

Burt B. Holmes

A young man's business vision and a chance encounter with an old friend was the beginning of QuikTrip.

Chapter 01 - 1:09

Introduction

Announcer: Equipped with a degree from The University of Tulsa and the experience of working with his father, Dan P. Holmes, in his insurance business, Burt B. Holmes and Chester Cadieux co-founded QuikTrip Corporation in 1958. QuikTrip has grown to be one of the country's most successful convenience store networks.

Later, he established Burt B. Holmes and Associates, the predecessor of The Holmes Organisation Inc.

In 2010, The University of Tulsa's Collins College of Business named Holmes the Outstanding Entrepreneur for his dedication to life-long learning, entrepreneurship, and support for the arts, education, and community.

Burt is president and director of Leaders Life Insurance Company, the American Institute of Medical Technology and National Occupational Health Services.

In this interview you will hear Burt talk about his chance meeting with Chester Cadieux which Burt says was the best thing that ever happened to both men. If he hadn't met Chester on the streets of Tulsa that day, he would have sold the idea of a convenience store to someone else.

And Burt talks candidly about the relationship he had with his father in this oral history interview, heard on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 6:45

Dan P. Holmes

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is May 28, 2014.

Burt, state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age, please.

Burt Holmes: Burt B. Holmes, October 8, 1931, eighty-two. B. – Bonfoey.

JE: What's the significance to that name?

BH: Well, he was a good friend of my dad's, when my dad started in the insurance business back in the '30s. And when I came along, he named me after two insurance men. One was a guy he worked for named Burt Halliburton, and the other was Mr. Bonfoey, who I never knew.

JE: Tell us, where are we recording this interview?

BH: In the offices of the Holmes Organisation, a large general insurance agency in Tulsa.

JE: What—

BH: We're domiciled in what used to be the old Warren Petroleum building. It's now known as International Towers, or something like that. Yeah.

JE: Where were you born?

BH: St. John's Hospital.

JE: Talk about your mother, mother's name, maiden name, and where she was from.

BH: Her name was Alice Margaret Lamburtson. She was from Moline, Illinois. She and her mom moved down here back in the '20s. Yeah.

BH: Met my dad who moved here in 1907, I think, I'm not entirely certain but I think, yeah.

JE: What was your mother's personality like? What was she like?

BH: I never think of it in those terms. She was a very nice woman to be around and I enjoyed being her son, I'll tell you that.

JE: Your father's name?

BH: Dan P. Holmes.

JE: What does the P stand for?

BH: Perkins.

JE: Do you know the significance of that?

BH: No.

JE: He moved here in 19—

BH: Probably right after World War I. They moved here from Fayetteville, Arkansas. He was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. They moved to Arkansas and then to Tulsa. His dad owned a small grocery store at 5th and Lewis.

JE: What was the name of that?

BH: It's the Holmes Grocery.

JE: Okay.

BH: And there were a lot of small stores in neighborhoods at that time. They no longer exist.

JE: What was his personality like?

BH: Well, he's very intense and a very highly motivated guy. He graduated from Central High School. His dad offered to give him a car or send him to the University of Tulsa. He took the car. We've always laughed about that.

JE: How did he get in the insurance business?

BH: He gets out of high school, took the car, started looking for a job, held some jobs with oil companies and this and that, never did a damn at them, hated the work. And somehow, someone referred him to Burt Halliburton, who was apparently looking for a young guy.

He gave my dad a hundred dollars a month and a car to drive. That was in about 1931 or 1932. And about three or four years later, Burt Halliburton jumped out the window at the Hotel Tulsa and killed himself.

So my dad was there, looked after his business for the widow, and after probably four or five years, bought the insurance agency from her.

JE: The Halliburton name, now we hear that—

BH: They're not the Halliburtons of Duncan.

JE: Okay.

BH: They wished they were.

JE: Yeah.

BH: No, those are gas and oil related people down there.

JE: Right.

BH: This is no relation.

JE: Right. He had Dan P. Holmes—

BH: And Associates. That's correct.

JE: Right.

BH: And I worked for him for ten and a half years.

JE: We remembered his commercials that he did on television.

BH: It's probably the best piece of institutional advertising that's ever happened in Tulsa, in my opinion. And it just happened, it was not planned.

JE: Tell us what happened, tell us what it was.

BH: Well, Fred Jones was a client of his and they had that radio station. They wanted him to advertise. So he said, "Okay, I will." He would open every one of the newscasts that he was sponsoring with a few words. Highway 33 wasn't much of a road and probably couldn't be much of a road because there was no highway money in the state at that time.

But somehow, before World War II, the University of Tulsa played the University of Arkansas every Thanksgiving afternoon for many years in Skelly Stadium. After World War II, Arkansas says, "We ain't doing that no more. If you want to play us you can play us over in Fayetteville. We'd be happy to play ya."

So everybody in Tulsa that was interested in those things started dragging over there once a year, over that terrible road. He hated that road. You come home on that terrible road, you know. So anyhow, he said, "We need to do something to spruce up that road over there." But he also recognized something that happened after World War II is the

economic change in northwestern Arkansas. In 1939, a guy named Peterson put in the first pen of chickens in Decatur, Arkansas. That's in '39, before the World War.

Some other people over in the Springdale-Fayetteville, Arkansas, started the chicken business at that same time. And he recognized that there was industry going in over there and that part of Arkansas, when they went someplace they got on the train, which was only north/south, and it went to Kansas City. That was where they went to do things. Tulsa was a lot closer than Kansas City.

And he said, "If we can just figure out a way to get them over here it will be good for them and good for us. We need to figure out a way so we can do business with them and vice versa."

So he started pushing this Highway 33 thing, talking to people about it. And one night, it just came to him, he was in front of that damn mic, didn't know how to finish, and he said, "And remember Highway 33."

Somehow that caught on, he kept doing it, and he became known as Mr. Highway 33. It was a spectacular piece of institutional advertising. And just by happenstance.

JE: And everybody talked about it.

BH: Still do.

JE: And still do, right. But then, that became Highway 412.

