

Joseph H. Williams

As a business leader, he reshaped Williams Cos.,
but the Tallgrass Prairie is his lasting legacy.

Chapter 01 - 1:15

Introduction

Announcer: While Joe Williams is known historically in Tulsa first as an oilman, his friends and family speak of him as a bird hunter and conservationist, and then an astute businessman and oilman. It is Joe's work on behalf of the country's largest preserved tract of native tallgrass prairie that is his lasting legacy. He is given credit with making it happen, thus the preserve was renamed the Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in 2015. He is past chairman of both the Oklahoma Board of Trustees and the National Board of Governors for The Nature Conservancy.

Joe Williams never intended to get involved in the family-owned Williams Brothers pipeline construction business. He had other plans. Fate stepped in, however, and he spent thirty-five years with the multibillion-dollar company, the last fifteen as chairman and chief executive officer. When he retired in 1994, the company was a much more focused, greatly expanded, and significantly more profitable enterprise than when he assumed the chairmanship in 1979.

In his oral history interview Joe Williams talks about his days in Iran with the Williams Companies and the pivotal meeting that led to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve.

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Chapter 02 - 8:00

South Carolina

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is February 28, 2018.

Joe, would you state your full name, please?

Joe Williams: Joseph Hill Williams. Known as Joe Williams.

JE: Hill, where does that name come from?

JW: My grandfather on my mother's side was Judge Joseph Hill from Fort Smith, Arkansas.

JE: Your date of birth?

JW: June 2, 1933.

JE: Your present age would be?

JW: Eighty-four. I'll be eighty-five in a couple of months.

JE: And then tell us where we're recording this interview.

JW: In Dresden, South Carolina, which is our home where we live.

JE: When was this building built?

JW: Seventeen ninety-one, and it has a historical plaque outside that tells that

JE: I think we should give credit to Judge Joe Morris because he put us together. Judge Morris, who I've interviewed for this website, now ninety-five, legal counsel for Amerada Petroleum, dean at the University of Tulsa College of Law, federal judge in the Eastern District of Oklahoma, vice president of the Shell, and then general counsel for Amerada has—I think the thing that ties you together is your love for hunting?

JW: Yes.

JE: Did you ever go hunting with him?

JW: Oh, yes. We did a lot of bird hunting. I didn't do any animal hunting with him but we hunted quail, we hunted doves, we hunted ducks. And he didn't hunt turkeys as much, but he did anything that had wings he loved to hunt. And he loved working birddogs and he had good birddogs. So we had a lot of fun.

I had birddogs as well and we hunted together. He was a very, very special fellow.

JE: Yes. Where were you born?

JW: I was born in Tulsa.

JE: What hospital?

JW: St. Johns Hospital.

JE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

JW: Yes, I was the youngest. My dad started this business and he was building pipelines all over the country. So my sister Kate was born in Louisiana, but my sister Martha and my brother, David, were both born in Tulsa as well.

JE: Your mother's name?

JW: Martha Hill.

JE: That was her maiden name. Where did she grow up and live?

JW: She grew up in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Her father was Chief Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court. They lived there.

My dad knew the whole family and he started his construction work in Arkansas, and then moved over into Oklahoma to what was to be Oklahoma. It didn't really take off until Glenpool was discovered and that other pool up in Kansas. He and his brother, they moved to Tulsa and started working in other parts of Oklahoma and Kansas.

JE: What was your father's name?

JW: David Rogerson Williams.

JE: About your mother, what kind of a personality did she have?

JW: She was very quiet. She read a great deal, and she was intellectually oriented. She was absolutely marvelous. Do we have time for a funny story?

JE: Sure.

JW: Our family was from South Carolina originally, Camden, South Carolina, and we still have the old family plantation there. But Dad moved out West with Uncle Miller. Then Mother got sick in Tulsa, so she went to see the doctor.

The doctor examined her and the doctor said, "Mrs. Williams, you're not sick." And he said, "Glorious news, you're pregnant."

And she said, "I can't be pregnant, I'm forty years old and my husband's broke."

(laughing) He said, "Mrs. Williams, that's a very touching story but you're still pregnant."
(laughing)

JE: Oh, it was you she was pregnant with?

JW: Yeah. (laughing) It was me.

JE: Yeah. So then your father, what was his personality like?

JW: He was much more outgoing. He was absolutely rigid in being tied to doing things right, giving a fair job on construction projects, and not cheating in any way. He was totally rigid on that. But he had a wonderful sense of humor and one of the things that he wanted to do was to sort of restore the family name back in South Carolina. So he bought the plantation in 1928.

JE: That plantation was the Mulberry Plantation?

JW: Mulberry Plantation.

JE: In Camden, South Carolina?

JW: Yes, just about five miles south of Camden.

JE: Your father, did he purchase it from your uncle?

JW: From his uncle, who was always named David R. Williams. And then he started moving the family, giving them a homestead, really, because he had been traveling all over.

In 1923, he did the piping of Edmonton, Canada, back before pipelining really had gotten big. He was doing projects all over the place. He and his brother, Uncle Miller, were partners. Uncle Miller was financially oriented. He handled the business affairs of the emerging company in the wintertime and Dad would move the family over to South Carolina.

Dad was the engineer and he was over all the construction work, all the summer and fall. That's the way they worked. They built an organization and World War II came along, it became absolutely critical to the war effort. They built the "Big Inch" and the "Little Inch" pipeline to the East Coast. They built a refueling facility in Nova Scotia for the British Navy. They built all the loading facilities to be able to bring fuel on board in Africa for the North African campaigns. They built a trans-isthmus pipeline in Panama to be able to get oil from the Pacific to the East without having to go through the canal and ships, they'd have that much larger capacity with the pipelines.

That's just in a nutshell of what they were doing. And they brought along my brother, David, who was an engineer, and my first cousins, John Williams and Charlie Williams. John and Charlie and David eventually took over the business from Dad and Uncle Miller. And they had a really good cadre of construction engineers, equipment operators, and Williams Brothers continued to grow in the next generation.

JE: Finally, about Mulberry, it was Mulberry Planation, that's where you grew up, wasn't it?

JW: That's where I grew up. I was born in Tulsa, but I grew up at Mulberry.

JE: A working farm, about five thousand acres.

JW: That's right.

JE: This had to be great for a young boy—

JW: Yeah.

JE: ...who loved nature.

JW: It was wonderful. When the war came on, we couldn't go back and forth to Tulsa so Mother and my sister Kate and I were there at the plantation all during the war.

I used to ride a horse to school, five miles into town to the public school. A lot of people thought that was unusual. Later when I was up north they said, "You were so poor you had to ride a horse to school?"

And I said, "No, we rode the horse to school because we saved gasoline tickets that my mother could use to drive up to our summer cottage in North Carolina. That's why I rode the horse to school." And I said, "But I have to admit—I loved it."

Chapter 03 - 1:30

Williams Brothers

John Erling: So the Williams Companies were founded by brothers Miller and David?

Joe Williams: Correct.

JE: Miller is your uncle?

JW: That's correct.

JE: And David Senior is your father?

JW: That's correct.

JE: They did that in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

JW: They started in Fort Smith, Arkansas, but they migrated across the river into Indian Territory and then after Glenpool and those prolific fields were discovered in and around the Tulsa area and southern Kansas the business grew as production of oil and gas grew.

JE: Then, obviously, your cousin is John Williams and he was fifteen years older than you?

JW: Yes.

JE: His father was Charles Pettigrew Williams?

JW: Yes. And he—

JE: And his brother was—

JW: ...also had a brother that was Charles Pettigrew Williams.

JE: Was he known as Charlie?

JW: Charlie, yeah.

JE: John, with his brother Charlie, and David Williams Jr., your brother, bought the company from the founders Miller and David Williams Sr.

JW: Yes.

JE: In 1949.

JW: Yes, that's correct.

JE: And then John was president of the company until '71, and CEO until 1979.

JW: John was the leader of the company all during those years until the youngsters took over. Dad built a great cadre of good engineers and equipment operators, so they had a really good team. Then when John and Charlie Jr. and David took over, they took over a going company that was doing very well.

