were supposed to buy 2,200 acres out there in what they called then Rascal Flatts.

We hired a small staff to work for the city under my office. We acquired all of that acreage over the period of about a year and a half and that became the Port of Catoosa.

JE: Was it in 1963 or so when the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System was beginning to be developed?

BL: Yes. It was in construction in the mid-1960s and finished in 1971. I was in the mayor's office by then, but all during the late 1960s while I was a commissioner these construction projects were going forward. I had an active role with the Arkansas Basin Development Association and later chaired that for a couple of years. We were involved in all of the lobbying for the funding of the navigational channel. Every year you had to keep that funding stream up through the Congress.

JE: It almost sounds easy here having you talk about it now, but there had to be detractors and resisters to having an international shipping port here near Tulsa, Oklahoma.

BL: That was a strange thing for most people to understand—that we could ever do that in the middle of the state. But as far as detractors, there were very few. Frankly, I'm glad we got the port built when we did, because we would have probably never built it today with all of the environmental questions that would be asked.

JE: Did you interact much with Senator Robert S. Kerr and Senator McClellan?

BL: Not personally—I didn't. Most of their work had been done earlier in the 1960s as far as getting the funding mechanisms started. We did rely on Tom Steed and Page Belcher and Mike Monroney. Monroney was very instrumental in helping get the funding through the Senate especially after Bob Kerr died, which I think was in 1963. We had very good support from all of our delegation though for the funding.

JE: That had to be like it was meant to be, because then you become mayor as the Port is opened and dedicated you were the Mayor of Tulsa and you have put so much work into that project. President Nixon was here for the opening of the Port?

BL: We had the opening of the Port in 1971. Another interesting story about that—prior to the formal dedication of the Port, there was a little trip put together by some Chamber of Commerce people here. Ralph Lafferty who ran Zebco here, Early Cass and Mark Tower and several other names that I can't pick up immediately—we planned a trip down the navigation channel in January of 1971. All of the locks and dams had been completed so we put together three little outboard motor boats, 18 feet in length or so. We started out on what was a 15° morning. I remember there was ice on the river out there. We would break the ice as he started down toward Inola, the first lock and dam. We took a 3-day trip from Tulsa stopping in Fort Smith the first night, Little Rock the second night, and the third night—we were on the Mississippi and down the Mississippi to Greenville. We were met at each of these places by their Chambers of Commerce and river enthusiasts and all of that. It was a very exciting trip and it holds a lot of memories for me today.

JE: Those weren't big boats? Eighteen-foot boats?

BL: They were just little tiny boats. You would get in these great big locks and dams and the walls of those things would go up 20 feet above you. Here they are opening these huge gates to let these little tiny boats go down the river.

JE: Did you have any weather problems along the way?

BL: No, we had good weather fortunately.

JE: Also as mayor, you played a big role in our freeway system—talk about some of the early decisions on that.

BL: Of course the job I had as street commissioner had been done very well previous to me by Guy Hall in the city and Frank O'Brien in the county. They had already gotten some funding for various right-of-way acquisition projects on the interstate system. Also they found money through various bond issues to acquire land for what they called the urban expressways, which didn't have interstate designation, but which required more local funding in order to acquire the right-of-way. Frankly, when I came into office there had just been an earlier bond issue at the county level that had funded things like the Crosstown and the Keystone. They had done some really advanced work on getting the system built. But when I came into office, you have to remember, the Broken Arrow Expressway was being completed, but the Keystone was not built in the Crosstown was not built and the Cherokee going north was not built. We still had the Riverside Expressway as a future project for our expressway system, but we knew that there were going to be neighborhood difficulties with that. That was kind of a whole new chapter really in my association with the expressway system. The Maple Ridge neighborhood formed a group against building that system down the Midland Valley tracks onto Riverside Drive at 30th Street and then down the riverbank to 51st Street. Of course that became an issue of great controversy during my street commissioner days. Lawsuits were filed against that. Eventually those lawsuits resulted in the Riverside Expressway being deleted from our system. Betsy Horowitz led the charge from the Maple Ridge group. She personally ran against me in the mayor's race at least twice. We had some heated discussions about expressways and what the effects were in Tulsa. I can say today without reservation that it was fortunate that that got deleted from our system. I think it had no business being programmed in there to begin with and would have taken away all of the potential for river development that we are seeing happen today even though it's 50 years later.

JE: Even though you were a strong proponent of that expressway?

BL: Yes, because I felt as if that was my responsibility to carry out the highway plan that had really been approved in some earlier bond issues so to speak when people voted about various rights of way.

