

Chapter 1 - 0:48

Introduction

Announcer: The renewed interest in Route 66 comes from the book *Route 66 The Mother Road* written by Tulsan Michael Wallis, the first person to be inducted into the Oklahoma Route 66 Hall of Fame. His work has been published in magazines and newspapers including *TIME*, *LIFE*, *People* and *The New York Times*. Has been nominated 3 times for the Pulitzer Prize. He is the voice of the Sheriff of Radiator Springs in the Pixar movie *Cars* in 2006 and 2011 sequel. Through his writing he has become an historian and biographer of the American West. Listen now as Michael Wallis candidly tells you his story made possible by foundations that believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 - 6:40

Early Storytelling

John Erling: Today's date is March 3, 2011. My name is John Erling and Michael would you state your full name, your date of birth and your present age?

Michael Wallis: Michael Wallis born October 7, 1945. I'm 65 years old.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

MW: In The Sophian Plaza, a historic 8-story condominium overlooking the Arkansas River on the edge of downtown Tulsa where I reside with my wife Suzanne Fitzgerald Wallis.

JE: From where we are recording this, you can look out your window and you can see...

MW: Yes, one of the pluses of living here is I can look out the window from both where I live on the 5th floor and where I write in my studio on the 3rd floor and see the Mother Road, my beloved Route 66 crossing the Arkansas River.

JE: Where were you born?

MW: I was born in St. Louis, Missouri.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name and where she was born and where she grew up?

MW: My mother was Anne Marie and her maiden name was Dorsey. She was born in St. Louis to a woman who came to this country at a very early age from Germany. Her name was Marie Sophie Bonnard and she was born in 1875 in Germany. She came here when she was 5 years old on a ship with her widowed mother and a big brood of children. The mother met a widower on the ship with a big brood of children. They combined families and ended up with about 12 or 14 children when they got here and then everyone scattered, some went back to Germany. I probably had more kin fighting for the Kaiser War than for Black Jack Pershing. One brother, Hugo went to Australia and became a rancher. One went out and opened an apple orchard in the Pacific Northwest. My grandmother lived in Kansas City and she would often tell me stories about her early years. She married an Irish cowboy from Texas named Burt Dorsey who unfortunately I never met. I knew my grandmother very well, but he died before I was born. It was said about Burt Dorsey that he could roll a Bull Durham cigarette on horseback with one hand. He fought in the Spanish-American war and has a very illustrious history goes way back, all the way to colonial America. So they ended up when they combined forces moving from Texas to St. Louis, Missouri. They had already had a son, my uncle Bud, who was in Fort Worth, Texas and then my mother was born on Texas Avenue in St. Louis, Missouri in 1909.

JE: What kind of the person was she?

MW: My mother was a very important force in my life. She greatly influenced the path I've taken because of my early on experiences with her. It was my mother and my grandmother principally without knowing it that truly taught me the art of storytelling.

JE: They were storytellers themselves?

MW: They were not storytellers as I am, or in the classic sense of the word. But both of them, my grandmother especially had a whole inventory of memories. She lived with us in a little apartment. Every afternoon I would sit in her rocking chair and she would make soldier hats for me out of the pages of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. She would supply me with strong tea and Lorna Doones (cookies) and she would just tell me stories about being a little girl coming to this country and about living in Kansas City in 1880, 1881 in 1882. She remembered the day her brothers ran into the house on July 15, 1881 and the day before in New Mexico territory Billy the Kidd had been killed. She remembered the following spring them running back into the house and saying the Ford boys just killed Jesse James and St. Joseph, Missouri. She told me about keeping house for one of her brothers in New Orleans at the turn-of-the-century. Her brother Johnny was a painter.

He had a studio near the French Quarter on Magazine Street. She kept house for him and she would tell me how exotic it was to be in New Orleans at that time. She gloried at the idea, for example, of bananas. You know, bananas were very exotic to her. The Creole food and the mixed races of people were all very interesting to me. She and some young women started making neckties in a little circle to pass the time. They were so good at it that a man would come by and take the neckties and sell them for them. So they actually made money. One day, this was so great for me to hear. She said we got kind of a wild hair. She told me that they wrote down their names and addresses and stuffed them into these fancy silk cravats and they were in tie boxes. The man picked them up and that particular shipment went way across the Sabine River into Texas. It went way out into Central Texas out in the old Comanche country around San Saba. A cowboy, whose father's small outfit wasn't too far from Ballenger, Texas, had just returned from the Spanish-American war. He rode into town because he had to buy a necktie because his cousin was getting married. He went into the mercantile store and picked out the gaudiest tie he could find. He looked at it and a little piece of paper fluttered to the floor. He picked the piece of paper up and by and by he wrote that woman and they started a pen-pal relationship. Then he jumped on a train and went to New Orleans and that was Burt Dorsey. He picked up my grandmother and they came back to Texas and got married. That's how they met was because of that necktie. Those are the kinds of stories that she told. Then we would sing songs. We would think old army songs like "Tramp, tramp, tramp the boys come marching" from the Spanish-American war. Or "Pony boy, pony boy, won't you be my pony boy? It was great. And my mother would supplement that in certain ways.

JE: You were about how old here when you were hearing this four or five years old?

MW: I was four or five, six, seven, eight, nine years old, right in there.

Chapter 3 - 6:40

Michael's Father

Michael Wallis: When I was about 4 years old I can remember distinctly for a period of time there we lived right off of Route 66, the old alignment going through Saint Louis about as far as Stan Musial could swat a hard ball. I grew up in this brick house down there. Men would come down off of that road from time to time, mostly by themselves, but sometimes two at a time. It wasn't a great flood of people, or an Exodus, but I can

remember this happening on several occasions and when I would see them. They would come to the back door and knock on the door. My mother would go to the door in her uniform of the day, which was her apron. They would take off their cap and ask her if she had some work for them to do in exchange for something to eat. They weren't begging for money or anything. These men were sort of dusty and they looked a little different. I would see a military tattoo or an old field jacket or some boots. My Dad told me, he said, "A lot of these fellows are from the war and they just travel the road. Back then, and it wasn't pejorative, we just called them tramps. My mother always found work for them to do. To move something heavy or chop weeds, she always made sure she found something for them to do and then she would give them a lunch. She would give them a plate of sandwiches and a piece of fruit or cake or a hunk of pie, ice water, maybe a mug of coffee, leftover stew. They would sit down outside and eat this food. When they did that, my mother would be at the sink and there was a window looking out over that side yard. I would pull a chair up and I would get up there with my mom. She and I would make up stories about who that was. Who is that man? Where is he going? Where has he been? You know, making me use my imagination. We would have this whole glorious biography created about this tramp sitting there eating my mother's food. Then when he was finished, he would come up and he would usually wash his stuff off at the spigot. My mother would collect the stuff and he would walk off through the yard and back off to the Mother Road. Every time that happened, my mother would always tell me the same thing. She said, "Son, remember you never turn anyone away from the door. That could be an angel, an angel in disguise."

JE: Did any of these tramps come back on a yearly basis?

MW: Not to my memory, that only lasted for a short time.

JE: So we are talking what year?

MW: 1949 or 1950 before the Korean War. I'm just giving you an example of how those women influenced me. They weren't, you know, great polished storytellers, but they sparked something in me. My grandmother died while I was in the Marine Corps and in 1964 and my mother died a few years later of cancer in 1967.

JE: Okay, about your father, his name and where he grew up?

MW: My dad was Hubert Raymond Wallis. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1905 right at the end of the great St. Louis World's Fair. His mother was pregnant all through the fair in 1904. It was the great "Meet Me in St. Louis" Fair. At that time St. Louis was the 4th-largest city in the country and a big headquarters town. It was an old city with French and Spanish roots. Then all of these immigrants came in. Germans and Prussians and Irish and there was dog-town. There were a great number of Italians and Slavs and African-Americans from the South. It was a great mixture of people in a really hybrid city

that like so many cities got smaller. But back then, it was in its real hey day. My father, his background was German and Prussian. Our family name had changed several times over the years. It depended on...some of them lived in a corridor that went back and forth between Prussia and Poland. My grandfather, my father's father changed the name to Wallis. Ernest Wallis did that. But my father grew up in a multigenerational household in south Saint Louis, the scrub and Dutch, the big German neighborhood. He didn't speak English until he was 5 years old and went to school, a Mayes Lutheran school. He spoke German and then they learned English as well. But all the school and church services were German until the 1st World War, when it became unpopular. You know, that's when he used to always kid that that's when hamburgers became Salisbury steak. But he was a wonderful guy who lost his other very young, a beautiful woman, to appendicitis when she was only 39. He was 16. So he and his baby sister and his father lived in this house with his maternal grandparents the Korte family, an old German family with an old maid aunt and various people. I had a lot of Lutheran ministers in my family and musicians. My great grandfather, Karl Wallis who was from Germany, was a very good violinist and pianist. He could play Bach and Chopin and so forth. But there were various great-uncles and cousins who became Lutheran ministers, but that's where my father grew up was in that house.

JE: What did your father do for a living?

MW: He went to high school. Both of my parents went to high school. Neither one of them went to college. He went to a trade school in Saint Louis and became a draftsman for Emerson Electric Company. Through the years, he of course climbed through the ranks and worked there, it was a big firm. They headquartered in Saint Louis. They manufactured electric motors and fans and everything. When he started he was working in design on ceiling fans, not for homes as you find them now, but for butcher shops and stores and practical things. By the time he retired in the early 1970s, after decades and decades of working there, he was working on rocket components and things like that. He was a very good designer and a skilled draftsman.

Chapter 4 - 7:29

Stan Musial

John Erling: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Michael Wallis: I have two sisters. When I was born in 1945. I had two sisters waiting for me. My

sister Marilyn was 16, and my sister Nancy who was almost 14. So it was a great situation for Michael Wallis because I was born right at the end of the war in October 1945. I was born to parents who really wanted one more child—and hoped that they would have a son. I had these two great big sisters, so I had three mothers. Those first years were just tremendous. All of my years growing up were tremendous. My sister Nancy unfortunately is dead. She died some years ago of a whole bunch of complicated problems. My sister Marilyn, who's 82 I guess right now, lives in Rolla, Missouri. She's a widow and has a very nice life up in Rolla.

JE: Your first elementary school?

