

## Robert L. Parker

A love of languages took her to D.C in 1944 to do her part in the WWII effort as a code-breaker for the FBI.

### Chapter 01—1:03

#### Introduction

---

**Announcer:** Robert L. (Bob) Parker Sr., a Tulsa native, graduated from Culver Military Academy in Indiana and earned a B.S. degree in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Texas. In 1954 he purchased Parker Drilling from his father, an Illinois farmer, who had founded the company 20 years earlier. Serving as president, Mr. Parker took the company public in 1969 and was elected chairman and chief executive officer. In 2006 Robert Parker became chairman emeritus of the company.

Under his leadership, Parker Drilling became a world leader in deep drilling and is known for having opened China and the Soviet Union to Western drilling techniques. His role as a petroleum leader was recognized when then-President Ronald Reagan tapped him to be the chairman of the U.S. Energy Policy Task Force.

Among Bob Parker's many honors, he is also a distinguished alumnus of the University of Texas and is a member of the Petroleum Hall of Fame.

### Chapter 02—6:55

#### Parkers to Oklahoma

---

**John Erling:** Today's date is April 8, 2009. If you will, state your name, age, and date of birth.

**Bob Parker:** This is Bob Parker, Robert L. Parker, I'm eighty-five, date of birth is July 16, 1923.

**JE:** Where were you born?

**BP:** Tulsa, Oklahoma.

**JE:** What hospital?

**BP:** It was in Morningside.

**JE:** And then your education, your elementary school?

**BP:** I went to Barnard and then Wilson and then moved to Culver Military Academy for my high school.

**JE:** Oh really? How did that come about?

**BP:** My father said it was great to get that kind of discipline and to find out if you knew what you were being taught in school. I had a brother and he preceded me so we both went to Culver.

**JE:** So you graduated high school there?

**BP:** Yes. Graduated high school there and went to University of Texas.

**JE:** Was that because your family was in Texas?

**BP:** Two reasons, my father was very interesting in engineering, petroleum engineering. There weren't many schools at that time that had petroleum-engineering department. Texas did. The head of it was a friend of his that formerly ran Gulf Oil Company here in Tulsa, so there were connections there. And he just thought it would be extra good for us to go there.

He also told us we'd be studying with people we'd meet later in the oil industry. It would be good to know them since that was kind of a gathering of Houston and Dallas and Austin, why that was one of the other reasons.

**JE:** So that worked out for you. You did—

**BP:** Worked out real well. Yeah.

**JE:** You did meet people.

**BP:** I did meet a lot of people that I still have as friends.

**JE:** So then out of the University of Texas, what happened to you?

**BP:** Along comes World War II. We were given options to leave immediately to go overseas or to stay in school and go summer and winter and then go overseas. And that's the one I chose. During that time they pretty much closed those universities and fraternities were closed and football team was moved away. So you studied pretty hard there for a three-year graduation. And then I went straight overseas.

**JE:** In what branch of the military?

**BP:** I went in as Infantry and ended up in Quartermaster because of the engineering degree in petroleum. And I handled petroleum products over in Germany.

**JE:** You spent most of your time in Germany?

**BP:** Yes, all of my time was there. It was about a year after I went over there. I went to Quartermaster from Army.

**JE:** And then after the military service what happened to you?

**BP:** I was there two years in the total service, not all of it overseas. I came back here and I went immediately to work in the oil fields. Moved to Brookfield, Mississippi.

Now I came back to a wife, I had married just prior to my going overseas. We were married in Texas. I immediately went overseas and she stayed and taught school the whole

time I was there. When I came back I picked her up and away we go to live in the oil fields in Brookhaven, Mississippi.

**JE:** And her name was?

**BP:** Kathryn McDaniel, Sissy.

**JE:** Okay.

**BP:** Sissy McDaniel.

**JE:** How did you meet her?

**BP:** At the University of Texas. Her senior year we met. I didn't have any girlfriend and she didn't have any direct boyfriend and we hit it off real well.

**JE:** Then you raised a family?

**BP:** Yes we raised a family. First of all, her father was in the oil business. He was with Humble Pipeline, which was a very prominent company at that time. I admired him a lot, respected him a lot. We went to Mississippi, we spent a year there and moved to Midland, Texas. So we were working the oil fields there. And in Midland Bobby, our son, was born to us. That was our first child.

After a year out there we moved to Tulsa, working in the safety department of the company. And this was where we had two more children, two daughters. Bob was our first one, Carol was our second one, and Debbie is the third one.

**JE:** So then let's back up, how did the Parker family come to Oklahoma?

**BP:** My father was from Illinois, his family was. Flat Rock, Illinois. He worked on the farm, he used horses to plow. He decided that wasn't much fun. At that time there was some early day in drilling in Illinois. Those people doing the drilling asked him if he wanted to make some money working on a drilling rig up there. Old, old cable to a rig.

He told them yes and then he opted to jump into the oil business, followed it to Glenpool. He came down to the Glenpool boom and started his own company, which was basically water-well drilling. That was the biggest need they had was water-wells. From Glenpool I could cover all the fields, but a million fields all over Oklahoma and Kansas and Texas. Gradually he got in the drilling, buying drilling rigs cable tools. Had a bunch of those and financed a rotary and right on down the line.

**JE:** Your mother's name?

**BP:** Gladys Caroline Parker, she was from Illinois too.

**JE:** Somewhere along the line then he formed the Parker Drilling Company.

**BP:** Right. In Oklahoma they called it Parker Camel and they were drilling then over by Stroud and in that area and Bristow. He bought out Camel, he ended up with Parker Drilling Company. That was cable tools so I don't know how many rigs he had then.

**JE:** Are there names in Glenpool that we would know that he was around? The Getty's had left already, I guess?

**BP:** Yes. We knew all them but we didn't drill for them then. Getty's and Skelly's and Sinclair's were all good friends. But the drilling was done by a company, most of them you don't know of today.

**JE:** So you had interaction or your father did with J. Paul Getty?

**BP:** J. Paul, yes I was with him a lot.

**JE:** You were?

**BP:** Yes I was.

**JE:** Really?

**BP:** Oh yeah. I was with my father many, many times, and with Bill Skelly and with Sinclair. J. Walker, you know, all the big names at that time in Tulsa. I got to be with them a lot, it was an experience.

**JE:** I bet it was.

**BP:** What was J. Paul Getty like?

**JE:** His son always had dogs. They would come to a drilling rig, they'd bring their dogs up on the floor of the drilling rig and look around the rig. Very nice, not real sociable, but nice people. Treated us nice, and they lived a little different life than we did. They were quite well to do.

**JE:** By that time, yes.

**BP:** By that time.

**JE:** So then at that point you were drilling for them?

**BP:** Yes we were.

**JE:** Your rigs were working for them?

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** Bill Skelly, what was his personality like?

**BP:** Bill was one of those likeable, big, old, blustery guys. The same thing of a lot of people in that day. And J. Walker was too. Dad was too. It was a generation of hard working guys, did it themselves and didn't really give a damn about the rest of the world. I learned a lot from them, I liked them. They treated me nice.

I'd sit in meetings like out here at Fairgrounds, Fairboard, that's where they were most active. Man, you'd think they were all going to fight the way they would talk, but they were friends, they respected each other. And I just sat there and listened.

