

Interviewee: Lambson, Alfred

Interview Date: August 15, 2002

HHA # 00257

Interviewee: Alfred Lambson

Interviewer: Steven Wiltz

Interview Date: August 15, 2002

Interview Site: Lafayette, LA

Interview Modules & No.: MMS: SW023

Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: The majority of the interviewer's backchanneling has not been transcribed for the purposes of readability.]

Ethnographic preface:

Alfred Lambson was born in Lawtell, Louisiana, in 1917. His father was born in Massachusetts and raised in Chicago; his father moved to the area in about 1910 when he got a 40-acre piece of property in a lottery; his father later worked for the Federal Land Bank. After a year at Western Illinois University, he came back to Opelousas in 1936 to be a secretary for his father in order to make money to get married. Through this work he made contacts with land men and, attracted by the work and money, went to work for an independent land broker, Mr. R. L. Whitlow, in 1937 and moved to Lafayette. After Whitlow died in 1940, he went into the brokerage business for himself, where his French language abilities gave him an advantage. During World War Two he entered the service and served three and a half years stateside. While waiting to be discharged, he roughnecked for a month or two on a drilling rig in south Texas. When he came back to Lafayette in 1946, he went to work for another broker and after nine months had made quite a lot of money. He really wanted to drill wells as an independent operator, so made a deal with a consulting firm, Bates and Cornell, that would allow him to learn from them in return for doing their land work free of charge. After doing that, he partnered with his brother-in-law (Sam Bennett), a petroleum engineer, and for 26 years they promoted, drilled, and operated a number of land wells. When the partnership broke up, he continued along in the same line of business by himself.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [SW]

Interviewee initials: [AL]

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SW: Here we go. Interview with Mister Alfred Lambson, August fifteenth, 2002 in his office. And you can speak [freely?] on that thing.

AL: Okay.

SW: Um, I got your birth date and your age and everything. You, you're originally from Lafayette?

AL: No, I'm originally from Opelousas. I was born-

SW: Opelousas

AL: I was born halfway between Opelousas in Lawtell. In uh, September 1917. And uh, born on a little farm, then moved into town after my mother died. I was raised in Opelousas through high school. Then I went to college up in Illinois, Illinois Western University, in Burlington, Illinois. [Pause]

SW: Your father was a farmer?

AL: No he worked for the Federal Land Bank, for the Farm Loan Associations. And uh [Pause] he was born in Massachusetts and uh, raised from about three years old in north Chica-, north, north Chicago. [Clears throat] Excuse me. They moved on 40 acres in south Louisiana on a lottery. And uh, in about 1910 or '11. That was four miles northeast of the town of Washington, Louisiana. And he came down here and uh, went back to Chicago and married this little German immigrant who is my, was my mother. And then moved her down here. And they lived down on the farm, then they sold that and bought a little farm over in Lawtell, because he got a job as principal at a school in Lawtell. And he was rural mail carrier. So he did all kinds of things and he owned some farms.

SW: Jack of all trades?

AL: Yeah.

SW: You were raised primarily around this area until you went to uh-

AL: 'Til I went to-

SW: To, to college.

AL: But I was raised in Opelousas, yes.

SW: What did you study at school in uh-

AL: Girls.

SW: What?

AL: Girls. [Laughs]

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SW: I'm writing that: "Studied girls."

AL: That's okay. I, I told, I told a professor from Pennsylvania who gave the commencement address for the graduate school here at UL a couple years ago, when it was still USL. We were at a party out there in [Inaudible] uh, because their, their uh, the dean of graduate school had invited my wife and me. And this fella was askin' me where I was from, and where I had gone to school, what I had majored in, and so forth. And I told him, "You know, most [Clears throat] most people can finish college in four years, some take longer. Some can get out faster. I was one of the lucky ones, I finished college in a year." And he said, "[Dang, it's all good?] Bill Gates finished in a semester." [Both laugh] Said, "That's right we both finished early for the same reason."

SW: There you go.

AL: "We had something we needed to do right then. Not three years, not four years, not two years from then." So I said, "We needed to do then."

SW: Okay. What was that?

AL: I needed to go to work so I could get married. [Both laugh] I wanted to get married.

SW: That's why you were studying the girls, huh?

AL: That's right.

SW: Lookin' for the right-

AL: 'Til I fou-, I found the right one.