JE: Let's bring you back. You attended Camden's school system through the eighth grade?

JW: Yes.

Chapter 04 - 1:55

Pearl Harbor

John Erling: Nineteen forty-one, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, you were eight years old. Do you have any remembrances of that day?

Joe Williams: I do. Camden was a horse town. They had horse races and polo and all sorts of things. There was a polo game on Sunday and it came over the radio that the Japanese had bombed a place called Pearl Harbor.

My dad said, "Turn that thing off. That's that Orson Welles with another one of his scare programs." (laughing) And it was the real thing.

JE: Right.

JW: (laughing) And of course, they found out very quickly, there wasn't any television or that type of communications, but anyway, Williams Brothers was called into action to start taking on projects to help with the war effort.

JE: What kind of projects?

JW: Mostly pipeline projects. The "Big Inch" and the "Little Inch" pipelines were to take oil and gas to the East Coast, rather than having tankers come all the way around. And somewhat later, when the Germans got into the act and we were torpedoing tankers those cross-country pipelines were being built and Williams Brothers was not the only one, but one of the major builders of those cross-country pipelines.

And I mention some of the other projects they did, like the trans-isthmus pipelines across Panama, Nova Scotia, and Africa. So they were very busy all during the war.

And Mother and I and Kate were basically there in Camden. My brother, David, was in college and so was my sister Martha.

David was twelve years older than I was. I was an unexpected dividend. (both laughing)

JE: During the war, the headquarters for Williams, was it in Tulsa?

JW: Yes.

JE: Okay.

Chapter 05 - 2:52

Conservation

John Erling: Let's talk about you and your youth and that great acreage you had there. You became a woodsman, naturalist, environmentalist. Everything was filtered into your brain as you were a child growing there.

Joe Williams: That's absolutely right, that's a good way to put it. It's true, I started dove shooting and I would be the retriever. I would retrieve doves and then I learned to hunt squirrels and then I learned to hunt anything that flew. I love the outdoor life and all of that.

Let's go fast-forward until I came back from overseas and I spent two years in Germany in a tank battalion. And then later, I went to work for Williams Brothers. I spent seven years in Iran, and after all of that the point is I came back and I was devastated, literally, to find what had happened to our country. The wonderful marshes and swamps and forests were being depleted rapidly. And that pollution, something we never thought

about, was evident all over the place. The degradation of the natural world was very, very obvious to someone that had been out of the US natural worlds for so long.

I didn't take on a crusade or anything but I began to find interests and ways in which I could help in conservation. Ultimately, ended up with me being very much involved with organizations like the Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, the Nature Conservancy, and many other organizations that wanted to ameliorate the damage that was being done. It wasn't a crusade but it was a deep belief and desire to do my share; to not let it happen any greater.

JE: When you came back was it in Oklahoma that you saw that?

JW: Well, I came back to both. I came back particularly to South Carolina. So much of the waterways in South Carolina were being dammed. Swamps were being flooded. The bird life was diminishing rapidly. If it had happened day by day I probably wouldn't have noticed it, but being out of the country and out of touch, really, with the natural world in South Carolina, it was a dramatic revelation when I came back.

And when I was asked to help with various different conservation efforts, I said, "Yes, that's what I want to do." I began to grow into conservation work and I ended up in managerial positions as a sideline to business. It was a natural evolution.

Chapter 06 - 2:43

Yale

John Erling: And I'm going to get into more of that. Let's go back: Your high school, where did you go to high school?

Joe Williams: St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire.

JE: What year did you graduate from high school?

JW: Nineteen fifty-two.

JE: Were you known as the Paulies?

JW: Oh, yes.

JE: And your mascot, the Pelicans?

JW: The Pelicans, yes. How did you find that out? (both laughing)

JE: Why did you go to St. Paul's School in Concord?

JW: That's a good question. I didn't want to go away to school. My dad felt that the public schools that I was attending in South Carolina were just not up to providing the kind of education that would enable me to get into a good college and/or maybe graduate school. He had a number of friends who knew some of the Eastern preparatory schools, particularly St. Paul's School and Exeter.

I went and looked at three or four of them with Mother and Dad and I picked St. Paul's School because it had sixteen hundred acres of land around it and streams and all and I thought, "Well, I could be very happy in this place." Exeter and some of the other places were just small cities and St. Paul's wasn't, it was a country school.

JE: So you graduate from St. Paul's and then you enroll at Yale University.

JW: Yes.

JE: Many of your family members attended Yale even before you.

JW: My brother, David, was a graduate of Yale. John and Charlie Williams, who were older, both went to Yale. I applied to Yale, to University of Virginia, and University of North Carolina, because I really wanted to go back to the South. But my brother and John, they all said, "Now look, you've got a good chance of getting into Yale. You've got great marks. You shouldn't overlook that just because you like the South."

So I got into Yale and I went there and I really enjoyed it.

JE: You were pretty active there. As a student, you were a member of the Yale Polo Team—

JW: Yes.

JE: ...for three years. You were captain during your junior and senior years.

JW: That's right.

JE: And so—

JW: You really have found out a lot.

JE: Right. You talk a lot about hunting but you obviously loved horses too.

JW: Yes.

JE: So you were able to do all that at Yale, so that was a great experience for you, wasn't it?

JW: Well, David was twelve years older than I was. David had gone to Culver before and that's where he became captain of polo at Culver. He went to Yale and he met Jack Daniels, who became captain of Yale polo, and married my sister Martha.

And then another classmate of theirs married my sister Kate. So we had a whole bunch of Yalies in the family.

Chapter 07 - 2:50

Marriage

John Erling: But then you were married too in '56. That's when you married Penny.

Joe Williams: She was from Camden.

JE: And became the parents of three children.

JW: That's right. Joe Jr., Peter, and Jamie. We were married all through the period when I was

in Germany in the army and my field work with Williams Brothers all over the place. And she lived in Glasgow, Kentucky, and Cloquet, Minnesota, and all, and then in Iran. In Iran, she taught school, a Persian school, and she's quite a remarkable gal.

After we got back, life sort of changed and how and why, none of that is of relevance here. But we grew apart and got divorced. I swore I would never get married again.

And three years later, one of my college roommates said, "I want you to meet the most wonderful girl. And she went to college with my wife and she lives just down the street from us."

I said, "I don't want to meet Wonder Girl, I just don't want to."

But anyway, there's a long story there, which is probably not relevant. But I did meet her. I did take her, actually to a Williams Brothers board meeting and dinner at 21 Club in New York. And I called her, I said, "Would you like to go to 21 Club for dinner?"

She said, "I love 21 Club but I haven't been there but once or twice."

So anyway, she came down to New York and we went. She's an absolutely beautiful woman. We went into the 21 Club and there were all my directors and officers and they all, "Oh, look!" And they said, "Where in the world did he find her?"

And in a matter of months, we got married and we've been married forty-one years.
(laughing)

JE: And we should say her name is Terry.

JW: Yes, Terese T. Williams, Terry. Terry's father was a banker in Ithaca, New York, and they all went to Cornell except for Terry. She didn't go to Cornell, she went to Vassar.

But anyway, when it came time to ask for her hand I went up there to Ithaca. He was very, very nice and he said, "You're from Oklahoma?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Would it astonish you if I told you I didn't know where Oklahoma was?"

(laughing)

I said, "No, but I think you would really love it. We want you to come see us when we get married."

Anyway, we became the best of friends and he lived to be ninety-six.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JW: He had no sons and he really took me on as a project and a very happy project.

JE: How old were you then when you married Terry?

JW: Forty-four years old.

Chapter 08 - 2:52**Military Officer**

John Erling: Let's go back after Yale.

Joe Williams: I intended to go to law school but the Korean War was on. So I was in the ROTC. I had a two-year requirement. The Yale ROTC unit was an artillery unit, so they sent me to Fort Sill to the artillery school. That was fine.

I got my orders, and I said, "There's something wrong with these orders."

They said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "Well, it's got me going to a tank battalion in Germany."

It's a long story, but the short story was I did go in a tank battalion in Germany and I'd never seen a tank before except in the movies.

