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Arkansas Memories Project

Interview with

John G. Ragsdale  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
13 October 2003

Interviewer: Jeannie Whayne

Jeannie Whayne: Do I have your permission to go ahead and tape record this and you are in agreement to make this available on line, and go through the whole process, to the [Arkansas] Center [for Oral and Visual History]. Now, you are a native Arkansan, correct?

John Ragsdale: Correct.

JW: Why don't you give me your full name?

JR: John G. Ragsdale, Jr.

JW: And what does the G stand for?

JR: Gails, G-A-I-L-S, Gails.

JW: Is that a family name?

JR: That is an old family name.

JW: Something from your paternal side or something?

JR: Yes.

JW: So, John G. Ragsdale Jr. --- and you are a native Arkansan?

JR: Born in El Dorado.

JW: And when was that?

JR: It was September 11, 1924.

JW: 1924. Your parents were . . . ?

JR: My father was a native of the area, as well as his father and grandfather. His grandfather who is my great-grandfather, moved to Union County somewhere around 1850.

JW: What did he do for a living?

JR: A farmer. They were all farmers. It was primarily an agricultural society. One of his sons, who was my grandfather, was born in 1875, and then my father was born in 1897.

JW: Was your mother also from around there?

JR: Well, she was from Virginia.

JW: Well, how interesting. How did your father come to meet your mother?

JR: Well, in one of my father's excursions to law school, he went to Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. He had graduated here at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] in 1919 and went to Harvard for law school. He had gone one year and decided he had spent too much money and he didn't have enough money. So he had to quit for a year and work and gain some income. Then he decided to go to Washington & Lee University for two more years of law school, which he did, and graduated in 1923. But he met my mother, who was a native of that area, and they got married there shortly after he got out of law school.

JW: So he met her and then they married and then moved back to El Dorado?

JR: That's right. They came back to El Dorado in December of 1923. This is about two years after the first oil boom and about one year after the second large oil boom. Earlier, my father came home in the summer of 1922 and took the bar exam and passed the exam. In those days they were a little looser, so he took it

and most of the lawyers in those days didn't go to law school. They studied under someone and then took the exam, but he had been to two years of law school.

JW: They usually studied under some attorney, right?

JR: Some attorney or local judge, or somebody who had the time to instruct them, I guess. That was before my time.

JW: So he came back two years after the oil boom started?

JR: Yes, he came back in December of 1923. He had already managed to work with another existing lawyer or law firm, and for two or three years he worked for one lawyer and then went to another one. Then in 1924, he became city attorney. That may have been a rather controversial job at the time in the boom days. He did that for four years. Then in 1928 he ran for county judge and was elected as Union County Judge. He did that for four years.

JW: What was his relationship to the oil industry --- oil boom?

JR: He was just a local person. His home was about fifteen miles west of El Dorado. They never did discover any oil on their land, although there was some drilling nearby. It doesn't help you if it's nearby. He did lease some land for drilling. Nobody ever drilled, but he did get some lease payments out of it.

JW: I would imagine that sometimes cases he was involved in had something to do with oil disputes.

JR: Well, I don't know if the city attorney or the county judge might have anything to do with that. He was later a municipal judge for thirty or thirty-five years, from about 1936 to 1973.

JW: That is a long time to be a judge. I bet there are not many people that could top

that.

JR: He had other jobs that he was earning money at during that time. He worked for an oil company as one of their abstract attorneys and legal consultant. He was not an employee of the oil company. He was the municipal judge, but he did have a job there. He was acquainted with the leasing activities and the drilling activities during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

JW: So you were born in September 1924, and you attended schools in El Dorado?

JR: I attended grade school and graduated from high school there in 1942, and then I came to the University of Arkansas.

JW: So what was it like growing up in an oil boom town?

JR: It wasn't any different. We thought everybody lived like that. We lived in our own little circle of activities. We knew there were oil equipment, trucks and people. But the circle I traveled in, in those days, which was not very big --- didn't know that this wasn't much different than other places.

JW: So how big was the school that you went to?

JR: The high school had about 1,000 students. We had 192 in our graduating class.

JW: That is a lot for a small town. I guess it really wasn't that small of a town, was it?

JR: By the 1940 census it had about 25,000 people. It did in about 1930 also. As a matter of fact it has been about that size all these years, whereas some areas in the state are larger.

JW: Interesting. How big was your graduating class?

JR: 192.

JW: That is huge. There were 100 in my graduating class, and 27 in my brother's

graduating class.

JR: My wife graduated from high school. There were 18 who graduated that year.

JW: That is the reunion she is going to?

JR: Yes, that is the reunion.

JW: That is interesting. So you graduated high school in 1942 and you went to the University of Arkansas straight from graduation?

JR: I came here the fall of 1942.

JW: Did you know what you wanted to do when you came here?

JR: No. I had rather good grades in math and science, so for some reason I enrolled in the engineering school. I continued there. I did get interrupted to go into the service.

JW: I was wondering about that—if you were going to have to go.

JR: I had some physical problems that I couldn't overcome at first, and subsequently did, and went into the service. Then when I got through I came back to school to finish.

JW: What kind of physical problems did you have? Did it have to do with malnutrition or anything like that?

JR: No. It was just some physical problems that had to be corrected before I could get into the service.

JW: So you went into what branch?

JR: I was in the army.

JW: What did you do in the army?

JR: Well, I don't have a very good memory of some of that history there. I was in one

little group and then they decide they would transfer a group somewhere else, and I moved five or six times. I wasn't one of these people that had a nice, stable group in the army or in the navy that went to certain areas. I just moved from place to place wherever somebody sent us.

JW: What year did you go into the military?

JR: I didn't go in until 1945, I stayed through much of 1946, then I came back to the university. I graduated in 1947 with an engineering degree.

JW: What engineering college?