JE: Did all street bond issues get passed during your time?

BL: No. I actually lost one in 1969 when I was mayor and I think that was the only one.

JE: But they must have come back and approved it as building continued on on the streets?

BL: I think most of the expressway items had already been approved through the 1965 issues as I recall. We ran into difficulties when I was mayor in the latter couple of years of my term. You have to remember this was the late 1970s. There were some hard times in the oil business. In the mid-70s we had the embargoes and things like that that were very difficult on our economy. It wasn't all smelling the roses. It was a difficult time to get any public funding for things. I want to mention one other thing with regard to expressways, because one of the key projects in all of our expressway system was what we call the southeast interchange. That doesn't mean anything to people today, but it completes the loop of expressways around the central business district. We did not have that designated on the interstate system when I came in office as street commissioner, so we were always faced with having to buy the right of way ourselves as a city for that whole complex. As it came along, we just found that it was not probably going to be possible with the tenor of public acceptance of street bond issues to put together enough to do that. We decided that we would try and get the southeast interchange on the interstate system so that the right-of-way could be 10% local and 90% federal and the construction would be the same way. Otherwise it was going to be 50% local and 50% federal. Right-of-way is one thing, but the construction we would have never been able to put that up locally. So, with the help of Dewey Bartlett who was then in the U.S. Senate, he was a friend of Secretary of Transportation Volpe, so he arranged for them to look at this as an interstate project. We had a very important meeting in Washington with the Secretary and Sen. Bartlett about this designation and we gained the favor of the Department of Transportation to change the designation of that Southeast interchange. So even though we had lost the other interchange through the Riverside Expressway condemnation, we gained the Southeast interchange, which gave us our connection to the Broken Arrow Expressway and completed the loop around the central business district. So that was a very, very key element in our overall transportation plan.

Chapter 6—9:30**PAC**

John Erling: So then in the middle 1970s you began work on our new performing arts center?

Bob LaFortune: Yes, all during my term, even as street commissioner and as mayor, there was a lot of interest in replacing the theater on Brady. Actually, in 1969, the city put up what they called an Omnibus bond issue—a terrible name. A lot of people referred to it as the ominous bond issue (chuckle). It was put up in kind of a hurry and had 7 or 8 different issues in the one big issue. We had traffic control, water and sewer, storm sewers, parks, streets, and we had a theater. The theater envisioned was to do some renovation in the assembly center I think—to reconfigure that. At any rate, we put several million dollars in for a theater and it was probably the least popular issue. We had a river project in that issue also. We had money in for the low-water dam development and we had completed a study on river development that was very similar to what's going on today, but it was done then by an architectural firm of Hutchins Thompson & Ball in what was the middle 1960s. I might add that as an anecdote that my secretary through my city hall days was Ann Baxter, a lovely lady who had worked for city commissioners back in the 1940s and then worked for Sid Patterson when he was street commissioner prior to me. She told me about her water and sewer commissioner I think, who in the earlier days had proposed damming up the Arkansas River. That thought was in the minds of several of our chamber types and the futurists you might say for development. But at any rate, in 1969 we had a river project and it of course got beat with all of the other things in this '69 bond issue. The only thing that passed in this '69 issue was the water and sewer issue.

JE: So they could pick and choose which ones they wanted to vote for?

BL: They could pick any one of these—you had to have all separate issues obviously.

JE: So then the idea of the theater goes down?

BL: Yes, the theater idea went down in '69. When I became mayor there was still interest in that. We had a very important retreat in 1970 or '71. We had a downtown gathering of Katie Westby and Joe Williams was part of it—the president of Williams Companies here. Birch Mayo and others attended this retreat. A fellow named Halpern who was a land-use planner came here and facilitated the retreat. We had everybody walking downtown and looking at sites discussing what we should do. Charles Norman, a very close friend of mine who died just last year, was also important because he had been chairman of a municipal theater study committee. They had looked at all of the older buildings that might be converted into a theater, one of which was the Akdar theater at 4th and Denver. We did a serious study about converting that theater into the municipal theater. It was a really the best choice, but it seemed to be the best thing for the money that could be

raised. So we kind of drifted along with the idea that we needed a theater very badly until the Williams Companies put together a downtown urban renewal project that resulted in the Williams Center.

JE: We now know the Performing Arts Center is at 3rd in Cincinnati. So that was all blight—it needed to be cleaned up.

