

Tulsa Baseball / Bill Rollings

Bill Rollings saved pro-baseball from the city of Tulsa. He tells the rocky history of the Oilers and the Drillers.

Chapter 1 – 1:07

Introduction

Announcer: Professional baseball in Tulsa goes back to 1905 and, before then, amateur teams represented the city in the early 1890s. While it had its ups and downs, Tulsa baseball was a big part of city life. The team was known as the Tulsa Oilers for many years, but in 1977, the name was changed to the Tulsa Drillers. The name change represents an interesting story of how baseball was saved for Tulsa. The St. Louis Cardinals Triple-A team was moved to New Orleans leaving Tulsa without professional baseball. Building contractor, Bill Rollings, saved the day by securing a Double-A franchise from Lafayette, Louisiana and Tulsa re-entered the Texas League. Our storytellers are Bill Rollings and noted baseball historian, Wayne McCombs. You will learn about a crumbling baseball stadium during a baseball exhibition, the building of a new stadium, and how an angel went to jail. But, the man who saved baseball for Tulsa was Bill Rollings. The Tulsa Baseball story, brought to you by foundations and individuals who believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time; VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 6:26

Bill Rollings & Wayne McCombs

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is May 7, 2012. Bill, would you state your full name, your date of birth and your present age, please.

Bill Rollings: My full name is Bill Rollings, my date of birth is 1930, May 4th. I'm 82 years old. I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on the Sand Springs line at Brunner Station.

JE: What was Brunner Station?

BR: It was a streetcar station going from Sand Springs to Tulsa. We lived right next to the railroad in Sand Springs line.

JE: Were you born in a hospital?

BR: No, I was born in the house; my mother and father's home. We weren't very wealthy folks, John. But we basically did well. We lived there for, as a matter of fact, I started the school that Mark Twain, which is there.

JE: Joining me on this interview is Wayne McCombs. He's become a baseball historian, in particular, of the Drillers and the minor league teams that have been here in Tulsa. Wayne, tell us a little bit about yourself in terms of your love of baseball and why you think it led to becoming our historian.

Wayne McCombs: I always enjoyed baseball. I always liked to play baseball. My dad was a fan of the Cardinals. His favorite player was Stan Musial. Then when Mickey Mantle came along he liked Mickey Mantle because he was from this area. Other Yankees on the club were Allie Reynolds, who was from Oklahoma. Ralph Terry who was from Chelsea. So my dad liked the Yankees in the American League and the Cardinals in the National League so naturally I became a fan of both those teams. I have fond memories of listening to the Cardinal games on the radio late at night. It would be dark outside in the summertime that we would be sitting out on the porch listening to the Cardinal games. Getting excited because of Harry Caray. Sometimes when the Cardinals would go off the Tulsa Oilers would come on. It was back on KDOO when they did both teams. Or the Oilers would play and their game would be finished and then we'd listen to the Cardinals. It was a father son bonding time and I remember one time our radio was broken so we had to go out in the pickup to pickup the game because for some reason the pickup radio picked up the games better. And we would lay in the bed of the pickup listening to Cardinal ballgames in the summer. Just a sweet memory.

JE: It is. Did you like keeping stats and all?

WM: When I got to high school I couldn't hit the curve ball. If you wanted to be with the team and be around the guys I wanted to be around, you had to do something. So I learned to bunt and I learned to keep a box score. So I was on the team because I could keep the box score and would do the guys averages.

JE: But then this evolved into a tremendous interest in the game and then the Oilers and the Drillers. You've written two books as a matter of fact.

WM: Yes.

JE: And the names of those books?

WM: The first book I wrote in 1990 was called *Let's Go-o-o-o-o-o Tulsa!* It was a history of Tulsa baseball. And then in 2003 I wrote another book called *Baseball in Tulsa*, which is more of a photo book about the history of baseball in Tulsa.

JE: And you can go to our books store and you can find this book, *Baseball in Tulsa*, that's for sale, yes?

WM: Yes, that is still in print. It's through Arcadia Publishing. They can order it.

JE: Wayne, tell us now where we're recording this interview.

WM: We're recording this interview in a very, very happy place. We're about, oh, 40 feet from behind home plate at Drillers Stadium at 15th and Yale.

JE: Alright.

WM: Outside it's a lovely day for a ballgame.

JE: And we have wind and all, so you're about to hear that and cars off into the distance so it's the way a live radio broadcast would be happening.

Bill, about you...Let's talk about your mother. Your mother's maiden name, where she came from.

BR: My mother's maiden name was Kirkpatrick and she came from a little city in Texas called Hearne, Texas; very close to Texas A&M, which is about fifteen miles from Hearne. She met my father and they married in the mid-twenties, both are deceased and as Wayne said, my father liked baseball. We used to come out to old Oiler Park and they had a Peep Hole Gang and I'm sure that Wayne remembers that.

JE: Your father's name is?

BR: James Bo Rollings.

JE: Where was his background? Where did he come from?

BR: His background was, he moved here from Mississippi in a covered wagon.

JE: Really?

BR: Yes. He was raised in Mounds, Oklahoma.

JE: What did he do for a living?

BR: He was in the tire business and he sold used tires and recaps and that kind of stuff.

JE: Then you referred to the peephole gang, would it have been, Wayne.

WM: Actually it's called the Knot Hole Gang. The section that was out in left field where kids could get in for a dime. They had their own concession stand, their own restroom facilities. That's where the kids would go to hangout.

JE: That's when it was the Tulsa Oilers.

WM: That's correct. Yes.

JE: You remember doing that yourself.

BR: Yes I do.

JE: Where was that park?

WM: Oiler Park was about a hundred yards to the west of where we are now. It was at 15th and Sandusky. That was the entrance to that park.

JE: Bill, your first education, what school was it?

- BR:** I went to school at Mark Twain, started in Mark Twain on the Sand Springs line between Tulsa and Sand Springs. Then I ended up going to Sand Springs to school, then graduating and moving to Mounds, Oklahoma. That's where I graduated.
- JE:** From Mounds, Oklahoma.
- BR:** Mounds, Oklahoma. Once I finished school, I joined the Navy.
- JE:** Where you interested in baseball then as a kid in high school, Bill?
- BR:** I played baseball in high school and then I played in the Navy.
- JE:** What position?
- BR:** Actually I was utility ballplayer. I played third and first base and did some catching. I was utility ballplayer.
- JE:** You're a tall man. How tall were you back then?
- BR:** I was probably 6'1 then when I was playing, 6'1-2.
- JE:** What year did you graduate from high school?
- BR:** 1947.
- JE:** Then the decision came what to do with the rest of my life or how did that work out?
- BR:** My mother and father divorced and I was left on making decisions on my own and I joined the Navy. I served five years in the Navy.
- JE:** Did you have brothers and sisters?
- BR:** I had one sister. She married and lived in Big Springs, Texas. She's thirteen months older than I am.

Chapter 3 – 2:55

Bill in Korea

- John Erling:** Since you're on your own, how did it come that you joined the Navy.
- Bill Rollings:** I joined the Navy because it was at the end of World War II. I thought that I could get an education, and I could play some baseball in the Navy, as well, so I joined, and I was involved in the Korean War, which was 1950.
- JE:** To what degree were you involved..
- BR:** I made the Inchon Landing which is the real feat that caused the North Koreans to lose the war to the South Koreans.
- JE:** What were you doing in that landing?
- BR:** I was on the ship, the USS Toledo. It's a cruiser. We were making the landing at Inchon. The tide is 30-foot tide in Inchon, and we got caught in there because we had eight-inch guns, and we were firing on the North Koreans. We got caught in

there and was high and dry. The tide went out on us, and we were sitting there for 24, 36 hours.

JE: They knew you were there?