**JE:** And you would have been what age about that time?

**BP:** I was in my teenage years.

**JE:** And you were fortunate that your father brought you along.

**BP:** Very much so.

**JE:** To sit in on meetings like that.

**BP:** Yeah, he was good to me, he sure was.

**JE:** He obviously wanted you to learn from these people.

**BP:** He just thought it would be good for me to learn more about other people. And I did.

## Chapter 03—5:25

### Parker Drilling

---

**John Erling:** When the Parker Drilling Company was formed, I think that was in 1934?

**Bob Parker:** Right.

**JE:** What was the mission then of the company?

**BP:** At that time it was simply to continue making a profit if you could. And to enlarge the company to cover other areas other than Oklahoma. To just grow, just pay your bills and grow. It was not easy.

**JE:** You provided services then for somebody who wanted a well drilled?

**BP:** Yes, contract drilling.

**JE:** You'd come in? You did it all.

**BP:** Yes we did it all.

**JE:** To begin with that was land and you moved to offshore.

**BP:** Much later, much later.

**JE:** There was some pioneering going on in the oil well business then under Parker Drilling Company?

**BP:** Yes there was. But I remember now there was quite an evolution at that time. Cable tool was the key, that's what did most of Oklahoma drilling at that time. We're talking about Oklahoma City fields; we're talking about a lot of the big fields in Oklahoma.

Dad took all the family to Chicago World's Fair and there we saw the first rotary rig we'd seen. A big diesel electric rig and he bought it. I don't know where he got the money but he bought that big rig and it was the showplace of the industry. He brought it into Oklahoma, we had two or three counterparts of that used here at the Tulsa Oil Show. In those years that was a big show that's had here. We'd put the rigs out there and the supply companies would want to have them there for advertisement.

We went to that from steam rigs, that was a common rotary rig, and into the diesel electric, that's what the one from Chicago was. So we gradually built into what's called rotary rigs. They change all the time, new innovations, new style.

From that we went to some offshore rigs, and mostly foreign rigs. Went to those two. So it was kind of an unusual growth.

Dad didn't gradually slow down. He just walked in one day and said, "Can't be two bosses, I'm out of here." Just like that. Nothing else. We hunted together, we fished

together, we were good pals, but he turned the company to me. And that was before I owned the company, that's when I was trying to run it.

**JE:** Then let me bring you back here.

**BP:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** For students who are listening to this, first it was cable. And it was cable that did what?

**BP:** The cable tool was very easy, they constantly pound the ground. There's still a lot of that done, believe it or not.

**JE:** Really?

**BP:** Then you bail out the cuttings. Your problem with a cable tool is if you find a good well you can't stop it, it's coming to see you. So we had many, many blowouts. It was dangerous.

**JE:** So your father, did he take a big gamble then when he saw those diesel electric powered—

**BP:** Big, big gamble. Big gamble. Las Vegas doesn't know what gambling is. You know, it was big, that was his life, he did that. He believed in it.

**JE:** Took those chances?

**BP:** Yes sir.

**JE:** And that cost him big dollars?

**BP:** Big dollars. Yes sir, it did.

**JE:** Back then. And it was the talk of Tulsa when he brought it here.

**BP:** Yes it was. Yes it was. And it was the bank's big dollars too. There was a lot of people involved in those.

**JE:** Did your father feel the fear of the unknown? Or was he one that felt pressure every day?

**BP:** Didn't seem to bother him. He lectured us all the time on not spending money like a lot of people in that generation. Turn out the lights in the house. When you go, every door in the house had to be closed and things that then were very normal to conserve everything you could.

And you know about the ten cents movies and all that that we went through. The Depression. He went through that and his whole thing there was just work as hard as you could. That's what he did to keep the bills paid. And he passed that on to us. It was good education.

**JE:** Days of the Depression, I guess—

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** ...didn't effect anything that he did and his business was not effected by it.

**BP:** No we stayed in there but it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy it was tough. And a lot of people that we knew that we drilled for went bankrupt. We had a lot of turnover in the oil industry at that time.

**JE:** Where there any times during the Depression where you felt he wondered whether he was going to make it or not?

**BP:** I have no way of knowing. He never shared those worries with me.

**JE:** In the mid-40s then, was this branching out into the international market?

**BP:** Right.

**JE:** Talk to me about that.

**BP:** He moved rigs and people to Canada and to Venezuela. That was the first overseas work that we had. Dad moved those two areas and had good customers there, good friends and worked about four or five years there and then sold them. By selling them you could have a profit.

He was very anti-tax. That had much to do with his disenchantment with not just the drilling business, any business. More and more and more he saw himself and us working for the government. You think it's bad now he thought it was horrible then and it really was good. But at the time he thought it was impossible.

**JE:** Where there, because he was in Venezuela and then in Canada, tax advantages then? By working in those countries?

**BP:** Only by selling.

**JE:** Okay.

**BP:** Capital gains. He told me all my life, "You'll never make any money on a per day basis. You'll make it by selling your companies at different levels." That was what he did, and he did well in Canada. And selling that company was a growing and successful company. Did the same thing in Venezuela, then came home in both cases with quite a bit of money.

**JE:** So on a daily basis it was just to survive?

**BP:** That's it.

**JE:** Make the payroll?

**BP:** Make the payroll.

**JE:** Pay for the supplies?

**BP:** That's exactly right.

**JE:** And if you could break even?

**BP:** Hallelujah.

**JE:** Hallelujah.

**BP:** That's right.

**JE:** And sometimes he didn't.

**BP:** That's right, sometimes he didn't.

**Chapter 04—5:15****Bob Buys Parker**

---

**John Erling:** Then it was in 1954, I believe, that you purchased the company. Was that the year then when he came in and said, “It’s yours”?

**Bob Parker:** No it was before then. I was running it when I bought it. When I say running it, you know, he was there, but he wasn’t there. He couldn’t have been nicer but we never talked business, ever. We talked hunting and fishing and things like that. Spent a lot of time together but we didn’t talk business. I guess two generations differences. His was hard work. His and Bill Skelly and J. Walker. Now their whole generation was to outwork the other guy. More hours and hard work.

My generation was people. Do your best to develop good people, morale high, take care of them and see what they can produce. So there was a difference there and that was our two different philosophies. They didn’t conflict but they made a difference.

During that time I had a brother, if you remember, Gifford Parker Jr., we called him.

**JE:** Okay.

**BP:** Gifford C. Parker. And two sisters. Our dad decided he wanted to sell the company. He had four kids and he was trying to decide how to do it fairly and he called us together and he said, “I’m going to put the company up for sale to the market, the largest drilling company is here. If any one of you want to try to keep it then you’ve got to buy it at the highest bid.” And he said, “Now I don’t think any of you have that kind of money and I don’t think any of you should do it. It’s not a good business. I recommend you not be in the drilling business but that’s up to you.”

Well, I was the only one that was really interested in the drilling business so I went to the National Bank of Tulsa and Mr. Chapman, who was a good friend. And I said, “Here’s what he’s asked me.” I said, “I have no idea if I can pay you back or not but I’m going to try to do this.” And they loaned me the money and I bought it.

