

Neal McCaleb

A determined civil engineer, member of the Chickasaw Nation, and Republican politician.

Chapter 01 - 1:21

Introduction

Announcer: Neal McCaleb is a member of the Chickasaw Nation and a former George W. Bush administration official. Before his involvement in politics, McCaleb was a civil engineer and businessman. He served on the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission from 1967 until 1972 when President Nixon appointed him to the National Council on Indian Opportunities. He was also a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives from 1974 to 1982, and later was a presidential appointee on Ronald Reagan's Commission on Indian Reservation Economics in the 1980s. McCaleb ran for Governor of Oklahoma in 1982 but lost the Republican primary. He was appointed Oklahoma's first Secretary of Transportation in 1987, and from 1995 to 2001 he was the Director of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation and Director of the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority. In 2001, George Bush appointed McCaleb to be the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. After serving in the Bush administration, McCaleb served as Ambassador at Large for the Chickasaw Nation.

In his oral history, Neal talks about WWII and why they never drove over 30 miles per hour, what inspired President Eisenhower to build our interstate system, and how Oklahoma's first turnpike inspired the design for the interstate system. Listen to Neal McCaleb on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 7:23

Itinerant Surveyors

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is September 22, 2011.

Neal, would you state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age?

Neal McCaleb: My name is Neal Abernathy McCaleb. I was born on June 30th in 1935, that makes me a little over seventy-six years old.

JE: We are recording this, by the way, in my home here and office.

Where were you born?

NM: Oklahoma City. I was born in a little house just west of May Avenue on 16th Street, 2917 Northwest 16th.

JE: You just say, "In a little house," we all think in this day and age and future generations are always born in hospitals but being born in a house was kind of the thing?

NM: In that day and time, I think it was, yes.

JE: This name "McCaleb," does that have a story to it?

NM: Well, I guess everybody's name has a story. My antecedence on that side of the family were Scotchmen. They were ran out of Scotland when Bonnie Prince Charles was top and all the English were systematically exterminating the highlanders and they fled to Ireland, and from Ireland to Savannah. There were three brothers that landed in Savannah; two of them stayed in the Piedmont and one went through the Cumberland Gap and married an Indian woman. That's the last trace that there is of him. The others have another trace.

My McCaleb family was from Tennessee. My dad was born in Arkansas. The McCalebs came west about the time of the Civil War.

JE: About the—do you know about your grandparents? Their names and a little story there.

NM: Yes.

JE: Maybe you were leading to that but let's do that about your grandparents.

NM: Okay. On my father's side, my grandfather was named John Bell McCaleb and my grandmother was named Artie Jean Abernathy. I've carried her maiden name as my middle name.

On my mother's side, which is the Chickasaw side of my family, my grandmother's name was Nettie Burris. That was her maiden name. She married a white man who came to Indian Territory by the name of William F. Bridges. He got a political appointment as postmaster of the little town of Milburn. They met in the late nineteenth century and were married.

And then my mother was born. She was the youngest of two children, born in 1902.

JE: In? Are you talking about Indian Territory?

NM: Yes, Indian Territory, right.

JE: Right.

NM: She was allotted under the Dawes Commission Act in 1904, as an infant. And that's how Chickasaws established their citizenship. You have to be a lineal descent of an enrollee on the Dawes roll.

My father was from North Arkansas—

JE: He—

NM: . . . Batesville.

JE: His name?

NM: Jesse Burt McCaleb. He was a very intelligent young man. His father was a lawyer. Back then you didn't study law, you read law with a lawyer. And he became a circuit judge and he wanted his son, well, all his sons, to become lawyers; and two of them did.

He sent Dad off to Arkansas University. And when Dad came home, he announced that he wanted to be a civil engineer.

Dad told me the old judge kind of sniffed and said, "Civil engineers, aren't they itinerant surveyors?"

JE: [laughing]

NM: Turned out he was pretty close to right. Dad came to Oklahoma when there were very little paved roads. He started in 1921 with the Highway Department. In 1925, the map showed there was 5,000 miles in the system, which 384 were paved. There were no paved roads between Oklahoma City and Tulsa. No paved roads south of Norman. Most of the major rivers of the state had not yet been bridged. So he'd live about six months in one place building a bridge and move on to the next project. And he was an itinerant surveyor.

JE: This was in the early '20s. Was the state paying for these roads and bridges back then?

NM: Well, the state and the federal government and the counties. The counties paid a large portion because the state didn't have any money. They didn't pass a gasoline tax until 1922, which was where the state began a penny gas tax to use for the roads. Before that, the feds would put up half the money for the road, the Bureau of Public Roads and the County Commissioners, they'd put up the other half to build a bridge or a significant piece of road.

You notice a lot of times road projects today end at the county line?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: That's the heritage of that. There's no reason to stop a road at the county line today but they've done it that way for ninety days and gonna keep on doing it that way, I suppose.

JE: What kind of a person was your father?

NM: He was a private person, almost melancholy, as I grew up. My mother passed away when I was five, so he was a single parent all the time I was growing up until I was fifteen.

JE: You had other brothers and sisters?

NM: I had three siblings, two brothers and a sister. I was the youngest.

To give you an example of his quiet reserve, I'll call it, got a copy of his college annual from Arkansas University and they put a little information under each picture. Under his it simply said, "A math shark who never smiles." [both laughing] Wouldn't you like that

introduction? Actually, he did have a very good sense of humor, but, you know, he didn't make much public display of his emotions.

My mother, on the other hand, who I really never knew—I'm told by my brothers and sister and friends that she was a very exuberant, joyful person. And I suspect that she brought the joy to my dad's life that he'd never known. When she passed away early in life it was just devastating to him.

JE: And her name?

NM: Juanita Zelma Bridges, her maiden name.

JE: And you were five years old?

NM: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: What took her?

NM: Leukemia, she died of leukemia.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). She was Chickasaw?

NM: Yes.

JE: Three-fourths?

NM: No, she was about a half Chickasaw.

JE: She brought the land into the family then?

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative). That's right. My great grandfather was in the removal, Colbert Ashalatubby Burris, came as a young boy of eleven with his widowed mother, Checotah Burris, in the Chickasaw Removal in 1837. They settled first in the Fanshawe, in what's now Le Flore County, and moved southeast around Eagleton, the Smithville.

But when the Chickasaws bought the western portion of the Choctaw Nation, he moved out to a little town called Stonewall, this is after the Civil War, and it was named for Stonewall Jackson.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: Old Stonewall. The railroad came through and it didn't come through the town, it missed the town by a few miles, and they just picked the town up and moved it to the railroad. And then they renamed the little town Frisco, in anticipation of the Frisco Railroad coming through, which it never did.

He and my grandmother, who was a white woman, were buried there in the Frisco Cemetery, side by side. She and her father were, after the Civil War, trying to escape the Civil War still going on in Missouri and all the border raids and everything. And they were going to California and passed through the Chickasaw Nation. And he was an educator.

My great grandfather was teaching at this little school for Chickasaw young men called the Collins Institute. He ended up marrying Laura Bradley, who was my great grandmother. And they had seven surviving children.

He had been married before to a Chickasaw woman and she died early in life and they had two surviving sons. So we call them the First Family and the Second Family at our family reunions.

JE: Sure.

Chapter 03 - 3:11

Chickasaw Nation

John Erling: You said, part of the removal—would that then have been part of the Trail of Tears?

Neal McCaleb: Well, it was, it didn't all happen at once. The Cherokees came first in the early 1830s. The Chickasaws were the last to remove in 1837.

JE: And they came out of?

NM: Northern Mississippi, Western Alabama. Their estate prior to the arrival of the Europeans went up to the Ohio River and back to the Appalachia Mountains and west of the Mississippi and about halfway to the Gulf from Northern Mississippi. The Choctaws occupied south of there. There's a rich history in and of itself, the Chickasaws—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: . . . and the Choctaws. They wandered up from Mexico, it really is one tribe and two brothers, one called Chikasa and the other called Chata. They split up to Mississippi as to which way to go.

JE: And that's how we have?

NM: Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes. But they're very closely aligned, their languages are very, very similar. And a lot of their customs are very, very similar. And, in fact, when the allotment came, you could either choose to be allotted as a Chickasaw or Choctaw, either one. The federal government treated them like one tribe, at first.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: But the Chickasaws, they didn't swap land, they actually sold their land at public auction in Mississippi, and came west with a sack full of money. Because they wanted a separate government. They bought the western portion of the Choctaw Nation and again established their own sovereign government.

JE: Were the Chickasaws the only ones who sold their land? Others came penniless.

NM: Yes, they actually swapped land.

JE: Which was?

NM: Mississippi for land in Indian Territory. In fact, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek that the Choctaws signed is how our line of title comes. They were given land west of the

Mississippi as sovereigns, more than just land to be simple, they controlled it, they owned it, every aspect of it—land, water, air, minerals. They had sole sovereign control over that land.

That's an issue today in the water rights—

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: . . . issue between the state of Oklahoma and the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations.

JE: Right. Do you think the fact that the Chickasaws sold their land gave them a leg up to be one of the wealthiest tribes today?

NM: Well, the Chickasaws, I think, have always been skilled traders and negotiators. One of the reasons we came last of the five tribes was just because the Chickasaws put off the removal by delay and negotiation until they were finally forced to move. But the selling of the land at public auction was part of ploy, I think, to delay removal.

So when they came to Indian Territory they were settled with the Choctaws, it was like I said, it was one tribe in the federal view, but they wanted to reestablish their individual sovereignty.

I think there is a heritage of shrewd business sense—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: . . . among the Chickasaws at large. Certainly among some of those now, Governor Anoatubby being an excellent example of that.

JE: Right.