BH: But before it was changed, Highway 33 was taken to 169, which is Shoto, okay? Henry Bowman dedicated the highway to there. He said, "Dan," he says, "you know, it'll take us another ten or fifteen years to get enough road money to get this darn thing from here to Siloam Springs. It's only forty miles." He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll just build a turnpike."

And three years later, there was a turnpike there and it just changed the complexion of business in our part of the country.

JE: Eh (starting to speak).

BH: Do you realize that for many years 25 percent of the cars in Utica Square Shopping Center on weekends were from Arkansas?

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BH: That just jumped out at you, what it's done, you know.

JE: They say even Mrs. Walton drove over from Arkansas.

BH: Sure.

JE: Sam's wife, to shop at Utica Square.

BH: Oh, sure, oh, sure, oh, sure, oh, sure, yeah.

JE: And now Highway 412 is a beautiful drive. I drove it on Memorial Day weekend—

BH: Yeah.

JE: ...to avoid the other traffic.

BH: Yeah.

JE: And it all started with Mr. Highway 33.

BH: You know, he had a lot to do with it, there is no doubt about that.

Now when we were standing there talking to Henry there were a couple of Amish guys, you know, that went through Inola.

JE: Yes, yeah.

BH: And I said, "Hey, what do you think about this new highway?"

He said, "Oh, we love it."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Well, now we can race our buggies and we won't have to contend with any cars."

JE: [laughing]

Chapter 03 - 3:25

Many Houses

John Erling: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Burt Holmes: I had two brothers, younger. One, two years younger, Dan P. Holmes Jr., he's now deceased. Then I have one named Victor, Vic Holmes, who is still alive. And he's twelve years younger than I.

JE: Did you have any recollection of grandparents that were—

BH: Oh, yeah.

JE: Tell us about them.

BH: In the Depression, about the time my dad went into the insurance business, there were no jobs here. And my stepgrandfather couldn't get work, he had worked for the county or somebody and got laid off. Couldn't get any work here. So my dad went over to Arkansas, Decatur, and bought them a log cabin and ten acres that had some vineyards on it, and gave him a pickup truck in Decatur.

So that's where we went every summer. And that was my mom's mom. He was the only guy in town, that town of 350, that had a pickup truck. Everyone else was driving horses and buggies, and so on. When they wanted to sell a pig or something up in Joplin, my grandpa would put it the thing and take care of it for him. Yeah.

JE: What was his name?

BH: His name was Harve McConnell.

JE: So you have fond memories then of, of—

BH: Yes I do.

JE: What was the first house you remember living in?

BH: It was cattycorner and across the street from the southwest corner of Barner School. And you asked this good question. I've just gone through that this week, finding every house that I lived in. I was born in St. John but went home just across from Barner School on 17th Place.

JE: You said you've gone through every house you've lived in. You moved many times?

BH: You want the list?

JE: [laughing]

BH: I just got the list today. We moved from there a year or two later, down to 19th Street, just from of Yorktown, just a couple blocks south of there. Then around 1940, my dad decided to build a house out on 31st Street, 2500 block East 31st Street. He bought two lots out there, paid six hundred dollars apiece for them. Built a house and we moved out there when I was in the second grade. I lived there clear into college.

Then after I got married in college, we had an apartment out by TU, then a rental house out by TU, and then bought our first house on 26th Place, off of Pittsburgh.

Back then, the average stay for people in a house was seven years. We moved out on 53rd Street, and I said, "Seven years." And then I built a big house out behind Southern Hills. I stayed about nine there, but this seven-year deal was just interesting.

JE: Yeah. But when your dad bought those lots at 31st that was like moving out in the country?

BH: Let me just tell you. You know where George Kaiser lives right now?

JE: Yeah.

BH: That's where I'm talking about. We lived two houses east of there. Two more houses east of there the pavement ended and there was a dirt road to Harvard, okay?

JE: Yeah.

BH: Yeah.

JE: Okay.

BH: Across the street was the woods. We used to hide out there and watch the bootleggers sell and change the stuff between cars.

JE: The first school you attended?

BH: Was Barner. I went there through the beginning of the second grade. I had a series of childhood illnesses starting in September. It lasted six to eight weeks. The doctor advised my mom to keep me out of school that year. So I've been retarded ever since. At least one year retarded, ever since then.

Then, instead of going back to Barner, which my folks thought the class sizes were too big, we went to Elliot.

JE: What was that childhood disease?

BH: Measles, just all that kind of stuff.

JE: Okay.

BH: Nothing serious. I did have a little bit of pneumonia at that time, but I got over it.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 04 - 1:43

Polio

John Erling: Polio was big, you didn't have polio?

Burt Holmes: Yeah, I've had polio. I had post-polio syndrome, as we sit here, but that was not until I started in junior high school, when the polio hit. And I went to Wilson Junior High School.

JE: Okay, so then we can jump to that time in your life, Wilson.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Polio was a big thing then.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: The Salk vaccine had not been invented yet.

BH: Wasn't any vaccine.

JE: So tell us about it and how you think you got and how it affected you—

BH: Well, for—I don't know how I got it and no one knows how it was passed on. They would say it was in the swimming pools or you overexerted. There were a variety of ideas, but I got it right after a friend of mine hired me to work at her farm and do some stuff. And I worked my tail off, it was really hot.

The next week, I did come down with it. Now, fortunately, it was a mild case. It only potentially affected my lower right leg. But I limped when I got well, but I wasn't truly well. It never kept me from playing athletics because I played in spite of the fact that I limped. And I got well eventually.

JE: How long were you laid up with the polio?

BH: I was not laid up in a hospital or anything. I had friends that were, I had friends who died.

JE: They called it infantile paralysis.

BH: Yes, they did. Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And many were paralyzed, and so you were considered to be very fortunate.

BH: I was very fortunate. Do you know Bisser Barnett?

JE: No.

BH: Who are the people who own the *Tribune*? Or used to own the *Tribune*?

JE: The Joneses.

BH: The Joneses. Her name was Bisser Jones.

JE: Okay.

BH: She married Howard Barnett who started the—

JE: Yeah.

BH: ...Brookside Bank. Okay?

JE: Yeah.

BH: She had polio.

JE: Oh?