**JE:** And your father had to be surprised.

**BP:** Just amazed and wondered why I could be that dumb.

**JE:** But you had worked as common laborer for a while.

**BP:** Oh yes I—

**JE:** In the oilfields.

**BP:** I rough-necked on the rigs and drilled and pushed tools, yes, I worked. When he put me in the oil fields there was no Mr. Parker, you just were a roughneck and you earned it. They knew you were there but you had to learn the business that way, and I did.

**JE:** All right, so then you get this loan from National Bank of Tulsa. What a gamble that was.

**BP:** Big gamble. I didn’t know any difference; I was too young.



**JE:** So you get this loan and then you started into the business. You probably came up with some new drilling techniques.

**BP:** Yeah but in fact, just a little prior to that happening I went to the University of Texas and I was sitting in my classroom on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. One of my fraternity brothers came in and said, "I guess you've heard the news?"

I said, "Sure I've heard it." It was Pearl Harbor everywhere.

After the class was over the teacher of the class said, "I'm sorry about your brother."

That was the news that he had been killed in a car wreck the night before. I didn't know it, so that was the news they came in to tell me and I waved it off 'cause I thought it was Pearl Harbor. Anyway, that's when I lost my brother.

**JE:** Where was that accident?

**BP:** It was at Bastrop, which is a town near Austin. He went to sleep driving back from Houston where he'd had a late date. And hit a bridge and killed himself.

**JE:** Oh my.

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** Devastating to the family.

**BP:** Devastating.

**JE:** To you.

**BP:** So I had to fly back his body, which I had never done, and bring it to Tulsa. What might be of interest to people, Mother could handle it, Dad couldn't. He couldn't handle it at all, so he didn't show up anywhere for about two or three years. He never would go back in the church. The funeral just wiped him out.

We're all different but that was the first time, I guess, he'd ever seen anything he couldn't do himself.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Couldn't control it.

**BP:** Couldn't control it.

**JE:** He remained in a deep depression then, obviously.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** Did he come out of it, before his life ended?

**BP:** He came out of it but not in business wise. He came out of it intending to hunt and fish and became very active in the Fair Board. That was one of the main things in the oil companies. He even bought some cattle ranches and followed the cattle. And then developed cancer, and the cancer is what finally killed him.

**JE:** Hmm. Did you ever get interested in the cattle business, yourself?

**BP:** No, I loved the outdoors but he loved registered cattle. I still have cattle ranchers and I still go a lot to them, but I'm not an expert on cattle and have good help and I try not to be an expert in something I'm not.

**JE:** I'm taken with when your father went through those three years there. But you'd go to visit him. It had to be difficult for you to—would he visit? Was he open to you and talk to you a lot?

**BP:** Oh yes, oh yeah, yeah. But in those days a lot of things were happening in this country and the television had just come in. And he didn't think it was here to stay. But he would watch boxing, that was one of the main things on television. And he would watch it by the hour. So when I would go to see him and Mother in the evening he would watch his boxing while we all visited around him. That's just his personality.

**JE:** Was he interested in asking you questions about How's the business going?

**BP:** No. No.

**JE:** Are you failing? Are you surviving?

**BP:** Never, never brought it up.

**JE:** Is that right?

**BP:** Just like I'm counting on you.

## Chapter 05—3:20

### Parker International

---

**John Erling:** So you have purchased the company and then you came up with some new drilling techniques.

**Bob Parker:** Yes, remember now we were back home. The rigs were out of Venezuela, out of Canada, and that's when I started moving rigs back to foreign countries. Bolivia, Canada, places that we'd been before I expanded greatly on international. I did that because we could make more money there. It was that simple.

**JE:** Because it was not as costly?

**BP:** No it was costly but you'd get paid a lot more for the same rig and the same people. So your daily income was nearly double what it was for rigs here in Oklahoma, places like that. So we found it to be highly lucrative. It brings problems and brings people problems, travel problems, some government problems, but that's part of business. And we had to work with those.

And you probably remember the Wishard Lemons story because we had so many drilling crews around the world a long ways from their wives and their families. And I was greatly worried about their behavior because that involves safety on a drilling rig.

**JE:** And I'm going to bring that up, I'm going to talk about Wishard.

**BP:** All right. That'd be fine.

**JE:** Did your company, while you were always serving others, so to speak—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** ...you were drilling for others, did your company explore yourself for oil?

**BP:** No. Never.

**JE:** And why is that?

**BP:** We had an agreement with our customers who were the big oil companies. I had talked to them about that and they said, "Why don't you stay in the drilling and we'll stay in the oil?"

It ties into so many things, but let's take the North Slope of Alaska and the North Slope where we were very big. Every lease had value to its secrecy. It was re-bid and re-bid and re-bid and you cannot believe the security that existed in Alaska on every well. They made it clear that we were never, ever to get involved in anything, a lease or a production, in Alaska if we were going to do their drilling. They had to trust us. They always have and it's never changed.

**JE:** Because you would have had insider information.

**BP:** Inside information that would be very valuable to someone else. And it would be information they paid for. That's why we didn't do it.

**JE:** What were the companies then that you were drilling for?

**BP:** These were companies different than today a little bit, British Petroleum, Atlantic, Exxon, still different names there depending on what country you're in. There weren't too many on the slope. You ran a lot of rigs for one company is what you did. Arco was our biggest customer in Alaska. Then there was Sinclair, right here out of Tulsa, and we drilled our first wells for them.

You couldn't get rigs, there were no rigs in Alaska, and you couldn't get them up there. It was kind of like the Oklahoma land run, it was kind of a mad dash on how we can accomplish this.

At that time Sinclair was based right here and the head of it was Dan Alman. Dan just said, "You got to help me and I'll help you."

So we went up and bought a big portion of Alaska Airlines. We bought it because they had Hercules Aircraft and that's what it took to move rigs to the North Slope of Alaska. So we kind of cornered the market for a while. We were able to move rigs up there pretty fast, a bunch of them, while the others could not. We stayed with Alaska for fifteen or twenty years and they were good people. I'm talking about the airlines. That proved to be good, very happy.

**JE:** Your father never thought that you're going to end up buying an airline.

**BP:** No, no, I was afraid to ask him about that one.

---

**Chapter 06—4:00**  
**Parker Goes Public**

---

**Bob Parker:** But in between there that's a great big step and that was to go public. Because to go public you give up a lot of personality of your company. And yet that's where you get the financing to grow your company. You couldn't get it in BOK here or in smaller banks, you had to have big New York money.

**John Erling:** Right.

**BP:** So we took our little story that we had to New York, I did, one day, and I was dumbfounded by the success of going public. So I came home with a bunch of money and public and over half the company. I had a happy day, one of the happiest in my life.

I called together all of our top employees and handed them enough money where they were wealthy for most of their lives.

**JE:** Wow.

**BP:** And it was just a real thrilling example, I'll never forget it.

**JE:** Was there some fear and trepidation as you went to New York?

**BP:** Yeah, yeah, I was scared to death. I didn't have any idea what I was doing. Yeah.

**JE:** Do you remember who you first approached?

**BP:** Yes, I chose a fellow, I can't think of his name now but I got his name from Charlie Thornton. He was reading a paper. Charlie and I were good friends and he recommended this fellow. And he was good and he opened the doors for us and it all worked. They were hungry for investments and energy at that time. I was too.