SW: Up in uh, in Illinois?

AL: Yeah, yeah.

SW: Okay.

AL: And took me two years but I finally made enough money every month to bring her down here and get married.

SW: Okay. So after school you came back here and she was still up there?

AL: Yes.

SW: Oh, okay. So that was kind of, I see. Um. What else, what else did you uh, what other courses did you take at college?

AL: Well-

SW: Any petroleum or-

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AL: No, no, they uh, there were no, I took no petroleum courses at all. Uh, just the usual freshman thing.

SW: Freshman courses. [Pause] And you, and then you came back. So when you came back here, that must have been uh, nineteen...

AL: I, I came back here in nineteen thirty... six.

SW: Six. Right in the middle of the Depression, right?

AL: Oh yeah.

SW: So must have been tough findin' a job.

AL: Well my dad, I went to work for my dad as his secretary. [Clears throat] He was workin' for the [Pause] Saint Landry Farm Loan Associations and the Evangeline Farm Loan and the Avoyelles Farm Loan. All headquartered in Opelousas. His secretary was getting married and so he uh, he sent me a telegram, "Come home, I have a job." So I came home. And started out at 45 dollars a month, which is not as bad as it sounds. And uh-

SW: Forty-five dollars a month in 1935? Nineteen thirty-six?

AL: Thirty-six, yeah.

SW: That's, that's pretty, pretty good.

AL: I didn't, yeah, well it's, it's beginners pay, you know. And then I worked up to 60 dollars a month, which was top pay for a secretary in the, in the Farm Loan Associations and the Federal Land Bank headquartered in New Orleans. And when I got 60 dollars a month, I was still not makin' enough money to get married on. And uh, but these oil people would come through. These land men and these brokers. And, and I liked 'em, I liked, I liked what they represented. They had to come see us because the, the Federal Land Bank owned it seemed like every third piece of land or had a mortgage on it or had half the [members?] or some, some reason to, somethin' that required them to come see us, give subordination or a lease. And uh, so I got to know these guys. And these, the, the land men they uh, the people who contact land owners and mineral owners and do that, do the trading, these are the people as opposed to the engineers and geologists who do other things. The engineers play with iron and geologist play with [Inaudible].

SW: So these are the guys that are contacting-

AL: These are the guys that had contact with people and, and they're, they're that kind of people. And I, I, I figured I was that kind of people. That kind of people. And I, I enjoyed [Clears throat] I enjoyed knowin' them and got to know some. They would come through. Now I'll just talk if-

SW: Oh yeah, that's fine.

AL: If you ask, you stop and ask me questions, whatever-

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SW: It, it sounds like you're tellin' me you mo-, this how you get into the oilfield was, was these contacts.

AL: That's right.

SW: Okay, that's, I'd like to know that.

AL: And uh, so and I, I had great admiration for people who were older and smarter than I. Everybody wasn't older than I, but most of 'em were smarter than I. [SW chuckles] And uh, so they, it, I, I was workin' at night, too. I couldn't, my girl was in Illinois and I was down here, so I had nothin' to do at night. So I was takin' correspondence course in accounting and uh, and do whatever work. So I'd be at the office, so they didn't mind askin' me. What these guys would do, they'd go out to buy a lease from a landowner and they'd uh, most of 'em didn't even have a typewriter. They didn't know how to type. These guys, these guys had been, they were traders, they'd been sellin' used cars or uh, news salesman or, you know, somethin' like that. That was a people people thing. But they didn't know how to type up anything, but you had leases you had to fill in. So they might go out to a landowner and, and make a deal with him to buy his lease, and then come to town, find me, get all the information from the landowner that he needed, find a secretary, a notary, a lawyer or somebody'd fill it out. And so since they had to come see us anyway, they got to know me. And uh-

SW: And you could type.

AL: And I could type. And I was interested and I didn't mind workin' late. And they would tip me. Uh, and the smallest tip I ever got was two dollars. Now understand I'm workin' for 60 dollars a month. A two dollar tip is a day's work. The biggest tip I ever got was 10 dollars. And uh-

SW: So you're makin' good side money?