Chapter 04 - 3:50

English Speaking Family

John Erling: Let's come to your family now. What are your first remembrances? The first house you remember and how old were you?

Neal McCaleb: Well, my mom and dad built what during the Depression was a very, very large house. She still had oil royalties—in fact, I still have oil royalties that I inherited from my great grandfather's allotment. But anyway, they built what would have at that time been a nice big two-story, three-bedroom house, west of Oklahoma City, close to Lake Overholser in a little development called Woodlawn Park. And that's the only home I remember because they moved there when I was two years old. So I was raised there.

As far as first remembrances, I've thought about that some, and we took some vacations the two summers before my mother passed away. I think my dad was trying to build some memories and we went to the Gulf of Mexico at Galveston. I remember that, swimming in the Gulf, and they had these little inflatable rubber rafts that they rented out,

I guess. We'd ride on those. And I can remember the caution that I had received about the jelly fish that were in the area.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: And we fished with bacon on the end of a string for crabs in the rocks, which I thought was great fun.

The second memory that I have is, again, a family vacation when we went to Estes Park in Colorado, the summer of 1940, just six months before my mother passed away. Going to the mountains was a fun and great experience for me.

JE: Traditions in your family and Chickasaw traditions, were they talked about? Did they speak Chickasaw, any of that?

NM: No, not really. Had my mother survived, I'm sure that there would have been, but I was raised essentially by a Razorback from Arkansas. Although he treasured my mother and actually I have some Chickasaw words that she had shared with him that he wrote down, but no firsthand language experience with my mother.

And actually, my great grandfather discouraged the kids from speaking Chickasaw. He spoke three languages. He was a sometimes preacher and he preached in Chickasaw, he spoke English, of course, and he spoke French very well because that part of the country, French was a dominant language then. But in his view, I'm told, he felt the English language and the white culture was going to be the dominant culture and he wanted his children and their offspring to be not only fluent, but convincing in English. They were and are.

And, of course, my great grandmother was white, so she didn't have any opinion on that subject. As a result of that, the Chickasaw language was pretty well lost to our family early on. And a lot of things, not a lot of Chickasaw-speakers still around. But Governor Anotubby and their Cultural Division is trying to reestablish the Chickasaw language as a part of the culture of the people.

JE: Yep. The first school you attended, elementary school?

NM: Well, it was the last school before I went to college. I went twelve years to Putnam City, which was out near the little town of Warr Acres. It was a big country consolidated school.

I remember when I was going there we used to say we were the biggest consolidated school in the world. I didn't even know what consolidated meant, but anyway, we were big.

JE: Right.

NM: I rode a bus to school, a 1936 Dodge, and I rode it to school all the way up to 1950.

[laughing] When they finally bought a new bus. One of my early memories in the first grade was standing in line at school, waiting for the bus. And ride the bus was great fun. It wasn't a long ride so it wasn't too bad. But I like Putnam City, and I liked my fellow

students there. I especially liked my second grade teacher, a teacher by the name of Miss Hickey, who treated me especially nice. My mother had just passed away a year before and I think she went out of her way to lavish affection on me, which I liked a lot.

Chapter 05 - 4:55**December 7, 1941**

John Erling: Nineteen forty-one, December 7th, you would have been about six years old.

Neal McCaleb: Yes.

JE: Do you remember anything about that?

NM: Actually, I don't remember much about December 7th. It was a Sunday and Dad made a ritual out of Sunday dinners. I think because my mother was gone by that time, but anyway, we always had a big Sunday dinner. And I do remember the radio being on, everybody was glued to the radio listening to the broadcast. But I mean, I was just barely six years old, I didn't know what was going on.

Now after that, my next four years were dominated by the war, just like everybody else was. The things I remember about it were the home front things, the rationing and the shortages. There never was enough gasoline. We never drove over thirty miles an hour because it was against the law. In order to conserve gasoline.

I remember one of my greatest sensations when the war was over was riding with Dad driving fifty miles an hour. I thought we were jet propelled because all my life I'd moved at the top speed of thirty miles per hour. But there was all kinds of rationing, groceries.

And the thing that impacted me the most was there wasn't any bubblegum.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: For some reason, bubblegum was in short supply. Lucky Strike used to be packaged in a green package within a white package with a target on it. And when they changed it there was a big ad campaign, "Lucky Strike green goes to war." And I never did figure what that green was doing to win the war, but anyway, it was a big part of that campaign.

Everybody's life was influenced by the war because every family had somebody in the military. The front page of paper every day was war news. The radio was the big entertainment and the radio was just full of war news all the time. There was something happening every day, and towards the end of the war, another landing someplace in the Pacific. And we were marching across France and Germany, so the war was pervasive, and patriotism was not just the rule, it was demanded. Anybody that drove over thirty miles an hour, was at least, unpatriotic, and possibly, a saboteur [laughing] because everybody was just caught up in the war effort.

JE: So people might talk about those people?

NM: That's right, exactly.

JE: Do you recall Oklahoma men, maybe women, who were lost to the war, lost their lives?

NM: Yes there were. Tinker Field just really took off at the beginning of the war and it was named after Osage aviator, General Tinker. They'd publish every day in the paper, names of people who were lost in the war. And there were people that my family knew who were war casualties.

JE: By the time the war ends in 1945, you're ten years old. I don't know if there's a recollection of, "The way is over"?

NM: Oh yeah. You bet you there's a recollection. Because it was a huge celebration. First of all came VE Day, Victory in Europe, that was a big celebration. And then my older brother was eighteen that spring and he had enlisted in the navy, into the CBs. As the summer wore on, he was shipped to Okinawa, which had just been liberated, or taken over. We call everything we took, liberation.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: At great cost to human life, with the kamikaze airplanes hitting the ships and the Japanese soldiers dying, rather than being taken prisoner, fighting to the death. I knew my dad was super anxious about my older brother being in the landing of the mainland Japan.

And then in August came Hiroshima and right on its heels, Nagasaki, and then the capitulation of the Japanese emperor. It was just a huge release for everybody and the joy was clearly an emotion, but it was more than that, it was—we were not going to be dominated by the fascists and the imperial Japan. No segment of the world, because Roosevelt never talked about a negotiated peace, it was always unconditional surrender.

I could say that before I knew what it meant.

JE: Yeah.

NM: But it meant unconditional surrender.

JE: Right, right.

NM: And that's what happened and not only had we won the war, but we finished the war as a great economic power. You know, I didn't understand economics when I was ten years old, but I knew we were number one in the world.

JE: As young kids, your playmates and so forth, you felt a sense of pride?

NM: Right, absolutely, absolutely, and a sense of as a nation we can do about anything. I remember a song that was real popular during that time, I don't remember the exact title, but the words were: "We must be diligent, we must be diligent, American patrol." And everybody felt that kind of obligation.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 06 - 9:30
Preparing for College

John Erling: You remember the names of childhood friends?

Neal McCaleb: Oh, sure. My closest friends were three brothers, Morrises, Red, who had bright red hair. Tom Morrison, I thought that Red was his name.

JE: Oh. [laughing]

NM: Steve, who was just my age, and Morse Lee, who was a couple years younger. And they had a sister, Eloise, who we all called Sister, even I did because I thought that was her name too. Initially, they were like tenant farmers on a little dairy right behind my house. There was a big dairy, they had a lot of Guernsey cattle and they milked every morning and every night. They were my friends so that's where I was. They had a creamery and we bottled the milk and separated the cream from the milk and then spent a lot of time washing up after each process.

JE: You helped them?

NM: Oh, yeah, I was really kind of part of their family. My dad was a single parent and his work required him to be on the road quite a bit. By that time, my older sister had gone away to college at Grinnell, Iowa.

And anyway, Dad thought the Morrises were great people and he just kind of turned me over to them and they took me in.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: They were like a second family to me.

JE: Did your father remarry?

NM: Yes, ten years later, I was fifteen. He married my stepmother, who he had known from Highway Department work. Her husband worked with my dad, Oscar Never. Oscar had passed away and they got together and were married, which suited me just fine because she was a wonderful cook and was good to me and, all of a sudden, we had a full home.

And one of her sons was just about my age and we were great friends in school.

JE: Then we bring you through junior high on into high school, and that would have been Putnam City High School?

NM: Yes, yes.

JE: Some recollection of that? What type of student you were? Extracurricular activities, that type of thing?

NM: Well, I was a good student, but I was kind of a miscreant, in terms of obedience. So that kept me out of the Honor Society. You not only had to have good grades but you had to have a good citizenship grade. And mine was lacking. [both laughing]

But I liked school and I graduated from Putnam City really pretty well prepared for college. I had one teacher, Mrs. Molnax. I took a biology class when I was a sophomore, just kind of a filler, and boy, she grilled us, and I spent more time in that biology class than in everything else. So I went back with her and took physics, which did more to prepare me for college than about anything else.

And I had a good math teachers. A guy by the name of Hillar who taught me Algebra II and Trigonometry, so that helped. I knew by that time I was going to be a civil engineer.

In my senior year in high school, or actually, the summer before my senior year, I met my wife, Georgann. By that time, I was working with a construction company. My dad put me up with some of his friends. I worked out of town all week long and came in and I thought I was pretty much a full grown man at seventeen. I met her at Lake Overholser. They used to have speedboat rides out there; you'd pay a quarter and you'd get to ride around the lake on a Chris-Craft, which was big entertainment then.

JE: Yeah.

NM: One of my friends drove one of the boats, the other one docked them, so we hung out, as they say now, at Dawson's. And my wife and a bunch of her little friends from Oklahoma City, from Classen, had come out there. Her folks had moved out to the country, as we called it then, because her sister wanted her to have a horse.

Anyway, I was home celebrating and I guess I'd had one beer and got introduced. I found out later, Georgann went home and told her parents, who were very straight-laced teetotalers, she said, "I met the most charming drunk Indian." [laughing] I had quite a bit to live down with her parents, but we were married four years later and are still married fifty-six years later. And raised four kids and have thirteen grandchildren.

