

Red Stevenson

One of Oklahoma's most colorful characters and businessmen was also a high-flying storyteller.

Chapter 01 - xxx

Introduction

Announcer: Red Stevenson was born in southern Oklahoma, where he spent his first few years in an orphanage during the great depression. Eventually he was adopted and moved to Bixby, Oklahoma. He was sixteen when he ran away and joined the Army Air Corp, and for the rest of Red's life he would credit the military for setting him on the right path. After ten years of service, including World War II, he went on to a number of careers. He became a truck driver and then operated a national wrecker service and a chain of tire stores. Red also became one of the country's top sellers of small aircraft. He owned and flew thousands of planes over the years, including over 400 war aircraft.

Red's longtime residence and office in downtown Bixby was known as "Red's Roost," where he loved telling stories that would cause you to ask if they were true—which they were. It was the way Red told the stories that made them entertaining.

He was also a writer and self-published an autobiography *Up, Up and Away: My Life and How I flew It*.

Harold Dean "Red" Stevenson was 87 when he died October 23, 2016. This interview was recorded February 3, 2016 and you will now hear Red Stevenson tell his story on the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 5:25

Red Becomes Legal

John Erling: My name is John Erling, and today's date is February 3, 2016. Red, would you state your full name, please?

Red Stevenson: Red Stevenson.

JE: You don't have a middle initial?

RS: No.

JE: Is your name officially Red?

RS: Well, I came to Bixby and nobody knew who I was or anything and I lived with a family by the name of Stevenson. I had red hair and the only name I'd ever been called was Red, and so it just became Red Stevenson. That's the name I grew up with.

I ran away and joined the military, and when I joined the military the recruiting sergeant said, "What's your real name, first name?"

And I said, "Red."

And he said, "We can't use Red in the government records."

So there was another sergeant sitting there and he said, "Hell, give him my name."

I wish the guy's name had been Alphonso or something but it was Harold Dean. You had to have a first and last name. So I went in the military as Harold Dean and I stayed in nine years.

And when I got out I never did like that name, so I hired a lawyer and went to court to get my name changed. The old judge was pretty smart, it was Clifford Hopper, and he was called Hanging Hopper. Hell, I'd thought he'd be in administrative court and it turned out that, boy, I mean, this guy, he gave one guy two years for spittin' on the sidewalk. And I thought, "Damn, I'm going to get a jail sentence here."

And my lawyer wasn't there. He said, "I don't need to be there, he'll take care of it."

So it kind of scared me. And he said, "What do you want?"

And I said, "Your Honor, I want to get my name changed."

He said, "Why do you want to get it changed?"

And I kind of halfway explained it to him how I'd been Red Stevenson all my life.

He was very nice to me. He said, "It's going to be a real problem for you because your government records, everything that has anything to do with you officially, you're going to be Harold Dean Stevenson." And he said, "I'm going to give you two legal names. One is Red Stevenson, and that's your legal name." But he said, "Then you'll still have Harold Dean Stevenson as your legal name."

Really, it's not been that bad. But I still use Red Stevenson when it's convenient.

JE: Your date of birth?

RS: I don't think anybody really knew but we settled on 5 January. And I don't know why they made it so close to Christmas. Hell, if I was picking a birthday I wouldn't want it close to Christmas.

Now, they found some of my family in later years. I had a brother and sister that became pretty well off and they hired a private detective, in fact, I heard it was a Pinkerton, to trace my family down. I think one of the brothers and sisters said, "Well, hell, he was born in the winter." Then he said, "He was born right after Christmas."

I'm not just sure how it came about. But we picked the 5th of January.

JE: What year?

RS: Of '29.

JE: So how old are you today?

RS: I would be eighty-seven today.

JE: But you're not sure?

RS: I'm not sure but it don't make no difference.

JE: And then where were you born?

RS: Well, we think we was borned around Paoli, Oklahoma. We've heard all sorts of stories through brothers and sisters and I guess I'm the last one living. To my knowledge, I had nine brothers and sisters older than me. And then we heard that the mother later had five more kids.

They tracked the dad down and they tracked him down and found him the day he died. They said, "You can go to his funeral if you want to."

Well, I didn't want to but I did. 'Cause my brothers and sisters probably was pressuring me to. But I think I'm the last one left.

JE: So you say, the mother and the father, and that means you're talking about your mother and your father?

RS: Yes.

JE: Did they just give you up at birth?

RS: It turned out that my mother, she was a Boren. She was David Boren's either mother, sister, or her mother's mother's sister. She came from a nice family. And the story I heard was, rather, well, I don't know if you'd call it humorous, but my dad was an alcoholic. I don't think he really amounted to very much, but he came to marry one of the Boren girls and she wouldn't marry him, she backed out. And they said my mother was fifteen and she said, "I'll go with him and marry him, I'll marry him." She didn't even know him.

You know, times were so hard. And, you know, they were farmers in rural Oklahoma before the '30s.

JE: Well, we're talking dustbowl and depression time—

RS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's it.

JE: ...coming up in 1929 and '30.

RS: And I suppose a girl would just do anything to get out of that kind of life.

JE: Right.

RS: But she probably got into a worser one because she had a kid every year.

JE: So who raised you?

RS: The Stevensons here in Bixby did.

JE: Is that family still around here?

RS: No, they don't have any heirs. In fact, they didn't have any kids, that's the reason they got me is because they couldn't have kids.

JE: So they adopted you, then?

RS: They adopted me.

JE: What were their names?

RS: D. W. was his initials. Well, Dennis, I guess was his first name, now that I think about it. D. W. and Bertha Stevenson.

JE: Were they good to you?

RS: You know, John, they weren't bad. I remember being whipped by a two by four before, but, no, don't shake your head because I wish now it'd been a four by four. You know what all my whippings were for was for not practicing the piano. They wanted me to be a pianist.

And let me tell you, now, I came to live with them when I think I was four, I think that was the age. But anyway, I got good. By the time I was twelve, hell, I was being asked to play for, well, at one time, the Metropolitan Opera visited Tulsa, and of course, they never bring a pianist with them. And I played for them.

JE: At twelve years old?

RS: Yeah. I was that good. I could play that good.

JE: That's interesting, you had that musical ability but they tapped into it.

RS: And you know what?

JE: Yeah?

RS: My wife played the piano also. You know, I love music today. I don't see how people can say they don't love music.

JE: Right.

RS: And I frequently, we'll be playing the jukebox, someone will, "I don't like music."

Chapter 03 - 2:13

Red's Roost

John Erling: Where are we recording this interview?

Red Stevenson: In my roost. I call it Red's Roost, in Bixby, Oklahoma. And we're sitting in my man cave.

JE: Right. When did you buy this property?

RS: I bought all of the railroad track that ran through Bixby several years ago. Bend in the railroad and I bought it for a nickel a foot. And a nickel a foot is pretty cheap. I sold it because it went all the way through the town. I sold it to everybody that owned property that adjoined it for the same price that I gave for it. I did not try to make a penny on it. They couldn't buy the whole thing or they didn't want to or something.

And I had this left because there was nobody that owned the property next to it here that wanted it. It wasn't good for anything. And I kept it for, oh, I don't know how many years. And my wife and I retired and we bought a motor home and we went to motor-homing, which we dearly love. But we needed a place to keep the motor home because we'd come home for two or three months.

We kept our home here in Bixby. So we decided to build a place to keep the motor home, a garage, here on this property.

JE: So that's what this is, really, a garage for the motor home.

RS: It was a garage for a motor home. But I did build a little office over there, a little fifteen by fifteen office added on. And when we were home, all the time we were home, I'd be down here at my office visiting people, one thing or another.

So after three or four years by wife said, "Red, when we're home you're always down there and I'm here in town, so why don't we just build an apartment on the back there?" And we did.

JE: You lived there for many years?

RS: For over fifteen years.

JE: Quickly we can describe this. Over here you have Elvis Pressley greeting you.

RS: Yes.

JE: You have a jukebox behind you.

RS: Yeah.

JE: You have a telephone booth there. Pinball machines.

RS: I have a one-armed bandit. And then I have my player piano, which I dearly love. My wife played the piano and I played the piano, both, and we always loved the pianos.

JE: We're north of the flagpole.

RS: Flagpole.

JE: By—

RS: One block north of the flagpole. And the flagpole's the center of old Bixby. Now, you know, people say, "This is not Bixby."

When they started building across the river my brother-in-law was pretty smart. He said, "You know, they ought to name it a different town."

Well, we didn't think it would ever amount to anything. We said, "Oh, no, we don't need to."

Now people think that's Bixby across the river and this is really Bixby here.

JE: That's right.

RS: The old part of it.

JE: Absolutely.