One of the humorous stories is that after I got paid a bunch of money that day in a check, I never had money like that, and I needed a haircut. So I walked downtown. The first thing I did was go to a barbershop in New York and get a haircut. Man, did they scalp me, I just looked awful. So I come home that night with my money and no hair.

**JE:** What a great day that was for you!

**BP:** Yes it was, it was a super day.

**JE:** But your story was strong because how many rigs did you have working?

**BP:** Twenty.

**JE:** Tell us what you told them.

**BP:** In New York?

**JE:** Yes.

**BP:** I told them that we had twenty rigs and we were going to probably double the company. We saw that much business coming in but I wanted to be able to finance and I didn't have the money to do it. We had a good track record and they would have to bet on our integrity and

whether or not they thought we were the right kind of people to do that with. They liked it.

Now along comes at that time, which had a lot to do with this, Amchitka. Now Amchitka is the Aleutian Islands. We had received a contract from the United States government to do all of the atomic testing on the Aleutian Islands. No one has ever done it. We had to create drone rigs that were larger than the world. We had to go up there and work in those areas of Alaska out on the Aleutians. It opened doors for us worldwide because it was a first. And we tried to build our reputation on a first.

But my point is we brought back some big earnings from that operation and that really intrigued the New York investors.

**JE:** That was with the United States Atomic Energy Commission that you landed that contract?

**BP:** Yes sir. Yes, we went from there after three or four years to Las Vegas, that's called Nevada Test Site, and continued doing work there. All the work was it was drilling these huge holes and then testing these devices down underground so they wouldn't vent into the atmosphere. Now I know the headlines now are different, but that's when I concluded there never would be a nuclear war. It was too awful.

**JE:** Yeah. Did they reach out to you? The US Atomic Energy Commission?

**BP:** Yes. You know how I got that? University of Tulsa. Instantly I chaired the board at the University of Tulsa for a few years when Mac McClinic passed away unexpectedly. He was the head of the bank here. So I was chairman of that and they had a lot of respect for our company. Since Tulsa was the oil capital of the world Washington came to the university and said, "Who should we talk to about this massive program?" And it was from them that we got our reference. It was a big, big help.

**JE:** But here you are a loyal University of Texas grad.

**BP:** Yes I am.

**JE:** What are you doing at TU? How did that come about?

**BP:** And in the famous night was at Southern Hills when I was head of the fundraiser for the University of Tulsa and I made a wonderful pitch, you would have loved it. "Please, we need support for the University of Texas." I mean, it came out, I could not help it.

But anyway, both are good schools and I enjoyed both.

## Chapter 07—2:15

### Deep Drilling

---

**John Erling:** I'm bringing you back to technology that you developed as you took over the company. Deep drilling technology, I think about, what was that?

**Bob Parker:** Yes. That was a choice then to whether to go offshore big time like Reading Bates and other companies or to go deeper on land. And we opted to go deeper on land and we were not one of the first ones offshore to do that. We had to build rigs that were larger and pumps that were larger, hydraulics that were larger, everything had to be designed for at that time twenty thousand-foot drilling. We thought that was deep. There were no rigs for that then so we pioneered that. And it was very productive, that became a very strong business. And we started building twenty thousand-foot rigs. Today they're forty thousand-foot, but that's what we started.

**JE:** You were a leader in the industry by doing that.

**BP:** We were a leader in the industry. At the same time, people were still looking for oil now, worldwide, and they couldn't get into the jungles around the world where they wanted to drill. That's when we developed what's called a TBA, Transportable by Anything, it's a helicopter rig. So we kind of monopolized the world on that.

We built thirty of those and they were busy, busy, busy for years and years. We still have a lot of them. Those were rigs you fly in—

**JE:** By helicopter?

**BP:** By helicopter and find out if the oil's there. Service it and do it all by helicopter. And there's still a lot at play where a road cost more than drilling a well. We do that in Alaska too, or a lot of places it's a day we do it. It just depends on the economics of the thing on the table.

**JE:** So you would have been the first in the industry to develop the helicopter technology?

**BP:** Yes, and let me correct it to this extent. There were two or three that had built aluminum light rigs, I don't know who they were, and they failed. They weren't drillable when you got them there. We opted not to use aluminum rigs, to build heavy, steel, strong rigs, but design them in components where they could be flown and used by helicopters. Meaning that when you landed the rig it would drill. It was a good, tough rig. That's what was successful, that was a change. And it was in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, all parts of that part of the world.

**JE:** Did you have accidents? Helicopter accidents?

**BP:** Not, not, we never had a helicopter accident. You always have accidents in the drilling business but we did not have a helicopter accident.

## Chapter 08—2:12

### Peru

---

**John Erling:** '70s and '80s you introduced changes in the area of arctic drilling.

**Bob Parker:** Before that I was sitting in my office on a Memorial Day weekend and had a call from Peru. The Vice President of Energy of Peru wanted to see me that day, on Memorial

Day. I was irked. I had planned with the family, had planned to go other places, didn't want to meet with anybody else. I'd met with too many of them, I knew it was just a waste of time.

Anyway, I was there in my office and he comes walking in, salutes, all neat and nice looking. Bowed down and said, "Mr. Parker, I'm up here to see you for two reasons. I want to see Oral Roberts University because I want to see the architecture of it so Peru can build something like that in Peru. But the main reason is I want you to come drill in Peru because we've just expropriated Exxon for reasons we think are right and they don't. So we need someone too come back into our country to show confidence that we're okay."

**JE:** So they said they didn't want Exxon there?

**BP:** They said that was their business with Exxon.

**JE:** They moved them out?

**BP:** Yeah. And now remember, Exxon is an oil company and we're a drilling company. But they said, "Your reputation is good, real good, and if we can get you to come to Peru others will too, like Halliburton and people like that."

I said, "Well, that's a great talk, can you pay for it?"

"Not a penny." He said, "We don't have any money, we're broke. And we're asking you to do that on faith. You come down there and help us and we'll help you. You just got to believe that we believe in Peru. We know there's oil there."

And I said, "Well, then I've got to do two things. One, I have to call Exxon and make sure they're not going to be upset with us. And number two is, I've got to call the bank." And both of them said yes. The bank said, "Go." Exxon said, "Go, doesn't bother us a bit." And we stayed there for thirty years. It worked well.

That's just business—you play a hunch. That doesn't mean that we were right, I'm just telling you that that's how we played that one and we became great friends with this fellow.

**JE:** Isn't that amazing?

**BP:** Yeah. It was.

**JE:** What a story that is.

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** Major influx then of profit to the company, obviously?

**BP:** Yes it was. It was.

**Chapter 09—5:40****Arctic Drilling**

---

**John Erling:** Back to the area of arctic drilling. That was new as well?

**Bob Parker:** Arctic drilling was simply that all of us had been up there in cold weather and there was lots of oil in arctic drilling, both in Canada and in Alaska. To do arctic drilling as you need to do it we had to develop rigs that could be moved, even flown, moved on even smaller truck loads, but places that would be compatible to the health of the people working up there. It was a hard life.

So we started specializing in arctic drilling and we had a gentleman move over to our company. We came foremost. A fellow named Ted Halk. Ted became a real expert in what kind of pumps, what kind of motors, what kind of protection do you need from the cold, and what techniques would we drill up there with? Because you're drilling in permafrost and permafrost is a condition in the arctic that is very dangerous. It's on top of the ground, it doesn't have anything that will bother you except you can't drill through it. We had to drill techniques to do that. We did.

