

Chapter 1 – Remembering September 11th, 2001

John Erling (Present Day): September 11th, 2001. It's one of those dates when Americans of a certain age can answer a simple question: Where were you when you heard?

Now, 25 years later, the Voices of Oklahoma Oral History Archive preserves the memories of Oklahomans who experienced that terrible day in very different places. Some were in Oklahoma. One was in Washington. One was living in New York City. And remarkably, one had been inside the World Trade Center just one day earlier.

Keith Bailey, former chairman and CEO of the Williams Companies, had been in New York on September 10th, 2001. He had been at the World Trade Center. And the next morning, Bailey was back in Tulsa and had a dental appointment when he began hearing reports about what was happening in New York.

Keith Bailey (KB): We get back, I'm having my teeth cleaned, and they had the radio on, and they said a light plane just hit one of the World Trade Centers.

JE: Where are you now, having your teeth—

KB: Tulsa.

JE: Oh, you would have come back on that same day, on September 10th.

KB: Right, because I had a 7 o'clock appointment the next morning, and I told Kathy, who was a dental hygienist, I said "That can't happen, that has to be purposeful." But the first report was a light plane hitting one tower, and then by the time I get in the car to go back downtown, it's both towers have been hit. And I get Steve Malcolm and Cuba Waddlington, who are the two senior executives, and I said we need to do something. We've all in Oklahoma have lived through the Oklahoma City bombing. We need to do

something. We need to provide some resources, and let's do it through the United Way of America. And we committed the original million dollars that was the basis ultimately for the 9/11 fund. We were the first contribution. We did it while the towers were still on fire.

John Erling (Present Day): Keith Bailey of the Williams Companies with his memory of September 10th and 11th. And by listening to the entire Chapter 11, you will hear more about the involvement of the Williams Company's employees and United Way.

Former Oklahoma congressman Wes Watkins was much closer to the danger. On the morning of September 11th, Watkins was in Washington DC, and he also was sitting in a dentist's chair. He watched television as a second plane struck the World Trade Center, and he knew immediately that America was under attack. Watkins left the dentist's office and headed toward Capitol Hill as Washington began reacting to the unfolding emergency.

Wes Watkins (WW): I was sitting in a dentist's chair in downtown Washington DC. I had a dental appointment. I was sitting back watching the television up there, and first one announced, and then all of a sudden you saw that other plane, and you knew that wasn't an accident. That had to be a terrorist or some group putting together that kind of attack. I immediately kind of dismissed myself and told the dentist I need to get back to Capitol Hill. I left there, and I had to go around the White House. When it was empty, people were leaving the White House because the other plane came in and hit the Pentagon. People's face -- I mean, they were startled. I hope I never see that kind of scared, startled look. We came around the White House as they were trying to empty it.

I had an apartment right behind the house on D Street. My wife happened to be there at that time. We continued to live in Ada, and I'd commute back and forth every weekend just about, but she was up that week. We had Democrats and Republicans coming to our apartment. They were getting out of the Capitol building, and we were there. Steny Hoyer was one of them, who's still there as a Democrat leader. It was a very chilling, very sobering type experience, to say the least.

JE: Many of them gathered in your apartment, obviously watching television. What was said or done in there?

WW: Not much said. I mean, it was just—you're lost for words. Were they going to be attacking the US Capitol building? Evidently it's Flight 93 that went down in Pennsylvania that was headed to come hit the Capitol or the White House, one of the two—they were trying to get in there. We spent an hour or so there, and finally we went back over to the Capitol Building.

JE: Did you sing together?

WW: We went out on the steps of the US Capitol building, and we sang God Bless America.

JE: A whole group of you?

WW: Yes, there was a group of us.

JE: ... Singing God Bless America.

John Erling (Present Day): Former Oklahoma congressman Wes Watkins.