RS: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Chapter 04 - 2:05**Red Ran Away**

John Erling: What was your education? You went to grade school?

Red Stevenson: I went to ninth grade and I ran away and joined the military. And I was either fifteen or sixteen. You know, it's kind of interesting, I caught a freight train. That seems to be a good way to run away.

Well, first of all, I built a raft and it sunk. I wanted to go down the Arkansas River, float down to New Orleans, and join the Merchant Marines. Now the Merchant Marines would take you when you were fourteen. Did you know that?

JE: Uh-uh (negative).

RS: Yeah, they would take you when you was fourteen, so that was my idea. But the raft sunk so it didn't work.

JE: How far did you get down the river?

RS: It sunk when I launched it. I cut the trees when they were green in the winter.

JE: Yeah.

RS: I didn't know that green trees wouldn't float. Hell—

JE: I didn't know either.

RS: ...green trees, well, they don't. They fill with that sap or whatever it is and they lock it up in the winter.

JE: What led to at sixteen wanting to run away?

RS: Oh, I don't know. Doesn't every kid want to run away at sixteen? I thought they did. Back during World War II I think they did.

JE: Aah, whenever I told my mother I wanted to run away, she'd say, "Well, don't forget to pack your soup cans and all that kind of stuff." And then that took the fun away for me.

RS: Yeah. But I think maybe just every kid wanted an adventure.

JE: So then you decided to hop a train.

RS: And I rode it three days and three nights. That was the thing that I always wondered about. Where did that train go? It moved almost constantly and I thought I could smell the salt water. I looked down, you know, and I could see the sand coming up. And I thought I had seen a picture of this town in the encyclopedia. And I thought I was at Corpus Christi, Texas. It just looked like Corpus Christi to me. And I could smell the salt water.

And I got off, well, I actually got throwed off, but I got off. And you know where I was at? I was at Okmulgee. The train had run two nights and three days. I don't know where it went. It must have went backwards half the time.

JE: So you're sixteen and you're in a boxcar?

RS: Yeah.

JE: Anybody else on the boxcar?

RS: There was a couple of boys run off with me but when got into Okmulgee they were so disappointed they come home.

JE: But you weren't going to do that.

RS: No.

JE: So you continued on to where?

RS: Join the army.

JE: In Okmulgee.

RS: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: But you intended to go further than Okmulgee?

RS: Oh yeah, damn, yeah.

Chapter 05 - 5:45

Army Life

Red Stevenson: I said I wanted to join the Navy too. Well, I joined the Air Force is what I really joined, but I wanted to join the Navy. That was my first thought.

John Erling: What year would that have been? Forty—

RS: 'Forty-five.

JE: Okay. So the war had been on then.

RS: Yes, and it was just over. And at that time, it's rather interesting, they'd take anybody because we needed army occupation. And the real soldiers, they wanted to come home, the war was over. But we needed army occupation and we really did. And they were desperate. The draft was bigger at the end of the war than it was during the war because we couldn't get people to stay in.

When they originally drafted, you're drafted for the duration of six months. I believe that was how it was done. But they didn't want that six months even, so they'd take anybody.

And I got in and less than ninety days I was on the way to Okinawa. And the war was just over, there.

JE: What was your job in Okinawa?

RS: I was in a little outpost and my job was administrator, which if you only got ten men there who you going to administrate? But I was promoted to corporal.

I had an experience in Okinawa. I wrote a book about it, it was called *The Last Hero of World War II*. But World War II was still considered on because we had Japs hiding out in the caves and everything.

And we were playing a joke on this boy. We didn't intend that he'd get hurt, but he did get hurt and we couldn't admit it was or we could have went to prison.

JE: What did you do?

RS: We had to go to the bathroom with slit trench, you know. You just dig a hole and squat over it. But we couldn't have it too close to our little camp because of sanitary reason and the smell too. But it was in the jungle, you know, it was kind of creepy going to the bathroom. Bathroom is first always, remember everybody would say, "I'll go with you if you go with me this time"? You know, 'cause they didn't want to go by themselves because there was still Japs hiding out, one thing or another.

So pretty soon it got to where the privacy was better than being scared. So it was about two blocks through the jungle. What we was going to do was we was going to hide on the trail and throw a bomb and scare this guy. We was going to let him get by a ways, but it went off sooner than we'd intended and it hurt him pretty bad.

Everybody in the camp, they heard the explosion because it was a big explosion. And they all come a runnin' and they thought it was the Japs that had done that. And—

JE: And you let them believe that?

RS: Yeah, yeah. Oh, hell, they wanted to believe it.

JE: So you spent a year there?

RS: I spent a year on Okinawa.

JE: And then what?

RS: I came back and I got assigned down to Bergstrom, Texas, that Austin, Texas. It was a beautiful base. It just really a great place to be stationed. Their mission was training glider pilots.

You know, it's rather interesting because a story is never written, never talked about hardly. They had two ways to get people behind enemy lines. Well, really, there was just one way: paratroopers. And then they come out with these gliders. You've seen pictures of them landing at D-Day behind the lines, getting them in behind the lines.

The thing of it is, it took a lot less work to train a guy to sit in a glider and jump out than it did to be a paratrooper. After World War II, a lot of military planners thought the next war would be gliders, no paratroopers.

JE: Hmm (surprised sound).

RS: So they were training glider pilots down at Bergstrom, Texas. The way it worked, we used the C-82 for the tow plane. It was a big flyin', called Flying Boxcar. It towed three gliders at a time. And my job was to hook up the gliders. I used a Jeep and I would go out and pick

up the ropes that were dropped by the last plane that flew over, dropped the three ropes. I'd pick them up. And by the time I'd get back they'd have the next three gliders pushed out. The last three gliders still out floating around.

I'd back up and I'd hook up the three ropes to the back of the C-82 Flying Boxcar. Then I'd back up and stretch the rope. And when I'd get it back far enough to where it would reach the glider I'd leave about a ten-foot loose end. And I'd step out of the Jeep and leave it here with the emergency brake. And then I'd get out and snap the hook to the glider.

So I had been doing this for, oh, six, eight months and got pretty good and pretty relaxed, you know. You think you know your job, there ain't nothing going to happen that hadn't already happened. Three gliders were called a stick.

And I was out there one day and it was the last stick of the day and maybe things just kind of relaxed more late in the evening. And I had hooked the two outside gliders up and I backed up to hook the middle one up. And when I got all the way to the back I started to step out of the Jeep, put it in gear, and set the emergency brake, and I had one foot, one leg out on the runway and the other was still in the Jeep. And when I sensed something was not right, there was a change, they'd left the engines idling because when they'd taxi up there I'd have the gliders hooked up in five minutes, but I sensed that something just wasn't right.

And I stepped back into the Jeep. And when I stepped back in, the C-82 brought both engines full power up. And of course, you know, being a novice and a kid, I thought I could stop the airplane. So I just stepped back in, you know, I thought I had it under control, and locked the brakes. And I went from zero to sixty in probably three or four or five seconds.

JE: Wow.

RS: I didn't realize the airplane had that much power.

JE: Were you injured?

RS: No. I stayed in it. Hell, if I'd jumped I knowed I'm going to be hurt.

JE: Yeah, but even so, you still weren't hurt?

RS: Well, no, I wasn't hurt. As I said in one of my little books, called *The Last Hero of World War II*, I put my head down on the Jeep's wheel. A Jeep, if you remember it, the steering column is exposed between the dash and the floorboard. And I just put my legs up underneath the dash and wrapped around it. Then I wrapped my arms around it. I didn't know what was going to happen after the airplane took off, but I knew I was going to be hurt if I jumped.

So I just locked myself in there and I'm going to trust to somebody else to take care of it.

Chapter 06 - 4:42**Betty Margaret**

John Erling: So you get out of the army, and then what?

Red Stevenson: I worked for Gates Wholesale Hardware. You might not of ever heard of them.

It was a big outfit back years ago. I got out in 1957, I think it was. I got out on a Wednesday, went to look for a job on Thursday, and went to work on Friday.

JE: At Gates Wholesale Hardware? Where was that?

RS: Gates, at Brady and Elgin. The north side. I went to work just at the time whenever Sam Walton started Walmart, or started whatever you want to call it. You know, there are no more wholesale hardwares. Walmart was so big they eliminated the wholesaler. Walmart could sell it for what—

JE: Wholesale was buying it for.

RS: That's right.

JE: Right.

RS: That's right. You know, it's not in business, hasn't been in business for years.

JE: How long did you work there?

RS: I think I worked there two years and I did very well.

JE: And what did you do there?

RS: I was a bookkeeper.

JE: Now how did you learn how to become a bookkeeper?

RS: I was in administration in the military.

JE: Okay.

RS: I was very good. I could type close to 150 words a minute. I won all sorts of typing contests.