BL: Actually, it had already been all cleaned up. By then, the buildings were virtually clear from a large part of the area and the Tulsa Urban Renewal Authority had been trying to take proposals on development of that area, which is now a 9-block area. It went from 1st Street to 3rd Street and all the way to the railroad tracks—and it went from Cincinnati to Boulder. That area had not been able to attract any significant development of proposals. However, when the Williams Companies decided that they wanted to build a new building—they had been in the present building NBT building at 3rd & Boston...They were growing very fast and needed a lot of office space. They hired an architect, Minoru Yamasaki from Detroit to come in and design a Williams Center office complex. Since we kind of had our foot in the door with Joe Williams, he knew that we needed a theater, and so in talking with his brother John, they kind of settled on perhaps a theater could go in the new complex. So they picked out the corner where the new Hotel Tulsa had been, the half block off of Cincinnati and north of 3rd Street and they designated that for a potential site for a theater. John Williams, in his work with Yamasaki had very ingeniously converted what was a two-tower project of Yamasaki's for the Williams Companies to a one-story tower. Yamasaki had presented two towers of about 25 or 30 stories each. John suggested he just put one tower on top of the other and just make a taller building. The building that Yamasaki developed was very similar to the World Trade Center Towers that went down in 9/11. John saw the potential of the theater site, so he approached Leta Chapman to make a major league gift for a theater. She consented. She agreed that she would give \$3.5 million. He then called me for a meeting and he said, "Bob, if we can go half and half, public and private on \$14 million budget. I'll raise \$7 million privately, half of which is already assured through Mrs. Chapman, and the City can put up \$7 million and we would have enough to build this theater for \$14 million. That's how we got started with the theater.

JE: But then, did that have to go to a vote?

BL: Yes, the City would have had to vote on the \$7 million, so it looked like a slam-dunk to me to have half of the money already available, and sure enough it was. Because where the theater had failed in 1969 by 25/75, in 1973 it passed by 75/25. So we put up our \$7 million and John raised another \$3.5 million privately from individuals who were interested in a new theater. So with \$7 million from the public and \$7 million raised privately, we had the \$14 million to do the project. So we proceeded to design the theater and go to bids.

However, when the bids came in, they were about \$18 million. John Williams came back to the City and said he would raise another \$2 million if the City would put in another \$2 million. Fortunately at that time, the City was receiving what were called revenue sharing dollars through the Nixon Administration. They were giving us a real resource for capital dollars that we didn't have otherwise. We agreed that we would find our \$2 million in the City through the revenue sharing door and John went out and raised another \$2 million from virtually the same individuals who had pledged the other \$7 million. So we ended up with \$18 million in raised money. We went back to the construction of the theater and actually formed a committee, which was a very unique idea that Charles Norman had conjured up. They entered a contract with FlintCo on a fixed-fee basis to build the theater. We were in a time of hyperinflation—so there was a lot of pressure to get the work done while inflation was raging around us, but it also enabled us to earn a lot of interest on the money that we had already raised through the bond issue and through the private donors. So we put the money to good use and finished the construction of the theater for \$18 million. We actually ended up with \$1 million over that because of our interest earning and that \$1 million went into our Performing Arts Center Trust, which still operates today to encourage programming of events at the theater.

JE: The opening night had to be a big night. Do you remember what the opening performance was?

BL: Ella Fitzgerald was the big attraction for opening night. The Tulsa Symphony of course had a wonderful program planned. It was a gala night and historic certainly for Tulsa.

JE: So you stood on stage and welcomed the crowd?

BL: Absolutely. It was one of the finest treats of being a mayor was to have that theater, a real presence. As we all know it's been maintained in almost perfect condition ever since.

JE: That was in 1977?

BL: Yes.

Chapter 7—4:18

Boy Scouts

John Erling: You were talking about the development of the Williams Center and the Williams Tower. That included a shopping area and an ice rink. Can you talk about that?

Bob LaFortune: Yes. They envisioned a big retail complex. They had attracted a quality, five-star hotel. They developed the Williams Green, which is really an outstanding urban ark

today with a parking structure underneath it to serve the hotel and the theater. Then they had a large retail complex within what is now known as the BOK Tower and some other office buildings that were sited in the plan.

JE: They had an ice skating rink and families would go down there.

BL: Yes, the initial development for the Williams Center included an ice rink and a variety of cafes and restaurants.

JE: They had a movie theater in thee.

BL: That's right. They had a small theater in there, which is in use today by the Williams Companies.

JE: Also you were involved with the Tulsa Parks and Recreation Department and took a special interest in that?