JE: That's good.

NM: She's been a wonderful partner and a wonderful wife.

JE: Stories you may remember in Putnam City or movies that you may have remembered back in that era?

NM: Well, of course, really, up until the time I was in the fifth grade, all the movies were war movies, either about combat or people who were separated from their loved ones. And after that they started to be quite a few cowboy movies. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy and people like that. And the big entertainment was going to the Saturday afternoon matinee at the Coronado Theater, they had a double feature, both of them cowboy shows.

But Putnam City was really a rural school at that time, so we had a lot of rural type activities. I was not an avid or a particularly gifted athlete, in fact, I was not a gifted athlete, I did wrestle in high school—not very well, I only won one match. [both laughing] But my wife was watching when that happened, so that was good enough. I used to say

I got interested in engineering laying on my back looking at the bow string trusses in the gymnasiums all over the state.

A lot of my friends were wrestlers. We had a very good wrestling team.

One experience that I do remember, we were wrestling Edmond, and there was a guy by the name of Ray Watkins, who later was state champion that year. The coach knew that we were probably going to lose that weight. And the guy that wrestled right above me was pretty good, so he made him pull down to my weight, 138 pounds, and move me up to Watkins weight. I remember he was telling me, he said, "Now, McCaleb, don't try to do anything, just go out there, keep on your base," in other words, your hands and your knees, "try to keep your back off of the mat and see if you can last out."

So I went out there. This guy had two arms and two legs just like I did, so I shot a double-leg dive and he chicken-winged me and it was all over in fifteen seconds. [both laughing] I probably set a record. I looked back and my coach just had his head in his hands.

JE: In high school, were you involved in writing or papers work?

NM: Oh, I liked drama. I participated all the way, really, the seventh grade on through high school in drama production. I guess I was just a ham, I enjoyed doing it.

JE: So you graduated then in what year?

NM: Nineteen fifty-three.

JE: And then on to?

NM: Oklahoma A&M College. And I had a decision to make. In the spring of 1953, we were still at war in North Korea. They were encouraging everybody to enlist but it was kind of a stalemate at that time. They were trying to negotiate some kind of a peace treaty at Panmunjom. I was in love and I didn't want to go off, so I went on to college, decided to go on to college and take a student deferment. Actually, they signed the armistice in July of that summer.

But a bunch of my buddies had already signed up with the marines and they went with what's called the Buddy Company. But I went to Oklahoma A&M College and stayed there until I graduated in 1957.

JE: Yes, Oklahoma A&M and Oklahoma State University.

NM: I was the last class of Aggies. They changed the name in 1957.

JE: And then, of course, you were after a civil engineers degree.

NM: I was, and I was intimidated by it. My older brother, who is gifted mentally, a very fine mind, got his degree in electrical engineering, is five years my senior, so he was out by the time I was getting ready to start. And he kind of discouraged me, he said, "You'll never make it in engineering."

With that encouragement I went to school with some trepidation. And then they gave you these placement tests then. And basically, they told me that I needed to do something else. [laughing] I wasn't getting any encouragement there. But I stuck it out.

JE: What drove you on?

NM: Well, I was determined. My dad had been a great role model for me and was the only parent I knew. And he was very affectionate to me. We had a lot of good times together and he'd take me with him on what are called Plan in Hands by the engineers, where they get the plans ready from surveys. And they take the plans to the field, Plan in Hand, and they mark them up to fit the circumstances that they see on the ground that might not have been readily apparent in the surveys.

So I got to along a lot of those, especially in the summertime. I learned to drive in an old state car. All the state cars were black and yellow at that time, with a little bed in the backend instead of a trunk. 'Cause there was only allowed three automobiles for the Highway Department, everything else had to be trucks. So they'd take these Chevy coupes and convert them with a little bed to make a truck out of them.

Anyway, I learned to drive one of those. A lot of the roads in were on what we called a Green Field, on new locations. So they'd have to go out across the pasture. I'd take the car, drive it around, and meet them on the other side, which was pretty heady stuff for a twelve- and thirteen-year-old. So I grew up around those engineers. They were my role models and they're all good men.

JE: So I guess you said, "I'll show everybody!"

NM: I'll stick it out. Actually, when I got done I finished at the head of my class in civil engineering. The Association of General Contractors ordered me a scholarship as their outstanding civil engineer student.

JE: And did your brother say anything?

NM: I don't think he ever remembered making that comment, you know. [both laughing] We make passing remarks that are nothing to us but they leave an indelible impression on people, especially people who look up to you.

Chapter 07 - 5:50

Segregation

John Erling: The state of Oklahoma State University A&M then, the '50s on campus, segregation and all, do you have recollections of what that was like?

Neal McCaleb: Oh, yeah, sure. We had a lot of people of color on the campus because of Henry Bennett, who had been a part of the Point Four program. And A&M had actually established a university in what we call Abyssinia then. Haile Selassie was the emperor. He actually came to the campus. So we had a lot of foreign students of color at

Oklahoma A&M College. But we didn't have many Native American blacks, none that I can really remember. Because it was just about that time that the Fisher girl went to the Supreme Court to get her admission into law school at the University of Oklahoma.

But when Raymond Gary became governor, he had a very, I don't know whether it was tolerant or just pragmatic view, about interracial education for blacks. Oh, and when we integrated public schools in Oklahoma it was just painless. It wasn't seamless but it was painless. I say it wasn't seamless because there were still segregated schools because the neighborhoods were segregated. And the Mohanen Decision required that in order to reach some kind of racial balance that they'd bus people from white neighborhoods to black schools, and vice versa. That had a huge economic impact.

I was building homes in the mid '60s when that happened and a lot of people voted with their feet and left Oklahoma City for the outlying suburbs and I was building in Edmond, which was very much an outlying suburb at that time.

But, you know, the things that I remember about Jim Crow laws, I didn't even know what they were, but segregation was the segregated water fountains would be right side by side and whites only and for Negroes, it would say. And then riding on the bus when I was growing up, we had the Interurban running between Oklahoma City and out to El Reno, which I rode it. A lot of the black folk rode back in the luggage portion of the Inter Urban bus at the back.

I was early adulthood when they began to integrate the restaurants like Kat's and Anna Maude's Cafeteria downtown. I was actually working for the City of Oklahoma City when that happened and it caused a lot of social unrest at the time. Because most of us had been raised in a segregated society. We didn't think anything about the equity of it, that's just the way it had been. I became a little sensitive because I realized that a couple of shades darker and I'd be riding at the back of the bus. I got pretty dark in the summertime.

I remember when I was a kid I'd be outside, you know, we'd dress warm in the winter and hardly at all in the summertime because we didn't have any air-conditioning. So I'd get really brown, so much so that when we were going someplace, I can remember my dad when I was a big old kid of nine or ten, putting talcum powder on me so I wouldn't be quite so crispy brown. [laughing] Being a person of color was not an asset at the time.

JE: So it heightens the issue of it was all about the color of the skin. They would never have looked upon you and your features were not black.

NM: Uh-uh (negative).

JE: But they would say, "Well, he's Native American."

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And they could look at you and say, "Well, your skin is so dark we question your ethnicity"?

NM: Well, that and being Native American, I mean, it's kind of cool to be Indian now. Fifty years ago it was not. The white population had really just completed wresting control of

the land rights from the Indians that were here first. A lot of Indians didn't enroll because they thought it was a land grab. And it kind of turned out to be that way.

If you've read the book *And Still the Waters Run* [title corrected] by Angie Debo, it's a pretty shameful account of how that land was wrested away from the Indians. I got involved in what I called "Indian business" in the mid '60s, because in Western Oklahoma there was patent discrimination against Native Americans. A friend of mine, or became a close friend of mine, Dr. Bill Carmack at the University of Oklahoma, I remember we got him to speak to the Edmond Jaycees. I was president in '66, I think, and when he finished he said, "You're Indian, aren't you?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'm Chickasaw."

And he said, "Well, what are you doing about it?"

And I said, "I'm trying to make a living." Anyway, he got me involved and it changed my life because ever thereafter, I had two agendas. One of them was the non-Indian agenda of trying to get ahead and take care of my family and build a bigger house. And the other was that the general perception of Indians, at large, was they were not work-wise and had a propensity for alcoholism. So I guess as I look back, a lot of what I did in the Indian world was really trying to live that down.

JE: But was it fair to say in the '50s, the main prejudice was against blacks?

NM: Oh, yeah, yeah. An Indian's life was Valhalla in comparison to what the blacks were under the Jim Crow laws. I mean, they couldn't even exercise their franchise to vote, in a lot of places.

JE: Yeah.

NM: There were still towns in Oklahoma, because I was with the Highway Department working with contractors all over the state, there would be little towns that had signs that said, "Black man, don't let the sun set on your head in this town at night."

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 08 - 5:35

Civil Engineer

John Erling: Good student, obviously, at Oklahoma A&M. You graduate in '57—

Neal McCaleb: Yes.

JE: . . . with a civil engineer degree. Then what do you do? And when are you married? Somewhere in here?

NM: In '55. Georgann and I were married while I was still in college. She quit college and got her PHT, putting hubby through. Our first son was born while I was still at Stillwater and he was born in Stillwater Hospital there just before I graduated.

JE: And how were you paying for college and a family?

NM: Well, Dad helped some. Tuition was not such a huge problem then. Nor were books. You know, I'm amazed that my grandchildren have to buy seven, eight hundred dollars' worth of schoolbooks each semester. I wouldn't spend that much for the whole semester on a hide, hoof, and hair. But I worked. I had a job at the water treatment plant. They let the civil engineers who had good grades go out and operate the plant at night, because it had to have twenty-four-hour attention. I got seventy-five cents an hour, which was the highest paying job on campus for students at the time.