MW: Well, I went right across the street from that house that I just told you about, catty-corner, to Hudson School. I went there from K through grade 6. It was a great school. If you want to wait until later to talk about writing...that's where I really launched my writing career. Then I went to a Lutheran School for a couple of years. I went to a public high school for a couple of years. But I ended up going to Western Military Academy in Alton, Illinois. I certainly wasn't militaristic or anything, but I was always a hopeless romantic. I was really in love with history and I really thought I should go to West Point. So my parents sent me to Western Military Academy in Alton, Illinois, a great old river town near St. Louis on the Mississippi. It was a huge sacrifice for them because it was very expensive to send me to prep school. Western was an old school, dating back to the 1870s. A lot of illustrious people had graduated from Western, Sander Vanocur who you remember, a great broadcaster and Butch O'Hare of O'Hare Airport, Hailey the TV manufacturer, all kinds of people, Thomas Hart Benton the wonderful painter. So I went there and by my senior year I became a cadet officer, a lieutenant. I had more power for a 17-year-old than most have. You know, it was like a miniature West Point. It was a beautiful school, which alas closed in the 1970s when military schools became unpopular. I still keep in touch. We have a vast alumni association. I was well rounded. I never in my scholastic career did anything traditional with writing. I never worked on a school paper or the yearbook. I was an athlete. I played all of the sports. I was very interested in drama and became quite a thespian. My senior year I was awarded an honor military school nomination to West Point. That was a pivotal moment and the headmaster Col. Persing, this wise old owl, who we called not to his face, "Twitch" because he had an odd mannerism. Everybody had a nickname, *Catcher in the Rye*. He called me. He was a man who spoke Greek, Latin and German. He said, "Wallis, you can accept this and go to West Point, but I must tell you, your math and science scores are a little dubious." He said, "You will go there and end up with a degree in engineering as a 2nd lieutenant in the Army and I don't think that's for you." He said, "You're in love with this architecture. You're in love with the sashes and the sabers and the history and the fact that Thomas Hart Benton was

here and tradition and all of that. I just don't think it's for you." We thought about it and I decided not to.

JE: So was that disappointing to you?

MW: No, I thought it was a wise choice.

JE: Before we move on though, we need to bring you back to your days when you were 7, 8, 9 and 10. You had an opportunity to be up close to Stan Musial the great slugger of the St. Louis Cardinals?

MW: Yes, that ties in to one of my early writing experiences because it was the moment I knew I wanted to be a writer. I was living in Rock Hill, this St. Louis suburb, right off of Manchester Road a.k.a. the original Route 66, where I had my first job in the not too distant future from them in journalism selling the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on the shoulders of Route 66. But I was going to Hudson School right across the street, this elementary school. In the 5th and 6th grade I was a school patrol boy. Many people don't remember that, but we wore those white webbed belts around our waist and diagonally across with our badge and he would help the kids across the street so they wouldn't be struck down. So by and by, AAA the Automobile Association of Missouri sponsored a contest. It was to write an essay about what it meant to be a school patrol boy. My mother said, "You should enter that." I did and he wrote an essay. God, I wish I had it, but I don't.

JE: You were how old?

MW: I was about 11 and I won. Here was the prize. I guess it was Auggie Busch who owned the Cardinals. Somebody sent a car out to our house. Now that was a big deal for anybody then. I mean, of course I have ridden in hundreds of limousines, but that was the first time I was ever in a limo and probably the first time my dad was ever in a limo, truth be known. It picked us up and we went down to Old Sportsman's Park, now that's three stadiums ago in St. Louis. St. Louis is a great baseball town and I'm pure baseball. I still bleed Cardinal red. It's probably the best baseball city in the country. We went into Old Sportsman's Park at Grand and Dodier and they put my dad in a box seat and said, "You can have all the beer and anything you want." They took me down to the field and they said, "We are going to sit in the dugout." They put me in the dugout and next to me on one side was Kenny Boyer who played 3rd base. I loved Kenny Boyer. On the other side was Stan "The Man" Musial, number 6 and I was catatonic. We were playing the Cubs and Musial won the game at the bottom of the 9th with a walk-off homerun. Down in my studio on the 3rd floor of this building amongst all my other treasures and icons are signed balls from both Musial and Boyer. So we're going home that night in that car and I'm, you know, on a tremendous high and my dad is exhilarated. What an experience for his son and for him to go to that game. We talked about it and I can still remember

looking out the window of that car as we were driving back to Rock Hill and I thought to myself, you know this writing is not a bad thing to do. That's when it hit me right there.

JE: So it actually hit you in elementary school.

MW: Yes, in elementary school.

JE: How did that come about writing in elementary?

MW: Again it was all seeded by my mother and grandmother. My mother did some amateurish writing on her own. I remember she would always write little short stories and poems. She would send them in to women's magazines. I don't believe any of them ever got published. She was very naïve that way, but I saw her in the act of writing.

Chapter 5 - 3:35

Hopalong Cassidy

Michael Wallis: One of the places that my parents first took me was the public library in Rock Hill, Missouri on Manchester Road AKA Route 66. At that time, it's long gone, it was a big white frame building that dated back to the Civil War. There was a stone Presbyterian Church across the street. That's still there with slaves buried in the front yard, but nobody knew that when they built that church. That library became a real mecca for me, the dusty old Rock Hill library. That's where I met some of my great early friends. Not only the Hardy boys that Ivanhoe and Huck Finn and Robin Hood and Buffalo Bill. So I grew up right away reading voraciously, which is a good thing for a writer to do. Then I did fine, you know, writing in school. I was kind of an average student. But again, it was that essay contest that really kicked in for me. Then that was expanded on a few years later in high school when I want another big contest.

John Erling: What was that?

MW: It was my freshman year in high school. I entered a contest sponsored by *Every Week* magazine. Every week with kind next step up from the *Weekly Reader*. I don't know if any of them are still around. You know, we got the *Weekly Reader* and *Every Week* was for high school students. The contest was sponsored by *Every Week* magazine and Wesleyan University in Pennsylvania. It was to choose and write what we thought were the 10 biggest events of the year 1959. I'm not sure I can even remember them all now. I know Alaska and Hawaii were becoming states and I know it was also the launch of the Soviet space program. I know it was the Castro revolution in Cuba and things like that. So I entered that and I won that one. It was a big national contest. I think I even got \$25,

but I know I got a little plaque or something. I had my picture taken with my teacher and it appeared in the local paper and that was another kind of “atta-boy.” Now, it sounds like all I’m focused on is the gifts that writing can give you, but I wasn’t even thinking about that at the time at all. I wasn’t thinking about making a living, I was just thinking about how neat this is to write something and have people read it and then that writing causes a reaction, causes people to do something.

JE: You met Hopalong Cassidy when you were young?

MW: Back in those grade-school days, not only Hoppy, but William Boyd who of course has great Oklahoma ties. But another one, I’ll never forget this. They were about one week apart on a Saturday at the old Famous Barr, which was a big department store chain in Saint Louis. My mother took me down there and there in the parking lot immediately I saw a Topper, Hoppy’s big white horse and there was Hoppy with that distinctive voice and gray hair and that black hat, which he never lost even in a fight. I got to go up to Hoppy and he shook my hand and talked to me and let me pet Topper. I was probably about 7 or 8 years old or something like that. The following week she took me down there again and surprised and it was Duncan Renaldo, The Cisco Kid with Diablo his horse. He was charming, you know as only a Latino could be. The same deal happened. I got to shake his hand and talk to him and pet Diablo. I am sure it was at least a month before I washed my hands.

Chapter 6 - 5:31

Marine Corps

John Erling: You decided that West Point was not your mission and then you decided to do what?

Michael Wallis: Well, I listened to the headmaster, Col. Persing. There were about 5 of us in the Class of ‘63. He advised us to go to a small liberal arts college in Missouri. Missouri is loaded with small liberal arts colleges. I was thinking then that maybe I would go to the University of Missouri because I was always a Missouri Tiger fan. He said, “I would go to Central Methodist College.” It was Methodist in name only. It wasn’t like ORU or something. It was in Fayette, Missouri, which is in central Missouri very close to Columbia as a matter of fact. It was an old, old very historic town with a beautiful town square. So I went to Central Methodist College from Western with several of other classmates It’s now called Central Methodist University and it’s gotten a lot bigger. I spent my whole

freshman year there. I broke my wrist playing freshman football and that's why I have that scar there (motioning). I was clipped in the last play of the game, running with the ball and I landed like this (motioning). It was really bad. I mean, really bad. They put me in the hospital and my parents came up. The football doctor from Mizzou came up and I'll never forget his name. Appropriately it was Dr. Payne. I'll never forget him looking at me and I was kind of groggy and he said, "Son, I was a combat doctor and surgeon in World War II in Korea, I've been a football doctor at Mizzou for years and I have never seen an injury like that." So, that made me feel really good. (Laughter) But he operated and put it back together. I had a big cast on. I'm 18 years old. I'm drinking my milk. I'm working out. I was playing handball with a cast on and that spring I made the college baseball team. So it was a great freshman year. It was great in many ways. It wasn't necessarily a year that showcased me as a scholar. I would say that I was a very average student because I just had plenty of things going on. Not the least of which were coeds. I have a high old time. It was great. You know, I did all of that typical freshman nonsense. That summer I was working on a Black Angus Ranch near Eureka, Missouri on Route 66. I was alone a lot of the time. I wasn't with the other people. I had the job of maneuvering this amorous bull from pasture to pasture to do his business with all of these cows. (Laughter) I also put up a lot of hay. It was just arduous great work. I was in great shape. I had played sports all of my life. Then I had allowed here. It kind of runs in my family and I didn't have it out of my system that wanted me to go to West Point. So one summer night I came home and I woke my parents up and I said, "I've made a decision. I'm going to drop out of school for a while." They said, "Why?" I said, "I'm going to join the Marine Corps." Two weeks later I was in Paris Island with my head shaved.

JE: Why?

MW: I'm telling you, I just a wild hair. Well, I'll tell you why. To be more specific it was because one of the people whom I really admired was Ernest Hemingway. This is true for a lot of white American writers about my age now, in their 50s and 60s. Some people went for Fitzgerald or Steinbeck. I also liked Steinbeck very much and it wasn't so much Hemingway and Fitzgerald's writing, although I really did like Hemingway's writing. But I fell in love with his biography, the way he became a writer. And he didn't do it by becoming a scholar or anything. He did it by getting out in the trenches out on the street. So in my way of thinking, I was off to a good start. You've got to out-drink, out-fight, out-womanize and experience everybody. You've got to just go out there and grab life and take it in. Become a Marine. Work on a ranch. Do this. Do that. So that was all part of it. So I spent a couple of years in the Marines and then stayed in the active reserves until 1970 and I was discharged as a sergeant E5. I picked up a lot of experience. I got off active duty fortunately before Vietnam geared up, although I would say half of my

recruit platoon, maybe not that many, were killed in Vietnam. A lot of them were lifers or in for long hitches. To this day, I've started going back to Paris Island to visit because I have friends that live down here. At first it was quite an emotional experience. But I have always been proud to call myself a Marine, once a Marine, always a Marine. However, I was not the kind of Marine like Oliver North. I was not a jerk. We're getting into politics. As far as I am concerned, Oliver North should've been in a Navy brig somewhere for what he did with all of that nonsense during the Reagan years. I was more like an Oliver Stone Marine. I was a grunt. I damned near went to the brig a couple of times. I was the way the old top sergeants like to Marines, rough and ready and stuff, not spit and polish.