JE: (laughing)

JW: But the flip side of that coin was terrific because my noncommissioned officers had all fought in Korea and had a great deal of experience. The colonel said, "Lieutenant, I don't know what in hell got you sent over here to me but I want to tell you two things: I'm going to put you into a good platoon, and don't you mess up my sergeants." And he said, "Secondly, you learn as much as you possibly can and then I'm going to give you the platoon all by yourself." And he said, "Let me also remind you that the Russians have thirty-four tanks lined up on the East German border. Our mission, as the balloon goes up, we have to go there immediately."

We had a lot of maneuvers and all that. Well, the master sergeant there had won the Silver Star in Korea. He was a wonderful man. The long and the short of it was that I learned how to work men that were much older than I was, had much more experience, that knew the job that I hadn't been trained for.

When I went to work for Williams Brothers I had a similar experience with these old-time superintendents and foremen and all of those people. You didn't push those people around. You had to know how to lead them.

So the army was a learning experience that helped me in my planning experience. We had some close calls where we took up positions. The Russian tanks, literally, were right across the river, right below us. It was pretty scary, we were all locked and loaded.

JE: Were you firing back and forth at each other?

JW: And we were firing into the air just to scare the other guys. And it scared us. But we did not have any direct engagement at all.

JE: But it was obviously very tense.

JW: It was, it was.

JE: You were a platoon leader in the tank battalion with the 3rd Armored Division in Germany.

JW: That's correct.

JE: Were you there two years, '56 through '58?

JW: To—that's correct.

Chapter 09 - 5:25

Joe Joins Williams

John Erling: Then you come out of the war—in '58 you're released. That's when you were planning to go to law school.

Joe Williams: Yes. My brother, David, talked me out of going to law school. John talked me out of going to law school as well. And I said, "But actually, I've decided to go to Harvard Business School." I enrolled and was *admitted* to Harvard Business School.

John had a fit over that. He said, "That's no good at all."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because Harvard Business School, as great as it is, trains you for your last job. It doesn't train you how to do your first job. And you'll come out as an arrogant [bleep] at twenty-four years old, or whatever." He said, "I would not hire you after Harvard Business School."

That ended law school and Harvard Business School. My brother, David, said, "Well, you're going to have to learn this the hard way."

So I went to work for Williams Brothers.

JE: But you didn't really want to work for the family business, did you?

JW: I did not.

JE: Why is that?

JW: I wanted to be on my own. I didn't want to be the boss's son or the younger boss's little brother. I wanted to be on my own. It was that simple. But David, my brother, David, whom I just adored, he gave me a long lecture about my disbeliefs as well as my beliefs and said, "You'll never have a better opportunity to prove yourselves if you go to work for Williams Brothers. And you'll find John Williams is known as a tough guy but he's a fair guy. And he isn't going to treat you like a stepchild. He's going to make you work your buns off somewhere way away from the family."

I started out as a timekeeper and an assistant office manager in three different feed organizations in Kentucky, then Missouri, and then Minnesota.

JE: You're in Tennessee too, I think, weren't you?

JW: I was in Tennessee, I was all over the place.

JE: What does a timekeeper do?

JW: Everybody had a little badge with a number. The organization took about five miles, but actually, in Minnesota, I rented a horse and I would go up and down the pipeline and I'd have to check the number on the welder's thing and then put it in my book and all that.

Then I became an assistant office manager. We had a tough time in Minnesota because it is union country and we were a nonunion organization. Those iron workers were mean. We'd go into various different bars and they'd beat us up and threw us out.

But we had a good superintendent and I became assistant office manager and so the superintendent said, "Williams, this is a dry state but Iowa is wet." He gave me a whole bunch of money. He said, "Go down there, cross the line, there's a liquor store down there and I want you to buy me two dozen little pints of Four Roses. This is at the end of the month and when we pay everybody off we give them a little gift."

So I bought two cases of whiskey like that and I came back to the motel there in Minnesota. It was a couple of days before payday. I loaded everything in there and I went off to work and the next day, I came back and there, by my door, were the two boxes of whiskey and all my clothes and everything else there on the street.

I went in and I said, "That's my stuff out there. What's it doing out there?"

And this woman looked at me and she said, "We are God-fearing folks and any kid that could drink two cases of whiskey doesn't belong in my motel. Get your butt out of here!"

JE: (laughing)

JW: I said, "You mean I have to leave?"

She said, "You have left."

I said, "Well, I'll get fired."

She said, "You should be if you're going to drink like that."

I said, "But—"

She said, "Don't give me a but, just get out of here."

So anyway, I had to find another motel. (both laughing) But I had a lot of pipeline experiences like that that in retrospect were funny. But at the time, they were pretty scary.

JE: Did you ever think when you got into situations like that, "Is this really what I wanted to do?"

JW: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

JE: You did think that? Many times, I'm sure.

JW: Absolutely.

JE: But you wanted to work overseas.

JW: Yes, I wanted to work overseas because I thought, "I just don't like being the son of the family. Get away from it all. See if I can make my own reputation."

They sent me to Ghana and they said, "Ghana's a pretty nice place. And you can take your wife there. The British have a compound."

I got to Paris and they said, "There's been a revolution in Ghana, we can't send you to Ghana."

I said, "Well, what am I going to do, stay here in Paris?"

They said, "Hell, no, you're going to Iran."

I said, "I don't even know where Iran is."

They said, "You will find out." (laughing)

Chapter 10 - 6:37

Iran

Joe Williams: So I got sent to Iran.

John Erling: How many years did you do there in Iran?

JW: Seven years.

JE: Seven years.

JW: They sent me up to Mashhad, where we had built the pipeline from Tehran to Mashhad, up in the Russian African border. We had built the tank farm.

I had just got oriented there and then we got another contract to do a US military contract in a place called Gulshan, which is right on the Russian Azerbaijan border.

So I went up there and this was another learning experience because I didn't know anything about civil construction. I'd learned a lot about engineering and equipment but building barracks up to military standards was not something I knew anything about. But I had good foremen, so I was up there for about a year.

JE: Who was your boss, then, when you were working there building buildings?

JW: Well, my boss was in Tehran, a fellow named Harry Hammerod, who was from Bristow, Oklahoma. A good old boy. I kept calling him on the radio at five o'clock in the morning, saying, "When are you going to send a superintendent up here?"

Finally one day, Harry said, "We've got one."

I said, "How soon can you get him there?"

He said, "He's already there."

I said, "Well, I don't know him."

He said, "It's you."

JE: (laughing)

JW: I said, "I don't know anything about building these kinds of things."

And he said, "Well, you get out your engineering manual." He said, "You've got three good master sergeant types, carpenter foreman, concrete foreman; you just put them to work in the right places and they will teach you what you have to learn."

And that was right. It was like being back in the army with those platoon leaders, because they were the same type of people. They're absolutely wonderful and took good care of me.

I migrated eventually and moved into Tehran. And four or five years later, I replaced Harry Hammerod and they moved him to Oman to build a big pipeline in Oman. We had three big projects going in Iran, and so I took over there.

JE: Let's talk about the political climate in Iran at the time. Again, you had your wife and three children there, so they attended school?

JW: Yes.

JE: And they learned to speak Persian?

JW: Yes. I learned to speak Persian pretty well but not as well as the kids. We put our kids in the British school because I worked for Willsborough UK Limited. So I had access to the British school. Not only would the kids learn English the right way but they had a requirement that 50 percent of the students had to be Persian. And we wanted our kids to go to school with the Persian kids and not just be expatriates.

My wife, then, started teaching English in the same school. We lived in this village seven kilometers out of Tehran. Not an expatriate, it was all local, everybody couldn't have been nicer. We had both learned to speak the language and we had quite an interesting and enjoyable experience. Even though it was really, really hard work because we worked seven twelves, seven days a week, twelve hours a day, plus transportation.

JE: There was a revolution going on in Iran at that time.

JW: Yes.

JE: The white revolution.

JW: Th—

JE: The Shah of Iran was eventually overthrown, went into exile in Paris.