My wife worked for a professor over in the athletic department and there were all kinds of prejudices. The rule back then in Stillwater with women working on the campus is when you show you go. It was somehow an embarrassment to be pregnant, anyway, they didn't want pregnant girls that were in their fullness working on campus jobs.

And I remember Mr. Kevin, who our son was named after, let Georgann work even after she had a tent on. Which was essential for us because we needed both our modest incomes in order to stay in school.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: Back then we didn't have Xerox machines so everything was done with multiple carbon copies. And if you made a mistake you just had to start all over again, you couldn't erase it. [laughing]

JE: No.

NM: And Georgann was not a good typist. [laughing] In fact, she said sometimes Mr. Kevin would take it away from her and type the letter himself.

JE: [laughs] Carbon paper, that's something future generations and present generations know nothing about.

NM: That's right. When I got out of school in '57, to show you how things change, we were just starting the interstate system, which was a huge public works program, biggest public works program ever. It was great for civil engineers. But we didn't have computers. Our calculators were, if you were fortunate, electronic rotary calculators and you had to use eight-place logarithms to do your calculations and interpolate between the logarithms. And eight-place trigonometric tables in order to do your trigonometric calculations. It was just bone-numbingly dull work.

I remember I was working on the bridge, I-40, over the North Canadian River and it was kind of a challenging bridge. There were four-hundred-foot continuous spans. It was on a horizontal curve, meaning it was super elevated, and a reverse vertical curve. Every

bridge had to be calculated to the location and then had to calculate the elevation and it was just grunt work. I don't know how else to say it.

I remember going home at night and I'd think, *I've ruined my life. If this is engineering, I'd want to be digging a ditch.*

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: But I got out of that, took another job with the City of Oklahoma City, which most people considered, at best, a lateral move, if not a step down. But my boss, who was named Woody Baker, was sitting engineer and he just shoveled responsibility at me. And all of a sudden I was making meaningful decisions about design and planning and working with the public and going to city council meetings and watching policy being made and however imperfectly.

The Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce was really making the decisions at that period in time. I remember every Monday, we'd walk down to the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce and check in with Stanley Draper to see what we ought to be doing that week. How—

JE: How old would you have been then, about?

NM: Well, I was twenty-five.

JE: Yeah.

NM: Twenty-six. I was very young for the job at the time but Woody had a lot of confidence in me and, like I say, just ladled responsibility on me, which was probably the best thing for me that could have happened at the time.

At the expiration of the two years, I was ready to be eligible to be licensed to practice engineering, which means I could sell my services to other people. So I left regular employment with the city and started an engineering business, which just petrified my wife, you know.

Her dream of life was to have a steady salary and a good job. She had been raised by a masonry contractor and a very good one. But, you know, like any construction business, always checking her feathers. So that was a big family decision when I went into business for myself. It turned out to be a good one.

JE: Did it take off right away so she—

NM: No! It did not. I had some modest engineering jobs. One of my clients was a guy by the name of Pat Henderson, who ran TG&Y, which was a big regional five and dime firm at the time. Pat was also doing a lot of real estate development on his own. So he hired me to do the site development on a big shopping center up in Edmond. When I got done, he was going to pay me whatever it was, X dollars. And he said, "I'll tell you what, I'll give you 2X dollars' worth of lots if you'll take the lots rather than the cash."

So I did and I had two lots in the middle of two hundred other unbuilt-on lots. And that put me in the home building business.

Chapter 09 - 2:14
Arrowhead Homes

John Erling: You started a home building business, which you called?

Neal McCaleb: Arrowhead Homes.

JE: Then you had two businesses?

NM: Right, I pretty well carried forward two parallel careers; one in engineering selling consulting services, and one as a merchant builder, what I call a merchant builder. We'd build speculative houses—build houses on speculation and hope to sell them when we got done.

JE: You started building in what community?

NM: South part of Oklahoma City, 78th Terrace, just off Pennsylvania, that's where Pat had this development. I only stayed there about a year and a half and I moved up to Windsor Hills. My home building business really kind of took off then.

General Electric had just moved a big plant into Oklahoma City, so there was a lot of high-paid GE people. We sold a lot of houses to them. Unfortunately, my accounting skills weren't as good as my sticks and bricks business was. I had my best year ever and I lost \$84,000, which in 1964, was a lot of money.

JE: Wow.

NM: It took me about four years to work my way out of that. And I did it partly in exchange, because by that time, my engineering practice was doing a lot better, so I was paying for some of my sloppy accounting work with my engineering practice.

JE: You built in Edmond, didn't you?

NM: I moved to Edmond. My first real successes in home building started in Windsor Hills, which is between 23rd and 30th in Northwest Oklahoma City. It used to be a golf course, Windsor Hills Golf Course. I used to caddy there when I was a kid. But I moved up to Edmond because I got into the land development business with a couple of oil guys, one's a geologist and the other is a land man.

They had bought some land up there and they came to me and, anyway, we developed it. Large lots, two, two and a half acre lots on water well and septic tank. But it was an instant success. I've drilled up a lot of additions there in Edmond.

And my son still builds there.

JE: And your son's name?

NM: Caleb McCaleb.

JE: Now you have McCaleb Homes?

NM: Well, he has it. We worked together for about five years, and then Keating reappointed me as secretary of transportation and I wasn't making a contribution, so I stepped out of it. And he's done very well without me, thank you. [laughing]

Chapter 10 – 7:15**Politics**

John Erling: Somewhere along the line here you get into politics in 1974.

Neal McCaleb: Yes, the precursor to that was Edmond was still a very Democrat town then.

Registration was very lopsided toward the Democrats. C. H. Spearman had been the representative in the House for a long time and was well thought of in the community.

We'd try to run a guy against him by the name of Percorny and C. H. just obliterated him.

JE: You were a Republican?

NM: Oh, yeah, yeah.

JE: So your father was Republican?

NM: Oh, no, no, no, I'm a biological Democrat. Because back then, if you wanted to vote in the primaries, and that's where people got elected, it wasn't in the general election, that there wasn't enough Republicans to fill a phone booth in most towns. You had to be registered as a Democrat to vote in the primaries, and that's where people got elected. So I was registered Democrat up until 1967.

I changed my registration to Republican.

JE: Why?

NM: Oh, a couple of reasons. Hubert Gregg had become a mentor of mine, he was a highway commissioner. I had a good friend, Dick Richardson, who was running for county commissioner as a Republican, so I switched my registration and I decided to get honest with my predisposition politically and we started some modest progress.

Anyway, in '72, we ran a girl against C. H. by the name of Jan Turner. She beat C. H., first Republican ever elected from that district. Two years later, she came to me and said, "Neal, I love to run but I hate serving out there, so I'm not going to do it again. Will you run."

Well, I didn't take much coaching. And in '74, I ran for that House seat, District 81. That summer, Richard Nixon resigned, so it was not a choice time to be a Republican. But I won anyway. The guy I ran against decided to campaign in overalls with a straw hat on and wheat straw in his teeth, you know, down home Democrat.

JE: What was his name?

NM: Jim Ed Douglas, good guy. He had been part of the J. Howard Edmondson administration.

JE: Governor J. Howard Edmondson?

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

JE: You defeated him?

NM: Yes, and I'd been active in the community for six or seven years, president of the Chamber of Commerce and I was pretty much involved in every worthwhile project that came along. I thought I knew everybody in town until I started going door to door asking for votes, and I didn't know anybody.

JE: Since the district had already broken the tide of Democrat, they already had a Republican.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You come along as Republican, you didn't have to overcome, I guess, then?

NM: No, I didn't have to break the ice, that's right.

JE: Yeah.

NM: And, of course, Edmond is a very Republican town and registration. But that was forty years ago.

JE: You were elected then in 1974.

NM: I was sworn in, actually, in November 16th of '74, and session started in January of '75.

JE: And your age was then?

NM: Thirty-nine.

JE: Had governments and politics interested you as an observer? Before that we had Henry Bellmon as a governor—

NM: Nuh-uh (negative). I got interested in government and policy when I was working for the City of Oklahoma City. I became aware that the real decisions were not being made by engineers with slide rules, they were being made by elected officials who set policy, decided where we're going to build the roads and water plants and sewers and how we're going to develop the city.

Oklahoma City, at that time when I worked, had a very expansive annexation program, in order to stop the surrounding satellite towns for choking them off. Stanley Draper, that was his plan. Oklahoma City became in the late '50s, the largest city in the United States, in area. A lot of people would call that urban sprawl today. We called it expansion at that time.

I think Oklahoma City is far better off for having done it, but people say, "Well, if we're in the city, bring us services. We want sewer services."

Well, there weren't any sewer lines running out there. I remember my boss would say, "We'll provide you service." We had honey wagons that would go out, big tank cars, and pump manholes to provide service. Just a mess, really bad.

But that was the indigestion that the city had with its sudden spurt of growth. And now Oklahoma City is far better off for that expansive program.

JE: So you found the policy making more interesting or it needed to be there rather than the civil engineering work?

NM: I found it both more interesting and more influential. If you wanted to make your ideas count for something you needed to be at the policy level.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: So I got interested in politics. I actually supported Bill Atkinson against Henry Bellmon in 1962, because I was still a Democrat. And nobody thought Henry Bellmon was going to

win. Here was this big, awkward farm guy, you know, he couldn't take his hands out of his pockets when he talked and he looked at his shoe toes, the toes of his shoes.

Shirley tricked him one night and she sewed his pockets shut. You know, he'd stand up there and jam his hands in. [both laughing] So he got up there and started talking—

JE: His wife, Shirley, sewed the pockets.