Chapter 7 - 5:26

Suzanne

John Erling: You come out of the Marines?

Michael Wallis: I come out of the Marines. I go back to St. Louis and I do several things. I take some night courses at the college in St. Louis. I accrue a whole bunch more college credits. I was also working full-time. I did all kinds of jobs. But I was a social worker then for about 10 months. (Laughter) I kind of faked my way into that one. I also was a lab technician for a while. I really faked my way into that one. On the application it was for a lab assistant in this big cable company where they apply enamel to the cable. They were looking for somebody with kind of a science background. It said, "What was your major in college?" I put, "ENG." It was English, but they thought it was engineering. So I got the job. I was on the graveyard shift and I would come in there at midnight and they would leave me notes of what to do. I had a white lab coat on and I was like a trained monkey. I had to test the viscosity of these enamels and everything. I remember I would always make soup in the beakers too. I would get all of the work done and then I would have this time. I would write. I would make up stories. I would read. I would meet people out in the plant. I remember seeing a guy getting killed out in the plant. He got caught up in one of the machines. Then I worked as a social worker. I was a real renegade social worker. I really tried to help the people out there. I had great experiences with that. I also married for the first time. I married a woman named Judy Baker. Several former Marines, we were all taking classes together at this community college and we started dating these girls from Lindenwood College near St. Louis. It was a fancy girls school. They hooked me up with Judy. She was a pretty blonde majoring in French about to graduate. She was a little bit older than me.

By and by we got married in the Lindenwood College Chapel just before my mother died. I was totally ill prepared for marriage. I was still really crazy wild. I decided to go to the University of Missouri and we moved to Columbia. I took a whole load of courses there and our marriage quickly dissolved. There was a little catch to it, which I will get back to in a minute. But one of the courses I took was bonehead Spanish. It was mostly for seniors who had put off all of their language requirements until the very last. It was just bonehead Spanish, 5 hours. You met every day and had labs. I was in a big class. It was mostly a lot of football players and a lot of ex-GIs, a lot of former Marines and a lot of soldiers and sailors. We were just a little bit older than most of the regular students. This graduate student walks in to teach us, this TA getting her Masters in Spanish, Señorita Suzanne Fitzgerald. That's the first time I laid eyes on Suzanne. My God she ran a tight ship. She could keep control of us guys. Suzanne loves to tell this story. Right away, I figured, I can't do all of this stuff. I was drinking pretty hard and playing hard and running around on my wife. I was working at different jobs. (Sigh) I was bartending and doing a little side bouncing. So, when she'd ask a question in Spanish, my hand would be the first one up like this. (Motioning) I was waving it. She'd call on me and I would just say gibberish. She didn't know what to do, so she would call on somebody else and they would give the answer. So finally it worked, she just quit calling on me and I didn't even have to raise my hand anymore. She would get me to play the maid in different plays and stuff like that, which kind of pissed me off. But I really liked her. I was really drawn to her. My marriage was quickly ending. Suzanne called me into her faculty office, which was about the size of a Volkswagen. I came in the air and she said, "Señor Wallis, I know you are trying very hard, but you are really not making much improvement. I'm afraid that they are going to make me send a notice home to your parents." (Laughter) Well, I hadn't lived at home for a long time. I said, "Señorita, you do what you think is best. It's okay." At the end of the semester, she'll tell you, she was looking at her grade book. Instead of the "F" that I richly deserved, she felt so sorry for me, maybe she was shell-shocked I don't know, but she gave me a D-. I took the next semester by correspondence and I hired her as my tutor. My marriage ended. Suzanne, ahead of me moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. She gave me Santa Fe that crazy summer of 1969. That was a great summer. We were actually in Los Angeles when the Manson killings happened. We had nothing to do with it. We hitchhiked into Mexico to go to bullfights. Suzanne, who had grown up in El Paso, as she says, South New Mexico because people from El Paso don't particularly care for Texas, most of them. She had spent all of her time as a child and young woman up in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, this magic city. I'll never forget that with her and a woman we called Proud Mary, who became one of our group, going over that hill from Albuquerque and there I saw Santa Fe for the first time. It's never left my memory. This was another big milestone in my life, was the Santa Fe years. We moved there.

Chapter 8 - 5:29**Michael's Son**

Michael Wallis: There was a little kink along the line here, which I am not particularly proud of, but it happened, it's reality. In a last ditch effort to save our marriage Judy tried a few things. She ended up pregnant as we were divorcing. I still went through with the divorce. I remember hitchhiking back to Saint Louis on the day my son was born, John Christopher. I saw him for the first time and I had to face Judy's mother and they were imploring me to stay and I said, "I can't do it." I went back to New Mexico. It was a very selfish move, but it was one that I had to do because then I was fully committed to writing. It's where I came of age as a writer in Santa Fe living there with Suzanne. I sent child payments back to Judy for almost a year and she cut off all relations with me. I quit sending payments. She remarried a man named Ben Shaw. Judy had been a social worker and she went on to law school and became an attorney. Ben Shaw, whom I have come to learn, is a really sweet guy. He was a psychologist and his focus was...he is still working today... death row inmates. So (my son) John I knew was in good hands. I didn't put him out of my mind, definitely not. Over the years, my father, God bless him before he died, he has been dead for a while, would always say, "You need to connect with this boy." Suzanne didn't mention it too much, but she was very open. My feeling was...it got to the point where, I will be very open if this young man finds me, but I think it's his call. So I continued living in Santa Fe. Can I fast-forward? Ten years ago I was living here. I had just moved in this building and I was down in my studio writing. It was April 1, April Fools' Day. I got a message from someone that was writing on my guestbook on my website. The message said: *Michael, I don't know much about your books, but half of my DNA came from you.* - John - Suzanne happened to be down there and she said I made some sort of sound or something. She came in and I just pointed to the screen. We looked at it and at first I thought is this an April fools joke? So I thought about it for a long time and then I wrote back. I just said: *John, tell me about yourself.* - Michael - and back came this outpouring of John. In the narrative, he talked about who he was and what he had become. He's an artist. I have some of his work here. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. He also is an avid baseball fan. He loves history. He got his degree in Arizona and he has a Masters in Fine Arts Cum Laude from Ohio State. He ran with the bulls in Pamplona and did his Hemingway number. Then I opened the attachment and it's his picture holding this baby, Charlotte. Immediately, Suzanne and I went out to Arizona to Maricopa, south of Phoenix where he lives with his beautiful wife Tamara and with this little girl. Of course, that moment when that door opened was tremendous because we

wanted to be in each other's lives. He considers me his father and Ben Shaw as his dad. He said he remembered a couple of times when they were sitting there watching TV and they saw me. He said that Ben said, "You know, I don't need to remind you that's your father. You ought to seek him out." He said, "No, I'm not ready." He told me, "I knew I was ready when Charlotte was born. I wanted to see you. I wanted to meet you and I want you in my life." It was a great gift. It was an incredible gift that I am very thankful for. We've had great talks. We've brought them here. We've gone to Santa Fe. We are with them all the time. We are going to go out there again this spring. Charlotte is now 9 years old. She's just gorgeous. She's interested in acting. John doesn't quite have my voice, but we have all kinds of similar mannerisms. He's a great big, good-looking guy. He's just great. He teaches art. He has a great position at the Phoenix Art Museum and continues with his art, painting and fiber work. Tamara started out for many years as a kindergarten and 1st grade teacher and now she's moved into administration in the public schools. I will just never-I mean-these are all pivotal times in my life. I've been mentioning to you the high water marks, the little bragging stories, about the decision not to go to West Point and the meeting at Suzanne. The most important day of my life was the day that I met Suzanne, the gift of Santa Fe, the gift of this lost son, lost father, I mean, that's it. It's just out there raw, but at the end of the day I don't regret a thing.

John Erling: We are in 2011-how old is your son John now?

MW: Forty-one.

Chapter 9 - 8:00

Thornton Wilder

John Erling: So you're living in Santa Fe and-?

Michael Wallis: I lived in Santa Fe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That's where I came of age as a writer. Santa Fe became my campus. On the streets of Santa Fe I got my Masters degree in writing because I sought out and found the old wisdom keepers. The old established writers and painters and poets and artists and just the keepers of magic. It was unbelievable, Frank Waters, the great writer and Paul Horgan. All I had on were my old Marine Corps combat boots. I didn't have two dimes to rub together. I waited tables. I tended bar. I did anything I could. I lived all over, you know. Santa Fe is not a cheap town. Either you go to Santa Fe dirt poor as a struggling writer or poet or filmmaker, or you go with all the money in the world. I loved it-I didn't give a damn. If I

could come up with a dollar a day I knew I could get lunch at the La Fonda because I had a friend named Steve Peters who was quite a bit older than me who wrote Western pulp and that was his day job. If I could get in there and scrape together a dollar and put it down, I would get a glass like that (motioning) and it would stay topped off with Jack Daniels and I would have a big basket of fresh tortilla chips and a reservoir of chile con queso and that was my meal on a dollar. I was living in a little apartment over a physical therapist's studio in this beautiful old Adobe and I was paying \$50 a month rent. I was living with a guy named Al Lickliter who was an impresario who brought theatrical acts to town. He was years and years older than me. He was a combination of Merlin and PT Barnum is all I can say. He had been married 14 times. I had never met a character like this in my life. He was unbelievable. So I would get up and I was publishing a little literary magazine called *Esperanza*, (meaning) Hope and I was writing. I was writing poetry and I was writing journalism. But I would get up and I would go to the post office to PO Box 1892, which I shared with Lickliter. I would see if I got any money at all or rejection slips or whatever. Then I would run my traps in the Plaza. I would go by and I would see Jack Potter, a bookseller who was well connected in the literary world and just a great guy and a mentor to me. He had 7 sons. Jack is long dead now, but his son Nick runs that same bookstore. He looks just like Jack. But I got into the La Fonda that day and I had a dollar. There was Steve Peters dressed up like a toreador behind the bar. He and I didn't see eye-to-eye about writing. He wrote Western pulp and I was more literary and more into pure journalism. So he pours me my whiskey and he gives me my chile con queso and he said, "Wallis, one of those old writers, the kind you like checked into the hotel last night. He was down here and I told him about you and he wants to meet you. He's going to be down here. Here he is now." I stood up and turned around and he said, "Michael Wallis, this is Thornton Wilder." Thornton Wilder. You know, it was like being with Stan Musial. I was catatonic but I was now an adult. I shook his hand and I spent 4 full days with that man. He was in his 70s. This was a few years before he died. He was there and he had a driver. He had come back to visit Santa Fe and Taos because he had been out there as an ex-patriot in the 1920s with Mabel Dodge Lujan up in Taos, the patroness of the Taos Art Gallery and the one who attracted DH Lawrence there and Aldous Huxley and Robinson Jeffers and Wilder and some of the others. So I sat with him and my girlfriend at the time. I had a lot of girlfriends. By this time, Suzanne and I had gone our separate ways. She was only there a few years. It was too high octane. She went back to Missoula to get another masters degree in guidance and psychology and I just chased women and wrote. So this girlfriend at the time, he would feed her olives from his drink. He was just a great old man. He would just tell me story after story about the old days and about DH Lawrence and all of these people.