JW: Well, he wasn't overthrown until later.

JE: Right.

JW: The Shah was still very much in power when I was there. Some of the major things that happened were earthquakes. There were several terrible earthquakes that just devastated a number of villages.

So we took our heavy equipment and went down at the request of the US Embassy and the British Embassy to rebuild a lot of these places. Then we got a couple of contracts from the US military, which my bosses didn't like the idea of. They said, "Working for the army is really difficult. They have so many rules that don't have anything to do with getting the job done but it's the army way."

I said, "Yeah, but I have commissary privileges, I have all sorts of other privileges working for an American company, import abilities and all that. So I think we ought to take these jobs."

So we did another barracks type of thing. The most difficult one was the colonel called me in and he said, "You're the only one around that has a top secret classification." Actually, it was one level above top secret. "And we have a project up on the Caspian Coast. I can't tell you anything more about it, but—" They had a whole list of machinery and everything, "I want this much of these things and this number of people and I want you to be up there tomorrow."

I said, "Well, that's a day and a half trying to get equipment up there."

And he said, "Do it!"

Well, it turned out it was a super secret facility. The first over-the-horizon radar and it was aimed into Russia at a place called Semipalatinsk, which was one of their missile sites that they were experimenting with.

I said, "I'm the only one that has that level clearance but I don't know that type of construction."

He said, "Well, you better learn it."

(laughing) We went ahead and we got that thing finished. And the engineering company that built the big balloons put in all the electronic equipment and they hooked this big envelope over the top of it. We worked all day and into the next night and, finally, everything was all set. They signed off and accepted it.

We, the company, the thirty of us supervisors, drove down the hill at dawn and all of the natives, they were on their knees and they're bowing, and doing it back and forth. I said, "What are they doing?"

Finally we stopped and one of my foremen said, "Let me tell you what they're saying. They're saying that only the Americans could do something like this because only God can build a mosque overnight and you have done it."

They brought fruit and all sorts of foods and everything to the little cottage that we were in, all because we had built a mosque overnight. (laughing)

JE: Oh, wow.

Chapter 11 - 4:48

Shah of Iran

John Erling: You met the Shah of Iran and you were around him, correct?

Joe Williams: I did everything I could to stay away from the royal family. So I only met him at two or three ceremonial events. And then later, at the ceremony when we built the world's first forty-two inch pipeline. But I stayed as far away as I could from the Shah and the royal family.

JE: Why did you stay away from them?

JW: Because they would put their hand out and force you to give a bribe and all sorts of other illegal things.

The French contractors were bad about that, they thought that was the easy way and the only way that you could get that kind of work.

We and the British, I was working for the British company, refused to do that but we got along well with the Iranians.

JE: You told me about a time when the two of you were together.

JW: Oh, when he came with the British ambassador, the American ambassador, the Shah, and my boss from London, were all there. And that's when we walked up to the big cooling and wrapping machine. And this old American from Idabel, Oklahoma, was up there and says, "[Bleep]'s done quit."

The Shah didn't take offense at that. He didn't take offense to the fact that this American had said to his boss, "[Bleep]'s done quit."

So I just didn't pay any attention to that at all. I had a really unfortunate experience in that a Cabinet minister called and said, "Prince Shah Haram wants to see you. He's just graduated from Harvard. It's where you went to college, isn't it?"

I said, "Well, yes. I'm about to go out of town."

They said, "He is the prince of the land, if he wants to see you, you see him."

So he came over to my office, we talked a little bit about life in the US and he had just gotten back. And he said, "I understand, the big project, you have a thousand people working down there around Avedon and Bandar-e Mahshahr."

I said, "Yes, that's right."

He said, "I also understand that you are using the British cooks."

I said, "You've gotten that wrong. We have a contract with a British firm. We have a thousand people employed down there."

And this guy, this twenty-four-year-old guy said, "Well, we'll take over the catering contract."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Yes." He said, "I'm in the catering business and we'll take over. We'll feed them and all."

I said, "But this would be a disaster. It'll shut the whole job down. And the job is for your government, the National Iranian Oil Company." So I got rid of him.

And I went up to the embassy and to the American ambassador. "I want to see the ambassador."

They said, "Well, here's not here. You'll have to see the commercial attaché."

So I went to see the commercial attaché, and he said, "That's very strange. I'll just have to write a report and send it to the Commerce Department in Washington. They can't do this."

I said, "They are doing it."

He said, "That's all I can do."

I was at my wits' end. I had gone fishing with the British ambassador once. I got along very well. I liked him very much. He invited me to go. I asked for an appointment to go see the British ambassador. I told him this story.

And he said, "What a bloody shame. If I get this straightened out, will you do whatever I ask?"

I said, "Yes, Mr. Ambassador, I certainly will."

He said, "I'm going to see the Shah. Can you be back in my office at seven thirty tomorrow morning?"

And I said, "Yes, sir."

I got back there and he said, "I think we've solved the problem, but," he said, "would you be willing to charter two Viscount Prop Jets? Put all of your British cooks on them, fly them to Kuwait. We'll give them transit visas and fly them back the next day. They cannot abricate transit visas by the British government and we'll solve this problem."

I said, "Chartering two prop jets is expensive but that's a heck of a lot cheaper than having the job shut down."

So the British solved it completely. The Americans, all they wanted to do was send a report to the Commerce Department in Washington.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JW: I won't go into them all now but I had a number of other experiences like that where the British came to our defense. Fortunately, our company was called Willsborough UK Limited, so we qualified as a British firm.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

Chapter 12 - 2:38

Cousin John

John Erling: You're gaining tremendous experience in this.

Joe Williams: Yes.

JE: Then, doesn't Cousin John show up and says he wants you back in Tulsa?

JW: He came over and he said, "You've been running the biggest project in this country for a good while now. They want you to come back."

And I said, "Well, who will I report to?"

They said, "You'll report to John, the brother, John."

I said, "Well, I just don't want to do that."

Charlie said, "Why?"

And I said, "Well, that's just a family thing. I don't want to be John's flunky."

And Charlie said, "That's a very arrogant thing for you to say."

I said, "Well, try me again."

And he said, "Well, I'm going to get your brother to come over here and let him tell you how it is being a younger family member."

My brother, Dave, came over and talked me into going back.

All kinds of different things were going on at Williams Brothers then. We were moving out of the pipeline construction business and we were getting into the operation of pipelines and all this. I found John was a terrific boss, as long as you told him the truth, he was behind you all the way. If you tried to play games with him, which I didn't, you would have problems with him.

But John was brilliant and he knew how to leave me alone so that I would learn on my own and get things done the right way. So eventually, I became Chief Operating Officer and then later President and Chief Operating Officer, and then Chairman and Chief Executive Officer.

JE: You also were one of the last Williams' family members who could operate the business.

JW: Yes.

JE: Because after you, then, a non-Williams person came on and we can talk about that.

JW: That's true.

JE: He also knew that he wanted blood to run this company.

JW: Yes.

JE: So he probably was being really careful so that you wouldn't run away.

JW: Probably, yeah. And John was smart, he was very smart. He knew how to deal with various different kinds of people. He had had some remarkable experiences when he was a young man like I had been in Iran. He was in Mexico. There was a big pipeline from the ocean into Mexico City. He was project manager at a very young age. So he had a lot of sympathy with my concerns because he had been through those same sorts of situations.

JE: I've interviewed your cousin John. He's on this website and he tells his whole story as well.

Chapter 13 – 3:14**Diversify**

John Erling: Then as you became chairman in '79, there were challenges. Williams was a diversified company, owned a fertilizer operation, an interest in a coal company, oil and gas production, and telecommunications.

Joe Williams: That's right.

JE: And then two things happened, causing you to rethink the direction of the company. Ronald Reagan was elected and kicked inflation in the head and you thought inflation was here to stay.

JW: Yes.

JE: Talk to us about that time.

JW: Well, Ronald Reagan was elected and he was going to kill inflation. It never occurred to anybody that that was going to happen. So a lot of these projects that John had gotten us into depended upon inflation making the investment more and more valuable down the road.