NM: Yeah, Shirley Bellmon. [laughing] Henry never did become a polished orator but he lost his fear of speaking.

Anyway, that campaign, Bill Atkinson, I support him because he wanted a big expensive highway program. He had a blueprint for progress based upon increasing the sales tax.

And Henry just went around the state saying, "No new taxes." And he won.

And I got to know Henry and admire him and he became a mentor of mine. He didn't know until later in life, that I hadn't supported him for governor in his first race.

JE: Did you tell him that quietly one night?

NM: Yeah, I did.

JE: He became the first Republican governor—

NM: Right.

JE: . . . the state had ever had.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do you have any recollection of Dewey Bartlett as governor?

NM: Oh, yeah. Dewey had a lot of influence on me. He was a great man and a thoughtful person. He created the first Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission and appointed me to it. He had a guy on his staff, a Cherokee, by the name of Don Bluejacket, who I had become friends with in my Indian work. And Don saw to it that I was appointed to the commission.

That was my first policy job, if you want to call it that. And I was able to make friends with Indian leaders all over the state as a result of that.

Dewey was a good governor. He instituted what we call "Career Tech," now. We called it "Vo-Tech" then. We have one of the best Career Tech systems in the United States in Oklahoma and Dewey Bartlett started that.

But he also was an advocate of school consolidation. And that's what beat him for governor. Because the school teachers and small town people were opposed to school consolidation because a lot of little towns, that's all they had was their school system.

Anyway, he lost, but came back two years later to run for the United States Senate and I helped campaign for him. He won, and he was another mentor of mine.

JE: So he didn't run again?

NM: He didn't.

JE: Because of his health.

NM: Dr. Kamm, who had been president of OSU, ran on the Republican ticket. David Boren ran on the Democrat ticket and won.

JE: Yeah.

NM: That was in '78, I think.

Chapter 11 - 3:30

Political Victory

John Erling: You remain in the House of Representatives for about nine years?

Neal McCaleb: Eight years. I served four two-year terms. I was out in '82, late '82, when they swore the new legislature in. I served functionally from '74 to '82, or eight years.

JE: You were elected House minority leader in '78.

NM: Right, and I served in that capacity for four years. Being the House minority leader and fifty cents would get you a cup of coffee down at the canteen.

JE: Because this state was run by Democrats.

NM: Absolutely, absolutely. We didn't have proportional representation on any committee. In fact, my big moment in the legislature was when we had a showdown with Dan Draper, who was speaker of the House. We wanted to eliminate the sales tax on pharmaceuticals, on utilities, and on groceries. And we wanted proportional representation on the important committees like Rules Committee and the General Appropriation Committee. We didn't have even a third of the legislature, we were close, but in '82, we had reapportionment. They reapportioned the legislature and he angered four or five Democrats, they were put in districts where they had to run against each other.

Anyway, they aligned themselves with us on some important votes. Back then, we stayed in session right up until the end of the fiscal year, June 30th. And there'd be money left on the plate that had not been certified for appropriation. But if it was there at the end of the fiscal year we could spend it. We'd take our legislative biscuit and sop up the last bit of money off the plate.

A law has to be in place for ninety days before it becomes law in an appropriation bill. The way they get around that is if it has the emergency clause on it, it becomes effective immediately. So these appropriation bills had to have the emergency clause.

So in mid-June, they started bringing out the appropriation bills and we started turning down the emergency clauses. And it put them in a crisis because if they pass them without the emergency, those agencies would go without money for ninety days. And they ran out the bill on higher education because I had CSU or Central in my district,

and Joe Manning, who was my lieutenant, had OSU, and Helen Cole had OU, and they thought they'd break our back on that. But we held together.

And Draper actually recessed the legislature for a couple of weeks to try to get his people back on board.

Actually, our coalition started falling apart even internally because some of our people were mad over the reapportionment too. I remember we had one caucus meeting and our guys were pulling off their coats and getting ready to go across the table and fight. The TV cameras were grinding outside the windows.

When the legislature came back in session, I was defeated and Joe and I went to Speaker Draper's office and I sat there what seemed like five minutes—it was probably ten seconds—with my chin on my chest just because I didn't know how to run up the white flag, say, "I surrender."

Dan broke the ice by saying, "Surely there's something we can do to work out this impasse?"

And I thought, *Bingo! He's got just as big a problem as I do.* And so we got the sales tax taken off of utilities and pharmaceuticals—not groceries—and we were able to get proportional representation on those committees.

That was my one triumph out of eight years in the legislature [laughing].

Chapter 12 - 4:30

Interstate System

John Erling: And then presidents, you know, you talked about the interstate system, Dwight Eisenhower—

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ... was really responsible for that.

NM: Yes. You know, the name of the interstate system is not just interstate, it's the National Defense and Interstate Highway System. Eisenhower as a young officer, made a trip across the United States with a battalion, or whatever it was, of military to try to go from one coast to the other. And it was just a fiasco.

Then during the war, he saw the Autobahn that Hitler had created in Germany, and he said, "That's what we need to protect this country for national defense. The railroads are too slow. We need to be able to move our troops and our equipment rapidly. Ergo, the National Defense and Interstate System. Most of the people don't recognize it.

We designed those bridges, by the way, not for trucks, we designed them for a column of Sherman tanks.

JE: Wow, so you may not have seen him or—

NM: I never met President Eisenhower or any of the presidents until Richard Nixon. I campaigned for Richard Nixon and they had the committee to reelect, the infamous CREEP committee. I was cochairman of the Native Americans for Nixon's reelection, which was called the Red CREEP [laughing].

JE: Did he come to the state and were you able to meet him then?

NM: I actually met him in the White House. He invited myself and others to the White House after he was reelected.

JE: Because of what you'd done for him in the state?

NM: Well, I was actually working on more a national scene with Native Americans all over the country, at that time. And by that time, Henry Bellmon had seen to it that I was appointed to the National Council on Indian Opportunity, which was chaired by the Vice President. It was for the purpose that I have always espoused in Indian country to eliminate the poverty and the social ills that go with poverty. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has done a miserable job.

I was appointed to the National Council on Indian Opportunity and, there again, my path crossed with Bill Carmack, who had gone to Washington with Fred Harris. He ran Fred Harris's campaign when he won against Coach Wilkerson.

JE: Since roads and bridges were a pet of yours—

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . were you able to draw attention to them during the House—

NM: I tried to. I served on the Highway Committee or Roads Committee. It was not a very influential committee at the time. I think part of what encouraged me to run for governor, not very effectively, it's obvious, was I wanted to get my hands on the Highway Department through the executive branch. But, you know, I got beat in the Republican primary by Tom Daxon, who got beat in every county in the state by George and I [laughing].

JE: And what year would that election be?

NM: That was 1982. But I remember the *Tulsa World* took us to task. It said, "McCaleb and the Republicans either want to rule or run the state." [both laughing]

JE: Then in '83, Governor Bellmon appointed you to serve as the first secretary of transportation.

NM: Oh, that was in '87—'83 was between my state service and President Reagan appointed me to the President's Commission on Indian Reservation Economies, with the idea of go around and look firsthand and see what could be done to resuscitate the economy in Indian country to try to solve some of the social problems.

Our report basically said we'd spent a year doing this, touring all over the country, and there's not any economy in Indian country.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: We made a lot of other recommendations relative to BIA, which were later enacted. In '70, Richard Nixon had actually articulated the concept of Indian self-determination. Up until that time, the BIA really controlled all the tribes. And Nixon said, "They've done such a lousy job of it, let's let the tribes try to chart their own destiny."

In '75, Congress finally passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act, Public Law #93638, which really began to change things for Indian governments, because they began to develop the skills, management, and operation of government, accounting and law, and things like that that were the precursors to real self-governance.

And then in the late '80s, Congress passed the Indian Self-Governance Act, which let the tribes take all the money the BIA was spending on that tribe or in that area. They'd make the policy decisions that they thought were appropriate.

Chapter 13 - 7:30

Secretary of Transportation

John Erling: Then I'm going to bring you to when Governor Bellmon appoints you to serve as the state's first secretary of—

Neal McCaleb: Transportation.

JE: . . . transportation. And to serve as director of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, also known as ODOT.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You served there until the end of his term in 1991.

NM: Yes, which was to an old civil engineer and second generation highway guy was like getting to play football at the Super Bowl. That was up until that time, the high point of my professional career.

JE: Did you have any money to play with?

NM: Well, we did because we passed the gasoline tax. I remember when Henry was announcing my appointment as secretary of transportation; the state was broke, just like it was when Henry took over, Governor Henry. And we knew he had to have some more revenue.

I was standing out there and my remarks was kind of hinting that we were going to go after a gas tax. And I remember this girl from WKY says, "Is this the same Neal McCaleb that was opposed to every tax increase and for every tax cut for eight years?"

She had me cold. We'd just gone through the oil crisis, by that time, you know, Penn Square Bank shut down in the summer of '82. I just said, "Well, let's just say a lot of us had brighter taillights than we did headlights." [laughs]

George Nye has never let me forget that, he calls me “Taillights McCaleb,” to this day.
[both laughing]

But we did pass the gas tax—six penny gas tax.

JE: All earmarked, of course, for roads and bridges.

NM: Well, it was, but they had been taking about \$50 million out of the general fund to help fund highways, up to that point. And when we passed the gas tax, which was about \$100 million, they took the \$50 million general fund money away. So we only got about half of the money, effectively, that the gas tax raised.

But we did a lot of work with it and improved a lot of roads. But the big accomplishment on highways in the Bellmon years was the turnpikes. We built the first phase of the Creek Turnpike, the John Kilpatrick Turnpike in Oklahoma City, the Cherokee Turnpike, which eliminated State Highway 33.

I forget the guy who had the commercials on the radio here forever.

JE: Dan, Dan P. Holmes.