I keep saying we, the company did. All I did was cheer. That was my role and that's how I was trained. But we became known as Top Hands Arctic. That's why we moved to Russia and Siberia and I can tell you all these places. Wherever it was cold they called us.

**JE:** All this development of new techniques, was that operating out of Tulsa? Where you—

**BP:** All out of Tulsa. No we didn't mechanically operate it. It operated out of Odessa and Louisiana. We had places all over the world where we was close to operate. We had places in Alaska.

But there's one thing for people who don't know business, you'd better have some fun. What I stress to you is I love that business and I still do. And I loved every day I went to work. I'd just hate to be in a business where I didn't care about it. Honest to God, I want people to know you can be happy in business. And I was. Not for the money, because sometimes that's good, sometimes it's bad. But for doing something and watching your people grow and watching things happen. It's a wonderful life and I like the people in the oil fields.

**JE:** Well, you like the roughnecks.

**BP:** Because remember when I went to Mississippi the first year I couldn't get a home. They didn't want oil field trash, and we were oil field trash. And that was a tradition that went through the oil, and they were pretty accurate. So we went there and couldn't find a place to live and there was a bunch of rigs coming in and sleeping in cars and all of that.

And I had a wife, don't forget, so we were sitting in a little Methodist church in Brookhaven. The first Sunday the preacher got up and said, "We have visitors here, they're oil field trash and I want someone in this congregation to give them a home to stay in."



A lady stood up and she was the wealthiest lady in that town and gave us a lovely place in her home to work. From there we've been lifelong friends ever since.

**JE:** Wow.

**BP:** But those are the stories that happened.

**JE:** And you recall oil field trash from the pulpit?

**BP:** Oh yeah, yes we were. Because my wife undertook that attack. The people didn't think much of themselves, the roughnecks didn't. They almost tried to be rough, do a lot of drinking, a lot of carousing, et cetera. So we went on a campaign of cleaning that image up of themselves and letting them know that they're the best in the business. They know what they're doing but they've got to live differently. And they did, they changed.

**JE:** So here you come in as a roughneck?

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** While your father is operating a very successful business?

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** And he had wealth.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** So tell us, you wanted to prove yourself to him? Or you wanted to learn the business?

**BP:** None of that. I didn't think that large. I'd go to work and I'd say, "Okay, what can I do today to make this a better company? And what can I do to make myself a better person? How do we go about it?" Just like you do, just like we all do. I didn't worry about his wealth. I didn't worry about being his son. I didn't have to make any tracks that have to be followed. But I thought, *There's got to be better ways of doing it.* And each day we tried to do that. And we did. And I was very pleased.

**JE:** Okay. So you had a mind of wanting to figure out—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** ...and make things better—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** ...and improve.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** And techniques and all that kind of thing.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** So that's what drove you on. And you were working for him, weren't you?

**BP:** Oh yes, for him.

**JE:** For your father?

**BP:** But again I'll say that much of your leadership comes from recognizing others that have talent. 'Cause you're not going to know it all. You're not going to be the best in anything. But you're going to have people who can do this thing better or that thing better, whether

it's arctic, whether it's the flying the rigs, whatever it is. So my main effort was identifying people that could make good things happen.

**JE:** You had to impress a lot of people as you moved up in the ranks because people would say, "Well, he started out as a roughneck."

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** That had to help you.

**BP:** It did, it did help.

**JE:** In your stature.

**BP:** It did help, no doubt about it.

**JE:** So when you went out to those rigs and talked to those roughnecks—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** They said, "He's one of us."

**BP:** One of us. And I went to their homes and we had dinner with them and played bridge with them at night. We did all of those things. We did like them, you hit on a point, I liked roughnecks. I don't fake it. I honest to God find them to be good people, solid people. They knew that, they could tell that. And I didn't like them because of money, you liked them 'cause just what they were.

So a lot of my best friends said they were roughnecks then.

**JE:** Is that a certain kind of person then? And what kind of person becomes a roughneck?

**BP:** People need work, like right now they're coming out your ears because all the automobile plants are shut. Believe it or not, they go back and forth, the labor market does. So when the boom was on all over the country it's kind of hard to get good hands on drilling rigs. They can get paid more at various places. But in today's world there's plenty of help from everywhere because their jobs are so scarce. So many available in places.

## Chapter 10—5:40

### Ronald Reagan

---

**John Erling:** That was a dramatic change in the '80s with Ronald Reagan as part of the National Energy Plan Two. And that effected your business.

**Bob Parker:** No, I had never met Ronald Reagan, didn't know anything about it, but I had a call from Oklahoma City from the fellow that runs Fred Jones Ford. We'd bought a lot of Fords during our lifetime. He asked me as an energy person if I'd be willing to come up and meet with Ronald Reagan? And I did. And liked him immediately.

But he asked me if I would be his Secretary of Energy. And I said, "I'd love to but what are the strings? What's the deal?"

Well, the deal was, you had to sell your company. You couldn't put it in trust, not in energy. I called my wife and she said, "Well, we got a son coming in, we'll work for Ronald Reagan but let's not sell the company."

So I declined, but then agreed to come up there every week from Tulsa and spend two to three days in the Department of Energy helping the new Secretary of Energy, James Edwards, and I did that for two years. We just had a ball.

But back to your question, at that time we were terribly short on oil, the country was. It was kind of a dead industry. So that's when Ronald Reagan said, "Would you head our energy task force?" Which I did that year. And then, "Will you talk to the oil patch and do two things: See if they'll buy a bunch of rigs. See if the banks will let them buy a bunch of rigs so that we can get this back on track here."

And I was surprised. I went to the banks, the New York banks, all of them, and I said, "We need a bunch more rigs, the president wants them. We need to expand quickly and they don't have the money, they don't have the credit to buy them."

Every bank said, "Go, we'll do it." And they did. We doubled the number of rigs in the United States then. Not all of them proved to be profitable. The boom doesn't always last that long, and that one didn't either. But it worked to help get the country back on track. Reagan was a big part of that so we got along great.

**JE:** You'd see him in meetings and so forth. Can you talk about his personality?

**BP:** He was a class, class act, I don't know how to describe it. He'd treat you and I just like he'd treat the president of a foreign country. You never knew the difference. Pat you on the back and encourage you. But it wasn't bull, it was real. He was just a likeable, likeable person.

Where I really saw him at work is when his Secretary of Interior was very unpopular because then and now you had the environmentalists and the difference in what we were doing. His secretary was kind of roughshod over the environmentalists where they would allow drilling anywhere. And we were doing that.

**JE:** And his name?

**BP:** Jim Watt. And he was a nice guy but he was determined to get oil for the president, period. The environmentalists just hated him, and media hated him and to make a long story short, he was forced to resign. So Reagan called us over to the White House. We're in there and I'm sitting there, *Oh God, I dread this day*. And he did the greatest job of making Jim Watt feel good that day by pointing out that he took the rap for him. "You did it for this country, you did it for me, and you're getting bumped over it." He said, "I want you to know I know that. I want you to know that very few people ever realize how much good you're doing for the country."

He was a super salesman, Reagan was. He could sell you on anything and especially the United States.