JE: And then a recession set in and you realized you didn't need an inflation-resilient company.

JW: That's correct. So I decided that we had to reorganize. And I also wanted to get us out of the coal business. I had a tough time there because John was sort of deemed as the man of great experience that got us into these different diversifications. And then here comes this kid that says we're going to get out of a lot of them.

But John was okay. He said, "I don't agree with you but you're running the company. Here, your rational, so you go ahead and live with it and get it done.

JE: That's pretty remarkable, isn't it? Even though he disagreed.

JW: He—he—he was an amazing guy. He was an amazing guy.

JE: Yeah, that is amazing.

Then, you discovered mutual funds were performing.

JW: That was an important discovery. Why it hadn't occurred to anybody else I don't know. But we adopted it as a strategy to diversify into lots of different types of businesses so that you would have ability through diversification to not be victims of any one business or whatever.

When the mutual funds came along, without you investing major bucks in the machinery, labor, and whatever, the mutual funds with a computer, which none of us knew much about at that time, could build any type of company in the world on paper and get the benefits of diversification, buying and selling the winners and the losers without having to physically do it. It was a different world than the diversified strategy that we had gone into. And I decided that is the new world.

And John looked at me and he said, "You're crazy. That's not the way it's going to work."

And I said, "Well, John, I believe it is the way it is going to work. I don't want to get caught with huge investments in iron when somebody makes it obsolete by investing in computer generated diversification.

JE: Well, you had hard assets. You had coal, phosphate, oil and gas, and you figured owning that would not be good. So you were in a quandary. And then, didn't you ask management to find some more ways to get profit from the existing assets of Williams?

Chapter 14 - 4:40

WilTel Communications

Joe Williams: Yes.

John Erling: And then the great idea came about, and that was Roy Wilkins.

JW: That was fiber optic technology. And Roy Wilkins was really a genius. With one tiny, little strand you can carry the entire telecommunications traffic from Chicago to Tulsa. He said, "There's a big problem with that, it's very easy to break that little strand. We've got pipelines, surplus pipelines all over the country." He said, "We can recondition some of those pipelines, pull fiber optic cable in it, and have a system that would cost millions and millions of dollars to build from scratch."

I said, "Roy, you're nuts."

He said, "No I'm not. I'm going to build a little mockup across the river by the refinery over there and we don't want to tell anybody exactly what it is. But I want you to come see it when we get it done. And we'll have about two miles of pipeline and have various different types of fibers in it and a computer on either end."

I went and I saw that and I said, "This is really working, isn't it? Now, will it work from here to Chicago?"

And he said, "Absolutely. And we have a surplus line that goes up through there."

JE: Was that mockup there on the Arkansas River?

JW: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: That's where it was?

JW: Yeah, they took it down but it proved the point.

JE: Yeah.

JW: So we started pulling fiber. But that meant we also had to invest in the generation equipment and the degeneration equipment so that you could convert those signals on either end. Which I certainly didn't know how to do or understand. But Roy and the

engineers did. That was the new direction for the company and it was a genius plan of Roy's. And everybody thought I was nuts for listening to a pipeliner saying that he was going to revolutionize the telecommunications business.

But I did, and it worked out to be the salvation of the company.

JE: So it became known as WilTel.

JW: WilTel, Williams Telecommunications.

JE: Oh, and Roy could probably think you named it after him too, Wilkins, WilTel. (both laughing)

JW: No, it wasn't his.

JE: Right.

JW: It was Williams Telecommunications, WilTel.

JE: Right. But it was a huge gamble and you had to be nervous about it.

JW: Yes.

JE: Cousin John, was he approving of WilTel?

JW: He was skeptical.

JE: Okay.

JW: He was skeptical, but he was a gambler too. He said, "My advice to you is do it slowly.

Don't try to build from one end of the country to the other."

And we did. I'll tell you, it was all hung to Chicago and I'm not sure of that but there was a short distance where we actually had surplus pipeline and we converted that into it and it worked!

JE: (laughing)

JW: And so, then we went on and it grew.

JE: Did you have anybody else in the company other than Roy saying, "This is going to work"? Did you have other people saying, "Go Joe"?

JW: Yes, Keith Bailey did.

JE: Keith Bailey did.

JW: Keith Bailey, and he later succeeded me as CEO.

JE: So he helped you.

JW: Keith and Roy were both brilliant. Roy was specialized in his brilliance. Keith was omnivorous. He never met a problem that he couldn't solve. He could be difficult over things like that but Keith was absolutely brilliant. He was my first and best choice to succeed me.

JE: So then, with WilTel looking like that's going to be good, you sell Agrico Chemical and its interest in Peabody Coal.

JW: Yes.

JE: Oil and gas production operations and Williams Realty, all that you sold?

JW: Yes, not all at once.

JE: No.

JW: But over a period of years. It was difficult to sell some of those. I mean, that in itself was a story. Telecommunications wasn't difficult to sell because that was a new idea and there were other telecommunications firms that wanted to tie into and whatever. But getting rid of the phosphate business and the coal business, that's because coal was beginning to deteriorate as a profitable investment. We hadn't gotten into the environmental problem with coal the way that it turned out later, but I didn't like the business because it was dominated by the unions. The Miners' Union was a very tough union.

JE: So this gamble you took with WilTel popped out at one billion dollars and it was sold for two and a half billion dollars?

JW: I think that's right but I'm not exactly—

Chapter 15 - 4:03

Joe Resigns

John Erling: You stepped down in 1994.

Joe Williams: Yes.

JE: What led to your decision for stepping down?

JW: Terry and I had a new life, really. We wanted to be able to go and do whatever and travel. I knew I had a good team coming on behind me and I didn't want to stay in their way. The timing was right.

Now, that's happened to a lot of other companies and they don't recognize the timing. They either want to stay because they like the prestige of being Chief Executive Officer or they have different reasons. But in my case, I thought it was the best thing for the company. The board didn't suggest it at all. The board was shocked when I said, "I want to move on by the end of next year."

JE: Well, you were sixty-one years old.

JW: Yeah.

JE: That's young.

JW: Yep.

JE: That's why they were shocked.

JW: Yep.

JE: And you were in good health and all?

JW: In good health, yeah.

JE: But it was time for you to go out and enjoy another lifestyle.

JW: Yeah, yeah. So we moved back to South Carolina. Spring Island is a, it's a wonderful place. It was started by a small group of people, one of them was a promoter, but he was an ecologist and he got three or four other people that were environmentally oriented. They decided to put special restrictions on the land so that it would remain in its pristine tradition. And it was, it was very pristine, it still is.

A dear friend told me about it. Judge Chapman, another judge, Bob Chapman said, "Joe, this is your kind of place. You don't want to retire to the plantation and be stuck on the plantation. Go down there to Spring Island and you will still have an interest in the plantation with your relatives, but you're just going to love the whole low country of South Carolina."

He was dead right. Terry and I went over there, and sure enough, in a matter of weeks, we made an offer. We bought a lot, we built a house at Spring Island.

JE: You spoke glowingly about your cousin John. Did the two of you have different management style?

JW: We had similar values but we definitely had different styles. There are a lot of people that thought John was very abrupt and rude. John was the type of person that if you were logical and right and knew what you were doing he would listen to you. But if you came up with some harebrained scheme and didn't know what you were talking about he could just be crude about not accepting anything like that.

But he respected talent but he wanted people that would do their homework, not people that just did snapshots. He would quiz you and make sure that you knew what you were talking about. And as you evaluated the risks of whatever the investment was, then he would be all for you.

I learned a lot from watching him. He also really believed in education. One of the first things he did, he sent me to the API, American Petroleum Institute School of Pipeline Technology for a three- to five-month course, I guess, down in Baytown, Texas.

And he said, "I know you know how to work. I know you know how to work all their equipment. But you don't know a damn thing about pipeline technology." And he said, "You didn't go to Yale Engineering like your brother did or like I did. But this will give you a big head start."

After I had joined the company and I had had those experiences in the field and all that, then he sent me to the School of Pipeline Technology. And then I went into the international division. That was important. He wanted me to get the education so that I knew what I was talking about. Particularly because I would be working with men a lot older than me. He wanted them to know that I knew what I was talking about.