BR: Yes, they knew. They were shooting at us and hitting us all the time.

JE: So bullets are firing all around you?

BR: Yes.

JE: Did you have mates?

BR: Oh yea. We were in a 20-millimeter torrent, and the man on the other side of the ship from us, that torrent got hit, and it killed a man there. We lost one man and injured several.

JE: What kind of a feeling is that? There you are, out and...

BR: I was just a kid, and it wasn't a very good feeling, I can tell you that.

JE: Are you amazed how you survived those 36 hours that you could easily not be here today?

BR: Absolutely and when I say that it was a situation where we were there, and I don't think we made a mistake. We were landing marines and soldiers, and we didn't get out of there, so I think we made the right decision. We did get hit, and there were some injuries and some deaths, but we ended up winning that thing pretty rapidly.

JE: Then, after that time, you moved inland, of course, and pushed the Koreans back.

BR: We didn't. I was in the Navy and the ship, once the tides come back in, the military had landed, and we'd cut supply line off. We'd cut the supply lines off to the North Koreans, and that was just a matter of months before it was all over after that. At that time General McArthur was the commander for that area and, as everybody knows, he got crossways with the president, and they fired him, but he wanted to go on into North Korea. We ended up going to the 38th parallel and stopping, but I was about three or four days from getting discharged when all this broke out. Mr. Truman gave me an extra year, and that's what caused me to be in Korea.

JE: Okay. How old now are you about that time?

BR: At that time I was 21.

JE: We thank you for what you did and...

BR: Well, I appreciate that. It was for a good cause.

Chapter 4 – 4:15

Dizzy Dean

John Erling: Beyond that then, you're moving into a more stable Navy life I would imagine because you said you played ball.

Billy Rollings: Yes.

JE: Your service there lasted five years.

BR: When the Korean War was over, I got discharged. Got out of the service and I played some baseball. It was minor league stuff.

JE: With an organized—

BR: It was an organized.

JE: Who did you play for?

BR: Actually, it was Milwaukee organizations that I was playing for.

JE: Where were you playing?

BR: Beaumont, Texas—Double A then.

JE: Beaumont at that time was in the same league as the Tulsa Oilers and the Texas League. You played ball for a while.

BR: Basically they didn't make much money playing baseball, As a matter of fact, I think it was \$300 probably a month and it was \$1,800 for the year. Wasn't enough money to satisfy me. I got involved in the construction business.

JE: What does that mean, got in involved?

BR: I went to work for a man that owned a contracting company and I started doing things for him. Digging ditches and laying water lines and doing this and that and other. I ended up in the business myself.

JE: Was that in Texas?

BR: That was in Texas.

JE: You got into the construction business.

BR: Yes.

JE: Are you married anytime within here?

BR: I got married when I was 30.

JE: A number of years later then.

BR: Yes.

JE: All right. So, then you get into the construction business and you decide if other people can do this so can I. How long were you in the business before you went on your own?

BR: Probably two-and-half, three years.

JE: You start your construction business in Texas?

BR: And Oklahoma. Come back home.

JE: Where did you set up?

BR: In Sapulpa.

JE: What was the name of the company?

BR: Rollings Construction Company.

JE: What was your first project building?

BR: I can't remember, John. We basically at that time DitchWitch and I'm sure Charles Machine works out of Perry, Oklahoma which making a little ditching machine. I bought one of those. We started laying waterlines and doing rural water districts and that kind of thing. We just grew from that. My last year in the business was in 1990 and I sold to my employees at that time.

JE: I've interviewed Ed Malzahn of DitchWitch. He was the creator.

BR: Ed was a friend. Ed was going to school at OSU when I bought my first ditching machine. I dealt with his father, which was Charles. Old man Charlie and Mrs. Charlie run the business and it was just in a metal building downtown. That's when they got started. Ed Malzahn's a wonderful guy. They still own the business. I think his daughter is running it now.

JE: They do. That's exactly right. He has a great story to tell and you can here that elsewhere on VoicesofOklahoma.com. Somewhere along the line we connect you to the Oilers.

Wayne McCombs: There's a story as a child. He's told me this story before. You went out to the ballpark to see Dizzy Dean pitch for the Tulsa Oilers in 1940. You're ten years old. There is Dizzy Dean, maybe the biggest star in this area at that time pitching for Tulsa. What was the feeling of going to the ballpark that day? It was special, wasn't it?

BR: It was special. Again, he was here because he had hurt himself. Of course, I was just ten years old. I was just a kid with all eyes. Dizzy was a big star. I didn't get to go too many places when we were small because money was tight for us. I do remember my dad bringing me to that ball game.

JE: According to WM's records, that appearance set a then record of over 7,500 fans.

WM: Right, that was in 1940. At that time, Tulsa was top farm club of the Chicago Cubs. They sent Dizzy here and I believe in May or so to work out the soreness he had in his arm. He played here through the end of the season and was named to the Texas League All Star team that year.

BR: His brother also played.

WM: Daffy Dean.

BR: Daffy Dean.

WM: Don't get many names like that in baseball anymore. Dizzy and Daffy.

JE: Right.

BR: I love baseball and I'm still very closely attached. I watch the Rangers. St. Louis was always my favorite team until I become involved in baseball and then I became associated with the Rangers. My heart was in two places.

Chapter 5 – 8:30**Bill Saves Tulsa Baseball**

John Erling: Then we can come to the 1977 season and when was it that you knew that the Tulsa Oilers' owner, A. Ray Smith, was moving the Oilers to New Orleans for the start of the '77 season?

Bill Rollings: Well, John, what happened was that A. Ray and the Fairgrounds people got cross-ways, and I don't know all the details of it.

Wayne McCombs: I'd heard, Bill, that A. Ray Smith was a Democrat and at that time most of the people that ran Tulsa County were Republicans, and a few years before that, when Watergate was going on, A. Ray was asking for some help to help fix the ballpark up and things like that, like he always did, but this time before the meeting started, he said, "What about your old boy Richard Nixon right now, huh?" That upset the Republicans on the Tulsa County Fairground—

BR: Fairground Board—

WM: Board, and they were mad enough at him they didn't give him enough money to repair the ballpark to his satisfaction.

BR: He moved after the 1976.

WM: After the 1976 season—

BR: He moved to New Orleans. Is that right?

WM: Right.

BR: I was again at that time doing a lot of work for the County and the City of Tulsa in the construction business. I was building water treatment plants and sewer treatment plants as well as land water lines and building buildings, so I'd expanded quite a bit. At that time, a man by the name of John Elsner was running the Fairgrounds along with Terry Young, was the County Commissioner, Lou Harris and—

WM: Mel Rice.

BR: Mel Rice. I'm going back 40 some odd years. It's hard to remember that. But anyway, I had made friends with the people that bought the Rangers in 19...

WM: It was 1972 when the Texas Rangers came from Washington to Dallas.

BR: Ok, that's when they bought them, in '72, and the guy that bought that team was a friend of mine. He and I were in business together. We owned a company that made plastic pipe.

JE: His name?

BR: Brad Corbett. Along with him, a man by the name of Eddie Childs was involved in the ownership of the Rangers as well. Eddie Childs owned the Western companies, I believe. And we built facilities for them all over Oklahoma and Texas and all over.

WM: The Western. Remember if you don't own an oil well, it—

BR: “Are you mad, too, Eddie?” Remember that old slogan?

JE: Oil business that he was in.

BR: He was in very similar business as Slumber Jay and used to be here would be probably out of Durant now...it would be Halliburton.

WM: Halliburton.