JE: Thornton Wilder, just name some of his works and describe what kind of person he was.

MW: What immediately would come to mind for a lot of people is the incredibly quintessential play *Our Town*. I think Wilder won four Pulitzer prizes for books and plays, at least three. At the time, I will describe him. He had on gold, scholarly looking rimmed glasses. He had a little trimmed sort of military mustache. He looked the part of an aging writer. You know, the tweed coat and a little, you know those knit ties that we used to wear, the little square knit ties and a button-down blue shirt. He was totally charming and totally giving of himself to me a young fledgling writer, which is something I have continued to do, as you should, I think. You need to nurture and mentor other writers. He surely did that just by giving me his presence, his time and a lot of his wisdom about some of his failures and successes and more importantly about the way he lived his life as a writer. That's what all of those old wisdom keepers from New Mexico gave me. They gave me a little piece of them.

JE: Other works by Thornton Wilder?

MW: *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is another big one. I've got one in there (motioning) signed by him. There was a moment in those salad days when I was struggling out there where I really was having a hard time coming up with money. It was really important for me to keep writing. I walked into a coffeehouse on Canyon Road and Lois Kerensky ran out little secondhand store there to supply the coffeehouse for their theatrical performances and poetry readings. She sold really neat little high-end items like a sterling silver tea set or an art book or something. She smoked and drank coffee in there. She was the sister of Margaret Anderson, the great founder of *The Little Review* published in Paris in the 1920s, published Ezra Pound, published the first *Ulysses* for James Joyce. Lois had been married several times. She had two sons. She was in her 80s. Her son Tom was in his early 60s. He was a chef at the La Fonda. He had grown up in Paris at this time and the young Hemingway had taught him how to box. He became an amateur champion in Paris. So Tom, when he wasn't working at the La Fonda would meet me in the afternoons and we would go to the Sombrero Bar, which is long gone, on the Plaza. It smelled of stale beer and every afternoon there was a good fistfight. We would sit at a table. He wore a beret. He would tell me stories about Paris in the '20s and about Hemingway and Fitzgerald and all of this other stuff. So one day I was walking into Lois' store and she's smoking and she says, "Wallis, I've been looking for you." She threw me a book. I looked at it and it was called *Taking The Count* a novel about boxing, published about 1921 by Scribners, Hemingway's publisher. This was right before Hemingway went to Paris. I opened it up and there was a long inscription to Tom Peters from Hemingway about the art of boxing and how it's a metaphor for life. It was long and handwritten and signed by Hemingway. She said, "I want you to have it." I said, "I can't take this." She said, "You like

him. I thought he was an asshole. You take it." I said, "Okay." You know how I felt about Hemingway and as much as I wanted to keep that book, I knew where to go with it. I went to my friend Jack Potter at the Antiquarian Bookstore, another mentor, and I showed it to him. He said, "Would you like me to buy this from you?" I said, "I would be ever so grateful." I got probably about \$350 dollars, which was a windfall for me there.

Chapter 10 - 4:45

Wisdom Keepers

Michael Wallis: Several months later, I was given from a rascal I knew, a brown package. It was a book wrapped in brown craft paper. This fellow that gave it to me was a questionable sort who dealt in goods and various things. He said, "I know you like this man. This is a gift, I don't want it back and I never want you to talk about it again. If you don't take it, it's destroyed." So I took it and I went back to my little apartment and I opened it up and it was *The Plumed Serpent* by DH Lawrence. It looked like it had just come off of the shelf. Inside, it was signed by Lawrence and there was a long, three-page, handwritten letter to his publisher talking about what he went through in old New Mexico and the writing of this incredible novel. I don't know where it came from. I went to Jack Potter and I told him the story. I got \$900, which was an incredibly fair price back then. At the same time, I had made friends starting on January 2nd, 1970 with a woman named Dorothy Brett out in Taos. Dorothy Brett was an acclaimed painter in England. She came here in the 1920s with DH and Frieda Lawrence when they were trying to set up a perfect colony, a commune. He had tuberculosis and like many with that horrible disease he had a sense of wandering, always seeking a better clime, a better place. Mabel Dodge Lujan, this patroness, drug him in here. This is at a time when Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Pound are all going to France and she is bringing in other writers to Taos. They were in Taos and Santa Fe. She gave him for two years the Lobo Ranch, which is still there, now owned by the University of New Mexico, to write and work and he did. And Brett, this Victorian painter, born in Victoria's Court can remember the old Queen and Windsor Castle where she took dance lessons. Her father was a Viscount Esher. When Brett was introduced in the Court her escort was a young Lieutenant named Winston Churchill, whom she found a little bit full of himself. She was very Bohemian. She left Court and went to the Slade School of Art and became a painter. Her best friends were Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and Middleton Murray. She became part of that Lawrence circle in the late

1910s and early 1920s. She was their lone recruit when they came to America to Taos, to Lujan. Brett stayed and Lawrence didn't. Brett stayed and is considered one of the great Taos painters. On January 1st, 1970, Suzanne and I and our group of creative types who we called the Spinners, this is back in the days of The Merry Pranksters and Ken Kesey, we weren't really hippies but we were living that lifestyle. We were too proud to go on food stamps, but we were all poor. We went up there in a pick-up truck with a (inaudible) hanging from the mirror and a bottle of stout rum and it was zero degrees. We spent the night in a commune because we wanted to find Brett and we did. We sat at her feet and we asked her how we could start a Renaissance. I mean, we were just totally idealistic, thankfully. That was the beginning of a conversation with Brett that lasted for years up until her death in her late 90s. Before she died, she gave me, and I have it downstairs, a double-headed axe with a broken handle with the blood and perspiration of Lawrence in it, his DNA. It was his axe. I have that down there with Pretty Boy Floyd's death mask and a piece of Woody Guthrie's house and so much more, my totems, my icons. Santa Fe, New Mexico, all those little wisdom keepers were incredibly important to me and still are. I'm still very tied to northern New Mexico, but I had to leave there after awhile because it was getting too high-octane for me too. I didn't know any plumbers or anything. I just knew poets and a lot of phony artists and a lot of talking artists who sat in the La Fonda and drank cappuccino in the mornings and said, "Well, today I am going to start my painting. Today I am going to start my book." If you'd come back in the afternoon they had moved into the cantina drinking tequila and they were saying, "Well, tomorrow I'm going to..." Yeah. There were a lot of trust-fund kids but a lot of really remarkable people as well. But I left there in the mid-1970s. I had been writing...I wrote for \$25 a story. I wrote for \$50 a story. There are so many stories about those years.

Chapter 11 - 9:22

Move to Tulsa

Michael Wallis: Then I went into daily newspapers. I joined the Jefferson Pilot chain. I was a state editor down in southeast Texas at the *Beaumont Enterprise & Journal*. I ran two or three outside bureaus for them and did bureau work. They gave me the Austin bureau. Toward the late 1970s I had five papers, *The Galveston Daily News*, *Beaumont Enterprise & Journal* and *The Laredo Times*, a couple of others and some TV stations. I officed in the Capitol building in Austin and covered politics for a few years. I started as a stringer and

then became a special correspondent for *TIME LIFE*. Even earlier, I was one of the special writers writing as a special correspondent for *People Magazine*. I wrote a lot of, not so much Sonny and Cher stories, I did a few of those, but I did more of the human-interest stories. A West Texas sheriff who saved Eagles from predator hunters, a man who made prostheses for kids whose ears and noses were lost to cancer or fire, things like that. But I really got into feature writing and hard news. One year, I went to 24 autopsies. I was at murder scenes, death and destruction. Covering, and it's a contact sport, Texas politics. I was just out there. Along the lines, I met and married an actress whom I had met in Santa Fe. We were married in Houston. Her father worked for Boeing. I was married under a moon rock from the moon with the astronauts there. She was very colorful. She was a beautiful woman, an actress. I was involved with my writing and we hardly ever saw each other. Within 6 months of the marriage I was already out on the trail with others. We ended up getting a divorce. I had an opportunity to leave Texas. I went to Miami Florida to join the Caribbean Bureau of *TIME LIFE* as a special correspondent, which meant I would get regular assignments from *TIME*, *LIFE*, *People*, *The Washington Star*, which was still around then which was owned by *TIME*. I could write for anybody else and I did, *TIME Magazine*, *Smithsonian*, *New York Times*. I could not write for the direct competitor *Newsweek* or the *Washington Post*, which they then owned. I was down in Miami and I was having a great time. I started living with a young woman he was a reporter for *The Miami Herald*, a beautiful woman. She's now a senior editor down in Charlotte, but we lived between Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. I spent all of my time either and the Caribbean with Caribbean pilgrims because the Mariel boatlift was going on or with drug lords. I was with smugglers. I was very dangerous. We did four or five cover stories that year about Miami. The Chamber of Commerce hated us. But it was like living in Casablanca, it was the hard news capital. I was down there 21 months and I decided to take a little sabbatical. I hooked up with an old friend of mine that I met years ago in Santa Fe, Terry Moore. He was a great photographer, still is, one of the best. We get a lot of stories together. He lived out in Arizona at the time. We hooked up and we decided to do a story swing on our own. We lined up some freelance stories in the Texas, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. We were invited by the City of Tulsa to come here on a fan tour. This was June 1980 and this was the first significant time I ever spent in this city. I had always driven by it on 66 on the Interstate. I couldn't believe it. They put us up in The Mayo Hotel. We were some of the last people to stay there. I remember being in the penthouse and it was just great. It was 110° or 112° outside. This was June 1980. It was horrible. Now, all of these travel writers are there and I am there. Of course I'm still a renegade. I was hosted by Steve Turnbo from Ad Inc. and Suzanne McElfresh, who became Suzanne Stewart. She had just