JR: This was a civil engineering degree. I was looking at several jobs at the time, and then I ended up going back to El Dorado for a few days. An oil company there was looking for engineers and I went to work for them.

JW: Did you have it in mind to go to work for an oil company when you returned?

JR: No. I even told them I didn't know anything about the oil business. "Well, that's all right. You studied pressures and can do some calculations, and this will do just fine." As it turned out there were a lot of people like that. You go to the engineering graduation and the rate has not increased much during the 1930s. There were a lot of people who were not petroleum engineers to do the work.

JW: There is a special degree in petroleum engineering?

JR: There are a number of them.

JW: Does the U[niversity] of A[rkansas] have one?

JR: No. The closest to here is the University of Oklahoma. I went to work for a short time because we had bills and rent to pay.

JW: You were married by then?

JR: We got married while I was in the army. Not advisable, maybe, but that is what happened.

JW: Where did you meet your wife?

JR: I met her here at the university.

JW: She was up here going to college getting a degree in . . . ?

JR: She was getting a degree in English.

JW: I think I knew that

JR: She subsequently taught that in several schools for a period of time.

JW: When did you marry?

JR: We got married in 1946. She had graduated in 1945 while I was in the army, and we got married when I came back and I got out of the service in 1946.

JW: Where did you all go after that? Was it straight back to El Dorado?

JR: I ended up going to El Dorado to work for the old Lion Oil Company, which was a rather substantial integrated oil company. It was integrated in that they had producing well, pipelines, refining, and marketing. It was from one end of the operation to the other.

JW: How interesting.

JR: It was truly integrated. That was the trend of companies.

JW: How much longer did the oil boom --- was it still considered a boom in the 1940s, when you went to work?

JR: Well, it was in south Arkansas, in 1921 and 1922 had greatly declined until we discovered oil in 1937 in the western part of Union County. We discovered some deeper, productive zones. That created other developments during the 1940s and

1950s. It was good for south Arkansas. Good times.

JW: Elliot West had a student who did pieces on the oil fields. Do you remember talking with that young man?

JR: Yes.

JW: I have forgotten his name now, but he talked about that there is still oil that is trapped underground. Why don't you explain what happened.

JR: When you produce oil, as we know in domestic operations, you don't get all of the oil out of the ground. Much of the oil is trapped in the pores and openings of the ground because of the lack of pressure or change in physical characteristics that are being produced, so in normal production you may get only twenty to twenty-five percent of the oil originally in place.

JW: Well. how interesting. I had no idea that it was such a small amount.

JR: There are some extensive secondary operations to remove the oil and with the pressure, they discovered that you may get forty or fifty percent.

JW: What do you mean by extensive secondary operations?

JR: Well, when you first discover the average field there is a certain pressure, and it may have some gas content, and it may have some water content. After you have gone through the economic discovery, there is some still left. You can go in and inject water or gas or some other fluid and move some of the remaining oil where you can recover it. But even after you are completed there, you have some left. About fifty or sixty percent of the oil may remain in the reservoir, but at some time in the future someone may come up with a extensive method to recover some of that.

JW: I understand it is too expensive to get at that.

JR: There have been a lot of trials using steam or heat or some other liquid that would cause the oil to flow more freely and those are not that successful and they are expensive. So it is a matter of economics.

JW: I understand that.

JR: If your current crude oil price is a certain amount, you can only spend so much. The recovery is based on economics.

JW: Well, this young man, whose name I have forgotten, argued in his paper --- I think he wrote his thesis, either an honors or an MA thesis with Dr. West that the first wild catters that came in and tried to recover the oil didn't understand properly, or some of them, anyway, didn't understand properly, that you don't just let the gas and the water escape to get at the oil, that you use the gas and the water to bring the oil up. Does that make any sense?

JR: That is true to some extent, when the first people drilled, at least in this part of Arkansas. The first oil well drilled was in 1921. All they were looking for was oil. And they discovered gas and water that was not desirable. So they would only go looking for oil. And if your oil came with gas included in it, they had to get rid of the gas. They had to contain it and sell it, or flare it, to produce the oil at that time. You can do it now if you're producing to some system that recovers the gas and markets it. But in those days there was only the interest in the oil. "Oh, we won't worry about the gas. We won't worry about the water." They poured the water down the creeks and that went along to someone down the river, and there is a lot of pollution that goes with that. Not just oil companies, but

manufacturing companies, and coupled with their disposition.

JW: As an engineer, you know about all of that.

JR: In the first drilling in 1920, they were just worried about oil. They weren't worried about the gas, or the oil pressure. They didn't worry about the water and moving. When you take out pressure in one place, it can move to some other connected area. They didn't know about that and they didn't worry about that.

JW: You would have thought by the 1920s that there would be people who understood that pattern.

JR: Some did, but, in general, many did not. We all discover things as life goes on. When they first started drilling in the Gulf Coast, which started in 1901, with the discovery of the Spindletop Dome near Beaumont, they discovered oil. They weren't able to control their gas very well or their water volume either. They took the oil they could get and didn't worry about the gas or the water. That continued since that time until the 1920s, and by then there were some operators who would drill and they didn't know what pressure they would encounter and when they encountered pressure, they were overcome, and they didn't know how to control it.

JW: Blowing out meant . . .

JR: Uncontrolled pressure.

JW: Uncontrolled pressure?

JR: In those days, 1910 and 1920, that was an occurrence and an embarrassment to the driller. It would often burn out of control. Physically, you may still have a blow out for some reason — an accidental occurrence.

JW: So you worked on that sort of thing as an oil company?

JR: We were aware of it, yes.

JW: So what was your specific job?

JR: Well, I was in the drilling and the production section, where we took the land that had been leased. The other employees had leased the land and we would go in and set up the drilling plan, and if the zone we encountered was productive, then we put the foundation on there to produce the oil.