**JE:** That had to be a real moving moment then in that room.

**BP:** It was real moving. And then also the city, you have the Marine base there, the headquarters and other military places. And the Marine base I was asked to come out and give a speech on energy to the commandant of the Marines and in front of his leading officers. They were ten-foot tall because they had a president. They hadn't had one for a long time.

And he was bragging on them. He loved military. He made them feel highly respected, all of them. And they just worshiped him and it changed their whole lives. I was just glad to see a guy do that.

**JE:** Hmm.

**BP:** He lifted people up.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**BP:** Like I've never seen. You know, John, he was sick before people knew it so he lost a lot of his punch in the last two years. I didn't know it either for a while. All I know is it became his cabinet running it for him and they don't do as good a job as he was doing.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**BP:** But God, what a wonderful man. I wish you could have known him.

**JE:** Did you sit in on cabinet meetings?

**BP:** I have sat in on them but I was not a member of the cabinet. And I would just go in at his request every once and a while.

**JE:** But you'd come in occasionally?

**BP:** Yes, oh yes.

**JE:** You'd sit in on it?

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** And you'd hear him conduct those meetings?

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** And he was on his game?

**BP:** He was on his game, is a good way of putting it. He knew everyone, he knew their families, their children, their wives. He knew why they were there and he thanked them every meeting. They had problems, they always had problems, but, God, what a—I just can't say enough good things about Ronald Reagan.

**JE:** So he engendered this feeling of you wanting to really work for the president?

**BP:** Absolutely. People don't know that but it takes a real servant to work in Washington. They don't get paid much. The members of his cabinet, they got a home at home and they come up there and have to have a place to live. Their income is very low and it's a tough go.

Henry Bellmon is a good example. I can just tell you people like that that were up there because they believed in our country. And they all went up there for that reason.

They thought they were going to change the direction of our country. And a lot of them left disappointed because it's a system that's hard to change.

**JE:** Yeah. And it had to make you feel good that you were able to contribute to our nation—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** ...in that role.

**BP:** It was a wonderful feeling, wonderful.

**JE:** Meanwhile the company continues on.

**BP:** Yes sir. Yeah, it made me feel real good and I learned a lot of respect for government. I learned that I don't want to be in it. But I also found out when you go up there you can't buy their dinner, you can't do anything for them. Just work, help them and coach them, they're good people. But they were clean.

## Chapter 11—5:45

### China

---

**John Erling:** Somewhere along the line here you were awarded the contract in China.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** Let's talk about that. How that came about.

**BP:** The contract came about because the Chinese government contacted us in Tulsa because they had in the Tarim Basin, a huge basin in China, nine blowouts, still blowing. At one time, wells on fire. One of them was really bad. It had been nine years blowing out and on fire and the Chinese kept everything very quiet. So we didn't know that, and it wasn't out business anyway, it was theirs.

But they said, "You have a reputation of good people, the best in the business for unusual things."

We had been called to Canada to do the same thing up by the North Pole where a well was on fire and it was under the ice. We sent our key guys up there and they controlled it.

China heard about that and so they wanted us to send people over there to contain these blowouts in these wells in the Tarim Basin. And we did, we did. I just admired the heck out of our people.

**JE:** I believe another first for your company. First American land drilling company to work in China.

**BP:** And in Russia and several places.

**JE:** Because of the culture in China, was that an issue at all?

**BP:** No, no problem. All over the world there's good people. The language is not the barrier people think. We only speak English and I don't speak that well, but the Chinese came over here and we went over there, talking about management. And you get where you trust each other. And we took them down to this ranch we have in Texas and had them ride horses and all that. But those things make friends. We didn't have parties, you stay away from alcohol. You do everything you can to develop real friendships, and we did that.

They liked it and they created a company called Great Oil Drilling Company and put us in charge of it. We've been in China for a long time. Never has been that big of a success for us because they have their own rigs and they have their own company. They don't really need—in other words, we do best when they need you. And they needed us on the blowouts.

**JE:** Then when the blowouts were contained then they didn't need you as much?

**BP:** Not as much but they kept us drilling some of their offshore stuff on platforms there, with their rigs. Capital labor contract.

**JE:** There were other countries, New Zealand, Somalia, Sudan—

**BP:** Yeah, just place where there was oil and they needed some drilling. And we were asked to come in there. Of all those countries the real booms are still where the oil is. And the ones you're drilling most are where the oil is. You drill and move out, we don't stay. But your big oil is around the Caspian Sea. That's where we're drilling now.

We were in Saudi Arabia for a while and we're now up around the Caspian Sea. And that's our biggest operations both in the country of Kazakhstan and then we're drilling now on what's called the Sockland Islands, that's for Exxon, and that's Russia. Been there for several years.

And again, new technology, no one has ever done it before.

**JE:** Tell me, Helmerick and Payne, they build rigs. What's the difference between your companies?

**BP:** Well, first of all, they're a first class company. Good people. And I live next door to the Helmericks. All of our life we have. Good kids, good company, well-run. There is a difference. At this stage of the game they're much larger.

We chose to reduce the size of our company and go with new rigs. And then this year they've added about a hundred rigs or so to theirs, so they're a very large company. And they're not in areas we're in. We're not on land US, we're overseas on land, and we're in the Gulf of Mexico. Well, the on-land US market unfortunately right now has collapsed and that's their main market. They protect themselves well, they do an excellent job.

But we're not here, we don't compete with them here. And they're big in Venezuela. Remember when we sold out? We never did go back. And they got problems there. We all have problems somewhere.

But Helmerick and Payne is not anywhere like in Kazakhstan, not anywhere were Parker is. They've chosen more domestic type of drilling, new ideas, new rigs, good people, well-run company. And they have a lot of things besides drilling rigs. Remember, it's a broad company.

**JE:** So it's essentially the same kind of service.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** All these years they've been the same.

**BP:** All these years, that's right.

**JE:** And then you've just gone off in different directions.

**BP:** That's exactly right. They're good people.

**JE:** And you developed your own rigs, they developed their own rigs.

**BP:** Absolutely.

**JE:** And technology they developed is for them.

**BP:** Absolutely.

**JE:** And you've obviously done that down through the years for your own company.

**BP:** That's right.

**JE:** Back to the Great Wall Drilling Company, that was owned by the country of China...

**BP:** Yeah, yes.

**JE:** So then you and your people were involved with government people over there a lot of times.

**BP:** Yes, lots of them, oh yes. And they were fine, no problem there. Where we split up or broke apart there were good feelings. They wanted to become more worldwide, Great Wall did. They wanted to be in Kazakhstan, they wanted to be in these same areas we're in. They wanted us to, in effect, help them become our competitor. They didn't think like we think.

We explained to them that really wasn't a good deal and they felt differently. So we said, "Well, why don't you run your company and we'll run ours?"

And that's why we separated from Great Wall. Now we're still in China but just as Parker. We're still separate.

**JE:** Mao Zedong was in power.

**BP:** Yep.

**JE:** Did he even know what was going on? Did he know that?

**BP:** Yes he did. I only met him once and it was at one of those ceremonies you go to. The thing that he admired most, old age. They highly respected old age.

So I got a big kick out of my son, they'd just laugh at him, he was too young. So one of the few places in the world where it's good to be old.

**Chapter 12—2:10****Sharing Faith**

---

**John Erling:** Oil business has had its ups and downs. The later part of the '90s oil industry took a big dip.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** How did you cope with all that?