retired from the Chamber and Clyde Cole who used to be the head of the Chamber. You know, I just didn't have two cents to give any of them. Terry and I were pretty wound up. But I figured I could do a story here. The first thing I noticed was the architecture. I was flipped out over all of this Art Deco. That night they pick us up to drive us around in the first place they were driving was out south and I thought where are we going? Here I am on the campus of ORU in front of the City of Faith looking at these hands. Whoa. I said, "Why did you bring me here?" And they said, "Because this is the biggest tourist attraction in Tulsa." I said, "Well, what you've done is you've underscored every cliché and stereotype I already have about this place. I know religion is a big business here, but quite frankly I'm not interested in it. I'm interested in these great buildings downtown and the architecture." They said, "Oh we are tearing a lot of those down. A few years ago we made the Main Mall." Sure enough, when I came back to Tulsa the Skaggs building, which was a great building was gone and they built ONEOK. The Union Depot, the Baptists downtown turned that into a parking lot. The Waite Phillips building, the Union Depot, the bus station, not the train station—that would have been a yuppie hangout for lunch downtown. So I wrote about what I call Okie Deco and about the potential of the Arkansas River. I said, "You are neglecting the Mother Road here." And they were. I know I sound like a prophet and I don't mean to. But now, of course we acknowledge the river. We need to do it more. We acknowledge Art Deco and we know that Route 66 did come here and put vehicular traffic in this town and it still does. But I was so caught up in Tulsa that I loved it. Suzanne married a professor at the University of Missouri during that time. Right about that time I married the actress. He's a great guy. We are still friends today. His name is Charlie Dunlap. She was divorced. I was long divorced. She came down to Miami to visit me and we decided this time the timing was right. I married Suzanne. I put feelers out and two years later I thought, well, let's move back to Santa Fe. I was offered a job there at one paper as the editor. It was an unbelievably horrid salary. I said, "You've got to be kidding me. This is like a 1960s salary." They said, "We know but it's Santa Fe, you know." I saw there was no money to be made anymore in daily journalism. I was offered a job at one of the papers in Dallas. But a kid that I had met in Texas when I was a reporter, named Brett Hall, he was working in PR for Brothers & Company and different people. He had a postcard that Michael Wallis was moving back out to the West and he talked to Steve Hope and Chuck Hood after a handball game and said, "I know you are looking for a head of your PR department over at Hood Hope. I've got just the guy." I had dissolved everything in Miami. I was living in Columbia, Missouri with Suzanne. We were getting ready to make a move, probably back to Santa Fe. Hood Hope calls me and they said, "We'd love to bring you down here and talk to you about a job." I said, "Well, what to hell." So I came down here. They checked

us into a hotel. I went to the old Hood Hope office, which at that time was across from Southern Hills. They introduced me to everybody and talked about me. They said, "We've read all of these stories you've written and you are well published." I knew the job offer was coming but then that night we had Steve Turnbo take me around. We went to the KRMG Green Beer Party over at the fairgrounds and then he took me to Jamil's for a steak. I thought what's going on? So the next day, Steve Hope who was a colorful character said, "We want you to direct our PR division." I thought they were going to hire me as a writer. I didn't know anything about advertising. I knew a lot about PR. I hated PR guys. I ate them for lunch. I said, "Really?" They said, "Yeah. Here's the deal we'll pay you this salary." Which was more money than I had ever made. "We will give you these four club memberships. We will get you a car. We will move you down here. You'll have a staff and you'll assume the department. You'll have your own secretary. You'll have a beautiful office. Will help you get started." I thought why not? I went back and told Suzanne about it and Suzanne said, "Can you do that?" I said, "Yeah." Because I can do anything if I can work in a laboratory... So I said, "Yeah I can do it, because I know how to write." That's what they wanted. They wanted that plumage of a guy who's been published. I can direct people. I did in the Marine Corps. So I took over and build that thing up for two years. I made the move with them out to that Red Man Plaza. We moved to Tulsa. We were married. It was culture shock, especially for Suzanne who was immediately hired on by Brett Hall at Brothers & Company. She no more wanted to go into PR then the man on the moon. Shortly after that, I hired Brett away from Brothers & Company and put him on my staff and then they made Suzanne the head of PR. I was going to town and I was having a ball. It was easy for me to get clients. They let me keep writing so I kept writing my magazine stories and everything.

Chapter 12 - 5:45

Oil Man

Michael Wallis: After two years, Suzanne says to me, "I want you to go out to lunch with me and someone." So I met him for lunch. It was Suzanne and Joyce Gideon from Ad Inc. She and Joyce had been talking. These were two women who were just tired of the whole macho thing. They said, "We want to start our own agency, but we recognize we need a male figure. We want to start Wallis Gideon Wallis and we want you to be one of the Wallises." I said, "Wow, that's interesting." I remember what I've got going for me.

They said, "The deal is we can't take salaries for at least six months. You are going to have to give up those memberships." I said, "Well let me think about this." They really put the pressure on me and I did it. We formed Wallis Gideon Wallis. I stuck with them for at least a year and it really got going. I left after a little while and went full-time back to writing. By this time it was 1986 or so or 1987 I'm gone. Years later Suzanne bought out Joyce and it just became The Wallis Group, which she ran until not too many years ago. She ran it for 22 years and then she closed that. So I'm home and we are living on Rockford Road across from Philbrook. I bought a house from Ronnie Dunn and in the room where he wrote music, I started writing books. The first book I wrote was *Oil Man*. It came out in 1988 from Doubleday. I didn't even have an agent at the time and it launched my book career.

JE: What made you want to start writing books?

MW: Okay, again, sorry I keep going back to Hemingway. But I always remember Hemingway said if you want to write you've got to know when to leave journalism behind and go into books. Over the years, I had written a lot as a special correspondent and a special writer and as a freelancer. I was very successful as a freelancer writing for a lot of magazines. I kept going. But I was ready to write something more substantial. I thought about what Hemingway said and it was time for me to write a book. So I was here and I was looking around. My brother-in-law, James Fitzgerald, one of Suzanne's three brothers-I had known him since he was in college back in Columbia-he had spent a summer with Suzanne from his college in Colorado. He went to college with Dewey Bartlett as a matter of fact at Regis. Jimmy was working in publishing in New York. He had worked for *The New York Times* publishing and he was a senior editor then at Doubleday. He was out visiting with his daughters. It was Christmas and we had family here. Typically, I would rent a van and we would go on little trips. One morning I took them to Woolaroc and they all flipped over it. We drove around Bartlesville and then we went back down here in a little park having coffees and cookies or something. It was a bright winter day. Jimmy said, "I know you're looking to do a book. I don't think there are any books on these Phillips boys. I think this is a tremendous story." I said, "Really?" I thought about that. He said, "Well, write a proposal and send it to Doubleday, send it to Bill Barry the publisher of Doubleday." I said, "I don't have an agent." He said, "That's okay, it'll come." Jim goes back to New York after the holidays and he was in the Doubleday office. Bill Barry the second in command of this whole huge firm, this great Irishman walks into Jim's office and says, "Jim, here's this package. I meant to give this to you before the holidays. We got this from a man named John Phillips out in Arizona. He's the grandson of Frank Phillips, the fellow who started Phillips Petroleum in Oklahoma. This is tremendous. He has some diaries from his grandmother in here. Look at these photos and all of this information."

We think this could be a great biography, but we need a writer.” (Laughter) See, I’m half-Irish. Jim was for it so he told me what to do. He said, “Call John Phillips and talk to him. Show him some of your writing.” We did that. He loved me. I wrote a great proposal and sent it on to Doubleday and they said they would publish it. They assigned Jimmy as my editor and I wrote *Oil Man*. It’s still one of Suzanne’s favorite books, but it’s the book that launched my book writing career. It did very well for Doubleday and then it went into a trade paperback edition with St. Martin’s. So after that, after I had toured that book and did publicity, then I got an agent. My first agent was Carol Mann. She was my agent for some years. As often happens, I moved to another agent and then finally some years ago, Jim Fitzgerald who ended up at St. Martin’s and then ended up with 28 years as an editor, decided to become an agent. So, I left the agent I was with, Michael Carlisle, and I went to Jim Fitzgerald, which has been an interesting relationship working with your brother in law. It sometimes can get contemptuous. We sometimes are like two big bull seals fighting on the rocks but basically we have done very well together. That was my first book and in the spring my 15th and 16th books are coming out.

JE: The official title is *Oil Man: The Story of Frank Phillips and the Birth of Phillips Petroleum*

MW: Yeah.

JE: Then you’ve gone on to write *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West*.

MW: Right.

JE: *Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd*, you went on to *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People and Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation*. I would encourage those who are listening to this to check out all of these books including *Billy the Kidd*, *The Endless Ride*.

MW: And of course my second book, which is still very much in print *Route 66 The Mother Road*.

Chapter 13 - 4:48

Route 66

John Erling: Route 66-let’s talk about that.

Michael Wallis: Okay.

JE: You’ve written one book *Oil Man*, so your second book was *Route 66*?

MW: Yes. *Route 66* has always been on my mind, because I was very familiar with Route 66.

Remember, I grew up near an original alignment of the highway. I sold newspapers on the highway. It was the highway we took, one version or another, to go see relatives. We took it on a big yellow school bus to go see Lincoln sites and Springfield, Illinois, to Lincoln's tomb, to go west on the classic Western journey as a kid. Seeing my first Cowboys and Indians, seeing my first pump jacks, eating my first enchiladas, seeing the neon and the outlaw hideouts, The Grand Canyon, all of this. So, it was all part of my psyche. I did my first courting on Route 66, you know in a 1955 Savoy black Plymouth, stick shift. As a young reporter, I covered the good, the bad and the ugly on 66. I've lived in seven of the eight states. The only one I haven't lived in is Kansas where there are less than 14 miles (of Route 66). So with all of that in mind, when Route 66 was officially decertified over the decades from the mid-50s when Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act it took to the mid-80s. By 1985, when the last shields went down, people were talking about the road in the past tense. As I'm writing *Oil Man* and thinking about the next book, I'm thinking why are they doing this? I know my road's still out there. Eighty-five percent of it is still there, and it is. I knew that Ted Drewes was up in St. Louis serving up frozen custard and that Angel Delgadillo in Seligman, Arizona was cutting here in that old barber chair and that Lillian Redman was switching on the Blue Swallow neon in Tucumcari and that The Rock Café in Stroud, Oklahoma was still serving up Mom's meatloaf. I thought this is ridiculous. So I talked to my then agent, to Bob Weil who became my editor at St. Martin's Press and has stayed with me all of these years. He's now over at W.W. Norton. Bob thought it was great and I wrote *Route 66: The Mother Road* published in 1990 and that book sparked and ignited a Renaissance that continues to this day—close to one million copies have sold.

JE: I think that it is important to point out here that there is a difference between travelers and tourists.

MW: That's right.

JE: And you were a great traveler.

MW: Even when I was traveling with tourists I was a traveler.

JE: So what is the difference between travelers and tourists?

MW: To put it in a nutshell, it's this. To be a traveler you need to be a bit of a risk taker. You have to totally shun the word predictable. If you like the predictable, if you like the overly familiar, if you want the generic, stick to being a tourista. But if you are interested at all in getting off the beaten path, of trying something new, of slipping off that off ramp. William Blake, the English poet, he has a quote and I'm going to kind of paraphrase it. Roads of improvement are straight roads, but the crooked roads are the roads of genius. So I look out for crooked roads. Route 66 is such a road. My road. The Mother Road. As a son of Route-66 that's why I go back to this highway, that's why I wrote that book, which

is unabashedly a love letter not only to the highway but more importantly to the people who are still out there on that highway.