Chapter 16 – 2:05**Keith Bailey-Penny Williams**

John Erling: Keith Bailey you said was really good, that you brought him on. John knew Keith too, didn't he?

Joe Williams: Yes.

JE: He obviously approved of that and knew Keith because here's the first non-Williams person to take over the company.

JW: Well, Barry Gault was there for a little while. But Keith, Keith was brilliant in every respect. He had come all the way out through pipelining as a kid engineer. He went to the Missouri School of Mines, I think. So he had the training and the background and the experience.

There were some people that were skeptical of Keith because he was so cocksure about everything he said. John was a little worried about that but he liked people that said, "What if?" rather than saying, "Only this way."

By that time, John was no longer directly in the line of command and he thought Keith was a good idea. He liked Keith.

JE: And it worked out. He had a successful career there.

JW: Yeah, yeah, yep.

JE: Were you active politically at all?

JW: Well, I was a Republican and I was locally active but not really very active, no. It was not a big part of my life.

My first wife got very active publicly and she went on and went into the Oklahoma House and then became an Oklahoma senator, Penny Williams.

JE: She was a Democrat.

JW: A leftwing Democrat.

JE: (laughs)

JW: So that was really one of the problems we had. We had very different political views. I'm still in touch with her because she was a good friend since we were little kids. But she's amused at the fact that I'm a liberal.

And I said, "Now wait a minute. I have supported some things that look liberal but I know I'm still a Republican. I just don't like this Republican government whatsoever."
(laughing)

JE: The current way?

JW: The current way.

JE: Right.

JW: Yeah.

JE: Well, I should say, I've interviewed Penny too and you can hear her interview here on VoicesofOklahoma.com. She spoke kindly of you too, by the way, in that interview.

JW: Yeah.

JE: Let's talk about the Williams Center Forum.

Chapter 17 - 5:00

Williams Center Forum

John Erling: Long before the BOK Center at ONEOK Field and Brady Art District and all that to bring a life into downtown Tulsa, there was the Williams Center Forum bringing people downtown. It opened in 1978. Give me your thoughts about that and that investment.

Joe Williams: It was interesting. It started out, I was Chairman of the Board of Tulsa Chamber of Commerce and later of the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce. But at the time, Len [Leanord] Eaton was the president of the bank. So Len said to me one day, "I'm seeing businesses moving out of downtown Tulsa and from way down into the South, clearly there's something wrong that could be corrected."

So he put together a group of about thirty or forty people for us to come study the city. If I remember right, it was for about a month. And we had to agree to spend a good bit of time. We had policemen that drove us all around. We decided that downtown was worth saving, but in order to save it, it had to have some real leadership.

One of the things that was identified that downtown Tulsa didn't have was a good performing arts center. So John got interested in the performing art center thing.

Bob LaFortune was the mayor at the time. Len took John to see Mrs. Chapman about a foundation grant for a performing arts center. She put the money up and John decided that he would raise the rest of the money and that the performing arts center would be there.

Out of that came a whole concept of Williams Center, the non-block area, and the Williams Tower, which is right there. There were two or three other tall buildings but John, I remember, he said, "Look, you're going to have to live in this building, not me, so you pick the architect."

I examined all of the possibilities and then picked Minoru Yamasaki, who had done the World Trade Center in New York. And people said, "He's not going to want to come to Tulsa."

I said, "Well, I think we can convince him to."

He came down and he did the whole layout. There were going to be two Williams buildings.

John looked at that and he said, "That's ridiculous, we don't want to build two buildings." He said, "Let's do this," and he put one on top of the other. And he said to Yamasaki, "You're the genius that did the World Center, let's see if you and Joe can build that building."

And that's how we ended up with the forty-two story building. (laughing) Then I had my picture taken in the front of it.

That took a lot of guts on his part and everybody's parts because it—

JE: On John's part?

JW: ...meant stopping a trend that all over the country was happening. It wasn't just in Tulsa.

JE: Moving out of downtown?

JW: Yeah.

JE: Right. And urban renewal in the '60s had cleared that area.

JW: That's true, they had.

JE: Because it wasn't very good.

JW: Well, they hadn't cleared all of it but they had cleared a good bit of it. Bob LaFortune was trying to clean up his city.

JE: So you unveiled plans not only for the building but there was a hotel and/or shopping mall?

JW: Yeah, that all began. We had Eddie Henson do some work for us and various other projects, headquarters projects around. Eddie was in the real estate business, so I talked to Eddie about what could be done. And Eddie said, "Your sights are way too low. We could do a city within a city and put a hotel in, several other buildings, the Performing Arts Center." He said, "All this could be done."

I said, "How are we going to raise all that money?"

And he said, "We're going to go to John, (laughing) and see what John can do."

I said, "John doesn't give anything away."

But John went back to Ms. Chapman and various others and raised the funds.

JE: That was pretty remarkable, that whole area there. And then the Forum featured that ice skating rink, a movie theater, more than sixty businesses, and three levels of dining and shopping.

JW: That's right.

JE: It was just a wonderful, classy place to be.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

JE: You must have been terribly proud of all that.

JW: We all were, we really were. And we all had a lot to do with that, it wasn't just one person. Len Eaton had a lot to do with it. He was president of the bank and John, obviously, had a lot to do in raising the first grant.

Bob LaFortune made it easy to get permits to do a lot of things there that people thought you couldn't get done.

JE: That was great to have a man like that in the mayor's office at that time.

JW: Yeah, oh, he was wonderful.

JE: Yeah, he still is considered our mayor to this very day.

JW: Yeah, I believe it.

JE: He's a wonderful, wonderful man.

Chapter 18 - 5:13

Tallgrass Prairie Preserve

John Erling: You were former Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Nature Conservancy.

Joe Williams: Yes.

JE: And founder, director, and former chairman of the Oklahoma Nature Conservancy. Also a member of the Board of Trustees of the South Carolina Nature Conservancy. Give me a little story here about the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve located in Osage County. It's near Foraker, Oklahoma, and it's owned and managed by the Nature Conservancy. Give me a little history of that. Where did the land come from? And how you got involved.

JW: (laughs) That's a long story but it's a good story. The Nature Conservancy started in Connecticut. The Honest Gorge was the first project it ever did and it wasn't a big project. Then it began to spread and people got interested and excited about doing things for conservation.

One of the real important things that it did was an ACE Basin in the low country of South Carolina, between here and Savannah. The Nature Conservancy was the lead in developing that large scale project.

So in Oklahoma, there were a number of people that we should have some sort of conservation effort at scale. Some people said, "You know, all those big ranches up there, they're not making any money and we could get a national monument."

I got the government into it. I was chairman of Williams. Henry Bellmon was a good friend, and various other people. So we went to government and said, "We think it would be possible to do a national monument with the full protections of the federal government and this land, but it won't be easy because the oilmen will oppose it and the Indians will oppose it."

So anyway, they had a hearing in Washington. Senator Bumpers was head of the Interior Committee. I went to Washington and I took six other people and testified in front of Bumpers' committee. The Indians had been opposed. This was an astonishing moment as we walked into that building where Bumpers headquartered. I looked up and there comes about six Indians in full tribal dress with feathers and everything.

I testified and three others had testified and backed up what I said and the Indians testified that they didn't want to have anything to do with this. That it was a rich man's folly and the government had done them wrong all along and they didn't want to have anything to do with it.

We had gotten Chapman and the Bards to both agree they would sell to the federal government for a national monument. Well, when this fell through, the Chapmans backed out.

JE: You said it fell through, what do you mean?

JW: It didn't pass the Senate, but it still was alive. Then some strange things happened. The Sierra Club, of all people, came out and opposed it and said, "This is a rich man's folly. The oil industry was going to end up having their own private patch. They were just way off base but they wrote this article in their magazine.

So we lost one of those two ranches. I was trying to find a way to raise more money. I was on the Audubon board at that time. John Flicker was doing legal work for Audubon and he said, "Have you been to the Nature Conservancy?"