Bookkeeping is mainly using these postage machines and it was like typing.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). You were how old then about, at the wholesale?

RS: Oh, let's see.

JE: Twenty-five?

RS: Maybe a little older than that.

JE: Twenty-five, twenty-six years old.

RS: Yeah.

JE: Of course, Gates Wholesale was in North Tulsa.

RS: Yeah, North Tulsa.

JE: But in the meantime, here in Bixby, you had met a lady, a young lady way back when.

RS: I—I met her—

JE: So that's part of the story right now.

RS: ...before I went in the military.

JE: Tell us about that story.

RS: Well, her name was Betty Margaret Compton. She moved here from Mississippi when she was twelve. And we met, I think, the very first day that she moved here. I was fifteen and just somehow or another, I think we always maybe knew she was my forever sweetheart. When our hands would touch it would have lit the city of Bixby. It was unbelievable the sparks.

We never courted anybody else. I ran away then, of course, a year later.

We got married then, after I'd been in the military seven years.

JE: So you wrote a lot of letters?

RS: Oh, my goodness, hundreds of letters. And she kept every letter I ever wrote her. And the grandkids just loved them. They used to have her get them out, sit on the bed, and she'd read them to them.

And so, when she passed away not long ago, one of the grandkids became the custodian of all the letters.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). As a matter of fact, she died a year ago.

RS: Yes, a year ago.

JE: In January, January 18, 2015.

RS: January 18. That's right.

JE: You were married then, how many years?

RS: Sixty-three years. You know, I really do believe this, that if a man's been married over sixty years, sure you become close if you're married twenty years, thirty years, forty years, but something about fifty to sixty or seventy, you don't become a part of each other, you become each other.

If I was God, then I made man, I'd make him to where that if they'd been married over sixty years that the husband and wife would die together.

JE: Wouldn't that be great?

RS: It'd be so—you know, it ain't no fun. We knew that she was bad. And she told me I could buy an airplane, because she was a pilot too. All of our family, all three kids and we just didn't have an airplane. But she told me I could buy an airplane, which I did.

And she told me I could buy a sports car, which I did. I bought a retractable hardtop convertible, a new one.

She told me that I could join the country club again.

JE: Did she tell you you could remarry?

RS: She said I could get a girlfriend but the girlfriend couldn't be over ten years younger than I was. Now, you know, here I am eighty-six. That means I'm going to have to have a seventy-six-year-old girlfriend. Damn, I didn't want no seventy-six-year-old girlfriend. I didn't want a twenty-six, that wasn't it.

I did go to a party here a while back with a gal that was thirty-nine. Well, I told her I wouldn't hold her hand, I wouldn't touch her or anything, and I didn't. And it was a nice party.

JE: So how many children did you have?

RS: We had three children, Debbie, Cash, and Stacy. Two boys and a girl.

JE: Cash?

RS: Right.

JE: That's interesting.

RS: Names are very important. I was introduce you to my grandson this morning. I'm trying to get him on with Kenneth Copeland. Kenneth Copeland is a friend of mine.

JE: The evangelist, Kenneth Copeland, right?

RS: Yeah, oh yeah. He has a thirty million dollar airplane. He came and spent last Sunday with me. And names are very important. I wanted him to change, he's just got an ordinary name.

You know, I love military names. Major is a heck of a name. Say, Major Dupree or something. And somebody hollers, "Major!" everybody's going to look. But if they just holler, "John!" they might not all look.

JE: Right.

RS: But anyway, then his first name, his real name is Gordon. So I was telling Kenneth Copeland that, "You know what we could do? We could name Gordon, Gordon." Now wouldn't you remember a name if you had a guy named Gordon Gordon?

JE: That's right.

RS: You'd remember it.

JE: So how many grandchildren do you have?

RS: Oh my goodness, I don't even know. I probably got ten or twelve.

JE: Yeah?

RS: Or fifteen.

Chapter 07 - 4:35

Wrecker Serviced

John Erling: So let's go back to, you let the hardware business and you became quite a businessman. What was the first business you created?

Red Stevenson: I had an uncle that had a service station. DX service station. You remember DX?

JE: Yes.

RS: You know it's been out of business for years.

JE: Right.

RS: I bought a DX service station. I really worked hard and we really did good. You know, I sold gas one time for nine and nine-tenths cent a gallon?

JE: Wow.

RS: The taxes were ten cents, so you could see there wasn't nearly—but we used to have bad gas wars years ago in the '50s.

JE: Yeah.

RS: One time we got in a gas war and I lowered mine to 9.9.

JE: For the record, we should say in 2016, it's low, we're buying it for \$1.39 and in that range.

RS: That's good.

JE: Right. So that's really inexpensive but it affects the oil business in our state, so that's not good at all.

RS: Oh my goodness, yes.

JE: Anyway, the DX station was here in Bixby.

RS: Here in Bixby. And I ran it about five years. You know, every service station wants to try to do better. And I always wanted to own a wrecker, so I bought a wrecker. One come up for sheriff's sale. It was a '47 International and the thing I always remember was its top speed was forty miles an hour. I mean, if it fell off a cliff it wouldn't have went over forty miles an hour. And it had over a hundred thousand miles. And you know, it was only about ten years old. I never understood how it could get a hundred thousand miles on it if it didn't fell off a cliff 'cause it was forty miles an hour wide open running it. And I did real good with that wrecker.

JE: How did you use that wrecker?

RS: For the Highway Patrol. I put my name on their list.

JE: And?

RS: I had to take turns, you know.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RS: But I kinda come up with a new theory. If you, as an individual, lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and you're going on vacation in California, you wreck your car in Phoenix, what are you going to do? You didn't want to get it fixed out there. You don't know anybody out there. What are you going to do if you get fixed, you get home, and it falls apart?

No, you need to get the car brought home. I thought about, "How many people must surely wreck their cars a thousand miles away from home?"

So I had some cards printed up and it listed all the major towns in the United States. It listed Phoenix, Arizona, I'd go there. A dollar a mile was the regular wrecker rate, it didn't matter where it was, it was a dollar a mile. I took a paper and just figured and figured and figured. I figured I could do it for twenty-five cents a mile and make money. Now, that's

paying the gas and paying me and paying for the wrecker and everything. But I figured I could do it for twenty-five cents a mile.

So I got the phone book of every town I could. We'd go through a new town I'd stop and get a phone book of that town. And I sent this card showing how cheap I could go to all the body shops, all the car dealers, everybody that had anything to do with automobiles, I sent it to them.

You wouldn't believe how quick I started getting calls to go to Chicago. It was amazing how quick. And I finally got to where I had about twenty wreckers 'cause—

JE: Wow. So by that time, you gave up your gas station?

RS: Oh yeah.

JE: You sold the gas station—

RS: Yeah, I sold the service station.

JE: Now this was your main business.

RS: It was.

JE: And very successful.

RS: Very successful. Made a lot of money.

JE: And you don't think anybody else in the country might have had that same concept?

RS: No, no, no, no, no. Nobody could compete with us. And the beauty part, we were located in a central part of the United States.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

RS: Now, if we'd of been in California, it wouldn't have been that good of a deal.

JE: I imagine that the name of it was Red's Wrecker Service?

RS: Long Distance Wrecker Service.

JE: Okay.

RS: That was my first one. Long Distance. Because, you know, your name should mean something. And when people would see my card they would instantly say, "Long distance." They didn't normally use a wrecker to go over fifty miles.

JE: Right.

RS: I'd go two thousand miles.

JE: That's a great idea that you came up with.

RS: It was a good idea.

JE: So how many years did the wrecker service continue?

RS: See, I always bought new wreckers. And the last new one I bought, I think, was in '62. And I had a guy come along, and it was rather interesting. He offered me a tremendous amount of money for my phone number. That's all he wanted was the phone number. He didn't want the wreckers, he already had a bunch of wreckers. But he gave me several thousand dollars for my phone number, because we had built up this business.

I couldn't pass up a chance to make a lot of money.

JE: You made a lot of money on it.

RS: Yeah.

JE: Let's face it. In what year about, do you think that was?

RS: I think it was '62 was the last new one.

JE: Okay.

RS: I bought new ones almost every year. And I think '62 was the last new one I bought.

JE: So you sold your phone number.

RS: Sold my phone number.

JE: For millions and millions of dollars.

RS: Well, for a lot of money.

JE: Then what about the wreckers then? You just sold them off?

RS: I think I just sold them out individually.

JE: So you made money on it?

RS: Everybody, everybody wants to buy a wrecker. Every service station wants to buy a wrecker because they could think about how good they could do.

JE: Right, right. So there you have two successful businesses now. You've got a gas station and you've got the wrecker service. Okay, now what?