BR: Yeah. They were competitors. He was a smaller competitor. He did that. Lou Harris, Mel Rice, and John Elsner knew that I knew these people personally, so they got upset because A. Ray left. They wanted to have baseball in Tulsa. John Elsner called me and we met for lunch. He says, “I want to find out if you can get us a baseball team,” and I said, “I know him. I can call him and ask him.” He said, “Well, do.” So I called him and asked him and I talked to Brad. Brad said, “Bill, are you wanting to be in the baseball business?” and I said, “No, I don't want to be in the baseball business, but Tulsa needs a baseball team.” He said, “If you want to be in the baseball business and Tulsa needs a baseball business, you'll have to do it, and I'll get you a baseball business.” And that's how we got started in the baseball business. I talked to John and I talked to Terry and I talked to Lou and everybody. As a matter of fact, at that time our mayor was Bob LaFortune, and we talked about it. Of course the old ballpark years ago used to be downtown, and I talked to Bob about that. It ended up we formed a corporation. I joined the Texas Rangers and we bought the franchise for a Double-A team.

JE: What team was that? Where was that from?

BR: It was Lafayette, Louisiana. That's who owned the franchise, and we bought it from—it wasn't Lafayette, but the group that owned the franchise for Lafayette was a Double-A, and we bought it. The original deal was that the Rangers and I would own the franchise. I'm going to tell you this, we paid \$40,000 for the franchise.

JE: The year again would have been...

BR: In 1977. Today that same franchise, which is here, is probably worth \$650-700 thousand.

JE: What role did Hugh Finnerty, former Tulsa Oiler general manager, play in this?

BR: He was announcer for the Oilers. He was very close. I think he was the manager.

WM: He was the general manager of the Club—

BR: Of the Oilers.

WM: Yes, and then in 1965, he became the president of the Texas league—

BR: That's right.

WM: Right after Tulsa went to Triple-A.

BR: Right.

WM: Hugh Finnerty had a huge amount of contacts—

BR: He did.

WM: ...throughout baseball.

BR: Mostly bought the franchise.

JE: You bought the franchise, but you needed community support and county commissioner support?

BR: We needed to make sure we had a ballpark, which we did, because we bought the franchise and brought it to Tulsa as a Double-A team. Now the County insured me that I had a lease on the ballpark, the old ballpark.

WM: It's about 150 yards to the west of where we are sitting.

JE: Right.

BR: It was an old wooden frame. It was a nice ballpark. They painted it and they cleaned it up and made it pretty shiny. Again, with the relationship that I had at that time, Roy Clark, was, I think, when this first happened, I think Roy was in Vegas, doing a show in Vegas, which he, back then, did a lot of Vegas work. Anyway, he called and he wanted to become partners and wanted to get involved in the baseball business.

JE: Oh, you didn't reach out. He called you.

BR: Yes.

JE: Because he played baseball when he was a youngster in high school, and he told me in an interview that you could hear, here on Voices of Oklahoma.com, even to this day, if he sees kids playing, he may stop his car and just sit and watch them play ball.

BR: We all are the same way. He's the same way and I'm the same way and Roy is. Anyway, Roy called and had his accountant call, that's the way it was. But, again, I knew Roy, and we'd been involved because he was here and I'd played in his golf tournaments, so we'd been friends for a while. Anyway, he wanted to get involved, and I ended up selling 49% of the corporation and now I'm 51% of it. That's how it got started. After that we decided that we were in the baseball business, so I talked to Brad Corbett, and I said, "Brad, I need to have something to kick the season up in a big way. He said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I'd like to have the Texas Rangers play an exhibition game here." He said, "No problem. Who do you want to be there?" I said, "The closest one to us probably would be Houston." He said, "OK, I'll have Houston and the Rangers play an exhibition game." I believe that was April, I don't remember what day it was.

WM: April 3, 1977.

JE: All right.

BR: April 3, 1977.

JE: Before we get to that date, how did the Texas Rangers' front office react when they knew that you and Roy Clark had purchased the team and were going to put it in Tulsa?

BR: They loved it. They're the ones that found the franchise because my original comment to them was, "We want baseball in Tulsa." It was an ideal situation for the Rangers because

their Double-A farm club and they had Triple-A. Ended up...Triple-A was Oklahoma City and Double-A was Tulsa.

JE: You know, I have to get this out of my head here because I'm going back, A. Ray Smith and the politics of that county commissioner board, that they let politics stand in the way. Was there an outcry about that and people were upset that Republican and Democrat actually lost a baseball team?

BR: I don't know. Of course to me at that time, I was basically not involved in politics that heavy, but when I say that to you that A. Ray had probably stepped on some toes or he'd aggravated some people.

JE: So there might have been some things leading up to that?

BR: When I say that, I'm sure it wasn't all A. Ray's fault any more than it was the county commissioner's.

Chapter 6 – 10:52

April 3, 1977

John Erling: Then we bring you to this exhibition game, which is April 3rd, 1977. Maybe Wayne, do you want to set the overall stage of what happened that day?

Wayne McCombs: All right. It was Sunday afternoon and I was called to ask if I wanted to do the scoreboard for the first time. It was an electronic scoreboard. Up to that point it was a hand operated scoreboard out in right center field, so it was an electronic scoreboard that Fourth National Bank had purchased for the ballpark.

So I was excited. It was Sunday. I think the game started at one. I think I skipped Sunday School and came to the ballpark. It had rained all morning, but about 11:00 the weather started to clear and the game was going to go on. There was about 5,000 people in the stands and that's about all it could hold. The game began and then it started to cloud up again and began to lightly rain. Then in the second inning it began to rain again and there was some thunder. Then I heard what I thought was a heavy thunderclap. What had happened, part of the stands had given way. The people had come up underneath the stands where there was a roof on the right field side, between home and first base. They got in an area that was too weak for 2,500 people to stand on. About seventeen, eighteen people fell about twenty feet onto a concrete walkway.

Bill Rollings: Absolutely.

WM: Some of the people were injured. The game was stopped for quite a long time. Ambulance came. The accident occurred near the clubhouse of the Houston Astros.

About ten or twelve of those men came out and carried people in their arms out to the ambulance.

BR: The Houston Astros did and the Rangers, they all, all the players helped carry the people to the ambulances. There were seventeen of them that ended up in different hospitals.

WM: Right.

BR: When I say that, there was nobody that was a major, I think there might have been one or so that was...

WM: More than just an overnight stay in the hospital.

BR: Right. That's right. Yes. One maybe stayed more than overnight.

WM: Yes.

JE: Both of you were there when it happened and I brought my family about twenty minutes after it happened, so we were all on the grounds at least at the same time as we talk about this. What are you thinking Bill? Was Roy there?

BR: No, Roy was wherever it was, he was traveling; he wasn't here. We were to leave the next morning after this game, which was a Monday morning, and we were going to meet at Spring Training down in Hollywood, Florida. I believe that's where it was. But anyway, this accident just really got the press from all over the country. I mean there was people everywhere that were talking about this stadium collapsing. We were fortunate that it wasn't any more people hurt seriously than there was.

JE: What about liability issues? Did those people that were hurt—did they sue?

BR: We were insured by—I don't know if you remember the man's name or not, but he basically Highway 33.

JE: Dan P. Holmes.

BR: Dan. P. Holmes. That's right. He was the insurance agent for the fairgrounds. We ended up—there was some settlements and stuff. I don't know all of them, but basically they did a good job. They handled it. But Dan P. Holmes was the man, he was here also. We went on and left the next day and went to Spring Training. We had never played the ballgame with our own team. At that time we had named them the Drillers since A. Ray wouldn't allow us to use the Oiler name.

JE: Then I would imagine the county officials then ruled the park unsafe immediately the next workday?