JW: By the time you're doing that, this is the late 1940s, and the technology is caught up to you.

JR: Today it is fifty years better than it was then.

JW: That is the way technology works. So how much of your career did you spend in the oil fields. Was your entire career with the oil company?

JR: Well, no, I got out. I went to work for the Lion Oil Company in 1947 and, of course, the company was bought out by the Monsanto Chemical Company. Later they changed their name to the Monsanto Company, and I stayed with them for thirty-four years, until 1981. By then I decided it was time to make a change, so I left town and moved from Houston to El Dorado. At that point I worked for the Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission for three years.

JW: So it was 1947 to 1981 with Lion Oil and then Monsanto, and then in 1981 you went to work for the Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission. What kind of work did you do for them?

JR: The oil and gas commission was a state agency, and its main office was in El Dorado because that is where the oil boom began. It was the only state agency

that had no headquarters in Little Rock.

JW: How interesting.

JR: As far as I know, that is still correct. And they essentially are there to maintain state regulations of oil and gas. They issue permits to drill the wells. They maintain records of the production. They maintain records of the different reservoirs and how they are functioning. That is their purpose. I stayed there for three years. Then I decided I would go into the consulting business, which I did the rest of my time. I did a lot of work in regard to state and federal regulations of underground injections and approval of well locations and projects.

JW: What are underground injections?

JR: Well, if you produce water, you have to dispose of it. Much of it is reinjected back underground.

JW: Oh, I see.

JR: You can either reinject it in the reservoir you took it out of, or you could inject into a different reservoir. But you have to be aware of the consequences of putting the water down there, and where it's going to go and whether it's going to be contained in that reservoir and what the effect of the pressure was.

JW: I see. So you did that from 1984 to 1992?

JR: That is correct. By then I had been working in the oil business for forty-five years.

JW: Oh, my goodness. Now, you weren't just working with the oil business while you were doing all this, and I noticed you had an impressive list of publications beginning much earlier than that, starting back long before you retired.

JR: That is right. Well, I retired early, in 1981, by the existing retirement rules of the company. It was early retirement, before age sixty-five.

JW: I see in 1973, you wrote the first edition of *Dutch Oven Cooking*.

JR: Yes. I was doing a lot of the work with the Boy Scouts at that time, and we had discovered we could cook rather well using Dutch ovens. I found no book on the market that told about Dutch oven cooking. So I began to write recipes for them and we would give them different recipes each month when we went camping. Sometimes we would have contests. We might give each patrol troop the same recipe to see how it turned out. Or we might give each one a different recipe and let them compare them.

JW: So you had contests between them over who could cook the recipe?

JR: From time to time we would. After several years of writing the recipes and instructions and what to do when you cooked the food, I put it together and wrote some narrative instructions. Well, fortunately, at the time, I went to the Gulf Publishing Company in Houston, and I told them I had this manuscript, and I asked if they would be interested in publishing it. I previously talked to a couple of small publishers. As you know, publishing books is not an easy, 1-2-3 affair, but as it turned out Gulf Publishing prepared the larger technical textbooks and engineering publications. So they decided they would come out with a non-technical division called the Pace Setter Press. And this was the first publication that the Pace Setter Press printed, in 1973.

JW: Well, how nice.

JR: They later changed the name. But I was lucky they agreed to take it. I had

already inquired about some self-publishing, but decided I would do better with them and they would have the distribution system to market it.

JW: You have had several editions published since then?

JR: Yes. We have actually had two other editions.

JW: One would be with the University of Arkansas Press.

JR: That was a different book.

JW: That is not *Dutch Oven Cooking*?

JR: No, that was *Dutch Ovens Chronicled* in 1991. I also worked on one of those history books about Dutch ovens. Over several years I visited museums and historical places and put together some information on Dutch ovens. In 1991, the University Press published the *Dutch Ovens Chronicled*. I wanted to have the words "Dutch oven" in the title, so if somebody was doing a search they could find it easier. That is a rather mundane title, but I thought I would use it.

JW: Well, I like different titles. I like to know what I am picking up. The second book you published was actually on the Shuler oil fields?

JR: That was a publication by the Arkansas Geological Commission. And I did that in 1987, because the early Shuler field was fifty years old.

JW: It says that.

JR: I thought that would be a good time to write a history of the fifty years of production. I had worked in the Shuler field back in 1947-1948 period, so I knew a little about the field when it was a larger producer.

JW: That's interesting. So the title is *Shuler Field, Arkansas: A Historical Summary of Fifty Years of Oil Production 1937-1987*, published by the Arkansas

Geological Commission.

JR: They published several items. This was miscellaneous publication number twenty.

JW: So then you published a number of smaller articles with Pulaski County Historical Society.

JR: Several articles in the historical journals, and it seems small by all of your works.

JW: Oh, not at all. Something --- "What is the shape of your corn bread"?

JR: I had to come up with some title.

JW: That is a good title.

JR: I did mention in there that some cornbread was cooked in square pans, and some in round and some were hand-formed and cooked.

JW: I had never heard of hand-formed.

JR: You know, like pone bread or pone cakes. They used a thicker batter and more or less assumed their own form. Martha Rimmer was kind enough to put that in the journal at the time.

JW: She was a long-time editor. It was sad to see her step down. She is no longer editing.

JR: Well, she said, "You know, there is a time."

JW: She is a smart woman.

JR: She is still active with the journal.

JW: Yes. *Camper's Guide to Outdoor Cooking*?