Chapter 08 - 3:25

Tire Barns

Red Stevenson: Well, when I was in the service station business I sold tires. And I had to find something to do. I'm good at spending money.

My granddaughter recently told me, she said, "Grandpa, I know when you're going to die." And I said, "When?" Because she said it so sincerely.

She said, "When you ran out of money." She said, "You love to spend money." She said, "When you run out of money, you'll die."

Well, I think she's really right. But anyway, I opened a tire store.

John Erling: What was the name of the tire business?

RS: The Tire Barns. And they're still in existence today.

JE: And there's one here in Bixby as I drove up.

RS: One here in Bixby and there's two or three around. We had ten. Really did good in it.

And I wanted to buy an airplane. So I went shopping. There's a big dealer in Tulsa. And I wanted a six-passenger airplane but I really couldn't afford a six-passenger.

Breezy said, "I got an unusual deal here. I don't normally get involved in making partnerships," but he said, "I've got a doctor that's got five in his family and needs a six-passenger airplane." They didn't make a five-passenger airplane. And he said, "He needs a six-passenger airplane but he can't afford it." He said, "I wonder if I might put you two together, get y'all introduced and y'all talking."

So we met and we just instantly hit it off. So we agreed to buy a six-passenger airplane and be partners.

Well, he was a doctor, and he was the chief of staff at St. Johns. So, obviously, he was financially capable of doing some things. He lived in a forty-bedroom house. It was the old Bolewood Mansion.

JE: Really? Forty bedrooms?

RS: Forty bedrooms, yes. And it had a utility tunnel about three foot square. That's where the utilities, that's the electric, the steam heat, and the water, and everything went to different rooms in the house through this tunnel. And he said that he had to seal that tunnel up. His kids would get in it and he was afraid they'd get lost and they couldn't find them.

But anyway...

JE: So you buy the airplane? Now tie me that to the tire business.

RS: All right, so, I was making probably as much as he was making as a doctor. And here I'm a kid with a ninth grade education. So we got to be good friends. Everything just worked out wonderful.

I'm eighty-seven and Bill is eighty-three today.

JE: What's his name?

RS: Bill Harrison. He's retired now. He had three kids, just like I did. So he said to me one day, he said, "Red, did you ever think about expanding?"

Well, I really didn't because I was making pretty good money in a single tire store. And I said, "Well, no, I never did, Bill."

He said, "Well, if you want to think about it," he said, "I'd be your partner."

It helped my ego thinking of somebody with his education and qualifications and titles and everything. So I said, "Yeah, all right, we will."

So we borrowed the money and opened another store. We did good in that, so pretty soon, we opened another store. At the end, I think we had ten stores.

JE: Now this is a successful business. But I'm still not sure why you went into the tire business in the first place.

RS: I needed something to do.

JE: Okay. And, and—

RS: And I had been in the tire business when I had the service station.

JE: Oh, that's right.

RS: I sold tires and it seemed like I made as much money in the tires as I did in the gas business.

JE: Yeah. Okay, that made sense. All right, so then you had tire barns?

RS: Yeah, tire barns.

JE: Ten of them. For how long?

RS: I think it was ten years. I believe that's how long we were in business.

JE: So you're becoming a wealthy man?

RS: I didn't know how to save money. You could give me a million dollars, I could probably have it spent in the next week or two. I've never had occasion to have a million dollars.

You know, every man wants to make a million dollars a year. You got your "Do before you die" list.

JE: Yeah.

RS: Or now we call it the Bucket List.

JE: Yeah.

RS: But I think making a million dollars a year should be on every man's list. And I've made over a million a year, but that came a little bit later than the tire business.

Chapter 09 - 3:25

Hauled Chickens to Arkansas

John Erling: Wasn't there some time too when you were in the trucking business you hauled chickens to Arkansas and to LA?

Red Stevenson: Yes.

JE: Where does that mix come in here?

RS: That was right after I sold out in the tire barns.

JE: Okay. So now you're hauling chickens to Arkansas?

RS: Well, I didn't do nothing for a year or two. I spent all my money. When I was in the wrecker business a lot of times I'd take a wrecker and go to California, you know, to pick up a car. I always liked that. You know, you're on the road, you're one man, you haven't got a boss looking over your shoulder or somebody telling you what to do or anything. That's you. And I liked that.

So I bought a big truck, the biggest truck they made, and a refrigerated trailer, and I leased to a company over in Arkansas. And of course, back in those days, I don't know how it is now, but Arkansas grew more chickens than the rest of the world put together. Oh, man, you wouldn't believe. So I leased to a company over there.

I would load every Monday and deliver California, to LA, every Wednesday, I think. It took me forty-eight hours. I'd make a trip a week. I'd get home on Friday or Saturday, depending on the weather and the load and the unloading and all. And I

made good money doing that. I never shut my eyes. I'd go to California and back and never close my eyes.

JE: And how many hours would that be?

RS: That was forty-eight.

JE: And you never slept?

RS: Never slept. Never closed my eyes. Now, I don't like admitting this but I might as well be truthful. They made a pill then, called it White Cross, and these pills were unbelievable. I never used dope before, but obviously, they did have something in them. And this is so near the truth that I believe it myself.

The turnpikes had just opened not too long before that. I'd take one pill as I got my turnpike ticket over Sapulpa, that's where I got on, and I would take another pill as I went through the halfway point. And then I'd take a third pill. I don't think my kids would be disappointed in me telling this because I think they've heard it before. In fact, I wrote a book called *Old Truckers Never Die: They Get a New Peterbilt*. I think that's why I made the book.

But anyway, I'd take the third one as I paid my turnpike fee. Then I would stop at El Rio. They had a big truck stop. Truck stops are the most important thing in the world, they become a second home to a trucker that really trucks, especially if you run the same route all the time. They become a part of your family.

They had a big truck stop at El Rio, and I don't drink coffee, but I'd get a cup of coffee. And let me tell you, that cup of coffee was like lighting a fuse to a stick of dynamite to those pills.

And I would leave El Rio. When I got lined down, a straight line and everything lined up, the old truck attack, it was limited to '72, and I could jump and run beside it a mile. I mean, I really could. And then I would get back in the truck and climb up on the roof and watch that poor devil down below all, you know, hot, tired, everything. And I'd sit up there in the cool breeze.

Those pills were so powerful, this is the thing that amazes me, they were so powerful that I could see around curves. I could see over hills, I really could. Oh, you're laughing, but I'm telling, I could see through women's clothes.

JE: No.

RS: No, I'm serious. They were that power—I love to read. I don't know why I've always liked to read and I didn't have no education especially, but I could remember a whole page of some book I particularly liked and I could remember it word for word. The memories, everything, it was just unbelievable what those pills—

JE: Yeah.

RS: Let me say this to you, I'd always said I'd rather meet a guy on pills than I had meet one sleepy. The guy sleepy, he didn't see nobody, hell, you didn't have a chance with him. The guy on pills would see two of you and you had a fifty-fifty chance with him.

Chapter 10 - 2:35

Airplane Business

John Erling: All right, so you did the hauling business.

Red Stevenson: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Tell us then how you got into this airplane business.

RS: I was always a pilot. I wanted an airplane and I made good money when I was trucking. I made more than a lot of bank presidents made. I bought an airplane. I didn't have it a week until somebody offered me considerably more than I paid for it.

JE: And—

RS: And I sold it.

JE: ...sold it.

RS: Well, I think there ought to be a law that if you buy something and a fellow offers you 10 percent profit, you must sell it. Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?

JE: It does.

RS: That's what makes the country work.

JE: Exactly. So you sold that plane and then?

RS: Bought another one. And then I bought another one, and I bought another one. Now, I got to bidding on these military and civilian. This was a heyday of airplanes in '60s and '70s. They don't even build airplanes no more, they really don't. Back then it was damn near as big as a car business.

You know, Cessna was the biggest aircraft manufacturer in the world. And they had about two hundred dealers. They had probably a hundred repossessions a month or more. And they put out a list. But only their dealers were allowed to bid on this list. That kind of give them an advantage.

Except that I was the biggest dealer in the world. I'd got so big, you know, I really got big fast.

JE: It's—

RS: Because we bought the airplanes. Most dealers would broker an airplane. They would sell your airplane for you. You'd call them. They'd call me, within ten minutes I had them a

cash offer. And within twenty-four hours I could have a pilot on their ramp with a cashier's check to pick up the airplane.

It took me almost twenty-four hours to do what they called a title search. You got to be sure you get a clear title to an airplane.

JE: Right. But you weren't a Cessna dealer.

RS: No, I was not a Cessna dealer. But because I was so big—

JE: Yeah.

RS: ...and they were trying to get all the money they could for the repos, in fact, if a company repos and airplane and sells it for less than what it would have brought, they can be sued.