BL: I had seen during my days as a street commissioner how neglected the city parks system was. I think the last bond issue to fund any parks in Tulsa prior to my coming on as a street commissioner was probably in 1957 or 1958 or something like that. So that was one of the things that I wanted to do, so we did put a park issue up in 1970 or 1971 right after I was elected. But at any rate that was the first park issue that had been put up in many, many years. We put a lot of emphasis on Mohawk Park as well as some funding sources for acquiring new land for parks—not so much development as just getting the land. That gave us a major renovation of Mohawk Park and also gave us some funds for site acquisitions.

JE: Then you made the zoo a very attractive place.

BL: Yes the zoo had a lot of interest from various volunteers and city groups. There was a lot of interest in getting our zoo developed not only as an attraction for tourists but also just for the education of just our own young children. So that came about with what they called the living museum.

JE: Then you went out of office in 1978?

BL: Yes, I left office in 1978. I had served four two-year terms and elected not to get involved in other political races at that time.

JE: Certainly you were asked to?

BL: There was an opportunity because Dewey Bartlett was going through cancer at the time and really could not finish his term. So there was a vacancy in his term when he died.

JE: You could have been appointed?

BL: Probably not appointed, but I think I could have run for that office. That's when Don Nickles ran. He was a very young man, about 32 at the time but a very able politician. I really did not have an interest in trying to run for that office. My wife was an only child and her parents were still alive and living in Tulsa and she was not attracted at all to moving away.

JE: You were also active in the Boy Scouts?

BL: I got active in the Boy Scouts mainly as a fundraiser for their local Council. I migrated up through a series of appointments up to Chairman of their regional Scout organization, which is a five state area around Oklahoma. I went on the national board in 1978 and I am still on the Executive Board for the Boy Scouts of America. I had a great interest in that. All three of my boys had been Boy Scouts. The two younger ones became Eagle Scouts. When I learned how important that was I stressed that a little more in their development. It's been a great satisfaction for me to work for the Boy Scouts. They are outstanding. They are the major youth organization for the country. They do so much good and I have been very, very satisfied with the work I've done there.

JE: I recently visited with Fred Drummond who is very active in Scouting in the south. He pointed out that I think the first chapter of the Boy Scouts actually began in Oklahoma. That's good.

BL: Yes, the first Scout Troop was from Oklahoma.

Chapter 8—3:03

Political Family

John Erling: Let's talk about your family and talk about your wife and her name and how you met her?

Bob LaFortune: Jeanne was a native born Tulsan. Her father was W.W. Morse, a descendant of Samuel F. B. Morse, the man who founded the telegraph and the Morse Code. Their family line went way back in the northeast. Her mother was from Georgia and had a very southern accent. They came here in the 1930s or so. Jeannie was born in 1929 so she was a couple of years younger than I was. She was an only child, so she didn't have any brothers or sisters to hammer her or hammer on. But she was a very unspoiled person and that's the way her parents were. Her father was the general manager of Brown Duncan, which was a very important retail store in downtown Tulsa for many, many years, owned by the Duncan family. He left his employment there in the mid-1950s and moved to Wisconsin to run a store in Madison. They lived there about 10 years and we used to visit there in the summers obviously. Our children enjoyed those visits very much.

JE: Did you meet Jeannie in high school?

BL: Yes. Jeannie was just graduating from high school when I met her and I was either at TU or away at Purdue during our dating years. When I finished college, we got married

and started having our family. We had six children, three boys and three girls. All of them are married locally, with the exception of one. So today, I still have my six children. They are all well and healthy and very productive. I have 16 grand children and three great grandchildren.

JE: Now, is it a grandson that you have who is in the city council?

BL: Yes. My oldest daughter Susie Bynum has a son G.T. Bynum IV, who was elected to the city council a year ago and will be running for reelection this year's. That's an interesting family because his great-great grandfather was the second mayor of Tulsa in about 1900. So the Bynum family is old line Tulsa and we are very proud of that and the heritage that exists there.

JE: And you had a nephew who was the mayor of Tulsa?

BL: Yes. My nephew Bill, who is my brother Buddy's son was mayor and elected in 2002. Among his other things that he did, he was greatly responsible for the arena that we have in downtown Tulsa. He out together a very good quality building. I think he helped assure that we had a very world-famous architect who not only did a beautiful building but a first grade quality building structurally that has been economically successful since it was opened last August.

Chapter 9—13:00

Reflection—Advice

John Erling: As you look back over your life, can you pinpoint a project or projects that gave you the most satisfaction?