NM: Yeah, Dan P. Holmes, talking about the—

JE: Highway 412.

NM: Yeah. Right. State Highway 43 and 412. Anyway, we eliminated, not the highway, but the threat and built the Chickasaw Highway, which was never economically sound. But the Speaker Pro Tem Lonnie Abbott wanted the turnpike from I-35 up to I-40. The bill said that you will sell the bonds for all four of these projects or you can't sell the bonds for any of them.

We tried for a year to get that off and we couldn't. Bellmon finally said to me, “It says here in the bill that you can build all or any part of that. Why don't we just build a turnpike gate and build about a block of turnpike on either side of it?” [laughs]

And I said, “Governor, that might be a little too cute. Why don't we build a piece of functional road between Ada and Sulphur. On that line.”

So we did. And it was a two-lane turnpike, it wasn't a four-lane turnpike. We caught a lot of flak for that. But it was well worth it. Turnpikes began in Oklahoma in 1953, actually, the law was passed by Governor Turner in 1947. Gene Stipe was one of the primary authors of that bill.

A Turner turnpike was completed in 1953, when I was a senior in high school. I remember riding down that road in a yellow jacket. My dad and a guy by the name of Gaines Stout, who ran the survey's division, the front seat, and they were oohing and aahing over what a wonderful road this was and the interstates hadn't started. The Turner Turnpike was the precursor of the designs that were used on the interstate. What a fine wonderful road it was.

And I remember Dad said, “It's just too bad this couldn't be built as a free road.”

And Mr. Stout said, "Well, Burt, it's gonna be paid off in thirty years and it'll be a free road."

And my dad said, "Gaines, don't you ever believe it." [laughing] And he was right.

After that, we came back in '55, and we wanted to extend it on up to Missouri, but it wouldn't stand on its own base. So they submitted to a vote of the people a provision—I don't know that anybody understood it, but it said that you could cross pledge the revenues between the turnpikes, which meant we'd never pay off the turn, because we were always paying for a new turnpike.

And that's why it's never been paid off. Because it's—

JE: Because we're always paying for another one.

NM: Yeah, for a new one. That's not a bad thing or we wouldn't of had the Creek Turnpike, and we wouldn't of had the 412 Cherokee Turnpike, we wouldn't of had any of the new turnpikes.

A lot of people say, "Well, we probably shouldn't of had them," but they've saved a lot of lives. In the final analysis, highways are about three things: convenience for commerce or the economy, safety, and that's probably more important than anything, and convenience for the road-user. The turnpikes have a better safety record than the interstate systems do.

Once we took those terrible grass medians out, those happened because H. E. Bailey, they thought they were running out of money—they had thirty-foot medians in there to start out with. But they wanted to save money in the right of way, so they squished it down to a fifteen-foot median. His idea was to put that dirt mound in the center, which is just a killer, because you've got the yellow line and you're in that dirt. Once you get that tire in that soft dirt, it turns your wheels directly into it and speew (sound he made) you go airborne. And if there's any oncoming traffic, you're dead.

So we built the concrete barriers to eliminate that.

One of the things that I did when I was director that probably is my proudest accomplishment, or the one that I feel best about is we brought in these high-tension cable barriers. The first one was on the Heffner Parkway in Oklahoma City. It had been built with thirty-foot medians, just according to all the design standards, but it was carrying about sixty thousand cars a day and they were driving sixty-five or seventy miles an hour. Six lanes wide, so if you crossed that median, you were into opposing traffic. People were dying on that road at a rate of about six per year, which was just unconscionable.

And our engineers would always say, "Well, we did it according to the Green Book," which is the design handbook, "it's okay."

I said, "Well, tell that to the dead people." You know, I started saying, "Let's put the barriers in like we have in the turnpikes."

“Well, it’s too expensive, full of drainages in the middle, unlike the turnpikes.”

And then I found out about this English system called the “Brifen barrier,” which is a high-tension cable barrier, not the old cables that were between wooden posts that you see. But like on an aircraft carrier that is used to dissipate the energy of the planes as they land.

The Federal Highway Administration at first said we couldn’t use it because it was a proprietary product and they couldn’t get competitive bids. So we finally talked them into letting us use it as a research project, and boom, the fatalities dropped to nothing. We’re building them all over the state now. We were the first state in the United States to use that kind of a system. Now it’s the national standard and we’re saving lots of lives.

If I’ve done anything in the engineering profession that amounts to anything it’s introducing those cable barriers.

Chapter 14 - 2:50

Turnpikes

John Erling: Did our states in ’53 start going to turnpikes? Because we were not a wealthy state, because there are a lot of states that don’t seem to use the turnpikes as much as we have.

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative), well, highways have been underfinanced in Oklahoma since the creation of the Highway Department a hundred years ago. I mean, they didn’t even have gas tax for the first ten years. They were just nice guys riding around in old cars. They were hucksters [laughs] and under Trapp the first penny gas tax was passed. And that was challenged. Because it said the legislature has to appropriate every dime that’s spent, you can’t just earmark a tax.

Well, it went to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court decided, “Well, that’s a kind of appropriation because the legislature can change it if they want to.” Which is stretching your imagination. But it stuck and we had a lot of earmarked taxes, like for welfare, in the Depression.

But to the point, we were always underfinanced. We had Old 66 between Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the two population centers of the state, and the idea was, “We’ll sell bonds and build a first class road. And let it be self-liquidating.” Or we never would have had that road. We wouldn’t of had the Creek Turnpike if we hadn’t sold bonds. If we’d been waiting for ODOT to do it, we’d still be waiting for it. Because ODOT, from the time we passed that gas tax in ’87, hadn’t had a funding increase until 2007, twenty years later.

While the price of materials were going up 100 percent, the load factor of the cars had gone up 67 percent, and the revenue was dead flat.

So I got involved in jumping ahead now to 2005, in a group called Oklahomans for Safe Roads and Bridges. And we wanted to pass another gas tax. We were trying to pass the six-penny gas tax to try to solve this problem, which would have raised a little less than \$100 million.

Well, you know what happened then, the price of gas thing was going up asymptotic to the Y axis and we got beat worse than any statewide vote that ever happened. We got 13 percent affirmative votes—87 percent of the people in the state said no. Not exactly the high-watermark of my political career.

But we did make an impression on the legislature, who had all committed. They didn't want the gas tax but said something needed to happen. So two years later, under the leadership of Chris Binge and Mike Liotta, they passed the first major funding increase for the Department of Transportation. They followed back to back in two years.

Now instead of \$250 million we're getting about \$450 million for the Highway Department—and we need every dime of it.

JE: It occurs to me you said Highway 66, known as . . . [tape ends]

Chapter 15 - 4:15

Route 66

John Erling: . . . Route 66.

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Being a road man and bridge man, did that fascinate you when that was in its popularity, and still is, resurgence, but the lower of Route 66, did that interest you?

NM: Oh, I've spent my life within a half mile of the mother road. Our home out in [indecipherable] there was a quarter mile south of 66. The bridge in *The Grapes of Wrath* where one of the Joads died and they buried him underneath the bridge, that was hypothetically the bridge. That was the location.

We played on the bridge and under the bridge. You know, hitchhikers were all over the place during the war. People hitchhiked a lot during the war because they didn't have cars. It wasn't looked down on—you were kind of expected to stop and pick up a hitchhiker. And if they were in uniform, you were compelled to do it almost.

People didn't have tires. I'd see cars running down 66 on their rims because their tires had blown out and they had run the rubber off it.

My first firecracker stand was on 66. So, you know, my life is just a panorama of experiences on Old Highway 66. I live in Edmond now, three-quarters of a mile south of 66. It had an important role in the history of the state, as well as the history of the nation. And it was significant that I-40 parallels a lot of 66.

Driving out West, you can see it off there at the side of the road in western Oklahoma and Texas and New Mexico. So the alignment was right, it was serving the right places. But it was still a killer—it was narrow.

Where I lived, it was eighteen feet wide, and had tar shoulders, not asphalt shoulders. They were made out of tar. We'd go and put coins and things in and get an impression of it and everything and it was a big deal.

In the hot summertime, you'd ride your bicycle on those tar shoulders and uhhhn (grunting noise), you know, you'd just have to pump real hard because the tires were sticking in the tar.

It had short-sight distances. It was built for cars in the 19—late '20s and early '30s that were designed for top speeds of fifty miles an hour. And all of a sudden, we were driving cars that could go a hundred miles an hour and didn't have a lot of safety features that we have today. So in the '50s, our fatality rate per million miles driven was the highest it's ever been. The fatality rate, I think, was something like almost eight fatalities per million miles.

Now it's like 1.5.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

NM: Because our roads are better designed, they're wider, shoulders good sight distances, not so many curves. But Old 66 tied this country together, especially during the Depression where a lot of Oklahomans were going West to the land of milk and honey.

JE: Is it a greater piece of Highway 66 that goes through Oklahoma than most other states?

NM: Yes, Oklahoma has more mileage of 66 than any other state. And Woody Guthrie, you know, a lot of his songs are about 66 and about the Okies on the way to California. Some of the songs I remember, like "Do Re Mi, if you don't have the Do Re Mi, you'd better go back to beautiful Oklahoma, Texas, or Tennessee." [laughing]

And it was so bad, California required you to have so much money to enter the state. If you didn't have any money, they'd just turn you around, send you back across the desert. You got to have the do re mi. That's one of the first [indecipherable] fourteen thousand people every day, if you don't have the do re mi, you're out of luck.

JE: It was that California challenge that—

NM: Yeah, right.

JE: . . . causing him to write that song.

NM: Right.

JE: Did you think of him or know of him much?

NM: Oh, yeah, I mean, one of the songs that I still love was “The Oklahoma Hills.” I sang that when I was a little kid in grade school. “Way down yonder in the Indian Nation, rode my pony on the reservation, those Oklahoma Hills where I was born.” Yeah.