JR: That was another book I did for Gulf Publishing. They didn't think the first book would ever make it, so they were surprised that they sold as many thousands of

copies of *Dutch Oven Cooking*. And the secret was we got it in the Boy Scout catalog in 1973. So later I had another cookbook idea, and I told them about it. Gulf Publishing did what I thought was an unusual thing. The director of the book division at that time said, “Well, the first book was successful, so if you write the second, we’ll publish it.” So I didn’t even have it put together. I just had some notes and some ideas. For several months I went on and tested recipes and consolidated some clues that I knew about that came up for *Camper’s Guide to Outdoor Cooking*. Gulf Publishing had a series of camper’s guidebooks. I don’t remember all of them. It might be *A Camper’s Guide to Camping in State Parks*. It might be *A Camper’s Guide to Identifying Trees*. Anyway, they used it and put it in that series of books.

JW: When you were trying out your recipes and testing the food, which helped you decide?

JR: I tried different people. At that time I had an elderly woman across the street who didn’t cook a thing. I would take her samples and I would ask her for her opinion. I never got her opinion — everything was good. That is not what I needed. I told her to give me a true report — “especially if you don’t like something.”

JW: Well, Southerners are going to tell you it’s good unless it’s really bad. Then they won’t tell you. They just won’t eat it.

JR: I had a few favorites in there.

JW: Did you make these recipes as you were going along or did you borrow them?

JW: Some of them I adapted from an idea from somebody else. I had my own ideas

and ingredients. Some I got from old recipes my mother used or my wife had used or some friend had cooked. “Well, I will adapt this.” Well, you can take a recipe like corn bread, and you can vary the ingredients, but you still are going to have corn meal, eggs and milk, and in some ratio.

JW: And oil.

JR: A little oil and a little salt, bacon fat, or what ever you’re going to put in it.

JW: I noticed Mayhaw Jelly, or I am not pronouncing that right? Mayhaw Jelly: A Treasure of the South. I don’t know Mayhaw.

JR: It is a berry. There are a number of haw trees, H-A-W. I learned that one time from Dr. Dwight Moore, who taught botany here at the university for about forty years, and there a lot of haw trees. There are so many of them, I can’t keep up with them. He was the lead botanist for the state, but this is a haw tree that blooms in our area, usually in February or March. Then it produces fruit in May from which it is named the Mayhaw tree. There are a number of other haw trees, but the Mayhaw tree puts out the product in May. These are berries about the size of cranberries, shaped about like an apple in that they have a stem coming out from the branch, and they have a little bloom particle on the bottom of the fruit, and the color is about the color of apples, reddish or yellowish, and they ripen in May and there are several ways you can harvest it. In general, when you shake the tree, the fruit falls and you spread out a tarp so they don’t fall on the ground. Or if they drop in water you can dip them up out of the water.

JW: How interesting. What do they taste like?

JR: Very tart. You wouldn’t want to keep it if you bit into one. But you take the

berries in pans of water and you cook them in rather small batches and squeeze the juice out. Then you combine that with sugar and then let it gel.

JW: So, it's the juice of the berry that you add to obtain the jelly.

JR: Well, we do. Some very frugal people might use the pulp, but we don't. I tried this a few times, but generally you don't have enough to do that. Some people might cook it and squeeze it as far as you could use it. I have also read that the Mayhaw fruit was used for preserves and pies in the 1800s. In those days, people used whatever they had for their product.

JW: So once you get the jelly done, what is the jelly like, compared to like a grape jelly or something like that?

JR: Well, it's like a nice, flavored tart jelly. It is not too tart.

JW: Do you put a lot of sugar in it?

JR: You mix it with sugar. My wife and I experimented with ratios, and we developed a ratio that about what we think was a better way to do it. You don't have to add any artificial pectin to it because usually it has enough. If you add pectin, of course, you get more jelly, but it won't taste as good.

JW: There are these other publications, *Black Pots in Arkansas* and *The Use of Dutch Ovens in Arkansas*. These are just variations on the . . .

JR: Well, this was an article I did for the . . .

JW: The southwest regional meeting of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums in Washington, Arkansas.

JR: We did that a year or two ago when they were wanting some programs about Arkansas activities. But several years ago, four or five years ago, I went to the

national meeting of the ALHFAM group, which is Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural museums. They had their annual meeting in Staunton, Virginia. And I gave a paper, and the subject of that meeting was mobility of people as they moved from the east coast westward. I gave a paper on the mobility of Dutch ovens. As people moved west they carried them on their pack animal or in their wagons. That was their classic baking vessel for corn bread or pies, pastries, stews, or soups. But if you were baking that was the way you did it. You could make a soup or a stew using a pot or a kettle.

JW: Interesting. It is interesting to me that you got into your Dutch ovens through your association with the Boy Scouts. How did you get into — were you a Boy Scout?

JR: Well, I was in my younger years. But then about, let's see, 1962 I got involved again, because one of our boys was getting into the Cub Scout Pack.

JW: I see Cub Scouting Pack Committee Chairmen, in 1963 and 1966. That is you right?

JR: Yes, but I was involved with it a few years before that. After the Cub Pack we moved on and got into a Scout Troop. I thought it was a minor job and the lowest ranking adult they had in the group. It turned out not [to be the case].

JW: How many children did you have?

JR: Four --- two boys and two girls.

JW: And both of your boys went through scouts?

JR: Yes.

JW: What are your children's names? I should have asked you that earlier.

JR: My older daughter is named Julia. She is currently a lawyer. She got her degree in early education and taught school for a few years and then decided she would go to law school. She did that while she lived in Ohio. She graduated from the University of Dayton. Our second daughter is named Kathryn, and she works in a medical office handling a lot of paperwork for all the doctors in the clinic. She has done that for a number of years. Our older son David is an English professor at the Community College in Kingwood, Texas. Then our other son is Paul, who lives in Houston and works as a photographer or angiographer with Baylor Medical Clinic. He had worked for some other clinical people before that.

JW: So what does a photographer or angiographer do?

JR: They take a photograph of the eyeball and from that they can diagnosis some of the problems.

JW: Interesting. So you have lots of grandchildren?

JR: We have eleven grandchildren.