BH: Really bad. Yeah, she really had it bad, and I didn't. She fought that thing and would not give up. She got to where she could walk again and do an awful lot of things.

JE: And we all know that our president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had polio.

BH: Yeah.

JE: You kind of related to him then, I suppose?

BH: Yeah, yeah.

JE: When you knew you had that.

Chapter 05 - 3:30

December 7, 1941

John Erling: Along in here is 1941.

Burt Holmes: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And December 7th.

BH: I know exactly where I was.

JE: And Pearl Harbor. Tell us where you were.

BH: It was Sunday afternoon. On Sundays we used to take rides. You know, there's no air-conditioned home and no air-conditioned cars. You'd go out for a ride. In December it wasn't hot but, anyhow, we were about a mile west on Apache, from the airport. The radio was on, it came over the radio.

JE: And you were ten years old.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Remember the adults talking about it? Did it—

BH: Oh yeah. The adults talked about it. I didn't understand what they were saying. All they'd ever say, "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor."

I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was.

JE: Right. So the days after that, and certainly much after that there was rationing, and that type of thing. Do you recall any of that?

BH: Sure, oh, sure. We all had ration cards. They had ration cards not just for food, but had ration cards for gasoline, tires, a variety of things. We didn't suffer from rationing. Rationing apparently was needed but we certainly were not inconvenienced. Other than a little inconvenience by rationing.

JE: Family members, did they join the military as a result of the bombing? Or do you recall anything going on?

BH: I had no family members that were in World War II. That I know about. My dad was on a draft board in World War II. I think he was thirty-eight, or something like that. He was on a draft board but that's as close as he ever got to the action.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Then you're on to high school.

BH: Yeah, I went on from Wilson to Will Rogers.

JE: What year would you have graduated from Will Rogers?

BH: Nineteen fifty.

JE: Do you have friends? That you remember then? Maybe even friends today that attended Will Rogers?

BH: Some, sure.

JE: Any names that we might know?

BH: Steve Avery, have you ever head that name?

JE: Yes.

BH: He's the one that is pushing the deal that his granddad, you know, the big statue down by the river, Steve was in my class there. He's moved back to Tulsa here, by the way.

JE: We think—

BH: He's very active in trying to get the Highway 66 Museum built there at that statue, which is a magnificent piece, by the way, down there.

JE: Avery Drive—

BH: Yeah.

JE: ...was his grandfather then, that kind of helped direct Highway 66 to come through Tulsa.

BH: It was his grandfather, yes. Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: If it hadn't of been for him Highway 66—

BH: It might not have gotten here.

JE: ...may never have made it here.

BH: It may not have made it.

JE: Right. Tell us about Tulsa in the '50s. Downtown, the places you shopped for clothes, the restaurants, that type of thing, where you hung out.

BH: Uh-huh (affirmative). I didn't hang out downtown, but downtown was where you did business. There were no shopping centers at that time. Clarke's Good Clothes, Renberg's, downtown, Brown Duncan's, Vandevors, those were the main stores that we did business with downtown.

Bishop's Restaurant was downtown. The YMCA, which used to be over by the bus terminal—you know where old City Hall used to be?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: Over here on Cincinnati?

JE: I do.

BH: The bus terminal was catty-corner to that.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: And the YMCA was right across the street north, where the Bank of Oklahoma parking garage is.

JE: Yep.

BH: That's where the YMCA was. I used to come down on Saturdays and play basketball at the Y. We'd bring a quarter, we'd go down and play basketball at the Y. Then we'd go down to the old *Tulsa World* building on Boulder. The original Coney Island was there. The old man had those thick glasses. That's where we used to go.

And downstairs next door to that was a pool hall. And we all liked to think we were sneaking into and being big, you know.

JE: Were you driving a car at that time?

BH: No, I didn't drive a car. You could drive one when you were sixteen then, but I flunked the test, so I didn't get to drive one for another year. [laughing]

JE: So the time you're talking about is when you were—

BH: We rode the bus down.

JE: ...fourteen, fifteen years old, or thirteen and somewhere around that.

BH: No, I was younger than that. This was in junior high school.

JE: Okay.

BH: Yeah, I was younger than that.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 06 - 5:05

Race Relations

John Erling: Remember the treatment of blacks? The signs that say, "No Blacks," or restaurants or any—

Burt Holmes: Oh, yeah, I was fifteen then.

JE: Tell us what you observed.

BH: Well, we always had a maid. And the maids came to work then on the bus, and went home on the bus. We had one for many years, a wonderful human being. She had a couple of sons that were really nice men. Boys, at that time, became very nice men.

I'll never forget one time, her son was picking me up at Elliot School. He was parallel parking and barely tapped a car in front of him.

The guy driving the car in front of him, jumped out, comes back, and starts yelling at him, calling him a nigger, and just treating him just awful.

He started crying, I mean, it was an awful, awful thing.

That put an indelible mark on me and I've always been involved in things around town involving them. And right now, in fact, I just gave five scholarships to TU, only for black students.

JE: I want to get into that—

BH: Yeah.

JE: ...a little later here. But, anyway, you saw the way they were treated and they couldn't go into some of those stores that you talked about earlier.

BH: You know, I did not notice that they were not going in those stores, but, come to think of it, I don't think ever saw any in them.

JE: Yeah. Yeah. Theaters, movie stars at the time?

BH: Oh, we had the Rialto, the Orpheum, and the Ritz, those were the three downtown theaters of consequence. And then there's some cheaper ones north of 3rd Street, by the viaducts, where little off-color things were shown from time to time.

JE: Any particular movies or stars that you were enamored with, maybe, at the time?

BH: I've never been enamored with movie stars. Only radio guys, I get enamored with radio guys, yeah.

JE: [laughing] In the '50s, you remember the fear of communism?

BH: Yes, oh, yeah.

JE: And the talk about that?

BH: Hey, look, what happened in World War II, we were so propagandized. One of our greatest allies was Stalin. We loved him, yeah. Chiang Kai-shek wasn't a very nice guy, he just happened to be our guy instead of a so-called communist. But the propaganda was just awful during the war. And Japs were very bad, almost inhuman beings.

JE: According to our?