JE: Really?

RS: Sure. Because what if the bank repossesses a car and sells it for half—

JE: Okay.

RS: ...of what it's worth?

JE: Understood. Right.

RS: That's why they wanted me on that bid list.

JE: And you were here in Bixby. And what airport did you use?

RS: I used Riverside Airport. And we got to where we were Riverside Airport. Doggone merit.

JE: Also known as Jones Airport.

RS: Jones Airport, right.

JE: Jones. So that was your airport?

RS: That was my airport. And then I got so big they asked me to move.

JE: Oh, really?

RS: Yeah, 'cause we were really a problem for them. And I bought Pascal Airport. Now Pascal Airport is a privately owned airport and it had three hundred acres so I could keep as many airplanes as I needed down there.

JE: Man, you have a touch of gold, don't you?

RS: Oh...

JE: The Midas touch.

RS: No, I'm not sure about that.

JE: But we haven't finished with the airplane business yet because that just grew and grew.

RS: It grew and grew and grew. A minute ago I said every man would like to make a million dollars in a year, well, I did in the airplane business.

Chapter 11 - 4:28**The Grumman Factory**

John Erling: In the '80s, you were making a million dollars a year.

Red Stevenson: Yes, Jim Inhofe and I—

JE: Senator Jim Inhofe.

RS: Yeah, bought the Grumman Factory. What happened was I had a deal offered me that was such a good deal. But they needed three million dollars as earnest money or something and I had to have it within twenty-four hours. It was really a good deal. This was one of those once in a lifetime deals.

Jim was a pilot and he was also a businessman.

JE: Yep.

RS: I don't know why I picked Jim but it was a good deal. I was down at the mayor's office, nine o'clock the next morning. And—

JE: He was mayor of Tulsa then?

RS: He was mayor of Tulsa, yeah. And I was down there at nine o'clock the next morning, because this happened about three or four in the evening. And I could get three million dollars but I couldn't get it that quick. We had to have it by ten or eleven the next morning at their bank in Chicago. The factory was in Savannah, Georgia, but there ain't no big banks in Savannah, Georgia, that handles hundreds of millions.

So I was waiting at Jim's office. He come in at nine. He took me in his office with him. I explained the deal to him and he said, "Let's go to the bank."

JE: Let's go to the bank?

RS: Oh, it was that good a deal, let me tell you. This was—

JE: And so you went and got three million dollars?

RS: We had them the money before our deadline.

JE: And the two of you bought ...?

RS: Grumman Factory. And it was—

JE: And that's in Savannah?

RS: ...largest single purchase probably ever made except for the military or the airlines might have made a larger purchase. But we just covered the field up over at Riverside with airplanes. I was still at Riverside then.

JE: You flew all these—

RS: I think that's when, I think that's when they asked me to move because we just got so big.

JE: You flew all these Grummans, how many would you fly?

RS: Well, actually, the initial purchase was not that large. It was fifty-some, but that's still a large number of airplanes at one time. But I've got several times over that and repossessions that they had to repossess, we got all the repossessions and we bought them for fifty cents on the dollar too. And then we bought the ones that were unfinished, and flying them back we just had the most fun.

We'd go up to get them twenty-five at a time. We didn't advertise at all that we wanted pilots. People heard about this all over the world.

I had one call from England. This guy wanted to know if he could fly over at his expenses and fly back with us. Twenty-five airplanes flying in formation is a big—hell, I don't think the military ever flew that many in formation at one time.

JE: Right. Right.

RS: So going down, we just had the most fun. But twenty-five seats on Delta, had to change planes at Atlanta and go on down to Savannah. So we're all sitting together, obviously. I was buying the drinks because we could have a drink because we're not going to fly back until the next day.

The stewardess took her eye hard to serve twenty-five people a round of drinks. And one stewardess handled us all. So when it come time to pay for the first round, I paid. And she said, "Sir, are you doctors going to a convention?"

And I said, "No." And they was all hollering for another round of drinks by then.

So she had to stop and wait on them. So when she got done with the second round of drinks, she come back and she said, "Are you lawyers going to a convention?"

And I said, "No." They was hollering for another round of drinks.

By the time she got them it was almost time to land in Atlanta. So when she collected for the third round, she said, "I give up. What are you?"

I said, "We're the Tulsa mud wrestlers." That was when mud wrestling was big. And I said, "We're going to Savannah to mud wrestling."

And she went up and told the pilot and he put it on the speaker system. He said, "Good luck to you, Tulsa mud wrestlers."

We had more fun on that trip. And when we'd land somewhere, landing twenty-five brand new airplanes, they'd put it in the newspapers. And we landed in Tupelo, Mississippi. It was an ex-military base, a big base, so we knew we'd have enough room. And they had big story headlines to pay for it.

JE: So you fly from Savannah.

RS: To Tupelo, Mississippi.

JE: To Tupelo, and then from Tupelo?

RS: To Tulsa.

JE: To Tulsa. Once you had them here, you sold them pretty fast.

RS: Oh, my goodness. The Used Tulsa Piper's a bigger place to meet. I was handwriting the bill of sales and I would write them so fast my hand would get tired, I couldn't write. I'd just have to stop and shake my hand like that.

JE: And that's tough making money, isn't it, that way?

RS: Yeah, and we was making pretty good money because we could sell them for way less than what the factory sold them for.

JE: Jim Inhofe was the mayor.

RS: Yeah.

JE: Did he involve himself at all with the business?

RS: No, no.

JE: And he was financially helping you, partners.

RS: He helped me make the deal. Couldn't have made it and had—

JE: Yeah.

RS: ...well, I could of but I couldn't have met their deadlines.

JE: Right. That partnership lasted for many years?

RS: Well, no, it actually just lasted until we sold out of that Grumman business. Probably took us six months to sell them all. Because there was more kept coming in.

JE: Okay. And both of you made pretty good money on that?

RS: Made, made good money. Well, I met my goal of making over a million dollars a year.

JE: For many years.

RS: Well, yeah.

Chapter 12 - 3:55

Largest Airplane Dealer

John Erling: So then I've got to ask you, if you spent money, what did you spend your money on?

Red Stevenson: Well, when I seen something I wanted, I bought it.

JE: Was cars interesting to you?

RS: Well, I bought a new Cadillac Eldorado.

JE: What about a house? Did you buy a big house?

RS: No, but I built an airport up on one of them round concrete airports. And very few private individuals had built concrete airports. There's probably not a half a dozen in the whole United States.

JE: Yeah. Where was that?

RS: Oh, on Leonard Mountain. I built one on Leonard Mountain.

JE: On Leonard Mountain?

RS: Uh-huh (affirmative). You know, it was so funny. I was in a barbershop one day, a little town here in Bixby, you know. A little barbershop, a country barbershop. This guy's sitting waiting his turn, and I'm up in the chair and he's a wolf hunter. Well, you don't hunt wolves in town, you hunt them out on the mountain.

And somebody was telling about government waste, how they had read something in the paper. That old boy said, "Government waste, hell." And talking about Washington and all that, said, "You ought to see to the government waste going on right here in Bixby, Oklahoma."

Well, of course, I mean, everybody in the barbershop really gave him their attention. "What's the government doing here in Bixby?"

He said, "The government has built a new highway down on Leonard Mountain." He said, "It goes about two miles and it just drops off in a cliff and it don't go nowhere." He said, "It's just in the mountain, there ain't no road to it, there ain't no nothing." Said, "There's a trail to it," but he said, "what's the government doing building a superhighway down there on Leonard Mountain?"

Well, it was my airport.

JE: Yes. And the airplane business, that took about six months to go through all that?

RS: About six months to do it.

JE: But then you continued on as an airplane dealer.

RS: Oh yeah, I continued on, yeah. And I did very well because we weren't just the largest aircraft dealer in the world. Of course, all the aviation business is in the United States. I would be amiss if I didn't explain to you that 99 percent of all airplanes are manufactured, built, and sold in the United States. But not only were we the largest in the United States, we were told one time by the Federal Aviation, and they said that we were larger than the largest two dealers put together.

JE: Wow. You had the knack for business. But it was your personality that helped all that. You were a salesman all the time.

Tell us some of the famous people you sold planes to.

RS: Oh, my goodness. I sold and bought. I bought one from Cary Grant.

JE: From Cary Grant? Tell us about that.

RS: It was rather interesting about that. Revlon wanted him to be chairman of the board of Revlon.

JE: Revlon was—

RS: Women, you know.

JE: ...makeup and all that.

RS: Women thought Cary Grant was beautiful.

JE: Right, right.