JE: So it was a combination of the fact that you were a good writer, but she were also a traveler, so those two sides of you came together.

MW: I've always been a traveler. You know, I've always been kind of Gypsy-footed. I grew up in Missouri and like many Missourians I looked west down the immigrant trails- down the Santa Fe Trail, down the Oregon Trail, down Route 66. I have always looked to the West. As an established writer, I've more or less declared my major as the great trans-Mississippi American West. That's primarily where all of my professional experience has been, from Guadalajara to Calgary and all of that space in between. Not only the past, but the present as well, the contemporary American West, the pop culture American West, the biography, the history, the grit-the good, the bad and the ugly.

Chapter 14 - 5:31

Cyrus Avery

John Erling: Route 66 was once known as America's Main Street

Michael Wallis: Yes.

JE: Why did it earn that title?

MW: There was a gentleman, who like me was an adopted Tulsan, named Cyrus Stevens Avery. He came from Pennsylvania. He became a very prominent business and civic leader in Tulsa where he set up shop. He became part of what was called the "good roads movement" as cars became more and more affordable for the common man and woman, schoolteachers, clerks, farmers, thanks to mass production and Henry Ford could afford a car. It wasn't just a novelty for the rich anymore. We needed more roads. We didn't have very many paved roads. So he started the good roads movement, which ultimately led to the establishment of our first numbered highways. After World War I we probably had about 250 named highways in this country like Lincoln Highway, which I have also written a book about, the Father Road, Times Square to the Golden Gate, 13 states. There was the Jefferson Davis Highway and the Dixie Highway. It goes on and on. But they established to the federal government this network of numbered highways and Avery jumped on it. He became the champion of what became known as Route 66. It was Avery who made sure that it followed the path that it now follows. Including going through his adopted hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, thanks to a

bridge that at that time was 10 years old. The bridge is still standing. It's not usable anymore next to the current bridge that's 66, an Art Deco bridge built in 1916, which 10 years later he used to convince the powers that be—let's bring the road right through Tulsa, to cross the river here and then take it on to the capital city of Oklahoma City. Let's not follow a northern route or a southern route. Let's go this way. It was an incredibly important move. Here you have for the first time a road that was important because it was anchored by two big metropolitan cities Chicago and Los Angeles/Santa Monica-Lake Michigan to the Pacific. Because of the geography, it went on to become very popular with travelers, with tourists and all kinds of people as a route for both pleasure and business and commerce. Through 8 states, 2400+ miles, three time zones and for many reasons it became indelible in the public's mind. Cyrus Avery founded a national Route 66 Association and gave it the name America's Main Street. He put it on everybody's map by 1928, thanks to a Transcontinental Foot Race that he helped put together that became known in slang as the Bunion Derby. It went from Los Angeles to Chicago, the two terminal cities, and then on to New York to Madison Square Garden. It was won, not by one of the great professional runners from around the world that came, but by a part-Cherokee farm boy from Foyil, Oklahoma on the shoulder of Route 66, named Andrew Hartley Payne, Andy Payne. He got \$25,000 and by goodness it was like that event was four Super Bowls rolled into one. It put it on everybody's map. Then 66 immediately went through its various incarnations to the present day.

JE: We might mention that Andy Payne, when he stopped in Tulsa, where did he sleep?

MW: He slept in the Stadium at Lee School.

JE: Lee Elementary?

MW: Lee Elementary.

JE: Cyrus Avery-

MW: The Father of Route 66.

JE: He really wanted highway to be known as Route 60 at one time.

MW: Well, he wasn't vehement about that. That was the number that was assigned and they had already started printing up maps and so forth. But others in the Mid-south wanted that number and there was a great disagreement about this. So ultimately, what happened is they were assigned the number 66. And as soon as Avery considered it, he knew that was the right decision, because even to this day there is something in the way those two 6s kind of roll off the tongue. Sixty-six. People always say, well, they'll admit this is the most famous highway in the United States, arguably the world, because you'll see the (Route 66) shield all over, in Asia and Europe. But why is that? It's for the reasons I said because of the geography and the conduit it became. But it's also because those

of us in the arts immediately turn to 66, writers, poets, photographers, artists of all sorts, musicians, film, television, no other highway had a TV show about it. No other highway had that great anthem that my pal the late Bobby Troup wrote and sold to Nat King Cole. It's been recorded 250 times. *Get Your Kicks on Route 66*. John Steinbeck, my book, Kerouac's *On the Road*, all of it. It's because we turn to it, meaning the community of artists, because of what transpired from 1926 to today in the country and along Route 66, incarnations.

Chapter 15 - 6:33

Pulse of Nation

John Erling: The highway was more than cement and dirt. It was interesting to that art world because of the waitresses and the service station attendants, the wrecker drivers and that type of thing. That's what Route 66 was about. It was about the people.

Michael Wallis: It's about the people. It still is. It's the human experience. But, I've never romanticized Route 66. It can be and you know I'm a romantic. Perhaps I have somewhat, but I'm also very realistic about Route 66. Because I see a crooked road—an historic road, the Lincoln Highway, Route 66, the old Dixie Highway as great barometers. I see them, as I say in my book, as a mirror held up to the nation. You can get a feel. You can take the pulse of the road and get sort of the pulse of the nation. Some times it's good, some times it's bad, some times it's ugly. That was not a romantic journey at all for the thousands of displaced tenant farmers, the Okies, the Arkies, the refugees from the Southern Plains that poured into the highway during the one-two punch of the Depression and Dustbowl to seek new lives in the so-called promised land of California. They were broken people and they were met in many cases on the borders of Arizona and California with spittle, with derision, with Billy clubs, with hatred, yet those good souls for the most part survived and rebuilt their lives all along the road. When you have experiences like that, or experiences of the war years when civilian traffic virtually disappeared everything switched over to armaments. There was tire and gas rationing. You had convoys of troops on the road. Not only on the concrete road, but on the steel road, on the railroads, which is a great ally of 66 all the way out West. So all along the road you had training bases from the Great Lakes to the Pacific. You had Patton training his desert warriors in the Mohave sands right off of 66. Then, when the defeated African Corps and the Italian troops from North Africa, where did

they go? They came back to the prisoner of war camps on Route 66, such as the one in El Reno, Oklahoma, Fort Reno, where today I can still walk amongst the graves of the young German and Italian soldiers who died in prison camp of wounds and disease who lie buried there. Often times I encounter some of their comrades who have come back to pay their tribute. Or up in Miami, Oklahoma where there are the graves of young British Air Cadets who even before we got into the war were training for the battle of Britain and died in accidents. They are buried under Union Jacks along Route 66. So those tremendous upheavals, those tremendous times, those episodes in our history had an impact on the road and vice versa. Then after the war, all of the GIs come home. You had prosperity here. You had people wanting to travel again and show their family where they had trained and where they had been. The baby boom, the housing boom, the car boom, which led to this insane romance with the internal combustion engine and everybody had to have two huge gas-guzzling Detroit sleds with fins. You know, that was the hay day. That was the times of Elvis and poodle skirts and James Dean, but Route 66 is much more than that, than that episode, it's those other episodes. It's what came later through the '60s and the '70s and the decertification and the limbo years until we woke people up and said, "It's still there." And now people are returning and now they are shunning turnpikes. They are shunning the Interstate. They are getting involved with heritage tourism. Let's travel the old road. Let's travel the crooked road. Let's use the Interstate to our advantage, but then let's get off. As I always say many times, life begins at the off ramp. Get off the road, but know that it's not going to be predictable. When you are on the turnpike between Tulsa and Oklahoma City it's predictable. You know you are going to get the golden arches and you know you are going to eat your lunch out of a Styrofoam box and you are going to pump your gas at that pump-it-yourself station and you are going to go in and you are going to see the same junk food. The restroom smells the same. Everything is the same. The people look the same. Everything is the same. It's generic. It's cookie-cutter. It's homogenized. You get on that old road and it ain't predictable. You go into a café and you've not been there before, I say this, you don't know what you're going to get. You might get Ptomaine poisoning. You might just fall to your knees sick. Or you might find a blue-plate special that you would kill your mother for. (Laughter)

JE: As we were talking about the Dustbowl days, we need to acknowledge the fact that because of the Dustbowl, Woody Guthrie wrote a very famous song.

MW: Yeah.

JE: *So Long It's Been Good to Know You*

MW: Well, that is just one and that is a great song. Guthrie truly is a national treasure. Incidentally today, on this very date 83 years ago is when the Star Spangled Banner

became the official national anthem in the United States. It's horribly difficult to sing that song and everybody butchers it. It's hideous the way that some people sing it. But a better anthem would have been *This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land*. I would offer that. I truly appreciate and value the importance of Woody Guthrie.

JE: Elsewhere on this website I have interviewed his daughter and you can hear that and he wrote *This Land Is Your Land* because he didn't care for the song *God Bless America*.

MW: Right.

JE: He didn't think it was down to where the folk were, the people were.

MW: The people and that's what it's all about. He also wrote, besides the Dustbowl ballads and the Depression songs, the traveling music. He wrote the great Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd, which I value very much since I read about Floyd. There's a great line in there, "Some men will rob you with a six-gun, some with a fountain pen." How true, how true.

Chapter 16 - 1:05

Paul McCartney

John Erling: Paul McCartney of The Beatles?

Michael Wallis: Loves Route 66. He's traveled it many times. In fact, I think some of his first trips down Route 66 go back to the 1970s. But he has done it very quietly, perhaps with a companion in a nondescript car. He did it a few years ago and I started getting flooded with emails from both reporters and just plain folks. He started sending me iPhone pictures. It would be McCartney in a bait shop in Missouri or in a cafe entrance in Oklahoma with some good ole boy or good ole girl. They are just wide eyed. Their eyes are as big as pie plates and here is McCartney standing there. As a matter of fact, "they," meaning McCartney's people and some people here tried to get McCartney and I together maybe a year or two ago when he played at the BOK Center. They wanted me to take him out to lunch. He's never made it to lunch at the Rock Cafe in Stroud. He's always driven by when it's too late or too early. Unfortunately, we weren't able to make that happen but we will someday.

Chapter 17 - 8:05**Route 66 Towns**

John Erling: Route 66 enters northeastern Oklahoma on state Highway 7. The first town is Quapaw and then Commerce, Oklahoma, which is the hometown of Mickey Mantle.

Michael Wallis: Mickey Mantle Boulevard.

JE: Obviously, we can't go through every town here. But let's just start out. Quapaw, Commerce and Miami—do you have some comment about those towns?