BH: To our propaganda, yeah.

JE: Yeah, right.

BH: It was terrible, it was terrible, yeah. So...now I didn't understand at that time, how terrible it was because I had no frame of reference.

JE: Yeah.

BH: Being so young. The communist deal got fanned after the war was over when Russia would not, in effect, retreat and, in fact, take over all of eastern Europe. We let him take over too much, but Truman felt, apparently, that they had lost so many people that they had some entitlements, which included enslaving some other people, you know.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: Which—

JE: Then there was always that fear that communism was going to come here to the United States—

BH: Yes it was.

JE: ...and take over.

BH: But no one could tell you why or how.

JE: Right. But we fought communism in other areas as well. It was always we had to make a move because if we don't communism is going to take over certain countries.

BH: Yeah, and think what happened in Hollywood. I mean, they just beat up a bunch of people, intellectually, and business-wise, who were good people.

JE: When they blacklisted them.

BH: They blacklisted them, yeah. And that was absolutely wrong.

JE: Do you remember listening to presidents on the radio?

BH: Oh, sure.

JE: Franklin Roosevelt, his Fireside Chats?

BH: He used to have a saying, well, we've changed it a little, so, "I love the United States, Eleanor loves the United States, Fala (his little dog), loves the United States."

JE: [laughing]

BH: He had these Fireside Chats and they were pretty damn effective, yeah.

JE: Members of family listen to that?

BH: Oh, sure.

JE: Listen to the radio?

BH: Oh, sure, yeah, yeah.

JE: Have you ever come in contact with presidents in your entire life?

BH: Only once.

JE: Who's that?

BH: When we dedicated the lock out at the port.

JE: Port of Catoosa.

BH: Nixon, Nixon came in for the dedication.

JE: Yeah.

BH: I was sitting in the front row and he came down that row and shook hands with people. And I did shake his hand and say, "We're happy you're here, Mr. President." I was less happy about him later on, but at that time, I was happy with him.

JE: Why were you there?

BH: I was involved in some local somethings, I forget what it was that got me the opportunity to sit out there and do that.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BH: I've been involved in a lot of stuff, one way or another.

JE: Former Governor David Hall was there too.

BH: Yeah, I think so.

JE: That's—

BH: I knew him, he's a client of ours, and he needed to go to jail.

JE: So Richard Nixon that day, he must have impressed you in person. He was a handsome, good-looking man, and then he gave a good speech.

BH: Yeah. Now I did something in that deal, which I've never talked to anyone very much about, a few people. There was a photographer there that day who was a felon, and I knew he was a felon. He was disbarred attorney. What he had done, he was dating a woman who I knew, and she started dating somebody else who happened to be a doctor here in town. This guy hired somebody to throw acid in that doctor's face. Pretty big scandal deal.

So this guy couldn't be an attorney again. He was working for a television station as a cameraman. I was concerned about that, him being a felon and had created some violence.

So I told someone about him out there. They didn't do anything about it. I'm pretty sure they had someone watching, but they did not pull him away and make him not work.

Chapter 07 - 4:15

University of Tulsa

John Erling: You go on to college to Tulsa University. That was a no-brainer, I guess. You—

Burt Holmes: Well, yes and no. My dad was on the board at that time. He didn't go there but he got on the board, ultimately. We did love the school.

I decided to go though because they offered me a half scholarship to play basketball. That's the reason I went, it's a terrible reason to go to school, but that's what I did do. We didn't have to go financially. I'd played basketball one year. And then the next fall, basketball season started in October 1, but you could not go in and practice until October 15.

Bob Patterson, you know who Bob Patterson is, Bob was a freshman that fall. He and I were outside running. We ran from the north end of the stadium to the south end of the

stadium. At that time, there were temporarily bleachers on the field. And the two best players on the team were hiding under those bleachers. They'd been out drunk all night the night before and didn't want to run any.

Bob and I ran by them and looked at them and I got around to the corner and I said, "Holmes, it doesn't make any difference how many laps you run, how many steps you run, they're going to play and you aren't because they have talent and you don't.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BH: I went in the next day and told the coach I just didn't think I wanted to do this anymore. You know what? He didn't even try to dissuade me from leaving. I wonder if he understood the same thing. [both laughing]

There was this guy named Clarence Iba at that time.

JE: Clarence Iba.

BH: That was Henry's brother.

JE: And he was coach at TU.

BH: Yes he was.

JE: Well, I didn't know that. So had Clarence Iba been there for some time? Was he—

BH: Been there about two or three years. A couple years later, he quit coaching and moved to Ft. Worth. But he was there, certainly was.

Joe Swank was his assistant coach, and Joe became the head coach at TU after him.

JE: Tell our listeners who Bob Patterson was.

BH: Bob Patterson was from Kansas City, Missouri. He was a wonderful high school basketball player. During the spring, he would ride the train down and practice with us. He came to TU to play basketball. And, ultimately, he married Walt Helmerick's sister. He is still alive, she is not alive anymore. But he still lives here in Tulsa.

JE: So that—

BH: He was a very good man.

JE: You then earned a degree at TU?

BH: In Business Administration, yeah.

JE: So you graduated in what year?

BH: Nineteen fifty-four.

JE: You became a strong support of TU and you are to this day, are you not?

BH: I have always liked the University of Tulsa. I graduated, I was twenty-two years old. When I was twenty-six, I was president of the Alumni Association. I like to be around bright people and I'm just always been around the university, one way or another. Yeah.

JE: And today, you are an emeritus board member.

BH: That's correct.

JE: Board of Trustees.

BH: That's correct.

JE: How long were you a board member there?

BH: About nineteen years.

JE: So you've—

BH: And I was chairman of the board a couple of years.

JE: ...seen it grow to what it is today.

BH: I've seen the evolution and it's been spectacular. Slow for a while, and then it accelerated. I had torn down the first houses that were torn down west of the campus, twenty-six of them.

Charlie Norman, the next year, was the first one to get apartments built on the campus and we put the campus plan in place. Which it's been modified somewhat, but that's when it all got started, about then.

But the thing that really helped that thing was Fulton Collins, very key figure he was.

JE: He was.