JW: Are they involved in scouts?

JR: No.

JW: Not good then.

JR: We did have two or three of the granddaughters who were in Girl Scouts for a short time.

JW: So I noticed you went from Cub Scouting to Boy Scouting to Explorer Scouting?

JR: I had at least four units at one time when both of our boys were at that age. I had a very active unit. I gathered some others to help and be leaders.

JW: Then you have been active on the district and council level?

JR: Oh, yes. They are always looking for involvement on that level.

JW: On the national level?

JR: If you agree to do something, pretty soon they will find another job for you.

JW: I noticed on the national level you were still involved in 2001. Are you still pretty involved?

JR: I am still plugging away. As matter of fact, I am going to turn in my registration in December for next year. I will turn it in for my fiftieth-year registration.

JW: Oh, how wonderful.

JR: Well, that is nothing outstanding. I just lived longer. If you live long enough and pay your dues --- of course, I had a twenty-year gap in there when I left high school and joined the army and went to college. When I first went to work in the oil business it was seven days a week. I didn't have time.

JW: Is that right, seven days a week?

JR: That's right.

JW: What were you doing?

JR: We were in the drilling business.

JW: Well, I guess if you located a site you wanted to get to that.

JR: Once you've started you can't quit. There were a few days when they would only operate in the daylight. But generally you operated twenty-four hours a day.

JW: As the engineer, you had to be there a lot of the time.

JR: You had to be there a lot, but you communicated with the supervisors in the early days. Once a day somebody would go to the phone and call. Or once a day somebody would mail a drilling report. Well, today everybody has radios and cell

phones and direct communication that we didn't have in those days. At that time the field man was the one who made the decisions. "Do we keep drilling or do we change or do we do something else?" Often there were differences of opinion.

JW: So were you a field man or were you a . . . ?

JR: To start with, yes. And then I worked in the office and that was the practical thing that oil companies did. They put their new people out in the field, where you were able to see everything going on. When they got into the office, in the later years, then they knew what was going on.

JW: So then can you describe a typical day for a field engineer?

JR: Well, if you had the drilling rig operator and you had to be there to see what they were doing. Sometimes you might have more than one drilling rig. You had to plan ahead to make sure you were going to run tests in the hole. You had it on hand when you would need it. So if you were going to run some sub-surface test on the hole, you had to make sure the tool had arrived. That is the right the thing. Once you got your well information then you would run a test to make sure of that. Then if your well produced after all these labors, then you had to be prepared as to what you were going to do with the product. If you were in a remote area, and you didn't have an instant outlet for your product and you had to determine whether you were going to have to haul it off by trucks, which was the most expensive way.

JW: Is that right, the trucks would be more expensive than, for example, railroad cars?

JR: Well, yes, or a pipeline.

JW: Oh, yes, a pipeline, of course.

JR: But if you were in a remote area . . .

JW: Then pipeline was not an option.

JR: If you had to market your gas, then you had to have a gas line to somewhere that took the gas. Then you had your separation equipment that would separate the oil and the gas and the water. Then you could disperse them where everything needed to go.

JW: So you weren't in the field anymore, and you were in the office. What was the difference in being in the field and being in the office?

JR: Well, if you were in the office you had to answer to all the people in the field. And somebody had to be in the office, in the mornings, and seven days a week. Somebody had to be there to get the call early in the morning.

JW: And these calls were sometimes about problems or . . .?

JR: Well, just what the progress was --- what progress we have made into the hole. We had some problems with our crew in the hole. We had to have some corrections.

JW: So all these reports would be cataloged?

JR: Every day you had the drilling reports, and you put down any pertinent information.

JW: Interesting.

JR: Good or bad, sometimes the manager didn't want the bad information to get on the report. But if you were an analytical person you would want to know what those bad things were you so could make sure it didn't happen again. But that was not politically correct.

JW: You didn't always put that down.

JR: No, some people didn't.

JW: What else did you do? You went from being a field man to the office man. Did you move to another area you occupied?

JR: No, that was basically it. We had to work with our own geologists and land men. We wanted to plan for some future development. We always had to be looking for where you were going to drill next. If your oil was depleted — every day you took a barrel of oil out of the ground, it was one less that you had. And you had to keep thinking, "What are we going to do when we can't maintain our production?"

JW: What would be a good day in the number of barrels?

JR: Well, I don't have a good answer for you there. Some low-volume oil might make ten barrels a day and some higher producing reservoir might make several hundred barrels a day. But there again you had to be aware of what the state and federal regulations were as to how much you could drill out. And those were essentially based on careful producing practices from the reservoir. It could be economics. Your purchaser says, "I can't take anymore this week," so you would have to cut back and wait.

JW: So over your years in the oil industry, I assume there were growing regulations from the government.

JR: That is correct.

JW: Can you describe some of those and the changes that you see in that regard?

JR: Well, I don't have a good answer there for you. If you produced oil and gas or

water, you had to market it or dispose of it correctly. You had to make sure your measurements were correct. And you had to analyze the affect that any well had on the reservoir that was producing the oil. You might have a small reservoir that didn't have one or two producers and then you might have ten or fifteen wells. Ideally, you hoped you had one with hundreds of wells. But, there again, your spacing was also relevantly related to that state. Generally, you sought to drill an oil well on a forty- or eighty-acre spacing, or a gas well, so you had 640 acres. You had to keep up with your reservoir withdrawals and evaluate them. You would measure the pressures, and record volume, and the evaluations would indicate what to drill for.

JW: So would it be fair to say that many of the regulations tended to try to address environmental concerns or were they more . . . ?

JR: Yes. Even back in the 1920s and 1930s, people recognized that they were producing too much, and they had too many wells and that led to some additional regulations. If you look back at some of the earlier fields, like the east Texas field or the Beaumont field, they just drilled wells wherever they wanted to.