**BP:** Well, there's some things you can do and some things you can't do. You go to work every day and instead of picking up the paper and going crazy about all the problems that you see, you simply make yourself determined to work harder, to try harder to do what work is left on the table, to count on your friends that you've made over the many years. And you do a lot of praying. And you do that with your drilling crews and with your people in your company, it brings you together. And it works time and time again.

**JE:** So you would share your faith with those around you?

**BP:** With the roughnecks or their bosses. In fact, with some customers, wherever it isn't out of place, and we've had a great deal of respect. That's why Wishard comes into the act too.

**JE:** That's an interesting point, you said when it isn't out of place.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** Talk to me about that.

**BP:** If I'm going to Exxon's offices down in Dallas right now I'm not going to get down on my knees and pray. And I know them, they're Christian people, they're great people. But if I'm in an area where we work for them sometimes and there have been problems with the local government I've asked them if they minded if we prayed. And they joined right in and prayed.

It just depends on circumstances. Most times I go in the oil business prayer is brought up at nearly every meal now. It's a changing world.

**JE:** Is that because they know of you and your faith?

**BP:** It's broader than that.

**JE:** Yeah.

**BP:** It's broader than that. It's easier to do when you know someone else accessible to it. You remember Tulsa Club? At that place it would have been out of place, it wasn't done then. If you had the Tulsa Club today you'd be surprised how many tables have a moment of prayer.

It's encouraging to me but it's not a revival. It's just a kind of more accepted deal of faith. It comes across just in every subject anymore. And it has in our company an awful lot. But to be honest with you, it helped within the company with the drilling crews. Now the drilling crews knew how to pray better than we do. Now they are basic people. They believe it and they live it. So we became a team through prayer.



**Chapter 13—3:00****Bob Retires**

---

**John Erling:** You retired in April of 2006.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** Almost three years ago right now.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** We're here sitting in April. What brought you to that decision? And then you turned it over to your son, Robert Parker Jr. Talk to us about all that happening.

**BP:** Yes that's very easy. Bob Jr. told me some years ago, "We've got to move to Houston, Tulsa, all the oil companies have left. We don't have any customers here, therefore, we're kind of not in play. Like Bartlesville left, you know, the doers are gone."

And he was right. So I told him, I said, "I don't want to move, you've got to move." So from that day on he's been running the company, even before then he was the boss and he was running the company. Houston move has proved very, very successful.

Now having said that, you've got to remember that in Tulsa, I'm Mr. Parker, in Houston, he's Mr. Parker. Makes a big difference. If Mr. Parker is in Tulsa and not one of the players other places it's different. If he's the boss and they know he's the boss he's no longer my son. He's no longer a little boy growing up. And he gets much more respect, recognition. He's included where I used to be included. It's just great, just great.

**JE:** Obviously that move worked quite well for you.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** Now you're operating your foundation.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** We're sitting in your foundation offices—

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** ...as we do this interview.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** What is your foundation doing?

**BP:** I sold all of my stock in Parker Drilling Company and I did that when I retired. I got off the board. I made it as clean as possible for him to run the company. So that left our family with quite a bit of wealth. As the management of that wealth and the kids that we have, I still have a daughter here and her grandchildren. I have a lot of grandchildren here. So the management of the trust is mainly is just taking care of what finances we have. In today's world that's kind of difficult.

And then we have ranches that run, the cattle ranches.

**JE:** In Texas and Oklahoma?

**BP:** Both places, um-hmm (affirmative). Then I still have a contract with Parker Drilling Company to cover Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is one of the largest areas of the world that we're in, and that's number of rigs. And that was developed under my leadership. The friends that I developed are still there so it's very, very helpful to the company that I continue those relationships and most of them are in Washington, DC, with the embassy and with the ambassadors and people like that. I spent a lot of time on that and I'm doing that for three years.

**JE:** How many rigs, either maximum amount of rigs you either have now or did have?

**BP:** We've been as high as two hundred and we're down right now, I'd say we're about seventy. We sold a hundred land rigs when we moved out of the US. And we replaced them with newer rigs, fewer rigs for international. So right now we're about seventy rigs, a much smaller company, but much more profitable. Which is what we're trying to do.

**JE:** Yeah.

## Chapter 14—2:37

### Secretary of Defense

---

**John Erling:** You talked earlier about University of Texas in connections of people you're going to meet there. I think of note here is the fact that our current Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, sat on your board.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** Talk to us about Robert Gates, your connection, and how that started.

**BP:** Well, he was a good guy until he served as president of Texas A&M. Then we decided we weren't sure. Fine guy, good friend. He runs a different show. He's not going to run Obama's show and he's not going to run Bob Parker's show. He runs his own show. When I say "runs it," he does his separate thinking, and it's not always popular but he's highly respected by me and by others who work with him.

But even when he was on our board what would excite me in Kazakhstan wouldn't excite him at all. He just has a different set of beliefs and principles, they're all business and they're all good. And he's still a great friend, but he's different. He's not a Tulsa, Oklahoma, oil man by any means. He's not that kind of person.

We've had others like that, see, we were the first to put a Russian on our board. They're just as different as Bob Gates. But that occurred in Tulsa. I get a call from Tulsa University that they had this head of this new Russian company there and I needed to meet him.

I met him that night and he asked me to go on the board, the first night. And I said, "Well, that's not quite the way we do things."

He said, "Well, you can wait until morning."

To make a long story short, I called Dick Cheney, who knew him. And I called a couple of others, and they all gave me good references on him. And I called Bob Jr. and we put him on the next day.

**JE:** Did that work out to be a good relationship?

**BP:** Fair, didn't hurt, didn't help. Because Russia has such a fast turnover. So we kept him on about five years and then he resigned so he wouldn't get in trouble with the Russians on that side because we drilled in Russia. I see him and hear from him quite a bit.

**JE:** Bob Gates, what would he bring to the table then? When you would sit around your board-meeting table?

**BP:** Ah, outside blood. You don't get inbred, you don't get too hooked on what we think is important. He'd bring out a vision just like he's doing right now to the country. He brings a perspective that people haven't brought to the table. And you can judge whether it's good or not. He's real good about that.

**JE:** So he's just born with a way of thinking that seems to be different then?

**BP:** That's right. And you can call it arrogance, you can call it whatever you want, but he's not arrogant. He's a different kind of person.

**JE:** Today you can say about your company that's it's operating in how many countries?

**BP:** Today about twenty-eight. We've been as high as forty-eight. You never know which ones are gonna work out, which ones aren't. Depends on where the oil is.

## Chapter 15—5:10

### Wishard Lemons

---

**John Erling:** We referenced earlier to the roughnecks that you really liked. You felt apparently they needed some counsel.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** You've been associated with First United Methodist Church for how long?

**BP:** My life, all of my life.

**JE:** While you were born in Tulsa here and—

**BP:** Yes sir, always been a member of that church.

**JE:** And comes along a young man by the name of Wishard Lemons, who was an associate pastor and he was there with Bill Thomas.

**BP:** Yeah.

**JE:** Somewhere along the line you hired him to be a counselor to the roughnecks.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** Talk to me about your process in thinking about that.