Bob LaFortune: There are certain public projects that I am very proud of. Probably in the construction manner, the Port of Catoosa would be the one, even though there are many, many others who had a lot more leadership responsibilities in that than I did. You have to remember the bond issue that the City passed for the Port was in the Maxwell Administration. I always had great respect for Jim Maxwell, as well as my successor Jim Hewgley because both of them were very innovative in bringing new things. They were not afraid to try something new. Maxwell developed a lot of the City County Associations that we have today. Our library system, our health system and the planning commission—all of those are City-County efforts. Today we see a lot of problems between the City and the County because of a lack of camaraderie or something that existed in those earlier days. Jim Hewgley did the same thing. He was able to establish new things. We

had our model cities program that attempted at least to do a lot of development in north Tulsa with the black community. We gave a lot of representation to minorities through committees and new organizations and new ideas that at least surfaced some of the important racial divisions that we had. Hewgley started the Tulsa Housing Authority for instance, which to me has been one of the most important elements of the city development over the years in taking care of the need for low-income assisted housing.

JE: Those were all big and exciting building years—weren't they? What do you think is one of your best traits? How do you view yourself?

BL: First of all, I think in the commission form itself, it is a coalition form of building government. The mayor was the chief executive of the city, but he only had a limited number of departments—mostly executive departments. All of the operational departments under that forum were under the four commissioners that were elected and the city auditor. So, in order for the mayor to advance an idea or a new program, while the mayor controls the formation of the budget so to speak, he or she would not have anything to do with ordering out street crews or picking up things for the waste disposal or doing those things. The mayor had to coalesce support from among the commission elements. That meant that you had to be a coalition builder for your ideas. My theory always was, get the best ideas you can from the best people and advance them the best way you can. I lost some things. I lost some bond issues. I lost a project to get a low-security prison in Tulsa, which I wanted very badly because I knew that these prisoners coming out of jail are all coming back to our town, so why shouldn't we have them here where we can give them more vocational training and more attention and get them more rehabilitated. We lost that in a big way here in Tulsa.

JE: People were afraid?

BL: They were afraid of siting it. It's the same old thing, not in my backyard. I remember the good things we did and we did a lot more good things than the things we failed on.

JE: You talked about the low river dam that was talked about in the 1960s. Are you surprised that we are sitting here today, right now in 2009, trying to fund a low water dam? That's got to be a surprise to you.

BL: It is because it's just taken too long, for reasons I wouldn't necessarily opine on at the time. I think we missed an opportunity when we lost the vote in 2007. That's spilled milk so to speak so let's go on to the next one and hope that we can get funding for some development. Meanwhile, I am very pleased with what's taking place along the riverbank being funded through donations from the Kaiser Family Foundation or from QuikTrip. There are still a lot of things that can be done with respect to riverbank development without having the low water dams there.

JE: After you left office of the mayor of the City of Tulsa, what did you do then?

- BL:** I just went back into my private business. I do a lot of work with our family. Since my parents died, we have a couple of trusts that I am a major factor in overseeing. So that's my business today. I am still in the oil and gas ventures. From a personal standpoint, I still try to keep a hand in some of the civic jobs as a volunteer, particularly with St. John Health System and with some of the Catholic Schools that I associate with.
- JE:** At Notre Dame, there is a facility there named in the honor of your family?
- BL:** Yes, there's a LaFortune Student Center at Notre Dame that my mother and dad funded. It was the renovation of a very old building on the campus almost right next to the main golden dome administration building at the school. They did a renovation of the older classroom building and then in the mid-1980s all of our family members participated in a major expansion of that building to the status that it has today as the LaFortune Student Center. It is very much in use mainly for student activities and for campus restaurants for the students and meeting places.
- JE:** Describe your father to us.
- BL:** My dad was very much indoctrinated into work and responsibility. There was very much self-discipline in how he conducted his own life. He was very compassionate. He always had great sensitivity to people who worked—especially just normal laborers that he would see or encounter. He could talk to anybody. He could talk to the most important person in the country, a President, as he did with President Eisenhower when he was serving in his administration. He could talk to the normal day laborer working at the park. He used to go out to LaFortune Park a lot—almost every week. He would walk around or he might sit down on a bench. Some golfer would come by or somebody would come by and he wouldn't tell anyone who he was. He would ask them, "How did your day go? What do you like about the park? Did you see anything wrong out here? Something that might need fixing?" He would listen to their ideas. He wouldn't do anything about it, he would just go talk to the superintendent and tell him, "take a look at this, this is going to need some help. Without a doubt the Park was the golden part of his life. Even after the initial development, remember that he built the 3-par golf course as an addition. He built some of the tennis courts as an addition, and then the running track around it and then the playground. All of those things came later after the initial development. He never, unfortunately, saw the Park on the corner of 51st and Hudson. Nor would he have seen the newer development of the tennis courts, which would have pleased him greatly.
- JE:** It must give you an enormous sense of pride to drive up Yale particularly on the weekends and on Sunday afternoon and see all of the families playing and having family get-togethers and cooking out. That's got to give you a lot of pride and pleasure.
- BL:** Well, I have seen a lot of parks around the country in cities I visit, I don't think there's a more complete, small urban park than LaFortune Park—it's unique. You think of all the