RS: So I suppose somehow or other they equated them together. But he wouldn't be for money. They couldn't hire him for money. But he wanted this big, thirty-passenger airplane that the executive—I've got pictures, I'm sure that there's a lot of tax advantages. The corporation could buy it, Revlon could buy it, charge it off for taxes. He had no way to charge it off for taxes.

So they bought it. I don't know what they paid for it but it was a beautiful airplane. It was executive. It had lounges and tables and bars and everything. It was really something.

And then he was president of Revlon for I don't know how long, maybe five, six, seven years, and he retired. Well, they didn't need the airplane. Hell, it was an expense to them.

So they put it up for sale, and I bought it.

The thing of it is, is I guess why we did so good in airplanes, you could call us on any airplane, military, seaplane, any airplane made, and we'd have you a bid within minutes, almost. And we'd have somebody on the ramp the next day.

I had to have a good banker and I did have a good relationship with my bank there.

JE: Here in Bixby?

RS: No, they were too little. In fact, one month my interest was \$87,000.

JE: How big a note?

RS: It varied. I would just call them and give them the end number of the airplane and they would do the title search for me. When the title search came back clear title, they would give me a check, a cashier's check, of course. And I'd send a pilot out.

I had a dozen pilots that picked up airplanes for me.

JE: Was that bank in Tulsa or—

RS: My wife even picked them up. It was not a bank, it was private company.

JE: And that's all they did?

RS: Yeah.

JE: You kept them afloat, didn't you?

RS: Well, I'm sure I was their best customer, for sure.

Chapter 13 - 7:50

John Wayne

John Erling: Did you ever see Cary Grant or talk to him?

Red Stevenson: No, I did not. Now I did John Wayne. I got to spend the night with him.

JE: Well, tell us about that.

RS: Well, I dealt with him. He was not a pilot but I dealt with him. And the deal was, this was a Meyers 200, which is a rare airplane but a very fast airplane. It had the reputation when it came out it was the fastest airplane made. And, of course, I could imagine John Wayne wanting a fast airplane. He had a fast horse.

So the deal was, I was supposed to deliver it at three o'clock the next day to Casa Grande, Arizona. I had pilots, I had a dozen pilots to deliver airplanes for me, and I think I mentioned my wife delivered a dozen airplanes for me. But to get a chance to meet John Wayne, I took the airplane myself.

And I always told my pilots, "Be right on time. In fact, even stay out of sight for thirty minutes or so, so you can touch down." Because it looks professional. Looks good.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RS: So I touched down right at three o'clock at Casa Grande, Arizona. I tightened it up and the terminal was something that looked like an outhouse, it wasn't anything. So I'm shutting the airplane off and filling out some figures and papers, you know, closing my flight plan and my door to the airplane opens and this giant hand, and I mean, his hand was as big as a baseball mitt, reached in. He says, "I'm John Wayne."

That was like having God introduced to you. John Wayne does not need an introduction, and I don't assume God would need one.

But anyway, I told him who I was and everything. And so I got out of the airplane.

Oh, and the very first, you know, just made me sick. He said, "Red, I've got a problem."

Oh, let me tell you what, we sold ten thousand airplanes and we didn't deliver an airplane unless it was paid for. We probably did more wire transfers on money. And it can't be recalled. When they call you in and tell you, "The money is in your account, sir," you don't worry about a bad check or somebody trying to back out of a deal.

So he said, "Red, I've got a problem."

And the first thought was, he didn't have the money. And I was just sick because here I had done the dumbest thing in the world and I've gotten myself personally involved in it. But I said, "What's that, John?"

And he said, "Red, my pilot's got a problem with the Federal Aviation people over in LA." And he said, "He was supposed to be here so you could check him out." Because this airplane was a little bit different, it had switches on it that other airplanes didn't have. In fact, as I recall, the biggest thing, it wasn't critical but you normally put your flaps down, push the flap switch down, and when it goes all the way down, the flap switch kicks off. This didn't, it just kept running. I never saw one like that, it was really weird. I don't know what would have happened, I suppose, burnt the motor up or something. But anyway, just little things like that.

And he said, "He's got trouble with the FAA." He said, "And he can't get here until tomorrow morning."

The deal was, I was supposed to check him out and then they would carry me back to Phoenix and I'd catch the late flight. And then I'd get back home that night.

"Red," he said, "is there any way you could spend the night tonight?"

Well, I hadn't thought about it and I didn't bring anything with me. He said, "I'd put you up over where I'm staying." And he said, "We'd have a few drinks and have dinner together tonight."

Well, man, who in the world would pass up an opportunity to spend the night with John Wayne? So this is what I always remember, two things, I carried a Jepps chart case, which is about two foot long, twelve inches wide, and a foot tall. You carry your charts and everything in it. He reached and got my bag out of the airplane and carried my bag.

Now how many guys had John Wayne carry their bag?

The other thing I remember is, you know what he was driving? He was driving a Ford woodie station wagon.

JE: Wow.

RS: So we drove over to this very tall, it was about eight- or ten-story tall resort. Later I read in the paper, a magazine, that it was rated the number one resort in the world. It was called San Frisco Grande.

He called everybody partner and he told them, "Give my partner a room and put it on my tab." He said, "Let's go in the bar."

And I said, "John, I'd better go upstairs and make some calls and explain why I'm not coming home tonight."

He said, "Oh, I'm sorry." He said, "Go ahead."

I went upstairs and made several calls. But he said, "Meet me in the bar." So I went down to the bar and we had a few drinks. And when I say a few, John's a big man, and he could have several drinks and maybe not bother him like it would me.

JE: Didn't you learn how to drink?

RS: I learned how to drink. But see now, he was drinking so fast though. I learned by drinking the first one quick, the second one slow, and all night walk around with the third one, holding it. Well, I couldn't do that with him.

JE: So—

RS: Because he was ordering for both of us.

JE: Did you make it to dinner?

RS: Oh, yeah, I did. Yes, I did.

JE: Do you remember anything you talked about?

RS: Yeah. About our family. And he wanted to know how I got in the airplane business.

JE: So he was interested in you?

RS: Oh yes. You know, he was very smart because that's it, he kept me talking about me for

probably close to two hours. Wanted to know how many kids I had. It was kind of funny. He said, "Did you have any trouble with your kids in school making good grades?"

And I said, "Well, our daughter made straight A's and our boys made straight F's." And I said, "And I knew they weren't stupid, so I had to do something. And I grounded them and I whipped them, I believe in whippings." And they'd been wanting a dirt bike, both of them, just mad about wantin' a dirt bike because they were eight or ten, something like that then.

So I went to a dealer that I'd sold an airplane to up Tulsa, Johnnie White. I told him to let them pick out any dirt bike they wanted below a certain size. I can't remember, 150 cc or something.

So they did. And he come back to me and he said, "Red, they got them picked out."

And I said, "Put them in the back of the pickup."

He said, "I need about thirty minutes to service them."

I said, "I don't want them serviced."

He said, "Red, you don't understand. They don't have gas or oil in them."

And I said, "No, you don't understand. I don't want gas and oil in them. I'll take them home, put them in their bedrooms. When they can bring me a report card without any D's, they don't even have to have A's and B's, bring me something that's not failing, I'll bring them back and get them serviced."

Well, I took them home and put them in the boys' bedroom. My wife and I would walk down the hallway at night and we'd hear them sitting in there on their motorcycles, going, "Wunnn, wunnn," you know, like that.

Boy, John was leaning across the table. He said, "Well?"

And I said, "John, they didn't even have any C's, it was all A's and B's."

He said, "I know I've been asking you a lot of questions. I want to explain to you why." He said, "You know, I was married fourteen years and my first wife. I just wanted out of it, I wanted a divorce no matter what." He said, "I told her I wanted a divorce and said she could have everything I had." He said, "I was pretty well off after fourteen years in the movies." He said, "She agreed," and said, "we agreed to meet in the judge's office, no jury trial, no nothing. Her lawyer and my lawyer and the judge and her and I, it'd just be five people all total. His name was Morrison. Her lawyer would put out this piece of paper and said, 'Mr. Morrison, read this and sign it.' " And he said, "I didn't read nothing, I just signed everything," he said, "I was wanting out."

Her lawyer said, "That's all." He said, "I got up and walked out." But he said, "Something told me that my wife would be out in a minute. They wasn't going to want her in there. She'd be coming out pretty quick. So I walked around the corner and I stood there." He said, "It wasn't five minutes and here she come. And when she come around the corner I just grabbed her arm and pulled her around."

She was a Mexican girl and I'm pretty sure her name was Maria. In fact, he was married three different times, and I understand later, they were all Mexican. He must have really liked Mexican women.