JW: What kinds of problems did that cause?

JR: Well, you had too much oil coming out too fast, and then you had pressure depleting. When you depleted that pressure that fast it didn't boost the oil in that well.

JW: So that would leave some oil stranded?

JR: Yes, that's right. Whatever pressure you had originated in the well. You could take it out systematically or waste it by taking it out too quickly.

JW: Then, of course, the manner of producing the gas and oil, like they did in the El Dorado area, was unwise at first. That was something else that would be regulated as time went on.

JR: In the Smackover oil field that was in the northern part of the Union County and the Ouachita County (in 1922 it was discovered) over a 6-year period, from 1922 to 1928, they drilled hundreds of wells.

JW: How big were the oil fields do you think, [expressed in] acres?

JR: I don't remember. Of course, that was before I was working there. As I look back at it, I don't know how many acres were there. There was a lot of gas wasted. They had to get rid of it. They had to burn it to get it out of the way so they could recover the oil. They took the water and poured it into the creek, and the creek ran down to the river and the river went to a bigger river.

JW: My impression was that the gas or the oil, or the water helped push the oil out.

JR: It could, if you removed it systematically. But every time you produce some oil, or water or gas, you reduce the pressure in the reservoir, usually. Some reservoirs might have a large water contact that they keep feeding in, but many did not. And you don't know that when you start.

JW: The regulations that you see, that you observed being imposed over time, do you think those were in the main good?

JR: Generally, but people would disagree with me. But if they saw it was going to cut their production and they were getting so many thousands of barrels and so many thousands of dollars a month and they hated to see their revenue reduced. But it was done probably in the hope that you had more in the long run.

JW: So I guess there are two components to those kinds of rules: one is to help you preserve the oil field so it would produce more, and the other regulation is to make sure you didn't do any environmental damage incidental to the drilling.

Were there other regulations that had to do with something else I am not saying?

JR: There was the conservation of energy and reservoir for revenue. And everything was related to revenue.

JW: So even this environmental damage that was done early on, then it is the productivity of the moment.

JR: Even looking at the timber industry, they try and stagger the removal of some of the trees, so that there are more to keep it going. The coal business --- look at the fresh water reservoirs. Look at the Sparta sand reservoir. It was highly available in the Union County area, but withdrawals were much more, than what was being replaced. And the pressure was depleting rapidly. As the pressure depleted, low pressure areas developed and in some places the sandstone reservoir collapsed or shifted. And when you get down to some low, low numbers, it may cause that distortion in a reservoir.

JW: That traps that oil . . .

JR: I am just talking about fresh water reservoirs. I am talking about drinking water, which is usually in a shallower zone. And that is going to cause problems to some extent. Now they are taking the other water out of the river. The process is to provide that for industry, so the industrial users won't take it out of the drinking water reservoir.

JW: That is quite fascinating.

JR: In fact, Union County has come up in the last couple of years with the most successful, responsible performance for maintaining a drinking water reservoir. There was a newspaper article on it a few weeks back, entitled, "From the worst to the First." It came from the worst case examples to the ones who had done the best to be the leaders in solving drinking water problems.

JW: So what was the worst?

JR: The worst was the taking out too much, too fast, and depleting the water. And when the pressure in the fresh water zone got to some lower level, then the water from the nearby salt water might encroach on that. And you didn't know that until it was too late.

JW: And then it would be too late. Well, in your years as an engineer was there something that sticks out in your mind, as particularly extraordinary, or that shouldn't have happened or that should have happened, or I am fishing here?

JR: I don't have an exact case for you, but when you start out in a development you don't know in the first stage all the things that you should do in the final phase. You can try, but you don't always know anything at that first phase. There was an old joke in the oil business: the first day you drill into a reservoir, you don't know anything, but you want to know everything. And as time progresses, you get the history of the production and the history of the pressure. And the last day you produce, you know everything about the reservoir, but nobody cares about it. So you have those two bits of information.

JW: How interesting. Well, is the oil industry making news of doing things? Do you think there is any extraordinary . . .?

JR: The domestic oil business has declined greatly, but there is so much demand for crude oil that there are great efforts to try and increase the total use and improve operations.

JW: So increase recoveries mean that getting at oil that has been not cost effective, to put it that way --- to get to?

JR: They are looking for new resources.

JW: So looking for new sources and trying to get to some other techniques to recover oil that was too expensive to recover now with the cost associated with the current technology?

JR: Even back then in the 1920s and the 1930s, the oil companies could see that depletion was going to take place. So that was why they went to North Africa and east, the Malaysia area, looking for crude oil in the 1920s and 1930s, looking for new production.

JW: So what do you see in the offing? Are there exciting new technologies that are coming online?

JR: They are doing some things that should help. Larger operators keep research projects going, looking for improvements. I think we in the United States use far too much crude oil for our own use. We need more conservation. But that is not a political [option].

JW: In your profession, anyway. Do you think that we should try and develop alternative fuels for our automobiles and industries?

JR: I think so. We look at things like solar generation of electricity. There is some of that going on. But we are using crude oil at a rapid rate, and a lot of it, and a lot

of other societies are now entering that same condition that they want more crude oil for more gasoline for more cars to drive more places. And you have a limited amount.

JW: Well, there do seem to be some exciting technologies coming online — these new automobiles they're trying out in California and other places.

JR: I just read last month about combination ones that are coming out.

JW: I do like the sound of 50-60 miles per gallon

JR: See, you're just a consumer, looking for the good mileage.

JW: That is absolutely right.

JW: One other area I wanted to touch on is your interest in history and where you — it is almost a dumb question for me to ask as an historian. Of course, you'd be interested in history, but there are an awful lot of people who are not. I just wonder . . .

JR: Well, I don't have a good answer for you. I just, through the years, read and observed things that make you think how this fits into history. It might be the history of the development of recorders or tables or the refined oil engine.