different activities and all of the things that are going on there at the same time and it's just a gem among park systems.

JE: Yes. As students listen to this interview, do you have any advice for life or careers in public service—is there anything you would like to impart to them?

BL: I think today especially we need young people who are interested in public service. That's why I was so pleased to see my grandson run for city office. He's had probably a political bent since he got out of college because he went to work for Sen. Nickles for 5 years, and he worked for Sen. Coburn for a year or two. He's always had an interest in it—it's kind of in his blood. It goes back to his family and his great-great-grandfather being a mayor, so I am really proud of that. More people need to have an interest and not a scorn for a political life. Politicians are needed in our country—good ones. If the good people don't step up, the ones who aren't that capable will and we will just have so to speak a vacuum where we need new leadership. I might add, young people need to feel a sense of responsibility in everything they do. They need to get through high school without getting into trouble. They need to watch the people they run around with. They need to pick and choose good friends. That's probably one of the most important things that I think I've had. I've always had good friends. I've been proud of them and not ashamed to associate with them. The other thing is to keep a sense of integrity about your life. Ethics today have been under severe stress—especially among our top corporate leaders in the country and among a lot of our political leaders—so integrity is probably the most important thing that you ought to be thinking about when you take on a job or a responsibility.

JE: In your life, would you look back on some individuals that you would look to—obviously your father would be one of them but were there others outside the family who were your mentors?

BL: Obviously, I would have run across or worked for people that I respect. A lot of my teachers—particularly in high school level and some even at the college level, that I remember as kind of forming my outlooks and my attitudes. I would say that's particularly true of the Augustinian priests I had at Cascia Hall and the Sisters of the Benedictine community here that I had in grade school at Marquette. Those two orders, Benedictines and Augustinians have a very wonderful attitude about their life and I think they impart that to you when they teach you.

JE: And you have been very active in the Catholic Church.

BL: That's one of the reasons that I think I've stayed so active is because of the religious influences from my teachers.

JE: Are there any names at Marquette and Cascia Hall—students that you went to school with that grew up in Tulsa that we might recognize that you have stayed in touch with?

BL: Father Theodore Tack who is presently stationed at Cascia Hall was a classmate of mine. He had the vocation of the priesthood. He went right into the seminary out of high school. He later lived in Rome for about 29 years as a priest, and became the superior provincial of the Augustinian order worldwide over 3,000 Augustinians. He kept that job for 12 years. He and I were obviously contemporaries in high school and we were very close friends through grade school and high school. We still maintain a close friendship. He's had a very favorable influence on my life obviously, because of his dedication to his own vocation.

JE: Do you have names of Cascia Hall students who stayed in Tulsa and got involved locally that you can think of?

BL: Bill LaFortune went to Cascia and Frank Keating went to Cascia and I'm sure there are others who have been very prominent in their own fields.

JE: So then overall as you are remembered, you could be remembered as what?

BL: Good ol' Bob. I've never wanted to get a lot of recognition—I don't think that's necessary. People know what I have done. I see it every day, I don't go almost anywhere in Oklahoma that I don't see somebody that remembers my face or my name or some association with the LaFortune family. That's a proud moment for me. Especially when I'm with some of my grandchildren who says, "hey Bob isn't that you? I remember you. We met 20 years ago." Or somebody will come up and say, "hey Bob—remember I work in your campaign?" I say, "my campaign? That was 30 years ago!" Those are proud moments obviously and not because you did anything about it—it's just that they have a favorable impression of what you did.

JE: Yes. Well thank you for this time. I appreciate it very much. It's very nice of you.

BL: We've covered a lot. I think what you've done is very good.

Chapter 10—0:33

Conclusion

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