BR: They did have the park inspected and they decided to tear it down, which they did soon after, got it ready before the season started with the new team, the Drillers, Tulsa Drillers. We only had a temporary stadium. Only had temporary seats. We had very few seats and fortunately we'd sold I think, I can't remember exactly how many seats and tickets we sold, but I'm going to guess probably we'd sold 1,000 or better. I can't remember, but we started playing and we had a pretty good team that year.

WM: Yes you did. You won, well the Texas League is divided into first half of the season and the second half of the season to determine play off teams, and Tulsa won the first half of the Texas League Eastern Division in 1977.

BR: Right.

JE: But then this makeshift ballpark reduced the seating capacity down quite a bit. To what, 3,500?

WM: About 3,500 is all the temporary stadium held and attendance was not good. The play was all right, but the park was not a fan favorite. There was no shade.

BR: It had no cover. It was just a temporary stadium; I mean Oral Roberts had a lot better facility than we did to play in. We struggled for two or three years. I mean really, Roy and I really struggled to keep it here.

JE: Here you are Bill, a businessman and you're used to making money. You are now losing money.

BR: Absolutely.

JE: And you weren't used to losing money.

BR: Nope, we didn't like it.

JE: How did you justify that?

BR: Well, John, when you were doing the programs at Tulsa Mountains back those days.

JE: Yeah.

BR: I think the first interview that we had, you interviewed us, this was before the ballgame as a matter of fact, our first ballgame we interviewed on KRMG with you.

JE: Yup.

BR: I think I told everybody at that time that I wasn't in it for the money, that Roy and I were in it to try to satisfy the city of Tulsa. We wanted to have where a family of four could come out to the ballpark, have a hot dog, have a Coke and get in for twenty dollars. We were able to do that.

JE: Mm-hmm.

BR: We really struggled because our average probably was seven, eight hundred...

WM: It was in the latter days in '78, '79. It was about 7-800 a game.

BR: Yeah, and that's not enough. The fortunate thing we had was we had our association which was a very good friendship between myself and Eddie Chiles and Brad Corbett, so they helped carry us a lot, so we basically were able to make it work.

As a matter of fact Roy brought *Hee Haw* in, Sam Lovullo and we did a program on Channel Two, I believe it was.

JE: Gerry Webber helped form that.

BR: That's right.

WM: They had a telethon to help raise some money...

BR: Yeah.

WM: ...to build a ballpark. That was in 1979.

JE: We'll talk more about that in just a moment, but do you know what an angel you were at that time because everything came together at the right moment. Here's a construction man like you. You love the town. You had baseball in your genetics and you loved it and you were the man of the moment. That if you had not been there, who knows how long Tulsa might have languished without a team. Might have gone for some time.

BR: It very well could have. There wasn't a lot of people out trying to buy franchises when we ended up buying the one from Lafayette, Louisiana. Again, as I say, the city had been good to me and has been good to Roy. Fortunately we were able to keep it here through the hard times.

JE: It had to be disappointing and...

BR: Oh yeah.

JE: ...hardly anybody come out. Did you ever think about getting out? Wanting to sell?

BR: Oh, I don't know how many times. I hate to say a grown man cries, but there's times when I nearly cried. I mean it just seemed like we couldn't get a ballpark built. Again LaFortune and Mel Rice and Terry Young and all of them wanted to help, but we just could only do so much.

JE: It was in 1979 the county held a bond election, right?

BR: Yes.

JE: To build a new ballpark.

BR: New ballpark and it...

JE: Which would be 9,200 people seating.

BR: Right.

JE: That was defeated 53 to 47 percent.

BR: Right. Right.

JE: Here you are throwing thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of dollars at this thing and it's defeated and you're thinking and this is what I get? This is my answer?

BR: There's no question that there was times I thought that. That's right.

JE: I have kept it alive now for three years and the least the public could step up and help me and pass this. What do you think was surrounding the time there in '79 that would cause that to be defeated? Why do you think they didn't want a new ballpark?

BR: I think that probably the economy wasn't the best at that time and there was people that were kind of hurting. I think it was hard to pass anything in the city at that time.

JE: Right. Was that a stand-alone vote or were there other things on the ballot?

WM: No, that was the only thing that was on the ballot, the bond issue. That vote was on June 26th, 1979.

JE: You probably called Roy and told him this went down to defeat and the two of you could have said you know what? We're defeated too and we're going to move on.

BR: We could have, but we didn't.

JE: You thought about it.

BR: We thought about it a lot of times. We talked about it and Barbara, Roy's wife, said I can't believe you're so hard-headed you won't give up. That's the way it was and we stayed in it and very few people know how much time that I spent plus Roy's time looking for some way to build a ballpark. Any way. We needed a facility. We had a club. We always had excellent players. Texas would give us excellent team. Is that right Wayne?

WM: Yeah, they were very popular with the fans. The players that came here quickly went up to Texas and while they were here they were real popular. Guys like Marty Scott, Billy Sample. Of course Bobby Jones played here for a little bit before he came back here as manager. He was—

BR: Pudge Rodriguez got married right down there when he was here.

WM: Yes.

BR: Pudge just retired recently.

WM: That's right.

BR: Texas really was a partner with us. They were part owners of the franchise as we were. It was a joint venture between us and the Rangers.

JE: What about the front office of the Texas Rangers? When Tulsa turns this thing down, they must have had some input in their thinking as well.

BR: Well, they were discouraged but again, they were trying to train ball players and they were having their own growing pains because they were in the same thing as we were. They were trying to build a new stadium back then. It wasn't the happiest time for the Rangers as it wasn't the happiest time for the Drillers.

JE: Your time was taken away from your own business. Would it be fair to say that maybe your business suffered some because of this?

BR: I'm sure it did. Yes. I'm sure it did.

JE: Anybody would have said Bill, if you leave, we understand. You need to go back and tend to your business and you're just throwing money in the wind right now with this ballpark. Right?

BR: I think that probably that was said several times.

JE: Probably some people said that Bill Rolling's is crazy.

BR: That's right. I'm sure that's true too. Maybe it was you John.

JE: No. No. No. No.

Chapter 7 – 14:15**Angel Goes to Jail**

John Erling: But then, we come to the year 1980. That's when you brought up, and let's talk about it, Channel 2 Sports Director Jerry Webber. What did he do?

Wayne McCombs: He came to Bill and said, "Listen. I can get an hour of free time on Channel 2. Let's start a telethon to raise money to build a ballpark here in Tulsa." Jerry got that idea and he talked with Bill and Roy. Roy brought a great deal of the cast with him to Tulsa for the show. A lot of the people from the *Hee Haw* show.

Bill Rollings: Except that Wayne Sam Lovullo was the director of *Hee Haw* for 20 years or however long. Sam, well, he brought, I guess, 10 or 15 of the *Hee Haw* people here.

WM: Yes. Goober was here.

BR: George Lindsey was here. George just passed away, as you well know, a couple days ago.

JE: Right.

BR: George was here. All the pretty girls were here.

WM: They raised \$90,000 that evening.

JE: Was that the seed then to build a stadium?

BR: That's what it was for. It was what it was used for to build the stadium, but that wasn't enough money. That didn't get us where we need to be.

JE: But it was, I'm going to call it the seed again. It was planted to start—

BR: Right.

JE: To build Driller Stadium, which is where we are right now.

BR: Absolutely.

JE: This is where we're doing our interview by the way. When those of you may hear the wind a blowing. It's a great afternoon for baseball, as a matter of fact, right now here at Driller Stadium.

How much would you have needed then in 1980 to build a new park?

BR: When we put together the numbers for the baseball park, we figured on spending a million and a half dollars.

JE: Let's go back a little bit again to Jerry. Do you think that he was really the impetuous to get it going?

BR: I think that he was a big big big help to get this going where we needed to go.

JE: Because you hadn't really thought, we're going to build—

BR: Again, we had talked about it. It was his idea. Jerry was dedicated to this community. He was a very very fine Christian man, as far as I'm concerned.