MW: It's a great entryway. You leave Joplin and you do that little 14-mile run of Kansas through three little towns. That was a great road because out of Joplin on 66 we were able to quench the thirst of a lot of people, a lot of Jayhawkers from Kansas and a lot of Okies, during the days when it was hard to get a drink of hard liquor. That was a good whiskey road to bring it down here. So you cross that border out of Kansas and you run into that town Quapaw, named of course for that tribe there. You are still in that mining country. There are great murals in Quapaw. Then you slip on down and in Commerce, you've got to acknowledge Mantle because Mantle is a true son of 66. His old house that he grew up in is still there. There's Mickey Mantle Boulevard. There are still people living that remember Mick and remember his dad Mutt Mantle and all the kids. Mutt worked in the mines. That's where those boys grew up. He played hardball for the Baxter Springs ballclub. He signed his first contract off Route 66 in Kansas behind the backstop. I still think he probably deep in his heart wanted to be a Cardinal, but he became a Yankee. I always liked Mantle. He had a lot of heart. He had a lot of problems obviously, but he's part of that whole picture. Then you get down there into Miami. I mentioned Miami earlier because it, like Route 66...all these towns have different layers too. I mentioned those young Brits training there during the war. There is still film from 1939 in 1940, these cadets in their uniforms walking down 66 with local girl. They would go to families' homes for Sunday dinner. They would go to the great Coleman Theatre a true gem on 66. It's been beautifully restored, a real iconic structure on 66. They would go there to see the matinee. The ushers in tuxedos, the wonderfully big organ, a stage where Will Rogers twirled his rope and Tom Mix performed. Where Sally Rand danced with fans. Can you imagine her in a small town in Oklahoma and how great it was? And then you just continue that journey in Oklahoma. You have to remember because of Cyrus Avery, because of Woody Guthrie, because of the dust bowl, because of the history here—past, present and the future history—Oklahoma is responsible in large part for the creation of Route 66. I would go so far as to say, that if it wasn't for Oklahoma there would be no Route 66. And to this day we have more miles (of Route 66) than any other state. There

are almost 410 miles blowing and going from Quapaw all the way out to Texola. This Eastern run is just as good as the Western run because you slip down from here and you go through Vinita where they still make the best calf fries in the world, with the possible exception of a joint I know in Claremore. Then you just keep going. You've got Afton. You've got Chelsea, where Will Rogers spent a lot of time, where he also discovered Gene Autry one cold night. Foyil, the hometown of Andy Payne and then at Foyil on a little side road are those great big totem poles, which are great, then Claremore, which is a pretty major town. At one time the highway was called The Will Rogers Highway. You've got all of the Rogers Memorials. You've got the big gun museum. You've got Patti Page Boulevard where you've got a lot of great cafés and a lot of great history there. There's the old Will Rogers hotel right downtown. Then you keep slipping down and you're getting close to Tulsa town now. You slip down and you get to Catoosa. There on your right as you are heading toward Tulsa pops up that big, smiling concrete blue whale that Hugh Davis created as an anniversary gift to his wife. Davis, who was at one time the director of the Tulsa Zoo, had what he called ARK out there, Animal Reptile Kingdom—a big ark-looking structure. They had snakes and alligators. He was always careful not to let them get into the swimming hole. He had this great blue whale. It's still there today. People still stop there today and sort of genuflect on the Mother Road at this place. Right across the street is a concrete block building. It's probably a garage now. It's been different incarnations. It's a plain, vanilla, concrete block building just across from the blue whale that at one time was the home of Chief Hunt. He was Hugh Davis' brother-in-law. He was full-blood Acoma. He left New Mexico and was here in Oklahoma. He had a trading post for a while on 11th Street near the University of Tulsa. He ended up out there (Catoosa) with a great trading post. He was a great jeweler and silversmith. That ring that I wear on my finger, that's his last piece of turquoise. This is his design of that bear claw watch. He's long gone. Not many people would know that. That was where Wolf Robe Hunt was, right in that old concrete block building. Then you scoot in out of Catoosa right by that big Cherokee Casino slip under the super-slab and come into Tulsa now on 11th Street.

JE: We have Hank's Hamburgers, Ike's Chili House, Wayne's Hamburgers, East Side Café.

MW: They are all along one of the alignments or along 66 in Tulsa, whether it's Admiral Place or 11th Street. At one time, it went down into downtown into what is now revitalized, the great Blue Dome District on 2nd Street. There are still many, many edifices, working businesses and recycled buildings existing. All of the great burger joints, the chili parlors, the residences, the churches, the garages, we were so fortunate to save at least that facade on 11th Street of the Warehouse Market. Where, until this year, Lyon's Indian Store was there and now they've moved down into the Blue Dome District. They are still

close to Route 66, but that was due to the folks at Home Depot. They didn't just destroy that big old Warehouse Market with the terracotta façade. It's still there. At the great Cyrus Avery Memorial Route 66 Bridge, which is on the national register (of historic places) that we are looking at out the window. Now on that hill is Cyrus Avery Plaza where the eight flags of Route 66 fly and where this year we are installing a big bronze of Avery in his jalopy with his dog. That hill with the walkover is where the city is going to create what we call the Route 66 Experience. That's where you'll find me in not too many years. That's where my newly formed Route 66 Alliance, a 501C(3) nonprofit dedicated to preserving, protecting and enhancing the whole road, past, present and future will be headquartered. It will be along with the River Parks Offices and some other people in a big built-out dining space on the top floor, an interpretive center and an archive, etc. Then you've got that great run on the remaining hunk of Route 66, Southwest Boulevard, AKA Route 66, which remains to the west side of town. It's the meat and potato side of town. If not for west Tulsa, there would be no Tulsa proper. It never would have been an oil capital because you go through Red Fork and you go through that little cluster of communities on your way down. You parallel to the super-slab and you go down past Frankoma Pottery and into Sapulpa the proper way off the two-lane.

Chapter 18 - 3:10

More Towns

Michael Wallis: Sapulpa Main Street is great all the way down to Oklahoma City is wonderful through that whole just litany of towns, Kellyville and Stroud and the great Rock Café, which is still going and blowing. Chandler, there's a magnificent old interpretive center there and a recycled WPA National Guard Armory. Wellston. Arcadia. In Arcadia, you've got the one-two punch of something old, the 1898 round barn and you've got Pops. I was proud to help with the creation of Pops, a state-of-the-art gas station. It's much more than that. It's got the biggest collection of pop bottles in the world, glass walls and a 66-foot tall neon pop bottle out on the asphalt apron. It's hard to get a seat in Pops. So there you have got the old and the new, which is a perfect blend. The highway always tends to get lost in big cities, so you've got to be careful scooting through Edmond and Oklahoma City, although it will take you right up by the Capitol. Then out through the west through those communities west of Oklahoma City. Yukon, there's a great stop at El Reno where it always smells of fried onion burgers. Past the old Fort to Clinton, a

quintessential Route 66 town and the home of the state Route 66 Museum. Again, it's an institution that I had a hand in and I love it. It's a great museum. The best gift shop on Route 66 and a great interpretive center. Then down in Elk City you've got another museum, totally different. They call themselves the National Route 66 Museum. It's six of one and a half-dozen of the other. They are both different venues and they both offer you something new. But the best museum of all is the road itself because it is still living. As you go west all the way out through Sayre and into Erick where the road is known as Roger Miller Boulevard, who was a great guy who died I think way too young out in Santa Fe. He loved Route 66-his road there crosses with Sheb Wooley Boulevard. Sheb Wooley, a lot of people won't remember but he was a cowboy actor and he wrote the Purple People Eater, which is a remarkable song from the 1950s. There's a Roger Miller Museum and then right off of there is The Old Curiosity Shop. That's a discovery of mine that I found when I was consulting with Pixar and I was introducing them to Route 66. A ne'er-do-well Harley and Annabelle Russell, they are the mediocre music makers and they wear red and white striped tuxedos and they're barefoot. They call them redneck tuxedos. They play music for so many tour buses and tourists and travelers, salesmen and vendors passing through at The Old Curiosity Shop. It's just a great place. Then a little bit farther you are nearing the border in Texola. There's an old jail there and a pretty good beer joint and then you are in the Lone Star State. 410 miles.

Chapter 19 - 7:35

Cars

John Erling: And of course we refer those of you who have listened to this and found that Michael has whet your appetite to get a copy of his book *Route 66: The Mother Road*. That experience led to the animated movie *Cars*.

Michael Wallis: Yes it did.

JE: It's all about cars that talk and there's a love story here. You can quickly give us the plot.

MW: First of all, I was hiding out and doing some writing in Santa Fe years ago and Suzanne found me. She said, "John Lassater from Pixar really wants to talk to you." I returned the call. He said, "Let me bring you out here. I've got something you are going to want to do." I came out to Emoryville in the Bay area and went to that great studio. Immediately fell in love with Lassater in his Hawaiian shirt and short pants. I'd only seen him in long pants at the Academy Awards. I knew if I broke open his chest I would pull out a 10-year-

old boy's heart. He said, "We want to do a movie about a race car that needs to learn to slow down sometimes and smell the flowers. It's got to be on your road. You're the go-to guy for Route 66. So I became their consultant for many years. I took them out on the road and gave them my road. They so got it. If you've seen that movie, it's all about Route 66 and the way we used to travel and the way we travel now. Suzanne and I wrote a book about the making of the movie *The Art of Cars* and they asked me to be the Sheriff of Radiator Springs—a 1949 Mercury. I was proud to provide that voice and now I have just provided it for *Cars 2*, which comes out in June 2011. In June of 2012, Cars land, 12 acres, a re-creation of the village of Radiator Springs will be right next to Disneyland where the Sheriff

will proudly greet you at the gate to make sure that you know that there's no running, no skipping, no lollygagging, no spitting and no tractor tipping.

JE: The *Cars* movie, the original one had Paul Newman?

MW: Yes, Paul Newman was a voice. He was the voice of Doc Hudson. Unfortunately, of course Paul Newman is dead and doesn't appear in *Cars 2*. Also a very important car character was Fillmore the VW Van voice by George Carlin who also passed away. But remarkably, John Lassater, Pixar and the Disney folks found a pretty good matching voice and Fillmore is still in there. I have great stories about all of the other actors in the movie.

JE: Michael Keaton, Richard Petty, Darrell Waltrip, Dale Earnhardt Junior, Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Billy Crystal. Can you share a story, maybe one or two that jumps out at you?