**BP:** It's good word, those are good words. At that time as companies were growing in the world many, many workers were feeling that they were just a paycheck. Your company got too large for you to know Joe and Jim and his wife's name. All companies did, ours did too. Ours had always been a small family company and all of a sudden we were an international company. We just didn't have the opportunity to cover all the bases in regard to friendship, which is so important. And I told you earlier how strong I felt that.

Wishard was at our church. I'm gonna use words that only you will understand. He was about half crazy because his personality is great. He's warm, he's funny, and he's exactly what I was looking for for crews to accept. I did not want a minister with a black suit and a Bible. And his job was not to spy, his job was to go wherever these families were, the men away from their families, sit down, have dinner with them, talk to them about Jesus if they wanted to, but if they don't, don't even bring it up. Find out about their kids and their birthdays, their illnesses. Do his best to become their friend instead of my friend.

You can imagine the flood of mail that I got from people all over the world whenever Wishard would come back, thanking me for allowing a person in the company to look after their interests, their personal interests. That's what it was and he's still mad at me. He'd like to be doing it today but we got worried about his health and traveling.

**JE:** But he did it for twenty-eight years?

**BP:** Yes he did.

**JE:** Lives were helped?

**BP:** Lives were helped, people were saved in many ways. Yes sir. And he was too. He grew with it too. He had some serious health problems while he was in this and had to be rescued and things of that nature. But Wishard still looks upon that as the greatest part of his life because he was able to help.

Like on the North Slope, he just fitted in right there with people that he never would meet the rest of his life. And some of his best friends are still there. He was good about making friends. He's a wonderful man.

**JE:** He kind of had a roughneck personality.

**BP:** He has a roughneck personality, you're exactly right. In fact, if I had any criticism of him, when he first started he was involved in that Peru operation I told you about. I heard he'd been having drinks on the plane and being kind of one of them approach. So I called him

back in here and I bawled him out and I said, "Now Wishard, don't try to be a roughneck. You're not a roughneck, you're a man of God, and you're there for the right reason. You're not there trying to get them to join your church or anything of that nature. But you show them we care for them as people. Don't try to be a roughneck. Don't try to talk loud and swear and drink and all that."

And he apologized and toed the line. I didn't want him one of the gang. I wanted him to be different. And he has been.

**JE:** So families too then? It wasn't just that individual roughneck because some of them had families. Probably the healing of families came through all this.

**BP:** Oh, the wives are the ones that wrote the most thanking us and thanking us and thanking us. Now today you don't have that problem, the world's changed. That's why Wishard isn't there. We had Sunny Presky here as well, another minister in Tulsa, who followed Wishard's younger person. But in those days you had to send your crews to Western Oklahoma or Odessa or wherever you're sending them to run these jobs.

You don't today. We have real good and foreign help, experienced people that we've trained over the years. So you only need one or two US people on each operation.

And then on top of that you now have the Moslem religion. So in a big part of the world we respect the Moslem religion. There are crews that do what we do and they're good people. They send me Christmas cards, they do all those things out of respect. And when I'm ever there myself they ask me to give a prayer just like I would at home.

**JE:** Is that right?

**BP:** Yeah. But in that part of the world, which is a big part of the world now where the oil is, it would not be proper for us to have Wishard go in and talk about Jesus Christ a lot.

**JE:** I don't know if you'd name the countries but would you notice when you bring your rigs in and you'd have the natives work with you that there are some countries that had better work ethics than others?

**BP:** Oh yes. All of them better work ethics than the United States.

**JE:** Really?

**BP:** Yeah. Oh yeah, no doubt about it. Hard working people. They've had to be, they don't have as much as we have here. They may not be as smart, they may not know the common sense that you need so much, but work, yes, work ethics were super, just super.

**JE:** You know, I thought you were going to name a foreign country and here it's actually us.

**BP:** It really is, yes.

**Chapter 16—3:45****In Reflection**

---

**John Erling:** Your faith has meant a lot to you. I'm a member there at First Methodist.

**Bob Parker:** Yes.

**JE:** And I see you there a lot. You've contributed your time and your money to that church.

**BP:** Yes.

**JE:** And Bill Thomas was big in that church.

**BP:** Yes he was.

**JE:** Talk a little bit about the church.

**BP:** Well, I've been there all my life. My family has too. And it didn't mean a thing to me for years and years and years. It just was a boring ordeal. Gradually through a series of programs there, one was called the Lay Witness Mission that Bill Thomas brought in, my faith became more personal. And then I began having problems, business problems and other problems. And I watched what happened to my father.

I decided I needed something to lean on and I'm not as smart as a lot of people seem to be and I don't claim to be. I need help. So whenever I run in over my head, which is very often, I turn for help. And I get help.

I recently lost my wife, in the last few months, she was stronger than I am. I wondered, *How am I going to hold up?* And I'm telling you it's been a Godsend. She's in heaven and I believe that. If I didn't believe that I'd be a nut right now. I believe it and I believe she's happy and I know that she's happy that I'm happy.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**BP:** So my faith there has helped me an awful lot.

**JE:** As we get older we are more reflective, we tend to look back on our lives. So what do you think when you look back?

**BP:** Luckiest guy in the world. The most blessed guy you could ever imagine. I've worked hard all my life, I didn't have anything given to me, but I've had so many blessings given to me in so many ways. The company has done well and my kids are fabulous. Financially I'm sound, all of those things, I just feel so happy about. I love the outdoors so I spend a lot of time there, and that too becomes spiritual in a lot of ways.

**JE:** Yeah.

**BP:** But the final point there is that in my business I love it. You got to know that. I have met so many people that the world doesn't know. Mr. Jim Chapman, he's right here in Tulsa, one of my idols. Bill Martin, president of Phillips Rex, now the chairman of Exxon. And I read all these bad things about him and I know they're not true.

I know these guys. I go to church with them, I pray with them, and I see them. They're good people.

I have a collection of friends that I just really treasure, really, really thankful for.

**JE:** And since you lost your wife I'm sure they've reached out to you.

**BP:** They have.

**JE:** To give you support.

**BP:** They have every way they could.

**JE:** As students listen to this conversation, and that could be years and years from now, what would you tell them regarding their future?

**BP:** Well, I'm very biased. You'll need energy. There's a lot to be learned in energy and there's a lot of opportunities so I think it's a good future. And I think it's something we need *all* kinds of energy.

And number two, everyone tells you to work hard, I tell you to do that. I tried to work harder than my competitors always. I always did that but I enjoyed it.

And then more importantly—like what you do. Try to find something that really makes you feel good about yourself and you'll work twice as hard and you'll do twice as good.

Of course, I believe Jesus, I believe in the Lord, and I think that made a big part with my life. I think that's up to each individual to decide. But it helped me. It helped me go through many things that I didn't know enough about and helped me get there.

**JE:** By the way, have you read the book *The Shack*?

**BP:** Oh yes. I mail them out everywhere. Great book.

**JE:** Yeah. I heard him speak. He was in town the other night.

**BP:** I know he was and I was out of town that day so I didn't get to.

**JE:** Well, Bob, thank you so much for doing this.

**BP:** Thank you, John.

**JE:** Respected you all these years.

**BP:** Well, thank you, same way.

**JE:** And the community has so for you to put this down as an oral history I'm very grateful.

**BP:** Thank you, you're a good friend.

**JE:** Thank you.

**Chapter 17—0:33****Conclusion**

---

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