JE: Right.

BR: He did a lot for baseball. He did a lot for Tulsa.

WM: He still coached American League Baseball. He would get off the news at 6:30, jump in his car, change his uniform and go coach a game. Then come back to do the 10:00 sports. That's how much he liked—now, his boys were playing American legend baseball at the time, but—

JE: Even so—

WM: He still made time for his sons in between that six and 10:00 news. Jerry was a very very nice man.

BR: Very dedicated city citizen in Tulsa Oklahoma.

JE: We've got 90,000 against a million dollars. Where do we get the rest of the money?

BR: We talked to the county, we worked with the commissioners. We look around. I just take time to push, trying to find people to get involved. One day out of the blue sky, my banker called me on the phone and he said, "I've got somebody that wants to talk to you."

JE: Can I know who your banker was?

BR: Tom Henson.

JE: At which bank?

BR: He was with Fourth National Bank.

JE: Somebody wants to talk to you.

BR: "Somebody wants to talk to you about helping you build a ballpark. A guy by the name of Smith, Marshall Smith. He's an insurance agent out of Miami, Oklahoma." I said, "Fine. Dandy." I told Tom, "Have him call me." He called me and he said, "We want to help you." I asked him if we he and a who. He said, "No a man that I do insurance for wants to help." Wouldn't tell me who it was. Anyway I ended up meeting this man. He didn't want to be known as who it was. We called him the angel.

JE: Publicly you referred to him as the angel?

BR: Yeah, because we were advertising trying to get anything. We started calling him the angel. He wanted to help, that's without a commitment, but he wanted to help. Again I was called by my banker, Tom Henson, and Tom says, "I can assure you. He can help you. He can build it if he wants to build it."

JE: So you had a meeting with the angel?

BR: Yes I did.

JE: Face to face.

BR: Yes.

JE: When you looked in his eyes, you knew there was a commitment there?

BR: Well, no. When I first looked him in the eye, he did not commit to me. I went back and talked to him several times. Ended up that he put some demands on me. I never told

anybody else this, but I'm going to tell you this now. He would build it if I would give him 49% of the Drillers and two percent would go to Marshall Smith.

JE: Okay.

BR: That meant Roy and I had left, 49%. He was committed to putting together a million dollars. This design is by myself and the county, that's who designed this ballpark and the people that sold us the bleachers. We cut every corner we could to get it done. And I did it for totally strictly cost. No profit, nothing, just cost. Nothing for my time or anything. But anyway, we ended up building the ballpark.

JE: You accepted his terms?

BR: Yes I did.

JE: How did Roy feel about that when he was first told?

BR: Well, Roy was like I—we were interested in serving the community. We weren't interested in making a dollar.

JE: So the two of you then shared the 49%.

BR: Yes sir.

JE: What was the name of the angel?

BR: Bob Sutton.

JE: Robert "Bob" Sutton.

BR: Right.

JE: And he lived?

BR: He lived in Tulsa at the time. He was from Sapulpa originally, and he lived in Tulsa at the time.

JE: Did you know him before this?

BR: No. No I never met him before.

JE: How did he come by his business?

BR: He was in the oil business. Back in those days the government had a situation where you got more money for the oil if it was new oil than if it were old oil. Therefore, he was selling old oil I think as new oil and he was making a tremendous amount of money.

JE: Should we deal with that here because then he eventually...

BR: Got in trouble.

JE: For doing exactly what you said.

BR: Doing exactly—the trading of the oil properties.

JE: You accepted his deal and then you proceed with the building of this Driller Stadium.

BR: Right.

JE: Which was limited to, how big of a seating area?

BR: Five thousand or so. We completed that and I think that he'd give us about \$800,000. Then he got in trouble and that ended that so we didn't have that anymore. We didn't

have his million dollars coming in. That kind of left the county and Bill Rollings hanging on the line.

JE: However, they named it Sutton Stadium.

BR: To start with we did. We named it Sutton Stadium and then we started building it. That's right. Before we finished it, he got in trouble and the county commissioner, Terry Young—to be honest—was the one of the most vocal, and rightfully so. Terry said, "I want the stadium changed, I want the name changed."

JE: Because already they had signage for Sutton Stadium.

BR: Right.

JE: People drive by could see the name.

BR: Right. Sure.

JE: Sutton Stadium.

BR: Right. That was because of me. I asked them to name it Sutton Stadium.

JE: Did Mr. Sutton immediately—did he like that?

BR: Yeah. Lou Harris and Mel Rice were for it. Terry was for it until Bob Sutton got in trouble and kind of left us hanging out there.

JE: Alright, in the meantime, was the ballpark completed?

BR: It was being completed.

JE: Being completed. Then you found out that his money would not come to you.

BR: That's right.

JE: What he had proposed, he never came through on.

BR: Not totally. He did come through with 800,000.

JE: Oh he came through with 800 but then he couldn't come up with the extra—how much more?

BR: Two hundred thousand.

JE: Two hundred thousand dollars all right.

BR: The county and I knew that we had the 100,000 roughly that we'd raised, that Jerry Webber helped us raise and we had some other. We were able to maneuver around and get that—it was going to be about a million 350 or million 400,000. What the original cost was.

JE: All right. You've got 800, you've 900, where'd you get the rest of the money?

BR: The county and Bill Rollins come up with it.

JE: Wow.

BR: Now that's something—I've never told anybody this, other than Roy.

JE: You mean the whole story of Sutton and his demands.

BR: Yes.

JE: You also came up with the end balance, which was another how much from you Bill?

- BR:** About 200 something thousand dollars.
- JE:** That you and the county split?
- BR:** The county put about 300 or something in it and I put something like 200 or something in it that allowed us to build it.
- JE:** Wow. Do you have any idea how much money you put into baseball in Tulsa?
- BR:** No, I have no idea. I've contributed a lot of time to it too. Of course my time was worth something, but I have no complaints. The only complaint that I sit here and look at, this stadium is still a nice stadium. I have frustrations with it not being used.
- JE:** Right and you probably don't want to know how much money you've spent on this, but an enormous amount of money Bill.
- BR:** John, when I say that, originally this was built for TU. TU was going to play here and they canceled their program. Again, it was for the community.
- WM:** And for a time it was used for high school football with some of the independent- not independent, but not the Tulsa public school—Bishop Kelly played ball here when Eastwood Baptist had a high school, they played their football games here. In the mid to late 80's there was some high school football here also.
- BR:** We made a big mistake. We let Mr. Sutton call the show and we put Astroturf down and we made the big mistake of doing that. We shouldn't have done that.
- JE:** He wanted Astroturf.
- BR:** He wanted Astroturf. I have to say in defense of Bob Sutton, he basically did as much as he could do. He went as far as he could go.
- JE:** Then he ultimately went to prison.
- BR:** That's right.
- JE:** Do we know where he is—
- BR:** Yes he passed away.
- JE:** Did you have words with him either before he went to prison or as he was being convicted in that time or were you not around him at all?
- BR:** No. I spoke to him one time and that was when he and I threw out the first ball. I don't remember what year it was but Chuck was, at that time, running the club.
- WM:** I think that might have been in 2005.
- BR:** Could have very well been.
- WM:** That was the 100th anniversary of baseball in Tulsa. Professional baseball started in 1905. I think I remember that as 2005.
- BR:** He and I both threw the first ball out.
- JE:** In 2005?
- WM:** Yes.
- BR:** The team at that time was owned by Hubbard.

WM: Right. Years later, after he was out of his prison time they brought him back for a game.

JE: Why?

WM: Because of what he'd done for Tulsa baseball.

JE: Maybe I shouldn't—

BR: Just remember John that I had never told anybody just what I told you so nobody knew that.