BH: He was chairman. He ran that thing as chairman of the board for about nine years. He probably left twenty million dollars of his own money in that school before he passed away. He worked out there, wasn't always liked by the presidents because he was insistent on making them say things the way it was. Would not let them dance around issues, and so on.

But the execution of the campus plan, he caused to happen. And he was a wonderful human being and so incredibly bright it's unbelievable.

JE: Another major administration building is named in honor of him.

BH: Yes it is, and, when they were raising money for that, they went to QuikTrip and QuikTrip gave them some money and named the boardroom after me. And I got lucky and they also put up a portrait of mine in the boardroom.

JE: They did, and I don't know if it looks better than you really look or not. But it's pretty nice.

BH: I think it's better. And I'll tell you who did it though and why. Chester Cadieux's daughter did that. She is a big-time painter in California.

JE: Oh?

BH: Since they gave me the money I said, I suggested they use her to do the portrait. And it worked out well.

JE: Yeah. It did.

Chapter 08 - 5:26**The Holmes Organisation**

John Erling: I read where you were described as mild-mannered and unassuming. Is that really an accurate description of you? Mild-mannered and unassuming?

Burt Holmes: [laughing]

JE: In other words, that's a laugh. [laughing]

BH: Well, I tend to say what I believe or think, and to some people that's an asset and to some people it's a liability. It's just the way it is.

JE: So to follow your life, somewhere in here you were married, right?

BH: I got married in 1952, the year after I quit playing basketball.

JE: And her name was?

BH: Carlen Lea, L-e-a.

JE: Okay.

BH: She and I had gone to high school together over at Will Rogers.

JE: Out of college then, what is your first business? What do you do?

BH: I went to work for my dad. And that's one reason that I wasn't a very good student. I knew I had a job. Most of my buddies didn't know they were going to have a job or what it was going to be. So many of them made good grades.

I didn't because I knew I was going to work for my dad. Which, in retrospect, I'm not liking very well. I wasted a lot of time and intellect where I could have been developing intellect. Because you realize that in a four-year college life for most people, it's the only time in their life that they have nothing to think about except education.

I did not take advantage of those years.

JE: You still graduated in four years.

BH: Yeah.

JE: And you did get a degree.

BH: Yeah.

JE: You're wondering how much knowledge you took with you though, is that what you wonder?

BH: I left a lot I could have taken with me, yes I did.

JE: By the way, why the spelling of using an s instead of a z in the Dan P. Holmes Organisation?

BH: You know, I told you that I hated to be thought of as average.

JE: Yeah.

BH: You're average.

JE: [laughing]

BH: Every person that sees it asks me the same question. And I did it because I was going to change the name of my company from Burt B. Holmes and Associates to something.

About that time on television, I saw a television ad for the Rank Organisation, R-a-n-k, Organisation, s-a-t-i-o-n, in London. They had IMB over there and then some entertainment stuff at the same time. I thought, "If I use organisation spelled that way, people will ask." And everyone asks.

We've sent that to printers and they've changed it and sent it back. We've made it go reprint material. Then it served the purpose and I learned about that in Marketing at TU. About trying to set yourself apart from other people.

I did that with that and it's been very effective.

JE: But that was Dan P. Holmes, that was your father's name.

BH: No, his name was Dan P. Homes and Associates.

JE: Oh, I see.

BH: And I left him, then I named it Burt B. Holmes and Associates when I left, for about eight or nine years. Then I changed it to The Holmes Organisation.

JE: Yeah, okay.

BH: My dad and I did not compete against each other, but I think at that time I was trying to differentiate myself from him somewhat.

JE: Why did you have to leave? Why did you leave?

BH: Because he didn't want me to own any part of the business. He just wanted me to work there and that didn't work for me very well.

JE: So there came a day you realized...?

BH: Ten and a half years after I went to work for him, I left.

JE: He told you, "You're not going to own any of this"?

BH: Yes he did. Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So you went out on your own?

BH: Yes I did. Called a fraternity brother of mine who was an accountant. I'm not good at that, I said, "Hey, look, I'm leaving my dad on January 1. I need someone to run the insides the insurance agency, the administration. You're an accountant, you know how to do all that stuff. I'll give you 10 percent of the deal if you will do that. I will do all the selling and bring in the business." And that's what we did do.

JE: When your father passed on, his organization went where? What happened to that?

BH: My brother worked for him, and my brother worked for him while I was with him too. He was two years younger than I. He stayed with him. I tried to get my brother, when I left, to come with me. He would not. And after my dad died, I said, "Look, Dan, why don't you come on over here and join us?"

He said, “No,” he said, “I never had a chance to do anything up here in management. I want a chance to run this business.”

He did do that and it did not go well. Probably four or five years later, he called me one day, and he said, “Hey, I think I need to come on over there with you guys.”

So we moved what business he had left—he’d lost most of my dad’s business—what he had left, with us, we took care of it. And fortunately for him, a year after he got to us he had open heart surgery. And he would have had no one up there able to run his business when that happened.

So I was happy that we were together, for that reason.

JE: Well, I don’t need to meddle anymore, but obviously, that re—

BH: You can ask me any questions.

JE: The relation—

BH: We are what I call pushing and shoving. I don’t have any egos involved in any of these issues.

JE: So there was an estrangement then between you and your—

BH: Yes there was.

JE: ...father.

BH: About eighteen years.

JE: So there was no sitting around the Thanksgiving table or maybe celebrating Christmases together.

BH: Maybe occasionally. Occasionally we went on and still did that, yeah, but it was not pleasant.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: And I was upset with my mom because she ratified his acts. But now I know that women in that era, that was much the way that they were brought up. And I did not know that at the time. Did not understand it, so I was estranged with her for quite some time. And toward the latter part of her life, she and I got back a lot closer. We weren’t close but we were a lot closer. And I was happy it turned out that way.

JE: But with your father, to his dying day, this was still an issue?

BH: Yeah.

JE: Between the two of you.

BH: Yeah, yeah.

JE: Do you look back on that with regrets?

BH: No. No, I did the right thing for me.

JE: You’re probably saying, “He should have looked back on it with regret.”