JW: Or Dutch ovens.

JR: Well, yes, it could be that.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

JW: Did you take any history courses here at the U of A?

JR: No, when I went to school everything was required for the engineering courses. We may have had two or three electives, but I did not take any history courses. I

have taken some in recent years at our South Arkansas Community College. I took one. I took a political science course at UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] earlier this year.

JW: Did you take that one that Scranton taught on President Clinton?

JR: No, I took a course that Dr. English teaches every January that involves a trip to Washington D.C. for seven days and then you have to come back and discuss it.

JW: How interesting.

JR: They do this the first week of January when all the normal students are out for Christmas break. They go there for seven days and they come back and meet several times and then write a term paper. It was very interesting.

JW: Did your wife take that with you?

JR: No, she didn't.

JW: I didn't ask you any questions about your wife. What is her full name?

JR: Dora Dean Johnson Ragsdale. She was born and raised in Hackett, which is a few miles south of Fort Smith. She graduated there from high school in 1941.

JW: You said that she was born in February 1924, and you all didn't meet until you got to college. Where is Hackett from El Dorado?

JR: Well, it is just south of Fort Smith.

JW: That's right.

JR: Yes, we met here at the university.

JW: And she taught school?

JR: Well, yes. As a matter of fact, she taught school for one year while I went into the army. She taught over in Turrell, which is near Memphis.

JW: Near my old stomping grounds. I am from Marked Tree.

JR: Turrell at that time, in 1945, was still a cotton agricultural community.

JW: That's right.

JR: She taught there for one year. And then she moved out to California while I was in the army. Later, she taught in El Dorado for just a year. Later, she taught in Houston at a high school there for several years.

JW: When did you all go to Houston?

JR: Well, we went there in 1962. The domestic oil business had expanded in the 1940s and 1950s, and by about 1960 most of the operators were beginning to consolidate their offices for economic reasons. Everything we do in general is for economics. We moved there in 1962.

JW: By that time you were working for Monsanto Company?

JR: That's right. Monsanto had bought out Lion Oil in 1955. It seemed Monsanto changed their name every once in a while. It was difficult to keep up with it.

JW: So she worked and taught school in Houston. Is this maybe after her children were.

JR: We waited till all the children were in school. She thought that the school teaching job would give her some opportunity at the time where she could leave at the same time as the children went to school and return the same time they did. It wasn't a perfect arrangement all the time. Because some of the younger children would get home before she would get home. We worked out these latch-key problems. Then when we moved to El Dorado in 1981, after we were there a year she taught high school there until she had some health problems that she couldn't

continue. But she did teach there for about six years. Not long enough to get any retirement. In those days you had to teach ten years. Now I think it is five.

JW: Oh, is that right? So, when you were with Monsanto what of kind of job [did you do], were you the office guy? Were you still sort of keeping track of what was going on out in the field during that time, answering the phone and things?

JR: All the operations out in the country, we kept a record and you had to update your production records and your geology maps. You had to check on your reservoir performance. You had to keep up with federal regulations. Same thing that happens today in the oil industry. And once there I was even transferred to Calgary, Canada in 1978. I spent part of 1978 and 1979 there, and then a few months of 1980. We had a subsidiary operation there in Canada. The oil production history in Canada was similar to the US production. We came in at a little later time, but much of it was in western Canada, British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. That's where the operations were. Reservoirs were similar, performance operation was similar, and government regulations were a little more.

JW: You seem to have some conservationist views regarding the oil industry. Are you rare among oil engineers?

JR: I don't know. You would have to take a survey.

JW: Well.

JR: I recognize the fact that if you waste your reservoir products you suffer the consequences. Well, just like if you waste your financial income every month, you would have to undergo the consequences. But if you neglect your history

students that you are teaching, then that could create some problems that you have to rectify. I hope we can be farsighted and do the best we can.

JW: Is there anything on your list that we haven't talked about, that you think we ought to address.

JR: One thing that I might mention was my philosophy that most people ought to do work that benefits the community.

JW: Clearly you have done that.

JR: I have done a lot of volunteer jobs. You can get all the volunteer jobs you want, and I did some work earlier with the Junior Achievement group. Our company decided we needed to do something for them. Our company wasn't always the kind that encouraged volunteer work . . .

JW: Now you're talking about Monsanto?

JR: Then several years ago, I did background work for the Habitat for Humanity when it had started in El Dorado. The chapter there turned out to be very aggressive in a good way. They have adopted the practice of constructing two houses a year, one in the spring and one in the fall. They had good schedule work. Lots of volunteers. They are on their 23rd or 24th house.

JW: Wow, that is amazing. What has been your role with them?

JR: Well mostly I was just background help. I have no carpentry skills. No electrical, no plumbing. I can pick up scraps or I can do little things. I can search for money and funding. They are fortunate that the corporations often volunteered the lumber or washing machines or refrigerators or plumbing supplies. So we had a lot of good support there.

JW: You have been involved at that level — getting the support and soliciting, that kind of thing.

JR: At the current time I have a little fun job at the Center for Aging, which began, the center began, three or four years ago. If you remember reading in the paper they had this large center on aging in Little Rock. It was really boosted by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation; the Center on Aging building was supported. UAMS [University of Arkansas Medical School] tried to set up different centers on aging in different areas of the state. You have a large enough area here in Fayetteville. We have a large building that is two fold. They have a clinic part, which treats people medically, and then they have an educational part, which tries to put on programs to inform people and train them in health matters. But I have a job there on Tuesday mornings. I am a door man at the lobby there. After a time or so some the supervisors of the volunteers said maybe you want a better job. No, this is a good job. I get to see everyone come in. Well, you know that if one of them is coming in with a baby or with a walker or wheelchair you have to be sure than the doors are open for them. So that is just my little volunteer job. My wife and I both do volunteer work with Baptist missions groups.