Howard Barnett, who served as chief of staff to Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, was having breakfast when his wife called, and she told him he needed to find a television. He found one just in time to see the second airplane strike the World Trade Center. Now for Barnett, September 11th also had an immediate Oklahoma connection. The state was in the final days of a highly contested right-to-work campaign, and suddenly politics seemed insignificant compared with what the nation had just witnessed.

Howard Barnett (HB): Frank and I were meeting. We were having breakfast with the guy who was running the campaign, and I got a call from Billy. She said, "Are you guys in front of a TV?"

I said, "No."

"Go to the TV."

It was about 8:15 in the morning, and we got the TV in time to see the 2nd plane go in—because we're meeting with our campaign manager—we immediately,

JE: Campaign for...?

HB: For the right-to-work, so we immediately canceled all of our ads. And bluntly, John, labor, which they're running nationally, they didn't. We felt like that was a big mistake for them, because their ads—you may or may not remember—were pretty vicious about how, you know, Oklahoma is going to basically be a wasteland, and, you know, all this kind of stuff, if we did it.

And then our first day I went back up that next Sunday night, and it was basically just Frank talking, saying we have an opportunity in Oklahoma to show the terrorists something. It's called democracy. We're the first vote to happen after 9/11. So whether you're going to vote for or against—and you know where I stand, I'm for it—please go vote. Show the terrorists that we care in Oklahoma.

JE: And it worked,

HB: And it passed. Polls flipped. We were down by 10 points. We won by 7 or 8 points.

John Erling (Present Day): Former chief of staff to former governor Frank Keating, Howard Barnett.

Dr. Clarence G. Oliver also remembers a telephone call, for he was home when his daughter called and asked whether he was watching television. “Planes,” she told him, “had crashed into the Twin Towers. Turn on the television.”

Now for Oliver, 9/11 became one of those defining moments in American life, much as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy had been for an earlier generation.

Dr. Clarence G. Oliver (CO): Well, I was obviously not in teaching at that time, not the superintendent at that particular time. I was home, did not have the television on. My daughter called me and said, “Are you watching television?”

And I said, “No.”

And she said, "The Twin Towers are coming down, some planes crashed into it, and they don't know just exactly what's happened, and turn on your television."

I did, and saw that taking place.

In all the days following that, there was great fear about what was taking place in the nation, great fear about what the implications of this might be. A lot of misunderstanding, and it's anything that people watch that same scene over and over and over for days and days and days and could not get it out of our minds. Finally people were just at the point that "I don't want to see it anymore," and they wouldn't even turn on the television. It was such a devastating feeling.

JE: That's the feeling I had too. I also thought, "America will never get back to regular life again," and we did. However, it did change.

CO: It changed.

JE: Enormously, internationally.

CO: Never the same.

JE: Never the same. That's right.

John Erling (Present Day): Former superintendent of schools for Broken Arrow Public Schools, Clarence Oliver.

And then there is Jimmy Steinmeyer's story. Steinmeyer was living and working in New York City when America was attacked, and his recollection brings us closer to the city itself and to what it was like to experience that morning as a New Yorker.

Jimmy Steinmeyer (JS): Well, David and I had an apartment then on 20th Street off of 5th Avenue. And then we had our offices on Spring Street, which is—let's see, we're between Broadway and—I can't remember the other street now, but right down there. But we were—that seems very close to the World Trade Centers, but it wasn't exactly, but it's close enough, so to speak.

JE: What was your first indication that something had happened?

JS: It was funny. I was talking to my younger brother, who lives in Texas, and I heard a plane, and it sounded very low. And I'd always—every once in a while you'd hear planes flying low, but usually it was just kind of a small plane, and didn't think—you'd never thought of it as a jet. And it just—I was talking to him, and I said, "That plane just sounds like it's so low, it's so strange."

And this was whatever, I don't know, right before it happened. And it was—all of a sudden, you know, people in the office started saying, "Oh my God, something's happened."