I said, "No."

He said, "Well, they're not known for big scale but now they're doing bigger scale projects." And he said, "I want to bring somebody down."

Make a long story short, the Nature Concerns, they got interested and they said, "It needs to be much bigger than just that one-half operation. And if we could raise the money it could buy these other lands because they're actually quite cheap at the moment."

So we set up a committee to do all this. We created a board of directors and started the Oklahoma Nature Conservancy. I got people like Pete Silas and various others, big guns in Oklahoma.

I remember, and we were about to lose the Chapman funding, and we had a meeting in Phillips' hanger in Oklahoma City. We were two and a half million dollars short of being able to have a project. And Pete Silas stood up and he said, "Joe, this is not impossible to do, but if you all sit around twiddling your thumbs it will never get done. If we believe in what we're talking about, I move that we commit to raising the two and a half million dollars and get on with the project as a private project, without the government."

That turned the corner.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JW: We agreed, then we started fundraising and it went on and on and on and on.

JE: I could sense the emotion that you're feeling right now.

JW: Yeah, very much so.

John Sawhill became executive head of the Nature Conservancy in Washington. And I got elected chairman of the board.

Chapter 19 - 5:05**Nancy Mackinnon**

Joe Williams: This is a funny story. I called Sawhill, I said, "This thing is going to fail because we don't have the right leader and really need somebody."

And he said, "We've got a number of people. I'll call you tomorrow." And he called me, he said, "I found the perfect leader. I think she can be ready in about three weeks."

I said, "Who is this? What do you mean, "she"?"

He said, "She is a project manager in Boston."

I said, "John, forget it. These are the cowboys and Indians and oilmen, that's the tough part of the land. You want a girl from Boston to come down here and tell everybody what to do?"

And he said, "Joe, grow up." That's literally what he said. "This woman has done wonders up there and she can make water run uphill."

Nancy Mackinnon was her name.

John Erling: Nancy Mackinnon?

JW: Yeah. She was incredible. She came down, she started organizing things. She had a tough time in the beginning. Nobody liked the idea of a woman from Boston telling them what to do in Osage County.

JE: (laughing)

JW: But the long and the short of it was she pulled things together. She said, "You know, we need to do something to make a big splash. You knew Stormin' Norman, didn't you?"

I said, "The general?"

She said, "Yeah."

I said, "He's on the Nature Conservancy's national board."

JE: Norman Schwarzkopf?

JW: And she said, "I want you to get him to come down and we will have an opening, even though we don't have anything to open. But we'll schedule an opening and we'll have him as the keynote speaker."

I said, "I don't know whether I can get him to come down here or not."

She said, "Yes you can, you have a company airplane. You tell him you'll send an airplane for him and you get him down here. If we do that," she said, "I've talked to the Commanding General of the Oklahoma National Guard and they said that if Stormin' Norman comes down they'll set up a tent city for everybody. So we'll have a tent city and we'll have Stormin' Norman and we'll inaugurate a project that didn't even exist."

(both laughing)

And Nancy and I did that. Nancy was just great. She went on and did big things for the Conservancy afterwards. She did Palmyra Atoll in the Pacific and a lot things.

And then she married one of the vice presidents of the Orvis Company and we stayed in close touch.

We had a big celebration last fall. All my family came and Nancy came. I gave a big speech about Nancy Mackinnon right there to everybody. And Penny, my ex-wife, was there. So it was a great event.

The most remarkable thing happened, the Chief and the Deputy Chief of the Osage came. We're all in this big barn, everybody gave talks, and the Chief got up and he asked me to come forward. He said, and I'm being braggadocio now but this is a fact, it happened.

JE: Right.

JW: I could show you the picture downstairs. He put his arm around me and he said, "This man representing something we didn't know anything about, the Nature Conservancy, convinced us to do this project. That this is the best thing for the tribe." He said, "We had been very distrustful of wealthy white men but this man convinced us that this was the thing to do." And they brought a big blanket and put it around me.

JE: Oh, wow.

JW: And he said, "He spoke the truth and we believe the Tallgrass Prairie is a real thing and has been now for five years." There wasn't a dry eye in the house. (laughing)

JE: No. My eyes are not dry myself.

JW: Yeah, yeah, it was amazing.

JE: Wow.

JW: There was another famous person involved in all this, was Harvey Payne.

JE: Yes.

JW: And Harvey Payne was a legitimate, not just dabbling in conservation, he knew what he was talking about. He was an artist, he was a photographer, he was a rancher. He had everybody on his side, but he had the imagination to keep pushing as we kept running into barriers.

One of the other good things we did was we started a board of directors for the Oklahoma Nature Conservancy. We put all the oil bigwigs and others that we could get on it, so we had a lot of support from the board.

JE: I've interviewed Frederick Drummond and I've interviewed Harvey Payne too, along with Jenk Jones, who also—

JW: Yes.

JE: ...was a big supporter.

JW: And Jenk Jones wrote a book about it.

JE: Right.

JW: Harvey did the photography. It's not a big book, it's just a little introductory book.

JE: Frederick Drummond, I think he was kind of a go-between the ranchers and all.

JW: Very much so.

JE: So he could talk to both sides. He could talk to you, he could talk to the ranchers, and the tribe.

JW: Very much so. He was a really, really important lynchpin to pull the ranchers together. He was part of that group that went to Washington when we testified—

JE: Yeah.

JW: ...and all the Indians showed up. (both laughing)

Chapter 20 - 2:08

Bison Saves Grass

John Erling: And now the Preserve contains 39,000 acres.

Joe Williams: I think it's 44,000.

JE: And another 6,000 leased in what was the original Tallgrass region of the Great Plains.

JW: It is.

JE: It's just a wonderful area, so beautiful. The buffalo that are there and all. We always ask what we are proud of when we look back. I don't want to put words into your mouth but that, obviously, has to be one of your proudest accomplishments.

JW: Absolutely. The biology of it is not just pretty place, the problem with ranching is that cattle are corporate-grazers, they graze right along like this.

Bison are bunch-grazers, they get it here and they get it over there. This is what happened to Tallgrass and so much of the West. Over-grazed by cattle and they grazed it right down to where they lost the seed crop. Whereas where bison had been there were bunches of tallgrass here, right over there, another bunch of tallgrass. The seed stock was still there.

So the biologist got hold of this and decided that there was enough land that could be put a stocking of bison on it.

The newspapers were saying that the Nature Conservancy went way out on a limb and it's a wonderful effort to save bison.

We weren't trying to save bison at all. Bisons were the vehicle that saves the tallgrass itself and all of the other biota that was related to tallgrass. It was a remarkable activity and Harvey Payne and the people I mentioned all came in line and it was amazing.

JE: And then, beyond that the J.T. Nickel Family Nature and Wildlife Preserve—

JW: Yes?

JE: ...located in Cherokee County, privately owned and managed by the Oklahoma Nature Preserve. Contains 17,000 acres of forest and grassland. It's just a beautiful area. And I've interviewed John Nickel for this oral history.

JW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That's a remarkable story too.

JW: It is, John.

JE: What he has done.

JW: It is. I never knew him very well. That came after I had moved away. But I met him and I know all about what he did and he did a great job.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 21 - 3:22

The Gathering Place

John Erling: In August 2014 the George Kaiser Family Foundation, with private donors, gave a new park named A Gathering Place for Tulsa, to the River Parks Authority.

Joe Williams: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: It's now under construction. I just recently had a tour of it and it's just wonderful. It's valued at \$350 million. The Williams Companies stepped up and I believe they're the largest donor to the project to the tune of \$18 million—the largest donation outside of George Kaiser.

JW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you must have been a supporter, maybe Cousin John was too of that happening?

JW: John had already passed away. They told me they wanted to do this so I said, "Well, since you're going to build something with my name on it I don't think I should be doing that. But if that's what you think the stockholders want and what Tulsa wants, that's fine." But we didn't put a lot of personal money into it, the company did. And I didn't think we really needed to push the Williams name anymore.