WM: So a lot of people didn't know. I didn't know.

JE: Didn't know what?

BR: What I just told you. That he was involved and how the deal was done, ownership and why. After we started the stadium, we opened the stadium in 1981 actually. I was not active because Mr. Sutton wanted Marshall Smith to run it.

JE: How did that set with you?

BR: I didn't come to many ball games after that.

WM: In '81 and '82 Marshall Smith was the president of the club. Then in '83 is when everything changed and everything was sold to Texas.

BR: That's when- what happened on that situation, the agreement between myself and Eddie Chiles and Brad Corbett was that if we sold the franchise, they could buy it or I could buy it, for the 40,000 that we originally had involved. I was out of it and I told them to sell it.

WM: Eddie Chiles owned the Texas Rangers at that time. Then he also purchased the Tulsa Drillers. So he owned the Tulsa Drillers and the Texas Rangers. He personally owned the team, not the Texas Rangers. Eddie Chiles as an individual owned both clubs. You can do that—

BR: He still does. They still, now that he's not involved in it, but they own the club- they're farm club now is at Frisco. They own that. They own their Triple-A club which used to have, the Rangers did, was in Oklahoma City. Now it's in Round Rock, Texas. Nolan Ryan at one time owned Round Rock club. Anyway, Eddie Chiles, of course he passed away as well. Eddie ended up owning the Drillers because basically he and I and Brad Corbett had a deal on the franchise. Once you own the franchise, you own the club. Now, Eddie Chiles never owned the corporation that we had.

JE: I'm still taken with the fact that Mr. Sutton wanted Marshall Smith to run the club.

BR: Right.

JE: Did you and Sutton have odds between each other?

BR: No. He just wanted it that way and I'd done what I thought was the thing that I wanted to do for this city. You understand? I had—as I told you I think the first time you interviewed me I wasn't doing it for profit. I was doing it for the city.

JE: Didn't you feel like it was a slap in the face?

BR: It didn't make me laugh, John, I can say that. It hurt. Yeah. It hurt.

WM: Here's a man that's not only saved baseball, but built a modern stadium for the city of Tulsa and at that time the attendance before this happened was very low. Then Bill Rollings hired a guy by the name of Merrill Eckstein as the general manager. He started doing things that made it fan friendly. The families began to come back. You saw parents and little children. You saw the teens out on a date. I think you had date night at two dollars apiece or something where the kids could come and have a date that wasn't very high. He brought those days back.

BR: Yes.

JE: After Marshall Smith.

WM: Marshall Smith came in in '81 and '82. Bill had established a lot—

BR: I had established Merrill here before that. I had brought him in.

Chapter 8 – 10:00

Dobbs, Lamson, & Roberts

Bill Rollings: My original General Manager, President of the Drillers was Glenn Dobbs. You remember Glenn Dobbs?

John Erling: The famous TU football coach and player and all that. Glen Dobbs was...

BR: When I got the Drillers, Glenn Dobbs was in Florida working for an automobile company. I hired him and brought him back to run the Drillers.

Wayne McCombs: And Glenn Dobbs was one of the reasons your ticket sales were so high.

BR: That absolutely right.

WM: Glenn Dobbs could sell anything to anyone and he went all over town selling baseball tickets.

BR: And he'd run it for two year when we were having the hard times.

WM: One time I remember coming to a game and something happened where someone was ill or something and you didn't have enough guys in the concession stand. I walked by and there's Glenn Dobbs flipping hot dogs.

BR: Right. My daughters worked out here and Glenn Dobbs...I always think that Glenn Dobbs, of course he was a tremendous football player, but we were playing and I can't remember the catcher's name.

WM: I know the story you're about to tell me. It was Russell.

BR: Russell.

WM: Joe Russell.

BR: Joe Russell. That's right.

JE: What's the story?

BR: Well I'll let you tell it.

WM: They were having infield practice and the catcher was throwing to second base and not doing well. Glenn Dobbs walks by in street shoes with dress pants and a long sleeve shirt. He said "Son, let me show you how you script the ball to throw it." So they rolled out an old tire that they had used when they would set out the tarp over the infield, they would have tires set down there to hold it so the wind wouldn't blow it up. They rolled out a tire, set the tire on second base. Glenn Dobbs takes a football and winds up and throws it 10 times in a row through that hole. He said "Son, you've got to grab the ball like you do a baseball and throw it that way." The players are standing around going "Who is this old guy?" Their mouths are all dropped open wide. There he is, street shoes, no warming up, no nothing, and throws the ball 10 times through the tire sitting on second base.

JE: That's a great story.

BR: He basically, really did a wonderful job for us.

JE: Was that prior to '81?

WM: Yes. '77 and '78 were the years.

BR: That he was here.

WM: With—

BR: He was President in that year.

JE: When did Merrill Eckstein come along?

WM: '79 to '83.

JE: So, Marshall Smith kept him on.

BR: Marshall Smith kept him on because he was a good worker.

WM: He was a dynamo.

BR: He left here...He's probably still in business somewhere. I don't know where he is.

JE: So then in '82, that's when the—the talks began to sell the Drillers to Eddie Chiles.

BR: Yes.

JE: That came about then. That happened.

BR: Yes.

JE: Because...

BR: Yes. He was one of the owners to start with when it was Brad Corbett and all of them. He took it on personally as a personal thing, not the Texas Rangers.

WM: Correct.

BR: What he did was, because I wasn't involved in it basically, he took it back. He personally signed it and then he ended up selling back to Went Hubbard.

WM: Eddie Chiles owned the ball club from '83 through '86 and then in '87 the ball club was sold to Went Hubbard.

BR: Yes, sir.

JE: Who owned it then for many years.

WM: He owned it from '87 to about 2003 or 2004.

BR: He ended up selling it to Chuck Lamson.

JE: I believe in '04.

BR: Was it '04?

WM: I believe so.

JE: Chuck Lamson had been a pitcher.

BR: Chuck Lamson had to come to us in 1978 as a left-handed pitcher for the Drillers. Texas Rangers owned his contract. He got hurt. He hurt his arm. They had to let him go. They released him. He got acquainted with a lady here in town and was dating a lady in town, he'd come to me and asked me and I hired him in the construction business. At that time, I think maybe he sold tickets part-time for the Drillers and worked with one of my crews here in Tulsa, in the construction business. He ended up going to work full time for Hubbard.

JE: Did you sense that in him that he would be that kind of a business mind?

BR: Merrill taught him a lot and Chuck did a good job. Chuck was a good promoter. He basically did a good job. I think he did a good job.

JE: When Hubbard sold it to Chuck Lamson and he owned it for a couple of years?

WM: I'm guessing maybe 5.

JE: Five years.

BR: Close to it, yeah.

JE: He oversaw the building of the downtown stadium.

BR: He, basically, yes. It was built by, contracted, was Manhattan; I think was who built it.

JE: He was the person representing the Drillers and where should he go...should he stay here, should he go downtown.

BR: As a matter of fact, I understand that there was a proposal for him to move to Jinx and there was a proposal for him to move downtown. I wasn't involved in that at all.

JE: It was never a proposal to renovate this park, was there?

WM: No, I believe there was just 2 plans...either move to Jinx or move downtown.

JE: They wanted a new park. It was just where they were going to put it.

WM: Yes.

BR: There's new parks in all the cities nowadays, but again, I still hold this park as a fine place to play baseball.

JE: It is.

WM: Even today, they haven't had a game here in over three years. Still, with the exception of the grass growing in the wrong places as we look out on the field, there could be a game here as soon as they put markings on the field.

JE: Yes.

WM: It's still a wonderful place.