He said, "The middle boy and the daughter was perfect, he has never gotten into any trouble or anything." And he said, "The youngest one, oh, let me tell you." He said, "He was a hellion." He said, "I had to go downtown LA and get him out of the big jail several times." And he said, "I live in Orange County and that's quite a ways, but," he said, "if it hadn't of been for my name I probably wouldn't have got him out."

But anyway, he said, "Maria, you've lied to me ever since I knew you." He said, "You never told me the truth." He said, "I want to ask you one question and one time in your life, tell me the truth." And he said, "She just looked right up at me and she said, 'All right, John.' "

And he said, "Maria, is that youngest boy really mine?"

And he said, "She looked up at me, right in the eye, and said, 'John, he is but the other two aren't.' "

And he said, "Red, don't ever ask your wife to tell you the truth."

And you know, that's why we've been married so long, I never asked my wife to tell me the truth after that.

Chapter 14 - 3:48

Plane Crash

Red Stevenson: Then we had a terrible plane crash. My sales manager got killed and a newspaper publisher from Springfield, Missouri. Evidently, he owned quite a bit of other stuff.

I had got up at four in the morning to go to an aircraft auction out in Colorado. There was some military airplanes. I called out there and checked the weather and they said, "Oh, it's zero-zero, horrible."

So I decided not to go. I hung the phone up and I walked ten feet to the door to my office, going back to the apartment. I was going to go back to bed at four o'clock in the morning. And the phone rang. And I thought, "Who is calling at four o'clock in the morning? This is unbelievable."

So I run back over and got on the phone. Well, it was my ex-sales manager who had worked for me several years before. He said, "Red, are you going to the auction out in Colorado?"

And I said, "Gerald, have you checked the weather?"

And he said, "Yeah," but he said, "I've got an American Airlines pilot that's going to fly for us and we're flying a brand new twin engine airplane." He said, "We can get in out there."

There was another boy going with us and said, "He needs somebody to sit with him in the back." Three is an odd number in an airplane. He said, "Why don't you go with us? That'll make it even."

And I said, "All right, I will."

So I jumped in an airplane and flew over to Riverside. The weather was good here. The weather had cleared a little bit. It was early in the morning when we got in, eight or nine, before the auction started.

The auction lasted until three o'clock in the afternoon. There wasn't no cell phones then and they had a pay phone. They'd shut all their other phones down out there. I called back to my airport, the Haskell Airport. Whomever answered the phone dropped the phone. They said, "Red S Aircraft."

I said, "This is Red, what's going on?" And they dropped the phone.

Then somebody picked up and I said the same thing, and they dropped the phone.

And then a guy by the name of Buck Meeham picked it up. And I said, "Damn it, Buck, don't drop the phone!" I said, "What in the hell is going on?"

And he said, "Red, Bill Ikey just got killed a minute ago and a newspaper publisher from Missouri, flying that T34 that you got in yesterday."

I'd just gotten it in Argentina. That's what ruined me, I guess, was I'd just gotten it out of Argentina yesterday, and that was Friday. There was a problem, it was not licensed right. It was illegal to fly it, really. You don't call the FAA, Federal Aviation Agency, you don't call them on Friday, any government agency, with a problem on Friday. They're wanting to clear out the week's business. You wait until Monday and then they're ready to go.

So I said, "Bill, we won't fly that airplane until we get this straightened this out." And I said, "I'll call on Monday and we can clear it up."

Well, what had happened was the publisher had bought other airplanes from us. When he saw that military airplane, it really was a good looking airplane, that's what he wanted. He wanted it but he wanted to fly it.

I got to be honest with you, if they'd had cell phones then and Bill Ikey had got a hold of me I would have said, "Yeah, go ahead." Hell, we flew it all the way from Argentina. So it wasn't no big deal for it to go on an hour flight, or thirty-minute flight, or whatever.

So he took this publisher. And what was so bad was the publisher's wife had come with him. She was standing there in the office when Buck was trying to tell me what happened.

But anyway, I had insurance, I think I had a twenty-million dollar umbrella policy—

John Erling: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RS: ...that reached out and covered anything. Well, this airplane was not licensed. You can't insure an airplane that's not licensed. I mean, it's just common sense. Insurance didn't pay a penny, and let me tell you what, I don't know what all that guy owned, but he evidently owned half of Missouri because the way you sue when somebody is killed like that is their personal worth, what are they worth?

Insurance company didn't pay a penny. So it put us out of business.

JE: It put *you*?

RS: Oh, my goodness, yes. My lender couldn't loan me no money.

JE: And so that's what ended the airplane business?

RS: Ended it instantly. Just overnight. That was Saturday, that was a Saturday, and I didn't even open up Monday.

Chapter 15 – 2:50

A Lucky Life

John Erling: After that, did you have enough money to retire?

Red Stevenson: You know, after that, I—no, goodness, no. I always spent everything I had but I had fun doing it.

JE: Did you have any near-death experiences?

RS: Oh, I had crashes. A bone come out of my armpit and a few things like that. But not anything—you've never known anybody that's had the fun that I've had in life. And I've said this so many times—if I was in a line of a hundred men and all of them were going to be shot except one, never bothered me. Hell, I knew I'd be the one that wasn't shot.

If I was in the military and they was picking one guy out per some really good deal, I always got it.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RS: My life has been like that, until my wife died.

JE: Right. And that's been tough, hasn't it?

RS: The only bad thing that's ever happened. Never had a bad experience. You know, all religious people want to worry about going to heaven. I don't have to because I've lived in heaven. I've lived in heaven and I've never had a bad thing happen to me until my wife died.

JE: Yeah. Something else I want to touch on, you are a writer.

RS: Well—

JE: You've written many books. I'm holding this one that says, *Red Says: Up, Up and Away: My Life and How I Flew It*.

RS: That's rather interesting. I'm glad you brought that up. When this crash happened, I think I might have went crazy. And I couldn't do anything but I wrote that book. And I think that might have kept my sanity. I could have never written, I didn't have the time to. Hell, I was busy twenty-four/seven, and that twenty-four/seven, I mean, you know, you get a call from Australia. You know what the time difference between us and Australia is? It's about twelve hours. And I'd get them.

And I had this one guy call me from Australia. I probably sold him fifty, a hundred airplanes. I love foreign accents. He said, "Hi chap, anybody ever talk to you about..." I sold him a lot of airplanes. I sent them over.

So he called me and said, "Red, dis a different, dis a different deal." He said, "I'm bringing a pilot and coming over and pickin' these up."

He bought two. They came over, but he said, "We want to go the long way around. We want to go over to Africa. Go to New York and then over to Spain," I think was his next stop. "And then to Africa. We want to take the long way around." Because the closest way was to go to San Francisco. It's quite a bit closer. That's the way we always sent him when we was paying for them to be delivered.

Do you remember when the Angola War was? About fifteen or twenty years ago?

JE: Yeah.

RS: Well, we got a bulletin from the state department, "Don't let any of our airplanes going overseas fly within a hundred miles of the Angola coast." Because Russia was helping Angola in that war. And they was furnishing military jets, fighters. We were real careful about down in that.

He said, "Don't worry, mate." They'd call us each stop. And their last call before they got to Angola, just was normal and everything, and I think we might have reminded them even again. And they disappeared.

Two or three months later, both airplanes just washed up on shores—

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RS: ...of some part of Africa or Angola, with bullet holes in them.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RS: So there's no doubt they were both shot down—

JE: Yeah.

RS: ...by Russian migs.

Chapter 16 – 2:30**Speaker and Writer**

John Erling: You have about eighteen stories here in this book, but real quickly, not only are you a writer, you're a public speaker. You spoke to the Oklahoma State University commencement. And here's a guy who had a ninth grade education—

Red Stevenson: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: ...and he's speaking to that college crowd. Some of them graduating maybe with masters and doctors. And how did you get selected for that?

RS: Because of the aviation. It was their aviation group that was graduating.

JE: Okay, all right.

RS: In their pilot school.

JE: But weren't you a replacement at the last minute?

RS: You know, I—

JE: Bob Howard, of channel 8—

RS: Yeah, Bob Howard.

JE: At the last minute he couldn't speak.

RS: And he lost his voice.

JE: He lost his voice. So who you gonna call? Red Stevenson.

RS: You know, my wife and I watched Bob. Bob flew for me too. He delivered airplanes because he loved flying. So my wife don't watch too many. Every night at five o'clock, so I'd turn the TV on. I'm in the front room and she's in the kitchen. He comes on and I said, "Babe, babe, come quick! Bob's drunk!" He's going, "Argh, argh," you know, he couldn't talk. That was so terrible.

His little daughter got killed about three o'clock and they tried to get him not to go on TV and he went on anyway at five.

JE: After the death of his daughter?

RS: Yeah, two hours.

JE: Well, you know, he had a problem with his voice, it may have started then.