BH: I don’t know, I don’t think of those issues very much.

JE: Right.

BH: However, that word *regret*, I did learn a lot a little later on when I got a divorce, in how to use that word. But no, I did the right thing for me.

Chapter 09 - 10:42

QuikTrip

John Erling: When did you meet Chester Cadieux?

Burt Holmes: Well, as far as QuikTrip's concerned, in 1957. However, I had gone to junior high school with Chester at Wilson Junior High School.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BH: He went down to Central, I went to Rogers. We didn't see each other until after we both had graduated from college. We met at a wedding. I got to know him then. He was in the Air Force at the time. And he came back and he went to work. Tried to selling printing and he wasn't very good at it.

I was standing in front of the Philtower building one May afternoon. And I saw Chester coming down the street. Of course, he's only about five six, you know. And I looked down at him and I said, "You look awful, Chester."

He said, "Well, Holmes, you don't look much better yourself."

I said, "Well, let me tell you my problem." So I took him inside. There was a place called the Tower Grill, at that time. It had great malts. I bought him a malt and told him that I had this idea. I'd been down to Dallas and seen the 7-Eleven stores and I thought there needed to be some up here. And I tried to do a deal with a guy for a year, a guy named Harry Burt, whose Dad used to own Burt's Good Humor Ice Cream Company. I never could get it down with him.

JE: Okay, you asked the ice cream man? You wanted him to get in the convenience business with you?

BH: I wanted him to be what ended up being the Chester. And he did not want to do that or couldn't. So I went on and signed a letter agreement for a lease, then I ran into Chester. And I told him, I said, "Chester, this is what I'm doing." I said, "A friend of mine at the bank across the street is going to loan me five thousand dollars. I've got three guys who want to put up two thousand bucks apiece. And I'm looking for someone who will put up five thousand dollars and I'll let him run the company."

Chester said, "I hate what I'm doing. I might like to do that."

I said, "Well, look, I'm leaving town for a week. When I come back I'll check with you."

He said, "I'll talk to my dad and see what he said."

So he came back and his dad told him he'd loan him the five thousand bucks, and that's how it got started. It was about that simple.

JE: So then you had a total of about how many thousands of dollars?

BH: Sixteen.

JE: Sixteen thousand dollars?

BH: Yeah.

JE: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BH: The next year we put in another four thousand.

JE: Okay.

BH: And then, never any more money.

JE: What was the name, again, of the first man you asked to go in on this business with you?

BH: Harry Burt, B-u-r-t Jr.

JE: Did he live to know how QuikTrip took off?

BH: Oh yeah.

JE: Did he ever say to you, "I should have done this, Burt"?

BH: No, not really.

JE: If you hadn't seen Chester on that day you talk about, was he on a list of people to call? Would you have called him?

BH: No.

JE: Wow. So that just shows how, on a whim, QuikTrip took off.

BH: Absolutely fortuitous for him and for me, yeah.

JE: And who knows who you might have tried to call. I don't know if you had a list in your head or not. If you had many others you probably did.

BH: I talked to a number of people, yeah.

JE: Yeah.

BH: Yeah.

JE: Has that happened a lot to you in your life? Lots of whims?

BH: No, but I talk to people. And when you talk to people you find out things that if you don't talk to them you don't find out.

JE: Yeah.

BH: He was unhappy in his job, as it works out. And I had this idea that was very important to me. I had tried to do it with somebody else and didn't work out. So, yeah, this is one of these turning points in my life and his life.

JE: Yeah. You also did some misspelling in the name of QuikTrip.

BH: No, that was by design. I thought up the name but I got some help from a guy in your business, a little bit, with that.

JE: In the advertising business?

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative). I had this name. I was sitting down one day telling Hugh Finity what I was wanting to do. You remember Hugh?

JE: Hugh Finity was a big name in this town.

BH: Yeah.

JE: In baseball and all.

BH: And I knew him through athletics, and so on. He said, "Burt, you know, that's a great name but we shouldn't print it the way you're treating it."

I said, "What do you mean?" I had Quick-Trip. He said, "We need to get this snappier." And he said, "Let's do it Quik-Trip." He said, "That is a better way of doing it." He's absolutely right. Yeah.

JE: So then you dropped the hyphen.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative). And eventually, started using the QT a lot. But that didn't happen for a number of years.

JE: Chester was to do the leg work.

BH: He was to run the company. He would run the stores. I was going to get the money and the locations. And after about three or four or five years, he did not need me to do either one of those things. And he became, frankly, a world class businessman.

JE: Yeah.

BH: And I had no idea that the ability to do that was there.

JE: There were ups and downs and I have interviewed Chester here on VoicesofOklahoma.com. And he talks about what you're talking about. You will also remember, he talks about the first store that you opened up. That had to be a big thing in your mind, and it was actually in a construction area. And Chester talks about he put out a sign that said, "Help," out in front of the business.

So what were your feelings about this, wondering, "Is this going to work or not?"

BH: Well, my dad was about to die. My dad's dad had gone bankrupt in the grocery business in the '30s, over on 5th Street. My dad was just very upset that I was going into a grocery business.

What happened is I had signed a letter agreement for twenty-four hundred square feet in a strip shopping center at 52nd and Peoria, on the west side of the street. After we did that and got started, the city decided to redo the intersection there because the guy that owned the Chinese restaurant north of Lypass right now, was going to build a shopping center across the street from us and they needed utilities. And they needed all the undergrounds and that stuff.

So they shut down the damn street in front of us for eight weeks. You know we were dying. We didn't have any business. The kids in the neighborhood would ride their bikes

in or the parents would walk in, but that's not enough to put in your ear, you know. But we made it through. And the rest is history.

JE: You must have had nights where you worried about it?

BH: No, I don't worry.

JE: That's not part of your nature?

BH: That's not part of me.

JE: Do not worry.

BH: I do not worry. I slept just as well then as I've ever slept in my life.

JE: Chester talks about the experimentation of what to sell. He talked about selling wigs at one time, and canoes. And he says, "We didn't know what we—"

BH: He didn't know anything.

JE: He didn't know anything, right.