And you were just like, "Oh, OK."

And we had—I think David's partner had a television in his office—and we watched that for a while, and, you know, everybody was sort of just didn't know quite what to do. You're just sort of stunned, you were just watching it.

And then, at some point, my office faced south, and I had a window that looked out over, looked towards the Twin Towers, and there was a young lady in the office, and she was standing there just kind of watching it and just dumbfounded, as I was. And all of a sudden, when they collapsed, you were just like, I don't know what I saw, and it—that can't be what I saw. And you were just—I don't know if you were horrified, you were just numb. You thought, I don't know what that was. And then later, obviously you would just kind of go, oh, that's what that was. And you would just—very, very shocked about the whole thing, right?

JE: Did you have a direct eye view of the towers?

JS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JE: And so you saw the collapse.

JS: Yeah, yeah, just standing there, just, you know, we were watching it, just kind of—because before, they were just, you know, on fire, and there was a lot of smoke and all that happening. And then all of a sudden, when they did collapse, you're just—you didn't know what you'd seen. You just were so surprised and stunned, and, um, it was—anyway, it was—you just kind of walked away and thought, "I don't know what that was. I don't know."

JE: So did it take you a while to think you could even go outside?

JS: No. Spring Street's far enough north of the World Trade Centers that we didn't have—we weren't caught up in the smoke and the collapse of the buildings and all that debris and all that whatever was in the air. We were—oh, I don't know how many blocks it is, but it's quite a distance really. But anyway, so we never got that. If you were closer downtown to the World Trade Center, then you really—everything was covered in that ash and dust and mess, and that was awful.

JE: So you probably went in that direction at some time?

JS: No, I never did. I never went down there. And also they had cordoned it off. You couldn't get down there unless you were helping or, you know, working somehow. If you lived down there, then you could get to your apartment and do things like that, but there are certain areas you couldn't—and people couldn't come for the first couple, first week or so, you couldn't even get below, I think it was 23rd Street, unless you could show that you had some sort of identification why you would have something like—we had our office, so we had identification, so we could go.

And, anyway, we went back to the office—that was on a Tuesday morning, I think—and we went into our office Wednesday and Thursday. And everybody, the day that it happened, everybody left, and they had to walk home, because they shut down the subway systems. And I would assume the buses were running, but I can't remember that in Manhattan, but you had to walk home if you lived in Brooklyn or the Bronx or New Jersey, and they did it—everybody did it. It was like this great flood of people walking. It was just kind of amazing.

I remember one of the funniest—well, it wasn't funny, but it was so stupid. We had a client—oh, let's see, she lived on 5th Avenue—and anyway, she was supposed to have some carpet installed in the service area on Friday. So she calls up, and Kathy, who was David's secretary, answered the phone, and she said, now they're coming today to install it. And Kathy was like, “I don't—no, I don't think so, because they're not letting any trucks or anything across the bridges. And no, that's not going to happen.”

She said, “Well, it has to happen, it's on the calendar.”

And she was just like, “Well, I hate to tell you, but it's not going to happen.”

And then you realize, you know, when you're dealing with very, very rich people, they just assume that it's going to happen. So anyway, you're kind of like, “Were you here yesterday? Have you been watching the news?” Anyway. So, but anyway, it's very—it was a strange time, that's for sure.

John Erling (Present Day): Jimmy Steinmeyer and his recollection of that day.

Nearly 3,000 people died on September 11th, 2001, but history is more than dates, statistics, and headlines.

History is also memory. It's a story of where we were, what we saw, whom we called, what we feared, and how our lives changed afterward.

25 years later, these personal memories remain preserved in their own voices: Keith Bailey, Wes Watkins, Howard Barnett, Clarence Oliver, and Jimmy Steinmeyer.

Five people, five memories of one unforgettable morning. And their voices, and hundreds of other Oklahoma stories, are preserved for future generations at Voices of Oklahoma.

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