JE: Were you—

NM: I thought it was the state song when I was growing up. [laughing]

JE: Well, didn’t it become our official ballad?

NM: Yeah, right.

JE: Of Oklahoma.

NM: Right.

JE: But when you sang that, you were feeling every bit of that because that was you.

NM: Yeah, yeah, I was full of pride about it. You know, they wrote a song about my life. [both laughing]

Chapter 16 - 5:27

President Bush Appointee

John Erling: President George W. Bush appointed you as the assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs. And you served that until 2003.

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You were charged with the administration and management of fifty-six million acres of land, held in trust by the United States government for Native Americans, Native American tribes, and Alaskan Natives.

NM: Well, that’s the cover I use for the failure of my mission in Washington. [laughing] Actually, it was a miserable time. The Cobell lawsuit dominated everything. The Cobell lawsuit is where five Indians, one of the Mildred Cleghorn from Oklahoma, Elouise Cobell was the most notable one, sued the Bureau of Indian Affairs for mismanagement of their trust funds. Which for the last 150 years, you know, BIA was guilty, prima fascia evidence.

But that suit was filed back in the Clinton administration. And the Supreme Court held Secretary Babbitt and the assistant secretary of Indian Affairs, my predecessor, Kevin Glover, in contempt of court. When I got there, I hadn’t been there four months and I found myself standing in the docks in front of a federal magistrate, and him saying, “You shall show cause why you should not be held in contempt for fraud on the court.”

I thought, *Wow, I’ve only been here four months, I’m not that smart.* [laughing] But, you know, same charge against Secretary Norton. And he ultimately held us in contempt. It was reversed by a higher court, or remanded back by a higher court because it wasn’t

founded in any fact. But it just destroyed my credibility in Indian country. Because there's always been a love/hate relationship between the BIA and them.

JE: The Bureau of Indian Affairs, you're talking about, right?

NM: Yes, that's right.

JE: You were charged then with about 310 Indian reservations in the United States. Not all tribes have a reservation.

NM: Right, there's actually 562 federally recognized tribes, 200 of those are in Alaska, which were brought in by the predecessor of the Clinton administration, Ada Deer, who recognized 206 of them with a stroke of a pen. A lot of them are just extended families, I mean, they weren't really governmental units at all. Like the Chickasaws or the Cherokees or the Choctaws.

JE: And then when you think about it, the geographical area of all these reservations is very significant, isn't it?

NM: Oh, yeah.

JE: Larger than some states.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative). It started out at the time in 1887, there was 150 million acres of Indian land. And it had shrunk to about 50 million acres by 1936. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs at that time, a guy by the name of Collier, in the Roosevelt administration, said, "This is unconscionable, you need to stop the erosion of this land."

And they passed the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, which set up the kinds of Indian tribal governments that most of the tribes in the state follow today. A lot of them, like the Chickasaws, are constitutional governments that have passed their own constitution. IRA is set up more like a corporate board with a chairman, and it's not very effective.

But it was the first move away from BIAs absolute control over Indian Affairs, to let the tribes begin to make some of their own decisions.

JE: Tribal sovereignty, you're talking about.

NM: Yes.

JE: These laws could permit legal casinos in on reservations.

NM: Well, they could, but they didn't until in the late '80s. They began to, a lot of them have little kind of super bingo parlors here in Oklahoma, but the Cabazon tribe in California, started doing gaming big-time, Las Vegas style. And the state of California tried to shut them down because that was against the laws of the state of California. And it went to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court said, "States do not have jurisdiction over tribal lands. Tribal governments are sovereign, just like states are sovereign, and they predate the states."

Boom, that was a huge decision, and Congress followed it in 1988 with the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which permitted gaming, Class 3, if the tribe had a compact or

an agreement with the state. You could do Class 2 without a compact. Chickasaws and Oklahoma tribes do a Class 2, which is really numerology bingo applied. I mean, the machines look like slots, they played like slots, and they paid like slots. But up in the corner there was a little disclaimer that said, "This is based on the numerology of bingo." [both laughing]

But in 2005, when we passed the Oklahoma lottery, it also permitted Class 3 gaming of some type—table games like poker and blackjack. And high-speed slots like Las Vegas slots. They play faster, ergo, they make more money. But the tribes had to give the state back 6 percent of their net take.

I think last year it was \$118 million in the state revenue. But the real impact is not that, the real impact is the number of jobs in rural Oklahoma. Most of these locations, like Chickasaws on the Red River, Love County was one of the poorest counties in the state and had the highest unemployment rate. That's not the case any longer.

We employ, I think, three thousand people at that one casino, in the ancillary activities, recreational activities.

Chapter 17 - 3:45

Reservations

John Erling: Many of the roads in Oklahoma were through land that Indians owned.

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So the state didn't have any jurisdiction to build on those, is that true?

NM: Well, we haven't had reservations, per se, in Oklahoma since statehood. The only reservation is the Osage Mineral Reservation, under the ground. So we have Indian roads but they're not reservation roads. But our roads are covered by the Indian Reservation Roads Act, which Oklahoma gets about \$50 million a year in federal money that goes to the tribes that decide where that money's going to be spent.

It's really helped the county commissioners, because what they've done, it's one of the few federal programs that use federal dollars to leverage other federal dollars. County commissions have an off-system bridge program, but they couldn't come up with the 20 percent. Well, the tribes came up with the 20 percent of this Indian Reservation Roads money, which was expanded. Oklahoma's take was expanded while I was in Washington, DC, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and a lot of the upper plain state, large land based tribes and the Navajos think there was a conspiracy on my part to feather the nest of the Oklahoma tribes.

But what we did was, we said, “We don’t have any Indian roads. We can count public roads in which the county doesn’t have the money to fund their upkeep and bridges. And we’ve been reducing the number of dangerous bridges as a result of that.”

So Indian tribes are making a huge contribution to road safety in Oklahoma, and facilitating that. Plus, you know, places like over here at Catoosa, that’s a \$39 million interchange and the Cherokees have paid a substantial chunk of that.

JE: From money they received the federal government?

NM: No.

JE: It’s what they made off—

NM: Money they made off gaming.

JE: Off gaming, right. Most of the tribes with their gaming have been able to contribute to the roads and bridges—

NM: Absolutely.

JE: . . . in their area.

NM: Absolutely. Chickasaw’s spent over ten million dollars on the Red River with their access roads, bridges, and they’re getting ready to spend another ten million dollars to build a second interchange. Because we’re backing traffic up across the Red River on big nights, which is dangerous.

JE: Yeah. The name “reservation,” do you know how that came about?

NM: Well, it’s a parcel of ground that is reserved for a particular purpose, that’s owned by the federal government. Like the military reservation at Tinker Field in Oklahoma City. That’s a reservation but it’s a military reservation. Fort Sill is a military reservation; it’s owned by the United States.

Indian Country in Oklahoma were not reservations, at least in Eastern Oklahoma. They were land that the tribes held in title and fee simple and with all the rights, privileges, and monuments that go there too: water, surface, air, minerals.

JE: Overall, your journey in Washington, was it pleasant? Was it good?

NM: Oh, no, it was bad. I mean, I was under the cloud of a federal court determination that I had defrauded the court, which never happened. And that whole Cobell lawsuit just sucked the air out of the room at the Department of Interior.

It’s just been settled after sixteen years and they determined that, in fact, the BIA had mismanaged trust funds of individuals. And they settled it by paying \$3.9 billion. Of that, about half goes for land consolidation, which I won’t try to explain. And the other half goes to the trust holders, Indian individual money market account holders. And a lot of Oklahoma Indians are waiting to get that.

JE: So when you left Washington, you did with a smile, “I’m out of here”?

NM: Yeah, with a big smile. I was getting out of Dodge.

Chapter 18 - 6:25**Natural Gas**

John Erling: Then you returned home to Oklahoma to be an advisor to Governor—

Neal McCaleb: Anoatubby.

JE: Anoatubby, governor of the Chickasaw Nation.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you've been given the task of development of long term economic development plans and policy.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You were appointed to the board of directors of Bank2, which is owned by?

NM: Chickasaws.

JE: Chickasaw Nation. You're chairman of the board for Chickasaw Nation Industries. You're a busy guy, aren't you?

NM: I'm gainfully employed, yeah. [both laughing]

JE: Chickasaw Nation opened the first tribally owned CNG fueling station in Oklahoma, Compressed Natural Gas in Ada, for your fleet of cars.

NM: Yeah.

JE: Tell us about that a little bit.

NM: I'm a strong believer in CNG and I probably was the motive force in getting that. But the governor made the policy that the Chickasaw Nation is, "We're going to convert our fleet to CNG." Migrate our fleet is probably a better word. You've watched their commercials, it burns cleaner than anything except electricity. And if you take carbon footprint to generate the electricity, it probably burns as clean as electricity does. It's abundant. In the last five years we've doubled the amount of gas reserves that are economically recoverable. We have a reserve for a hundred years in front of us—and it's American. We're not dependent upon some alien country that may not be benevolent to us. And it helps us economically and actually because if we can switch a lot of our economy over to natural gas the price of a barrel of oil won't be driving our economy, and we'll be beholden to Arab states for billions of dollars.

So it's environmentally sound, it's economically sound, it's good for our national security, and I promise you, it's good for Oklahoma.

JE: For those future generations who will listen to our conversation, here we are in 2011, just now trying to educate the public about natural gas, including our elected officials, because it's easier now to break the natural gas through from the shales we're drilling into.

NM: Yes.

JE: Because we were able to drill horizontally, relatively new technology, I guess—

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . for the oil industry. We're able to fracture those shales and then we release this natural gas.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do you see the future then in the next ten, twenty years that we're going to see CNG fueling stations all up and down the turnpike?