BH: He didn't know anything. But he got lucky early on. Git-N-Go started two weeks before we did. They brought up a guy from Texas named Billy Neal. Billy ran a convenience store down in Texas someplace.

Chester got to know him somehow and Billy got upset with Git-N-Go, who was owned by Hale-Halsell, the wholesaler. Chester said, "Well, why don't you come over and help us for a while?"

He did come over and help Chester with a lot. And we were very fortunate that that did happen.

JE: At the time, the very idea of convenience had to be sold to the public. They didn't grasp what you guys were trying to do.

BH: That's correct, but convenience was not used in connection with the stores. People called them bantams, small. Bantam roosters, you know. I forget what else they called them. Convenience store, that word came along some years later.

JE: Okay, what the idea then, was not—

BH: Yeah, it was convenience. People said, "What do you mean, QuikTrip?"

I said, "That's exactly what it is. You come in front, get in and get out real quick. That's a QuikTrip."

JE: And people had to slowly figure that out.

BH: Yeah. But my name connoted that and a whole bunch of them don't.

JE: Weren't you also a little more expensive than maybe the grocery stores?

BH: Sure, sure.

JE: Because you were making it easy for them to come in and grab it and go.

BH: Well, that, plus the fact that we couldn't buy as cheap as the grocery stores could.

JE: Oh, yeah.

BH: And to get a decent margin, we had to have higher prices.

JE: I think Chester talks about at one point where you needed some capital and he started knocking on banks doors.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And they said, “No, no, no, no.”

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

JE: And either you were with him or knew what he was doing.

BH: Oh, I knew what he was doing, yeah. We finally ended up, well, the banking deal, that was a ways down the line. And he ended up at a bank in Dallas, the Republic National Bank. Did he mention Terry Carter to you?

JE: No.

BH: Well, Terry Carter was the chief financial officer at QuikTrip for many years. He worked for the bank at that time and it was our banking officer down there. We got set up. After we got set up we were doing business with BOK at that time and they said no.

Chester called them and just told them, “We’re moving the business tomorrow.”

The president of the bank called Chester and said, “What are you doing?”

He said, “Well, we came to you and told you what we needed and you said you wouldn’t do it, so we found someone who said they would do it.”

He said, “Well, you still have to come back to me.”

Chester said, “Look, you told me no. However, what we’ll do, they’re going to parcel this out to some other banks, not just theirs, and we’ll ask them to give you part of the loan that way.” And we did do that.

And then, ultimately, we did get back to BOK because the bank down there changed hands so damn many times and they got to where they wouldn’t answer the phone as readily as Chester thought they should.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: So we changed back to BOK and have been there since.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). You said you never worry, so you went on to stores two, three, four, and five, and then there were ups and downs. But you figured that this idea is going to work, basically because you knew it was working in Dallas.

BH: I never had any problems with it. Yeah.

JE: Are you still connected to QuikTrip today?

BH: I own only a small amount. My family only owns a small amount of stock. I am emeritus on the board out there, which isn’t much fun because if you’re not truly involved in the deal, it’s not fun just to watch them read reports, you know. But I do go to the meetings. We’ll go to one this week.

JE: Doesn’t it give you a sense of pride as you go about your business and then you see the QuikTrip signs, and so forth, what you had to do with that?

BH: Yeah, I like that. Yeah.

JE: Must be a good, nice feeling.

BH: Yeah, I like that. Yeah, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And Chester turned out, as you just said, a world class businessman. What a nice surprise.

BH: Yeah.

JE: You guys were obviously good friends.

BH: You know, that company, we started fifty-four years ago this fall, that thing has got fifteen thousand employees now. I mean, that's crazy. I don't think any other Oklahoma-owned company has fifteen thousand employees in it.

JE: And—

BH: And they don't all have to be in Oklahoma, but, I mean, just employ that many.

JE: Hundreds of stores.

BH: We have about 670 or 80 stores now.

JE: It's closed several billion in sales.

BH: Over twelve billion in sales.

JE: And *Fortune* magazine consistently names QuikTrip to the list of best companies to work for in America.

BH: That's right, we're really proud of that.

JE: Chester talks about how important it was that the employees know how important *they* are to the business.

BH: That was a philosophy—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: ...that evolved during the first probably ten years of our life.

JE: Okay.

BH: I don't think Chester knew or thought about that in the first two or three years that we were in business. One of the things that he did always say, "We always have to keep expanding so that employees will know they have a chance to progress."

That's what a lot of people lose sight of. They have evolved this employee deal really well and gone very far with it. And the rest is history. I mean, it's the best-known convenience store in the country now. Yeah.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 10 - 5:17**Other Companies**

John Erling: Meanwhile, you're off starting other businesses, aren't you?

Burt Holmes: Yeah. From time to time, and not for my benefit either. I lost a lot of money and I should have just paid it into QuikTrip.

JE: Were you in the oil and gas business?

BH: Yes. I started a company called Hurricane Trading Company. We were in that for about five years. Bought and sold crude oil, did very well in it, and then got out of it. Closed it down when the market changed.

Started another company called Gas Energy Development Company, which buying and selling natural gas. We did not do as well in that one as we did in the first one, but we didn't lose anything. I'd take interest in wells from time to time, but nothing big.

I do not consider myself an "oilie," okay?

JE: Right. Another business was a Day School Incorporated?

BH: My second wife was in the daycare center business, and the first one, she bought that business, with me as a partner, from her brother. I was in it with her for twelve years.

JE: Here we're sitting on the floor of Leaders Life Insurance Company—

BH: Yes.

JE: ...which is your very viable business right now.

BH: Yeah, it's an interesting deal. I started that when I was fifty-six years old and I read the biography of Ray Crock, the guy who started McDonald's. He was fifty-six years old when he started McDonald's. I was fifty-six, had gotten a divorce, just sitting around, and I think, "You know, I've always wanted to try to have an insurance company instead of an agency. This is an agency here, the Holmes Organisation is.

So I went out and I raised a million dollars from friends of mine. The first guy was Fulton Collins; gave me—listened to me for twenty minutes and wrote me a check for a hundred thousand bucks. I raised a million dollars and then, ultimately, in the next year or two, I had to raise another million.