Allen Armstrong said, "You're not pushing the Williams name and John's not pushing the Williams name, we, the board of directors, are pushing the Williams name. We think that you haven't been given enough recognition here, so we want to do this."

There are two buildings: one is the Joseph H. Williams and one is the John H. Williams. I saw it when they first were starting on it. I'm coming back over the Williams shareholders meeting in May. Allen is hopeful that they can do a dedication of the Williams place at that time, but he wasn't sure.

JE: Man, that's great, that's great. And that whole park is going to be so wonderful.

JW: It's right next door to where I lived at 2700 South Boston.

JE: (laughing) That's great.

JW: I got in trouble when I was a little boy, my next door neighbor was a fellow named Bill McMurray. The farmer was planting watermelons. We dug under the fence, run over there, and we liberated a watermelon.

JE: (laughing)

JW: And brought it back. We had a little tent out there in the yard. And my mother found these watermelon rinds. She said, "Where did you get that?"

I said, "Well, I cannot tell a lie, that came from across the fence."

She said, "You have to go over there and apologize in person."

I went over there and I apologized. I think I said, "Mr. Blair—"

JE: Blair Mansion? Yes.

JW: I went over there and apologized, and he said, "Son, I really appreciate you doing that. I hope you enjoyed the watermelon and don't do it again because it costs a lot of money for us to raise watermelons."

I went back home and two days later, his farmer came over in his pickup and donated two watermelons. (both laughing)

I used to live at 2700 South Boston. When I was a little boy, about four years old. Every morning my dad would get in the pickup and that house that was right there on Riverside Drive and we would down through the fields to a bridge over Riverside Drive, across a river, that Williams Brothers built. Dad would take me down there so that he could supervise. And he wanted me to see what was going on.

It wasn't a big deal but we did build that railroad bridge. Now that was a stage in life when we were expanding outside the oil and gas construction.

Chapter 22 - 3:08

Two States

John Erling: It sounds like when you were young you lived both places, Tulsa and here in South Carolina.

Joe Williams: Yes.

JE: So you had the privilege of being both places.

JW: Yes. We used to make that long drive back and forth. And my mother was wonderful, she loved to drive. We would stop in Memphis and then in Chattanooga. We had a big old

Packard and had everybody all loaded up. And we got to the famous hotel in Memphis, I've forgotten the name of it, but they had ducks in a pond in the middle of the hotel. I just thought that was fantastic.

JE: (laughing)

JW: I used to try to go swimming with the ducks. It's funny, you remember silly little things like that.

JE: Yeah.

JW: But my mother was great. During the war, she formed something called the Women's Motorcore. The Germans were torpedoing things right offshore of South Carolina. So my mother organized this group of women and they all had flashlights. They would go and check all around the town and make sure there were no Nazis. (laughing) She was the leader of all of that.

Gasoline was very hard to come by during the war. And they also got special gasoline to drive soldiers back and forth to Camp Jackson, Fort Jackson, it was called then, in Columbia, it was about thirty miles away. She did her share for the war effort.

JE: You really are known as an Oklahoman and as a South Carolinian.

JW: Yeah.

JE: You were chairman of the Metropolitan Tulsa Chamber of Commerce, the Oklahoma State Chamber of Commerce and Industry. You were inducted into the Oklahoma Hall Fame in 1988.

JW: Well, you've done all your homework. (laughing)

JE: I have. Your cousin John would be proud, I did my homework. That's what he wanted people to do, didn't he?

JW: (laughing)

JE: And you were inducted in 2002, the South Carolina Business Hall of Fame. So it must be nice to have both states honoring you.

JW: Yeah.

JE: Because you did so much for both.

JW: Yeah.

JE: You're a member of Augusta National Golf Club.

JW: I'm still a member.

JE: You play golf there?

JW: Oh, I did. I won two tournaments there, member tournaments. I was a good golfer, but those were partnership tournaments and I had a different partner in each of the two tournaments. It's one of the silver trophies over there, that one.

JE: Oh?

JW: Augusta is an amazing place and I'm taking Joe Jr., who is a professor at the University of Tennessee, and Margo, my stepdaughter, who lives right down the street here, she's a

very good golfer. So Terry and I are taking them over there two weeks from now. I'll only be able to play a hole or two but the kids, they'll play thirty-six holes a day for two days. (laughing)

JE: That's great. Were there any that might have golfed at Augusta that you would have golfed with, any names that we might know?

JW: Well, I knew lots of CEOs of businesses that we did business with that were members at Augusta. President Eisenhower was a member, but that was before my time. Kennedy or Nixon played there as a guest of somebody, but Eisenhower was the only one that I remember that was an actual member.

Chapter 23 - 4:36

Looking Back

John Erling: As you look back on your career with Williams, is there any one or two things that stand out with a great deal of satisfaction?

Joe Williams: Well, you want me to brag? (laughing)

JE: Yes, you should brag.

JW: You know, I think I'm a people person, not a numbers person. John was a numbers person, he never met a number that he didn't like. And I had to struggle with numbers. But I always gambled on the right people. And so did John too.

But I look back, and, yes, I made some mistakes but I put a lot of good people into good positions to advance. That's where I think I was worthwhile for the company stockholders.

JE: What would you say to young people, I'm sure you've been asked, they're coming out of college, they're looking at various businesses. Do you have advice for young people who will listen to this many years from now?

JW: Don't be scared to reach for something. Yes, there's a lot of things when you're fresh out of college or whatever that look like they're not reachable, but try it. Go try it and take the gamble but always make sure that you're giving your employer your full money's worth. If you can do that you're going to have a good career.

JE: Those who influenced you the most? I guess your cousin John would be one of them?

JW: Yes.

JE: Other people that you drew from, who would those people have been?

JW: Well, a lot of family. My father and mother were absolutely wonderful people. My brother, David, kept me from getting discouraged, a number of different things. He was terrific.

And John, I was scared to death of John in the beginning because his style was pretty abrupt. But once I got to know John I realized that he not only was brilliant but he had a soft heart.

Charlie was wonderful. Charlie was kind of my champion in the background. He said, "Your brother can't be your champion and John won't be your champion, but I'm going to give you as much help as I can. And don't let your brother give you too many dreams. Don't let John scare you. I can help you with both of them because we need you. But I don't want them to scare you out of taking the job." (laughing)

JE: And Charlie was John's brother.

JW: Yes, he was a prince of a fellow.

JE: Yeah.

JW: Absolutely prince of a fellow. He lived right there in Tulsa. His widow is there in Tulsa and John's widow is in Tulsa.

JE: You have many years left to live. John lived to be ninety-four, you're only eighty-five.

JW: I'll be eighty-five June 2nd.

JE: You've got a lot of living left to do.

JW: (laughing)

JE: As you knock on wood. Let me take a picture of this hat.

JW: Yeah. (still laughing)

JE: You should hold it. Let me take a picture of you holding that hat.

JW: This is a typical hardhat that construction workers wear. Our welders all wore these hats. They didn't like to but they did because either that or they didn't work for us.

So they had a barbeque when the project was over. The foreman came up and said, "We have a gift for you."

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "Well, you were the first person we worked for that made a huge effort to employ Native Iranians and we were one of the few pipeline companies that had all Iranian welders." And he said, "We're famous as a group for metal work but we took a Williams Brothers hardhat, we want to give you this in thanks for what you did for us." (laughing)

JE: I'll take that one too. That's great, that's funny. That's got to be one of your prized possessions right there.

JW: Oh, it is. It's up on a shelf but I pulled it down here to show you.

JE: Right. Well, thank you, Joe, for this opportunity to interview you. I'm sure there are a lot of people who would love to sit here where I am to say thank you for what you've done for Oklahoma. For the state, for the Nature Preserve, and for the great city of Tulsa. So I thank you to you.

JW: Well, I'm about to weep (laughing). I can't tell you how much it means to me to hear you

say that because of your experience in life as an observer or Tulsa and of the area and of the family. That's a wonderful thing for you to say, so thank you ever so much.

And I've enjoyed the visit.

JE: Well, thank you so much today.

JW: And I don't think I've told any lies (laughing).

JE: No, no you haven't

Chapter 24 - 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.