MW: This is a tad shady, but it's a good story. I was having dinner at the world premiere one night with Paul Newman. It was a great opportunity to ask him about his films. You know, Newman wasn't a real big guy. He had those little half glasses on and he was looking over those at me and he had those incredible piercing blue eyes. So I have him telling me about the making of *Hud* and *Cool Hand Luke* and *Hustler* and all of the movies with Redford and all of that body of work. It was just incredible. He said, "Let's talk a little bit about *Cars*." *Cars* was his last film. He said, "You know that scene where Doc Hudson, that's Newman, has the Sheriff, that's me, up on the grease rack? And I am giving you as the town doctor a little examination in your tailpipe, a very delicate, private procedure." I said, "Oh, yeah." He said, "You remember Lightning McQueen comes sliding in like this little intruder into the garage. You look down at him and what do you say?" I said, "Get a good look city boy?" And then we stood him out and I said, "Hope you enjoyed the show." He said, "That was a great scene. I loved that little scene." He said, "But here's something that you need to know and that you need to remember. You are the only man on Earth who could say he had an intimate scene with Paul Newman." (Laughter) That's a great Paul Newman story. (Laughter)

JE: He was a real likable guy wasn't he?

MW: He was an incredible guy. He was very giving. Cheech Marin was not at all what you would think. We had a great conversation about art, literature, politics and history. He collects art and he collects wine. His girlfriend was a Russian virtuoso pianist.

JE: I suppose you didn't meet all of these people, these voices. Everybody (probably) went into the studios and recorded their parts, is that true?

MW: Yes. Everybody went separately, but sometimes we'd pass in the night at the studios. We all met during the premieres and during the whole press review. There was a period there where I bet we did 350 interviews.

JE: Flo's VA Cafe is an interesting landmark. What was the inspiration for it?

MW: People shouldn't be confused. If you're thinking it was The Rock Cafe, it wasn't. The Rock Cafe, the proprietress of The Rock Cafe, Dawn Welch, was the inspiration for Sally, the Porsche at the Cozy Cone Motel. Flo, one of the main inspirations was a woman named Fran from the Midpoint Cafe way out in Adrian, Texas. Her cafe is right at the sign that says "1/2 way to LA, 1/2 way to Chicago." She makes pie that is ambrosia that is called Ugly Crust Pie. We brought to the world premiere some of these people from the road like Sally. So I got to introduce Dawn Welch to Bonnie Hunt who voiced her in the movie. I got to put my two Sallys together there.

JE: There is a story that we take from this. There is the *Find Yourself* song that explains that when you lose yourself that's when you find yourself.

MW: Yeah. That's exactly right. First of all, there's no such thing as getting lost on Route 66. That's what I always tell people. It's not bad to get lost, it's a good thing, because sometimes you find your best adventures, you make your best finds and you truly can find yourself. The music was tremendous from that movie, but my favorite of all the songs was *Our Town* by sweet baby James (Taylor) because that comes in that pivotal scene where Sally has Lightning up on that mesa and she says, "This is the way we used to travel." And there you see that map with the crooked road honoring the land. Then you see the super slab, the Interstate just plowing right through the mesas and everything else. Then it goes back in time and you see Radiator Springs as it was and sweet baby James is singing about *Our Town*.

JE: And there been spin offs from this, videos Tokyo Mater and Cars Race-o-rama, Model Cars.

MW: I have signed so many, many pieces of Sheriff merchandise from cars to shirts to boxes of food with the Sheriff on it, to I'm sad to say, diapers, Sheriff's disposable diapers. I will never sign a soiled diaper, (chuckle) but I have signed some of the others.

JE: Two Oscar nominations came out of this?

MW: That's right.

JE: Many other awards...that's been experienced because your speaking voice certainly got you there. They didn't put you in there just because you were a consultant. It was

because of your speaking voice. You are actually, I think, at a point in your life where you are enjoying speaking as much as you are your writing.

MW: I get as much creative satisfaction out of speaking, that is giving speeches and doing voice work and interviews and whatever as I do out of writing. To me, it's just another form of articulation.

Chapter 20 - 6:42

Advice to Writers

John Erling: About writing, students will listen to this because you are first and foremost a writer. Many people think they are writers, but what about a true writer? Is that something inside a person that they have to do? They have to write it down? On VoicesofOklahoma.com I have also talked to the write N. Scott Momaday.

Michael Wallis: He's a great fellow.

JE: We talked about having to write. His parents too were storytellers.

MW: That's right.

JE: Momaday also is a voice person, so there are similarities here between the two of you.

MW: They have always been trying to match Momaday and I up to do some public readings. Unfortunately because of his health now, it's never come about but I have a high regard for him.

JE: What makes a writer? We all write and we think we are writers. But what makes a true writer?

MW: I think a lot of it is innate, but a lot of it is acquired along the way. If you look at my life and I've tried to spell out for you the different little landmarks and apexes, different high points that I can trace back that really impacted me and convinced me that this was the way to go. And yes, I got very early on to the point that I knew deep in my heart and in my soul and deep in my bones that I could only be a writer. This is difficult to explain. A lot of writers will tell you this and it's very interesting, yet often times you will do everything you can in your power to keep from writing. You will let yourself get sidetracked. There are lots of seductions. It could be the Internet. It could be friends. It could be the phone. Sometimes you even doubt yourself and you think, God, they are going to catch on to me here-this is really junk. That's okay. It's okay to question yourself and test yourself and have doubts. But ultimately, in the long run that's what I do. I think really first and foremost I am a storyteller, but for me, first came the written word.

First came the written word and then the spoken word. I fully plan to hopefully, many years from now to fall over dead writing. I don't know what we'll be writing on then and whether it will be a keyboard, or who knows, but that's how I plan to go.

JE: Have you ever just poured over your keyboard and just nothing comes in a day? Or maybe just one sentence and that was it for the day?

MW: Well, sort of. I'm not so sure I believe in what they call writer's block. I'm not going to question that. If people say they have it, I'm sure they do. What I try to do is get down what I can. Now, with that said, this quote is attributed to a lot of people but I think the main source of this quote was Red Barber. "Yes, writing is easy. You just sit down at your typewriter and you open a vein." And that's what it's like for me. Writing is hard. It is hard work. And you're right, everybody thinks, oh I could write a book. They come up to me and say, "I could write a book." Or they tell me the book I should write which is usually about their grandfather. I always say, "Be my guest." But they don't realize they might as well come up to me and say, "Oh, I'm going to start in the outfield for the Cardinals." Be my guest. That's how difficult it is. That's how difficult it is to become a real writer. It's not gauged by how much money you make, or even how much you're published. It's what goes on in your heart and soul if that's what you're committed to, day in and day out, year after year.

JE: Can you write several pages and then go back and say, that's really not any good and can you then throw those away?

MW: Usually that doesn't happen. I constantly rewrite as I write. Constantly, and when I finish... say I write three or four pages, now remember I am writing mostly nonfiction, so it's very difficult for me to get writer's block. The people that usually get writer's block are writing fiction. But I write very carefully. Sometimes I have big bursts, but the point is, when I finish for the day and I know I'm done, the first thing I do the next morning is I go right back to where I started and I go over it again and I rewrite it. Most of the time I am always reading it out loud. I want to hear it. I want to hear how it sounds. I want to hear if it sounds true or not.

JE: Do you need somebody immediately, like at the end of the day?

MW: No, the only person that reads anything I write before it's published is Suzanne. When I am done with something I give it to her to read because I trust her to be objective and true.

JE: How do you take criticism?

MW: Well, unless it's just totally stupid, I don't mind it. Sometimes criticism is good.

JE: You've had three brushes with a Pulitzer Prize?

MW: Yes, *Route 66: The Mother Road*, *Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd* and the third one was *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*.

JE: As we sit here in March 2011, you have two books that are about to come out.

MW: Yes, in May. One is coming out from W.W. Norton, my newest publisher who I published *Billy The Kidd* with and my Lincoln Highway book with my great editor Bob Weil. This book that is coming out in May 2011 is a biography of Crockett. Mr. Crockett, David Crockett. He never signed his name Davy. The title is *David Crockett: The Lion of The West*. It's a complete, thorough biography of this figure from American folklore, who does not really bear any resemblance at all to the character that so many of us from the Boomer generation met in the late '50s a la Walt Disney and Fess Parker. So that's that book and I am very excited about it. The other book I wrote with the help of my wife Suzanne. I did all the writing, but she was such a help with research and with working with our picture editor Robert McCubbin from Santa Fe who has the world's finest private collection of Western photography. I made sure that her name is also on the cover, *The Wild West 365 from Abrams*. This book kind of looks like an adobe brick, it's a very interesting trim size. As I like to say, if you read this book, which cover the Wild West from 1830 to 1930, you'll have the equivalent to a master's degree in American West history.

Chapter 21 - 3:11

Michael Reads

John Erling: Let's hear you read as we finish our interview here because this is an overview I guess you could say of Oklahoma.

Michael Wallis: It is.

JE: It comes from?

MW: It comes from a book entitled *Way Down Yonder In The Indian Nation*. It's been through several incarnations. It's still very much in print from the University of Oklahoma Press. In fact, this book is used in various schools including the Honors English program at Oklahoma State University as one of their texts. There are 20 essays of mine, *Writings from the Heartland* that cover everything in here from ghosts to barbecue to Woody Guthrie and on and on. My first essay is entitled *Searching for Hidden Rhythms in Twilight Land*. It's about the lack of self-identity of Oklahoma. I am often asked to read these first couple of paragraphs. I think it's sort of sums up the Oklahoma that I have come to know. "Oklahoma is tallgrass prairie and everlasting mountains. It is secret patches of ancient earth tromped smooth and hard by generations of dancing feet. It is

the cycle of song and heroic deed. It is calloused hands. It is the aroma of rich crude oil fused with the scent of sweat and sacred smoke. It is the progeny of an oil-field whose wed to a deacon; the sire of a cow pony bred with a racehorse. It is a stampede, a pie supper, a revival. It is a wildcat gusher coming in. It is a million-dollar deal cemented with a handshake. Oklahoma is dark rivers snaking through red, furrowed soil; lakes rimmed with stone bluffs. It is the ghosts of proud Native Americans, crusading Socialists, ambitious cattle kings, extravagant oil tycoons, wily bandits. It is impetuous and it is wise. A land of opportunists, resilient pioneers, and vanquished souls, the state is a crazy quilt of contradictions and controversies, travails and triumphs. It has been exploited and abused, cherished and fought over. It is a puzzling place. Forever, Oklahoma is American through and through.”

JE: How would you like to have people either know you today or remember you in the future?

MW: I would like them to know me first and foremost as I have said as a storyteller and a pretty good one at that. I would like them to know that everything that I stand for or care about can be revealed in one way or another in the work that I am leaving and that I plan to leave behind.

JE: Very good. You’ve been great. I thank you very much. You are a great storyteller and I thank you.

MW: You know if you have a passion for something...

JE: It was obvious.

MW: Yeah.

Chapter 22 - O:27

Conclusion

Announcer: As you have listened to Michael Wallis tell you his story, you no doubt have become interested in the stories that inspired Michael to write his many books, which can be purchased in our bookstore. We invite you to visit his website michaelwallis.com. We pay tribute to the generous foundations listed in our sponsor section who support this Oklahoma oral history website, VoicesofOklahoma.com.