NM: It's already happening. OnQ, right out of River City America, is already building natural gas CNG stations. There's one in my hometown of Edmond. They've built about five in Oklahoma City.

Love's Country Store is gonna build about a dozen that they think that they've have operational by the end of spring, up and down the interstate, largely.

ONG started this twenty years ago, almost ever ONG maintenance facility has a public pump for CNG. You don't have to go in, you just pull up like a service station. Now you have to have a credit card but it'll take Visa or whatever. It's very convenient and ONG sells theirs for eighty-five cents equivalent gallon. The commercial outfits like OnQ and Love's sell theirs for \$1.39 a gallon. Which is still a whole lot better than three and a half dollars a gallon.

And your car, if it gets twenty miles a gallon, you'll continue to get about twenty miles to the gallon. It doesn't raise your mileage, it just makes it cost less. The key is to have more fueling stations, like a chicken and the egg issue. There aren't more cars burning CNG because there's not enough stations to refuel at and there's not enough stations because there's not the economic demand from the cars. So these leaders like OnQ and Love's and others, and I was proud that the Chickasaws took the lead 'cause we had to dig down in our jeans for half a million dollars to make one of those installations, with no help from anybody, thank you.

But it was essential, there wasn't a CNG station within thirty miles of us, so we had to do that.

JE: Don't you think too that one of the driving forces of this will be the automobile manufacturers making more models available using natural gas?

NM: They'll do that when they feel the demand's there. They've gone backwards in the last few years. In the early '90s, and mid '90s, both Ford and Chevrolet were making a Dedicated, meaning it burned only natural gas engine. Neither one of them do now, the only manufacturer in the world that we have available here is a Honda that makes a Dedicated CNG engine. But that's not the answer.

The answer is converting to where you can burn either natural gas or unleaded gas, until there's more stations. I drove a Honda for a long time. You drive around white-knuckled, afraid you're going to run out of gas. And when you're out of gas in a Dedicated

car, you are out of gas. I mean, you don't pick up a five-gallon can and walk down to the closest service station.

JE: Yeah.

NM: So I'm driving a duel-fuel converted Impala, it's sitting out there in front. That's where we are right now.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: I get thirty miles to the gallon. A gallon of gas costs me about \$1.40. My fuel costs are like four cents a gallon. A Tahoe, which I used to drive, it gets fifteen miles to the gallon, and a gallon of gas at \$3.50. My fuel costs are twenty-one cents per miles.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: For a long time, the EPA really discouraged CNG because they have to certify the kits that go in the conversions and it cost about \$150 thousand to certify a kit. And you had to get it recertified every make, every model, every year. It just was designed to discourage conversions to CNG.

Now they don't even give the tax credit. Chris Benge passed a bill when he was speaker of the House that gave a state a tax credit that's very, very beneficial. We're attracting people from out of state, CNG Interstate from Utah is an example. It's moved in here making these conversions. Not on EPA certified. That doesn't certify the safety, it certifies the emissions.

And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that CNG is going to burn a lot cleaner—

JE: Yeah.

NM: . . . than unleaded gasoline.

JE: So students listening to us twenty years from now, they'll probably see far more use of natural gas but they were still have our regular unleaded gas and electricity.

NM: Yes.

JE: And all three of them will be—

NM: Options.

JE: Right.

Chapter 19 - 4:37

Roads and Bridges

John Erling: I'm going to go back to roads here. Subcommittee on Highways of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the United States House of Representatives held a field hearing in Oklahoma City, February 4th of this year, 2011.

Neal McCaleb: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you appeared before that?

NM: Yes.

JE: I thought it was interesting in your remarks you said, “There are 14,882 structurally deficient or functionally obsolete bridges, second highest in the nation, on the 84,000 county roads in Oklahoma. Eighty percent of those roads, located in the most rural areas, largely used by Native Americans, are ineligible for federal funding as major or minor collectors. In 2010, tribes participated in the replacement of 71 deficient county bridges. And over the last decade, have assisted the Oklahoma Department of Transportation with over \$100 million in safety and access improvement projects.”

So here we are today and we still have all these bridges that are structurally deficient or obsolete.

NM: Most of them are county bridges. Most of them are on the county system and not on the state highway system. That’s cold comfort if you fall through one of them.

JE: Right, right.

NM: But the counties are poorly financed and that’s why the tribal money is so important, because they get 80 percent money eligible from the Federal Highway Administration to replace these bridges. But they can’t come up with the local 20 percent. The tribes are filling the gap for that and we are making progress.

The Secretary of Transportation, Gary Ridley, has dedicated himself and the Department of Transportation to focus on these unsafe bridges on the state highway system, before anything else. And it’s not going to happen overnight. They didn’t get that way overnight. I mean, we’re driving on bridges that were designed for Model A’s, in a lot of cases.

JE: And I suppose some of them, unless a bridge falls down like it did in Minneapolis—

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . will go unattended for a long time.

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative), or, you know, we had one collapse in Harmon County. Fortunately, the truck got off it before it fell into the creek, but it collapsed under the weight of a garbage truck, I think.

JE: Right. Isn’t it interesting we have a hard time funding education, even healthcare, and roads and bridges?

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Which you would think would be in the forefront of the legislature, but they are not.

NM: Well, I admit, that’s an agenda for me. We collect a lot of money for highways that isn’t spent on highways. Your license tag you’d think would all go to roads—it doesn’t. Less than 3 percent of your license tag goes to roads.

I'm the chairman of a group called TRUST, that stands for Transportation Revenues Used Strictly for Transportation. And that's our mantra. Our objective is to get road-user fees back on roads. That's not a hard concept for me to get my hands around, or is it for most people.

JE: The general public, they want good roads and they want good bridges, so it would seem that's a no-brainer, but yet, we don't want to pay for them.

NM: Right. Well, a third of that money goes to education. And it's hard to advocate to take money away from the school kids in order to fix bridges. It just is. You know, I've got thirteen grandkids and as much as I love roads and bridges I want them more to have a better education.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). And it's interesting today, September 22nd, President Obama has made a political issue out of bridges and roads. For on this very day, he was to visit Cincinnati, Ohio, and a bridge linking the home states of House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell—

NM: Yeah.

JE: And it says, "A lot of the bridge that would connect the states of two such powerful leaders would be functionally obsolete."

NM: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So it's not only obsolete bridges in Oklahoma—here's the President of the United States making an issue and he wants to make, say, a WPA project out of the infrastructure on this day.

NM: From one rock rib Republican I say, "Amen!" I think we should do that. I think those kind of investments will last fifty years to a hundred years. And that it will advance the economy of this country because it links us all together. That's why the interstate system was so powerful. Before that our commerce was limited by poor transportation.

The interstate needs to be upgraded—it's sixty years old now. We need to be reinvesting in our infrastructure. Now I know that we've got to balance the federal budget and I'm an advocate of that also. Does that mean we need new taxes? Well, I'll say the unthinkable T word for Republicans—yeah, I think we need some new taxes in order to do that.

Chapter 20 - 3:18

Mentors

John Erling: As you look back, who would you say are the mentors, the people that you really looked up to? Is there one, two, or three of them?

Neal McCaleb: Oh, there's several. Politically, Henry Bellmon, Dewey Bartlett, Frank Keating is a contemporary but we mentored each other. He was the Republican floor leader in the Senate when I was Republican floor leader in the House. We used to call a press conference and nobody would come because we lacked any influence [laughing]. We started to call it the Lone Ranger and Tonto Show and got a little bit of interest in it.

But Frank did a lot of great things for this state, including finishing the turnpike system, and that was a high political tab that went with that.

Mentor may be the wrong word, but my wife has probably been the biggest influence in my life. We don't always think alike, in fact, very often we don't. But most of the time she's right, on the really important issues.

You know, that second grade teacher that I mentioned had a huge influence on my life. That's the reason why I think education is so important.

When I went to college there was a structures professor named David McAlpine, old redheaded Scotchman. He designed that 66 bridge they're replacing on the turnpike.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

NM: I've listened to him rehash that bridge design more times than I can recall. And I hate to see them obliterate the David McAlpine Memorial Bridge.

But people like that in your everyday life that you don't think are making an influence on you until you look back over the horizon and see they really did make a big difference in your life, in which way you decided to go.

JE: The state was fortunate to have you because you became an expert in two areas: As a civil engineer, and then very expert in policies with roads and bridges.

NM: Yeah.

JE: And then your work with Indian Affairs nationally, Chickasaws, you've given a lot to our state.

NM: Well, the state's given me a lot. One of the reasons I was so glad to come home is I was coming home. Washington, city, is a beautiful place, but it's not my home. This is where I was raised, where I've spent my life, I've spent all my life here except for that less than two-year term I did in Washington. This state's been very good, it educated me. You know, I got a great college education at Oklahoma Indian College, very inexpensively. It's provided me with all kinds of opportunities. I owe much more than I'll ever give.

JE: Students listening to this, do you have any advice, generally speaking?

NM: Well, I just advise young people, in general, to follow their dream, to have confidence in themselves, and to be prepared to make sacrifices to accomplish those dreams.

JE: How would you like to be remembered?

NM: As a good father, most of all. A good grandfather.

JE: Very good. Well, I thank you for this—

NM: I thank you!

JE: It will be heard by many, many down through the years.

NM: Posterity.

JE: Yeah, and to hear your voice talk about all these issues. And to hear us talk about this now in 2011. And they're going to say in 2050, "Man, are they still dealing with that natural gas?" And whatever, way back then.

NM: [laughing] Right.

JE: Anyway, this was very good. Thank you very much.

NM: Thank you, John.

JE: Yeah.

NM: It was my pleasure.

Chapter 21 - 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.

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