RS: That's when it did start. That's when it started, right then.

JE: Trauma, trauma to his voice.

RS: Trauma. He tried to sue Subaru because it was a little pickup—I had one of them. It had two seats and the bed back in the back for you to ride in. And the kid, fifteen- or sixteen-year-old was driving and went over a bump and she was riding in one of those seats and it threw her up. And when she come down, it killed her.

He tried to sue Subaru—

JE: Right.

RS: ...and they wouldn't let him hear the suit.

JE: He never did get over that voice problem.

RS: No, no, no, no, he never did.

RS: But it did get to where we could understand him.

JE: Yeah, you could.

RS: But at first though, he just went, "Argh, argh."

JE: So then, you got the call and, bingo, you went over and spoke.

RS: I went over and spoke.

JE: You probably spoke for two hours.

RS: Well, I had given that same talk, so I didn't have to ...

JE: So you did speak—

RS: Yeah.

JE: ...in a lot of places?

RS: Yeah.

JE: Amazing, absolutely amazing. And then you write all these little books. You've got all these little books.

RS: You can take one of each—

JE: *The Best Lawyer I Ever Knew; Old Truckers Never Die.*

RS: ...if you—Most people take them all, don't ever read them. That's the worst thing.

JE: *Bixby Characters, Past and Present; Memories before Four—*

RS: Let me tell you, hold on a minute. That *Bixby Characters—*

JE: *How They Bury Eskimos.*

RS: Yeah, now that's my favorite. In fact, that's the one the editor of the *World* said it was the best book he ever read. He wrote about going to Alaska and I sent him one of those.

JE: And then you even have reading time on here.

RS: Yeah.

JE: This one is 120 minutes.

RS: Well, I did, yeah.

JE: *The Hero* reading time is 90 minutes.

Chapter 17 - 1:20**Bixby Character**

Red Stevenson: But on that *Bixby Characters*, we had two characters here, well, more than two, in the '30s when I came here. This old man over here, he bought the last new car ever sold before World War II.

John Erling: How—

RS: It was '41 Chevrolet. And he drove it for forty years or there. He's owned a grocery store. You've heard of where a man and dog belong to each long enough they get to where they look like each other?

JE: Yeah, right.

RS: Let me tell you about this old man, this is a true story. He drove that car forty years and you could just meet him and look at him and tell what kind of car he drove. It was a '41 Chevrolet and his mouth grew to look like a '41 Chevrolet grille. Just looked just like one.

But the one that everybody, lived here then, all old timers will tell you, we had a guy that back during the Depression, any federal building a blind person could get free space in it to run a confectionary stand. Yes, this old boy was totally blind and he got free space. And his name was Blind Mitch. That's the only name I remember him being called.

He was a big man, he was probably six four, good health. Didn't walk the same route every day from his house. And he walked with a cane, tap, tap. He did like this with it to get people out of the way that he might run over, because I had to jog to keep up with him when I was a kid.

JE: Kid.

RS: And he knew everybody that came in, he knew their steps. He'd address them by their name. "Hello, John."

JE: By their steps, he knew them, right.

RS: Yes, he did.

JE: All right.

Chapter 18 - 2:30**The Chapel**

John Erling: Now we've talked a lot of things but let's talk about the chapel that you built—

Red Stevenson: All right.

JE: ...right next door here.

RS: All right.

JE: How did that come about?

RS: I wanted to do something for Betty Margaret. You know, fiftieth anniversary needs to be special. So we were driving in the motor home. We came in the edges of a little, bitty town, not near as big as Bixby is now, like about the size it was when I came here. Right at the edge of town was a little, bitty chapel, and you could see it wasn't being used. It had grass growed up in the yard.

We got out and looked at it. It had square windows, not gothic windows, and the ceiling just went halfway up and then went square. I didn't know what to buy Betty Margaret for her fiftieth anniversary. And I thought, "I'll just buy this." Because it wasn't being used. Surely it'd be for sale, and have it shipped back to Bixby for the fiftieth anniversary.

I always told Betty Margaret, I said, "After all, what does a man get for his wife's fiftieth anniversary that's got everything?"

She said, "I ain't got everything!" You know how women are.

Well, anyway, I found out who owned it and they didn't want to sell it. And it really did make me angry because they wasn't using it, they wasn't taking care of it. So I just went back out there and I measured it. And this one is the exact same measure, fifteen foot six by eight foot nine. But I made this with the round windows and I made it with a cathedral ceiling. And I'm so glad they didn't want to sell it because I wouldn't of been proud of that one.

JE: Well, it—

RS: It was just little.

JE: It is very, very cute. And today, people are getting married in it.

RS: Oh yeah. Got one today, I think.

JE: Four or five a month, maybe?

RS: Yeah, we've had well over a hundred, maybe two hundred or three hundred.

JE: What do you charge for a wedding?

RS: A hundred dollars but I don't believe we charge at all. We leave it open twenty-four/seven. The only reason we charge is we have to put heat in it. Now, it's going to be colder than hell today.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RS: So I'll probably put two stoves in it. It's Wednesday, yeah, it said Wednesday on that note. Yeah.

JE: You're amazing.

Well, we could go on forever and ever and ever, but you have given us a great slice of your life. You are indeed a fortunate man, aren't you?

RS: I'm lucky luck. I told you, if there's a hundred men going to be shot, all of them going to be shot but one, I'd be the one that wasn't shot.

JE: Yeah.

RS: In fact, I can't believe I didn't win that big lottery.

JE: Yeah.

RS: No, I'm serious. You're laughing, but I'm serious as a heart attack.

JE: We just had a huge lottery about a week ago.

RS: Oh, yeah, how many—

JE: And you didn't win it. How many tickets did you buy?

RS: Uh, I didn't buy that many.

JE: But you just kind of knew that you...

RS: I kind of figured I would. I'll surely win the lottery before I die.

JE: You've won a lot of lotteries in your life.

RS: I have, that's good.

JE: And your biggest one is when you married your wife.

RS: I like that. I going to say, I must use that when I'm talking. I've won a lot of lotteries.

JE: Yes, you have.

Chapter 19 - 2:22

Religion

John Erling: How would you like your life to be remembered?

Red Stevenson: The luckiest man to ever live in Bixby, Oklahoma. Because that's the way I feel.

JE: Yeah, you've been blessed in many, many ways. Anything else you want to say?

RS: There isn't anybody any more ready to go than I am because, you know, I'm eighty-seven. In fact, I read something, I read the other day that it's a very high percentage of anybody who's been married more than sixty years and their wife's died, the husband dies within a year.

JE: Oh really?

RS: Yeah, I read that. And my year is just about up now.

JE: So you're ready?

RS: I am ready, I really am. I told you I made over a million dollars a year. Sure, I wanted to do that. I wanted to make love to the most beautiful girl in the world, and that was Betty Margaret. She was, really.

JE: You said earlier, you've really been living in heaven here on earth.

RS: I have been, I have.

JE: You think you're going on to heaven, then?

RS: No. Now I hate to tell you this, I spell God different, I spell it with two O's. And if good won't get you into heaven, I ain't gonna go. Because I just believe in being good. And Kenneth Copeland, I told you he was here the other day—

JE: Evangelist Kenneth Copeland. Has he talked to you about faith and—

RS: Oh, my goodness. He got me down over there and tried to get me down on my knees. Just last Sunday, flying a thirty million dollar jet—

JE: Not from you?

RS: No, no.

JE: Right.

RS: But I sold him his first airplane. And I sold him several other airplanes.

JE: Right. So he tried to get you down on your knees?

RS: Yeah.

JE: Did you fight him off?

RS: Well, I just told him that I believed in being good. You know, I spelled God with two O's and if good wouldn't get you into heaven I probably wouldn't go.

I came out of the post office here, close to a month ago, I don't know. And there was a girl about twenty-five or thirty, outside the post office, crying. I asked her what was wrong.

She said her car wouldn't start. Her car wouldn't start, she didn't have any money, she didn't have a husband that she could call.

So I had two one-hundred dollar bills, and I gave them to her and I wrote a guy's name and phone number down, he's a mechanic right out here. If I was going to be religion, I'd be his religion. He's a Jehovah Witness, and he would die before he would do anything dishonest. And I said, "Call Floyd, and he will come and help you." And I gave her the two hundred-dollar bills.

And she said, "Well, I need your name and number."

I said, "No, you don't either." To me, that's religion. It ain't praying.

JE: Red, thank you so much.

RS: Oh, my—

JE: I've heard about you for many, many years. And the fact that at eighty-seven you can remember all these details. Thank you, Red, for this time.

RS: Oh yeah.

JE: This was fun.

RS: Thank you.

JE: I enjoyed it.

Chapter 20 - 0:33**Conclusion**

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