But I started that thing; didn't have enough money, didn't know anything about the business.

JE: The business of life insurance?

BH: Yeah, it's a particular kind of life insurance.

JE: Oh.

BH: And it was a specialty product. We made it, it's grown too slowly, as far as I'm concerned, but for many years, it made some money. It did not make any money last year, for the first time in maybe ten or twelve years. But it's still viable and has value.

JE: There's another company, American Institute of Medical Technology.

BH: Yeah, a friend of mine called me one day and said, "Hey, I've got a guy in town I want you to meet."

So this guy comes in, they're from India. He came in with this idea of starting a school to train medical technologists, specifically, ultrasound technologists, originally.

I didn't really want to do it very bad but I'm pretty entrepreneurial and it looked like an opportunity, it was right business. When you talk about getting in the medical business, as much as it's expanding, taking more and more of our money every year, you know, it offered me a way into that business.

So we've done that. We've been around about seven or eight years. It's been very difficult. I don't know whether, ultimately, it's going to make it or not, but it's still all right.

JE: Then National Occupational Health Services.

BH: Yeah. A friend of mine sold his hotel/grocery business, and was talking to me, looking for something.

Another friend of mine owned a piece of a drug testing company owned by a doctor, who died. And they wanted to sell that thing.

I said, "Well, let's go see these guys and see if we can make a deal." Which we did do. And we took over their existing business. We were completely ignorant, didn't know anything about it.

But my partner's Brad Petty, part of the Petty family that has a store in Utica Square, he is a super businessman. He learned that business.

We've now morphed it into an industrial medicine clinic to handle Workman's Comp claims, industrial claims. In addition to the testing that we do. And it's doing very well now.

JE: You were just a born businessman, weren't you? I mean, you say you didn't take any knowledge from TU, but there's an instinct that some people are born with. Would you agree?

BH: There's no doubt that I have instincts of a small businessman. I never think of building a business as big as QuikTrip. That evolved over fifty-some-odd years, you know.

JE: Right.

BH: It started out very small with one store. I call myself a small businessman. I have good instincts for doing those kinds of things.

Now, having said that, it doesn't mean that I haven't lost.

JE: Have you ever gone broke, as we say?

BH: Yeah, sort of.

JE: Have you had to sell everything off? Homes and cars?

BH: No, I never had to do that. Well, I had to sell the house in Aspen and I had to sell my best painting that I ever owned, both for a lot of money. But I told the bankers, the people

involved were I had debt, I said, “Look, if you’ll leave me alone in the Holmes Organisation I can pay all the interest that I need to and eventually be able to pay off the principal.”

They always left me alone. And I did what I said I would do over a protracted period of time. But it didn’t go quick.

When all the banks went broke because of Penn Square—

JE: Penn Square Bank in Oklahoma City.

BH: Yeah, the insurance agency lost a lot of money. We wrote off four hundred thousand dollars in one year. Drilling contractors that could not pay their insurance bill. But we stayed in business.

But the next year I got a divorce. So I had a lot of debt. I was a land speculator, I couldn’t sell the land I owned for any price. I was caught. But I went to see the banks and told them what I was doing and I worked my way through them.

It took me, to pay off my first wife and the banks, fourteen years. You know, just pecking away at it and finally got that done.

JE: But you had this Holmes Organisation and so the bank said, “As long as you have that business...”

BH: And it was growing.

JE: Right.

BH: That and some other deals that were good deals, allowed me to pay them off.

Chapter 11 - 3:00

Best Business Decisions

John Erling: Are you able to point out one or two of your best business decisions?

Burt Holmes: Yeah, probably. This would probably number one. The QuikTrip meeting with Chester, following up on an idea that I had was one of the best things I’ve ever done. Period. Another thing that I should have done and I did do was that I resigned from my dad’s business at about age thirty-two, because I needed to be in business for myself. That was a biggie for me also.

JE: But that was a contentious relationship between you and your dad for a long time.

BH: Yes it was. Yes it was.

JE: Was it just a personality...?

BH: Yeah, I think it was, he grew up in a different generation than I grew up in. And I was interested in things that he wasn’t prepared to talk to me about. And one of them was ownership in the business. At my young age of thirty-two. So, yeah, it caused stress. And I did the right thing by deciding to leave, yes.

JE: Students who are interested in business and they're listening to you, what kind of advice do you give to these young people or young adults that want to start a business.

BH: I don't give advice but I do believe this, that everything starts with a dream. Or an idea. An idea is a dream, in my opinion. If the dream has substance to it, it needs to be followed until a logical conclusion. But most people cannot do that because people cannot make decisions in the same way that I make decisions. I can, what I call, pull the trigger. I can think about something and then decide, instead of, "Oh, I'd like to do that!" I do it. And I pull the trigger.

Well, every once in a while, I pull it on bad deals. And good deals are better than bad deals, I'll just flat tell you that.

JE: Yeah. So that's an instinct that we've talked about earlier.

BH: Most people cannot pull the trigger. Most people sit around and talk about it, "I'd like to do this," "I'd like to do that," "I'd like to do something else." But they cannot pull the trigger to leave the comfort of their employment or whatever arrangements they are in, to go out and do something that has risk involved in it.

I am not risk-averse.

JE: Then how would you like to be remembered?

BH: Well, I think that I'd like to be remembered as somebody who was honest and honorable and worked hard. You know. Those things are enough for me, you know.

JE: Well, I want to thank you for this time we've spent with you, giving your time. I know you're a busy guy. I don't know how many businesses you're balancing right now.

BH: I'm getting ready to go to a bank director's meeting.

JE: Yeah.

BH: So I'm involved in that. And a lot fewer things than I used to be. Because the older you get, your energy level decreases. And most people who are not old do not understand that. And I used to be able to multitask a whole bunch of things at one time. I cannot any more because I just don't have the energy. You know?

JE: Yeah.

BH: So I'm in a few things and I try to do them as well as I can.

JE: Well, thank you, Burt, for this time. I appreciate you doing it, very much. Thank you.

BH: You're quite welcome. I'm happy to be involved with this thing. Thank you very much for it.

JE: You're welcome.

Chapter 12 - 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.