AL: Oh I makin' good side money. I told my dad, I said, "Pop, I'm gonna, I'm, I'm gonna leave ya, I'm gonna get a job in, in the oil business. I'm in the wrong business, you don't pay enough." [SW chuckles] "I make, I'd make more in 15 minutes than I make all day long workin' here. So I'm gonna get a job in the oil business." His comment was, "It's a good game, son." He didn't regard it as, as, people didn't regard it as a business, as a industry in those days. If you, you know, if you were to [refine?] it than it's an industry. But other than that, [see what we were doin' was?]-

SW: Said it was a game.

AL: It's a gamble, it's a game.

SW: Gamble, yeah, okay, I see what you're saying.

AL: Uh, so, [Inaudible] so the next guy that walked in to, to the office, I hit him up for a job. And I'd known him before and he was nice man. Hit him up for a job and he said, "Well, I'm lookin' for a young fella to come to work for me." I found out about six months later he'd come to Opelousas that day to hire me. And I hit him up for the job first, which was good.

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SW: So what-

AL: Then I'm askin' for it. And uh, this man was [Pause] 20 years older than I, had no children. So I was, I was like his son. He treated me like you would your son, you try to teach him everything you can. I came to work for him, did, did his secretarial work. And uh, book keepin', and filing, and typing, and letter writing, and all this stuff. [Clears throat] I would go with him, he'd take me out to the country when we were buyin' leases, because I could type fast and I could, I was accurate. And he was teachin' me what to do, and how you do it, we'd check courthouse records. And uh-

SW: Was it important to be accurate when you were typing, too?

AL: Oh absolutely.

SW: 'Cause you were, you were taking land titles that were official records and typing up a-

AL: That's correct.

SW: Like a report on 'em or something.

AL: That's correct and you ha-, you had to accurate otherwise, uh, you could lose your lease because-

SW: If you made a mistake.

AL: Somebody could come in and say, "You didn't describe it right." And, and because you wouldn't lose it until it got valuable.

SW: Yeah exactly.

AL: Then somebody else wants it if it's valuable. So anyway, uh, he, he asked me how much, how much I made and I told him 60 dollars a month. Said, "I'll start you off at 75 and raise you to 90 [per month?] in three months or let you go." [Slight pause]

SW: That was his deal for you?

AL: That was his deal for me. So I came to Lafayette on October the fifteenth, 1937. Uh, workin' for an oil man.

SW: This, this guy moved you here?

AL: Well I just, I, I-

SW: Or you needed to-

AL: Took, took both pair of underwear and moved over here. [SW laughs]

SW: But he operated out of Lafayette?

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AL: Yes. His uh, his office was in the old Gordon Hotel downtown.

SW: Oh okay. And that's where a lot of the oil companies were before the, the center here, huh?

AL: Uh, they w-, well they were downtown. We were the only ones in the hotel.

SW: Oh, but ev-, yeah, a lot of the offices were downtown as opposed to around this area.

AL: Yeah. Yeah. And there weren't that many of us. [Pause] Back in that, those days.

SW: Late '30s.

AL: Lots of money.

SW: Yeah, just a few, huh.

AL: There was a man here in Lafayette by the name of J. Maxim Roy, who was nice man. And he was mayor and he liked the oil people and he liked what they were bringin' to Lafayette. And uh, so he had a little camp over by oh, Lafayette Airport. And so he had a barbeque one, one, one weekend for, invited all the oil people. And I tell folks, "All 37 of us went." [Both chuckle] There, there weren't many. And, and-

SW: And so this, this mayor guy was Mister Roy, he, he encouraged the oil business?

AL: Oh yes. Very much.

SW: Good for, good for the city?

AL: Good for the community. Good for the city. And you see the oil people came here, a few of 'em stopped uh, in Lake Charles, some of 'em went on to New Orleans, some of the companies. Now the, the, the service companies and the supply companies, that, the uh, engineering group were, were mostly in New Iberia [Inaudible].

SW: Okay. At this time?

AL: Yes. At that time. And uh, the exploration part, the geologists and engineers and, I mean, geologists, and land men, geophysicists, were here in Lafayette. [Clears throat] [Pause]

SW: Okay.

AL: So, so anyway [Slight pause] let's see, I told him [Inaudible], uh, after, after two months he raised me to 90 or 100 dollars a month.