JE: We could just say about Chuck that his personality played well in the public and he represented the team very, very well. Had a very pleasing personality and then he was caught in this business...is it going to be Jinx, is it going to be downtown, and all the politics that went with that. Wouldn't you agree, though, that if it was going to be a Tulsa Driller it needed to be in Tulsa?

BR: I have no problem with them moving down there. They've got a beautiful ballpark. Again, I'm prejudiced, as you well can understand, but it's wonderful. I'm glad to see Tulsa do as well. We've spent an awful lot of money, you remember that million and a half dollars I was trying to raise? They spent about \$65 million downtown. That's pretty close. But again, they seat something like 6 to 7,000 down there. In here we were seating, what...12,000?

WM: Twelve thousand.

JE: Hasn't the philosophy of these newer parks, we build them small, we'd rather have overflow than have...

BR: No question. They've done a good job. Believe it or not, it probably will help Tulsa in the long run.

JE: You know how well this Driller stadium is built. This retaining wall down here by the dugouts, tell us about that.

BR: That retaining wall all around the dugout is set and dug in solid limestone rock. I know. I watched them shoot it and dig it. It's there. This stadium is not going anywhere. It's a shame that it's not being used, but again, I wish Tulsa University would get back into baseball and use this stadium.

JE: Here we are in 2012 and the county doesn't know yet what to do with the stadium. They just don't know what to do with it.

BR: I'm not active in it anymore, but it's a very good facility. I'd like to see TU do something with it because it'd be a nice facility for them.

JE: You mentioned Oral Roberts early on and you had a friendship with Oral Roberts.

BR: Oral had called back in '78 or '79, somewhere in there. He called and of course, we were struggling with the small facility and the temporary stadium and this, that, and the other. Johnson Stadium was a very nice stadium.

JE: On his campus?

BR: On his campus, right. He called and asked me if he could schedule a game with the Drillers, if we'd play him. I had talked to the ownership of the Drillers and as I said, the ownership of the Rangers was always excellent for us. Anything we asked them to do, they did. They said "If you want to play, don't play with the pitchers. Just go play them

if it helps the city do that.” It was Eddie Chiles that gave me that okay to do that. We went out and were sitting in Johnson Stadium in Oral Roberts’ box. He had a kid by the name of Moore.

WM: Mike Moore.

BR: Mike Moore, which was drafted, a number one draft.

WM: Right. He went on to pitch about ten to twelve years in the major leagues.

BR: They had two or three other kids.

WM: One was Tom Ideos, who was a player for many years. He’s also a manager in minor league ball.

BR: Right. Anyway, they had four kids and that was all that was going to be drafted by the majors at that time. Mr. Roberts said, “Do you think, Bill, that we can beat you all?” I told him, I said, “I’m sure you can, but if we really wanted to play and really work at it, you couldn’t beat us.” He said, “I don’t understand why you would say that.” I said, “Well, we just talked about it and you’ve got four young men that’s going to be drafted by the major leagues.” He said “Yeah, that’s good.” I said “Yeah. The Drillers have 25 of those people that were drafted.” He looked at me and said, “You’re smarter than I thought you were.” He was a very alert man, a very smart man. By the way, they did beat us.

JE: Really?

BR: Yes. One man played nine different positions. Is that right?

WM: That was Marty Scott who played in the majors a little and managed in the minor leagues for a number of years.

BR: I guess he still is, I don’t know.

WM: I think so. I think so.

BR: Marty played all nine positions. Our kids were just having fun out there. They weren’t trying to win. It was a good thing for the community. It was a good thing for Oral Roberts.

Chapter 9 – 4:05

Bill, A Shriner

John Erling: The Driller stadium downtown- or now it’s known as ONEOK Stadium—

Bill Rollings: ONEOK Field.

JE: ONEOK Stadium. Back again, about Sutton brought back to throw out the first pitch. Here’s a man who went to prison, they had to take his name off the stadium, but did they feel he had done enough, he’d already paid his debt to society and so we bring him back and honor him by letting him throw out the first pitch?

BR: Chuck Lamson did that. I didn't have anything to do with that. He did donate money to it. As I've told the county commissioners when we took the name off of the stadium, I said, "You know, he'd give us all he could give us. I feel like that we took something from him so we should thank him some way." Now that was my feelings of course. I have no grudges against Mister Sutton.

JE: When the Sutton name was taken off, then it became Tulsa County.

Wayne McCombs: It was Tulsa County Stadium from 1983 through 1989. Then it became Driller Stadium from 1990 until 2009.

JE: And that's when it opened downtown and became ONEOK Stadium.

BR: That's right.

JE: You've attended a few games downtown have you?

BR: Never have.

JE: Really?

BR: I've been to the stadium one time. It just my timing and I'm now a city councilor in Sapulpa, I travel a lot for the Shrine. I'm a Shriner—

WM: Tell him what you do for the Shriners?

BR: I drive kids to the hospital. As a matter of fact, the Shriners have 22 hospitals. I take the kids to the hospital in Shreveport, in Galveston, we got a hospital in Houston, we got a hospital Chicago, we got a hospital St. Louis, we got a hospital. We've got some of the best doctors in the orthopedic field there is. As you well know, the Shriners is a free ride for anybody. I basically donate my time and at this temple here, which is Akdar, we have six vans. I take one of them and take the kids. I normally make at least two trips a month.

JE: Wow. See some sad cases then don't you?

BR: Well you see these kids that do have problems, orthopedic problems in most of them. But they're so happy and they're so thankful that they don't think they have any problems, they think they're all right. Plus, you do this out of the kindness of your heart. Everybody says, "What do you do to get paid for that?" When I go to the hospital, and I always remember the first time I went to the hospital with Shreveport, and I took a little boy to that hospital, he'd never walked before. I watched him take his first step. I started crying. Tears started rolling out my eyes. He pulled on the side of my britches and he says, "You'll be all right." That was my payday. I go to St Louis and I go to Shreveport and I go to Galveston, I go to Houston. But I'm getting up to 82 years old. I drive by myself and take them. Normally we'll take the child and the guardian. Last time I went to Shreveport, which was last week, I took four down, four kids and four parents down.

JE: They're various ailments that they—

BR: Oh yeah. Most all of them that go to Shreveport is orthopedic. Bones or some deformed

legs or whatever. The last kid that I took down, he was 17, been going since he was two. We furnish them all the bracing and everything.

JE: But as much as they have their problems, you draw strength from them don't you?

BR: Absolutely. Everybody say, "How long does it take you to go from here to Shreveport?" And I just say its how many times these kids have to stop because they all like McDonald's and they all like CiCi's pizza and so they got you running every which way. And I like kids so I enjoy it.

JE: That's great.

Chapter 10 – 9:30

Stars of Driller Stadium

John Erling: Well, we've told the baseball story, haven't we?

Wayne McCombs: Quite a story that Bill Rollings has from the time his Dad took him out in 1940 to see Dizzy Dean pitch and what he's done for the City of Tulsa—not just baseball but all around. All his other building projects that Bill has done because he's a humble man; he hasn't mentioned the other building projects where he's helped people. I grew up out in the country and those rural water lines are really important.

JE: Yes, they are.

WM: Even when I was a kid growing up in the late 1950s, we had to haul water in from town for our drinking water and we would use pond water for the cattle and the farm, but we would have to bring our drinking water out so he and his rural water works is quite a boom.

Bill Rollings: That's really where I got started was rural water district.

JE: To the people too.

WM: So anyway, he just didn't own the Drillers. His community pride, his leadership and his thinking has really helped the entire northeast Oklahoma. I'm glad he's a voice of Oklahoma.

JE: Yes.

BR: I appreciate that.

JE: And what a better place could it be to interview Bill Rollings than just a few feet from home plate at Drillers Stadium.

BR: My excitement tonight is the City Councilor's Sapulpa is going to be not quite as exciting.