JW: Yes, I remember reading that.

JR: Our first time, really a substantial one, was in 1980, we took off three weeks, and I still had some vacation time. And we went to an area in central Tennessee. But about 1985 we became involved in a mission group that had a national mission board. It was called Mission Service Corps. We were assigned to certain areas in our state, or another area. We have been doing that when we could work it in. Of

course it didn't cost them anything. They had no expenses just some volunteers that would do something when they needed it.

JW: Well you have led an interesting life.

JR: Well, we haven't talked about problems, and we don't need to talk about them.

JW: It is interesting that you were able to spend all of it in Arkansas — well most of it in Arkansas.

JR: I spent one year in Mississippi, ten years in Louisiana, seventeen years in Texas, and two years in Calgary. Well, it just happened that this last seventeen or eighteen years when we were back living in El Dorado, then we did have some interesting excursions in Boy Scouts. I told you that when I started that I just wanted to be one of the local helpers, and it didn't turn out that way. I was always volunteering. And one time I was a troop leader that took a group to Norway to an international gathering. We spent a little more than three weeks there. The program was in Norway, and then we toured to see some areas in Sweden, and we had a home stay in Finland. That was interesting.

JW: That sounds interesting. How many boys did you take?

JR: Well, everything was by 1940s. So you had forty-person troops, three or four adults and thirty-six boys. Then in 1995, I went to a Scout conference in Siberia.

JW: What time of the year did you go there?

JR: Well, we went in July. That is when they planned it. That was in 1995. In 1992, the world scouting organization came to the U.S., and asked them to be instrumental in restarting Boy Scout work in Russia in the eastern half, which was the Siberian part.

JW: This was 1992?

JR: Yes, after the break up of the Soviet Union. The English were going to do the part in the western part, which was west of the Ural Mountains, and the US was supposed to do east of the Ural Mountains. And the national organization got some funding from corporate groups and sent a man and wife over there for three years. Of course, you made a lot trips back and forth between Siberia and the United States. They established an organization for professional workers and volunteer work. This was, remember, a country that hadn't had Boy Scouts since 1917. The whole population really didn't know about it. It was a total learning process. Anyway, they did it for three years, which was their obligated time. Well, at the end of this time the U.S. people traveled over and they had a joint meeting. And that is what we did in 1995. There were about thirty-five of us who went.

JW: This included Boy Scouts -- boys, too?

JR: Yes, workers --- mostly adults, but there were a few boys. It was open to any of them. I was hoping to have more people, but they didn't have enough publicity and didn't attract enough, just thirty-five.

JW: So how did you find it over there?

JR: Interesting, in that these peoples had quite a language problem, and they could depend on interpreters, and the people we mostly ran into were interested in getting their programs started. They asked a lot of good questions. I remember one woman who was scoutmaster of a troop and she spoke English fairly well, because she taught English in the Russian schools. One day she really got upset

that she couldn't get people to do anything. She couldn't get them to contribute the money --- couldn't get them to contribute the volunteers. She couldn't get them to be interested in the program. She was raising her voice. I said to her, "You know, we have the same problems. Not as severe as yours, but we have the same problem. We are always looking for volunteers to keep the program going." I remember her speech. I took one picture there of a group of U.S. and Russian people together in the meeting. And you couldn't tell the difference. I knew which were which but you couldn't tell.

JW: I guess we could wrap it up now. We have been at it for an hour and a half now.

JR: Before we do that, let me tell you one thing my wife and I did. Several years ago we set up two scholarship programs at the Arkansas Community Foundation. One program was for any student that graduated from high school in Union County, and this was for them to attend the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville or the University [of Arkansas] in Little Rock. And we also set up one for any graduate from any high school in the state to go to those two schools. Those were set up with the Arkansas Foundation.

JW: You also started the John G. Ragsdale Book Award in Arkansas history.

JR: Actually it was the J. G. Ragsdale that was the way my father did his name. Back in the 1920s a lot of the men would use their initials.

JW: I noticed that.

JR: I can't tell you at this point why that is or how it got started. A lot of people used their initials. But that was funding just to encourage people to write about Arkansas history. Or write about history in general.

JW: I know the Arkansas Historical Association is very appreciative of it.

JR: Well, I guess I have always been kind of glad to share information with people. I like to encourage them, positive efforts.

JW: Well, it is sure appreciated. Well, what I will do now — I will go ahead and turn this machine off.

[Tape Stopped]

JR: I taught two courses at the --- what is it now the community college.

JW: I noticed that on your vita. What did you teach?

JR: I got talked into one course on the basics of petroleum exploration and one was on the exploration of petroleum production. I had a little program that had one for each semester. There weren't enough participants. So after two semester . . .

JW: And where was this community college?

JR: In El Dorado. At that time it was called South Arkansas University- El Dorado branch, the university being in Magnolia. Subsequently, it's been called South Arkansas Community College.

JW: So is there anything else on your list. I was wondering about what courses you taught. I thought maybe it was something on Dutch ovens.

JR: Oh, gosh, I get invited to do talks on Dutch ovens all the time. Demonstrations. I was over at the plantation museum a couple of days ago, and every October they have a cooking program. We established a society here in the state about seven or eight years ago, and we looked for a central location, and the plantation director said, "Come over here and see our public room," which they normally charge for. His explanation was that we would like to invite you to come free. If you ask

we'll charge you. That was where we started out. For several years he has had a Dutch oven cooking program every October.

JW: So people come and observe you cooking.

JR: Anybody can come and cook. Anybody could come and observe.

JW: Do you all eat the things right there?

JR: If we cook the food, we have to eat it. Unfortunately, they don't get a lot of publicity about it. He told me the other day that they announced it to all types of people. They are getting it in newspapers.

JW: That is a wonderful facility they have over there.

[End of Interview]