JE: And you're still serving the public. As you look out here, is there any remembrance that you might have?

BR: I can remember setting up in the new stadium upstairs in the press box and I was hitting balls over into the lot which used to be a Safeway store over there. This was a thrill, you know? I thought that all of my headaches with baseball had ended. It turned out there were still headaches to go with it.

JE: Wayne, can you name some players that came through this ballpark, Drillers Stadium, that went on to the majors?

WM: Well, the ones that became big stars that everyone in the country would know: One was Billy Sample who was a really good utility player that played for many years and he became one of the first athletes to join the MLB Radio and Television Network as an announcer. Very effluent young man and his mother still lives here in Tulsa. Another of course was Juan Gonzalez. He was 19 years old when he came here and he won two American League Most Valuable Player awards with the Texas Rangers. Of course, Sammy Sosa when he was here. Of course, his records in the majors might have been tainted by the steroids however when he was here in 1989, we drew the largest crowd ever for a ballgame here for the Drillers of over 16,000 opening day. People were lined up out in the outfield, they were on the warning track. He hit a ball that went flying, it bounced off the walk and he got an inside the park home run and there were 16,000 people going crazy. Several pitchers in town: Dave Righetti played here, and of course, went on to set the record for 21 strikeouts in the game and then became a top star with the major leagues in pitching. He's one of the reasons the San Francisco Giants have been so good.

BR: He's the pitching—

WM: Because he's the pitching coach for the Giants. He's from the San Francisco area. Another was Kenny Rogers that pitched for many years in the major leagues; pitched a perfect game for the Rangers.

BR: Well, the announcers right now, the school up at Yale..

WM: Oh yeah, Ron Darling.

BR: Ron Darling.

WM: In 1981, when they had the players strike in mid-season for a few weeks, the draft was held and Ron Darling was selected by the Rangers, sent here to Tulsa and the Tulsa game where Ron Darling pitched was on national cable TV and several of the Ranger officials came here for that game because they weren't playing. Don Zimmer was here, the owners of the Rangers were here to see Ron Darling pitch for Tulsa and he had many great years.

BR: He's still announcing, right?

WM: Yeah, he still does things for the Major League Baseball Network.

Of course, Ivan Rodriguez maybe was the best of them all. He was 19 years old and I remember seeing him. He would catch a pitch still in his squatting position and throw out runners at first base. He wouldn't even stand up or move his feet. He was that good.

BR: He was that active for all twelve, fifteen years he played.

WM: Amazing.

BR: He just retired.

WM: And he'll probably be a first ballot Hall of Famer sometime, I think, 2017, he'll be eligible. We've had a lot of players that went on to be big stars. Sometimes it irked me a little bit when they would get up to the Rangers and then the Rangers would sell them off to somebody and get a crummy player for them. That used to hack me off.

BR: Corbett did that a lot with pitchers because he had excellent pitchers and he'd trade them.

WM: He'd trade them off for—

BR: But they were hurting money-wise.

WM: Yeah, anyway. There was a player named Walt Terrell that was a very good pitcher for Tulsa and became a very good pitcher in the major leagues. He pitched maybe ten to twelve years and averaged twelve to fifteen wins a year. He traded both him and Darling to the Mets for Lee Mazzilli. At that time, his career was about over but he was a handsome man and they would have Lee Mazzilli Poster Day with no shirt on and all the women would come and they would sell tickets to the ballpark. That just kind of hacked me off.

JE: That's a great legacy of the names you just named in this ballpark.

WM: Yeah, in this ballpark.

JE: That Bill Rollings built.

WM: That's right.

JE: We talk about the Yankees, 'the House that Ruth built.'

BR: Yeah.

JE: This is the house that Bill Rollings built.

WM: That's right.

BR: It is.

WM: I remember seeing there was a player for Shreveport, Rob Deer, who was a tremendous hitter. He either hit over the fence or he missed it five feet. He was one of those kind of guys. He hit one that went halfway up to the Safeway store in the street. Hit the street and bounced away and rolled away over the hill. I was sitting in right field watching it, and another knucklehead friend of mine—we went out and measured it. We got a tape measure one day. We went out and measured it. It was like 493 feet and that the longest home run ever hit here in Drillers Stadium. This is a great place...still clean and nice, fan friendly. All my children's first ball game was right here. In fact, my first child was almost born here. We came out to a game and it was so hot, my wife started hyperventilating and all this. Joe Preston, who was the general manager, saw this, quickly got her and brought her into the air conditioning.

- BR:** Joe did a good job.
- WM:** Oh, Joe was an amazing man. He brought her into the office into the air conditioning and she calmed down and was okay. Then a month later, my daughter was born. I don't know if we ever had a child born here but I was trying for it.
- JE:** That was pretty close, I'll tell you.
- WM:** I was trying.
- JE:** He names names and so forth. Bill, as an owner, did you ever get around the players or talk to them or visit with them?
- BR:** Sure.
- JE:** Anyone that stood out as a personality?
- BR:** Oh, Joe Russell was—
- WM:** A really friendly guy.
- BR:** A very friendly guy. And Billy Sample; all the ones he talked about.
- JE:** So you'd come out and visit with them?
- BR:** I'd go to the clubhouse nearly all the time when I was here. Of course, I still was working and I was gone some, but basically, yeah. The whole clubhouse was in the old building down there.
- JE:** The fact was it wasn't so much as an owner that you came in—you came in as a baseball mind. You just loved to be around players in the game.
- BR:** The owner Roy did it.
- JE:** He'd come down and visit with the players?
- BR:** He'd come down.
- WM:** Roy Clark in August of 1977, in those days you remember, he was the host for the Tonight Show when Johnny Carson would take off and he did that what, ten, twelve times a year? The first time in August 1977, he wore a Tulsa Driller uniform.
- BR:** Absolutely!
- WM:** As the host of the Tonight Show; wore the hat.
- BR:** That's right.
- WM:** The Driller top. He was so excited about owning a ball club, and if you remember that kind of started the phase of these celebrities owning minor league ball teams. David Letterman, Bill Murray, several people like that, they still own some minor league baseball teams. But I think he's the first celebrity to do that.
- JE:** We should point out that as the Drillers open this season, 2012, Roy Clark was there to throw out the first pitch.
- BR:** He sure was. I was in Shreveport delivering kids.
- WM:** That's good. I was there that night.
- BR:** Were you?

WM: And when I saw Roy do that, I'm sure most of the fans had no idea how much he meant to baseball in this town.

BR: He's a Shriner, as I am. We're both Shriners, hearts in the right place.

JE: Thank you Bill for giving this time. I appreciate it very much. We all respected you as I was a broadcaster and saw what you were doing. We respected you. Even now the full story and the story that you didn't tell before but you've now told, I'm sure I'm now speaking for Tulsa County and beyond to say thank you, Bill, for what you've done.

BR: I appreciate it, John. Nobody knew the story that I told and I had no intentions of telling it. I was going to tell it to Wayne because he had done the two books but there's no reason to degrade, it's just something that happened. The biggest mistake of all of it, I'd give anything if I could change is I would like to have not gotten out of the baseball business, and stayed with the Drillers and continued on. Right now would be very satisfying to run them and to manage them. You've got the facilities and all that. I'd like to do that. And again, there's a lot of difference in the money that we spent and the money today, because there is money involved in it today, but we never thought about the money.

JE: But still, in your soul, you'd say you know what? I'd kinda like to run it again.

BR: You got it. Yep.

JE: Thank you, thank you. Thank you, Wayne for your input.

WM: Oh, you're welcome. Anytime.

JE: Thank you for the historian that you've become in baseball and the books you've written.

BR: Thank you, John.

JE: You bet.

Chapter 11 – 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.