SW: Before, before this three month-

AL: Before my three months was up. He liked what I was doin'. And I was a hard worker. Up early and down late. And uh, and we, we had a good relationship, this gentleman and I. And so my girl, who later became my wife, came down for Christmas that year in '37. And she was

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staying with my folks Opelousas, I was stayin' here. And we'd get together every day. I hitchhiked to Opelousas. And uh, I told her, "Listen, while you're here, why don't we get married? I'm makin' 100 dollars a month now, I can afford to be married." And uh, so she said okay. So she c-, now we had been engaged for a year and a half too. And she called her [Clears throat] called her folks. And her folks liked me, so that was okay. They were sorry we were all gettin' married down here, they wouldn't be here. So we went out and got married on January the first of 1938. So [Clears throat]

SW: New Year.

AL: Huh?

SW: The New Year.

AL: The New Year.

SW: Bringin' it in, huh.

AL: Start the new year off right. And uh, we were married for 63 years, six months, 15 days, and eight hours when she died. Last year.

SW: I'm sorry to hear that.

AL: At, at uh, she died at seven ten in the evening. [Slight pause] On July the fifteenth [Inaudible]. And anyway, we had good, good marriage and I have since remarried. [Slight pause] And uh, anyway [Pause] when I was, before she came down for Christmas that year, I was invited, I, I, I, through a cousin of mine who worked here, I was introduced to this girl who's local, Lafayette. And uh, seemed to be a nice girl, so I invited her to go to the picture show. And she said, "Oh, okay." Says, "What do you do?" And I stick out my chest and I say, "I'm in the oil business." Said, "Oh, I'm sorry, daddy won't let me go with anybody in the oil business." Her daddy was a druggist in town. And he would not let his daughter go with anybody in the oil business.

SW: Why was that?

AL: We, we had very bad reputation. In those days, there, there, exploration people [were?] hard workin', hard playin', hard drinkin', uh, group of gamblin' type people. And-

SW: Had a rough reputation.

AL: And uh, so anyway, then I got married and we were living in a room at a rooming house where I had been livin'. Friend said, told me, said, "Let's, why don't you take my apartment? I'm bein' transferred to Morgan City." So he told me where it was, so I went to see this lady who was a school teachers at Lafayette High School. Uh, Ed-, uh, Edith Nugent. So I said, "Miss Nugent, uh, I wanna uh, I wanna uh, see your apartment." And so I had Helen with me, and so we went, looked around, and said, "Oh I like it. We'd like to have it. How much is it?" And she says, "Wh-, what do you do?" And I said [Saying proudly], "I'm in the oil business." I'm so proud. And she said, "That'll be 25 dollars a month." And I said, "Well, Miss Nugent, my friend was only payin'

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20 dollars a month, why you gonna up the price on me?" She said, "Because I know how you oil people are. And you don't pay your bills." [Laughs] Said, I've in the oil business almost three months by now. And-

SW: Okay. And you were already part of the-

AL: And already I, I'm, I'm [Inaudible]. [SW laughs] [To woman in background] Betty, you on the phone? [Introduces SW to his wife Betty.] And uh, and so [Pause] we rented it. She reduced the price a little bit. We rented it from her.

SW: But you had to convince her. [Both laugh]

AL: And then, so, but that was the way people in the oil business were perceived.

SW: Yeah, y'all were just a rough bunch of people.

AL: That's right, that we were, might skip out on the rent, and give bad checks, and uh, take after their daughters or their wives or whatever-

SW: Did they get, did they get transferred a lot if you [Recording breaks off] maybe you were in a house and the people would think you gonna stay there for years and after three months you, you moved, was that a problem too or?

AL: Uh, I don't know that that was one of the problems, because there weren't that many places to rent.

SW: Okay. [Slight pause] Yeah, Lafayette was pretty small at that time.

AL: It was about 12,000 population. It's about 10 times that big now, it's about 120,000.

SW: I've lived here all my life, I've watched it grow.

AL: Yeah. [Pause] And uh, so it's, it's uh [Pause] but it's, it's been, it's been fun bein' in the oil business and I'm still just as proud of bein' in the oil business as I was the first day I got in it. The first day I got in the oil business, came to Lafayette, I thought, "This is what I'm gonna do." Now I did my part, I worked for Mister Whitlow for two years-

SW: That was his name, Mister Whitlow?

AL: R. L. Whitlow. W-H-I-T-L-O-W.

SW: What was the name of his company?

AL: He didn't have a company, he just-

SW: R. J. Whitlow?

AL: Just an individual.

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SW: How long'd you worked for him? [Pause]

AL: See I went to work for him October '37 and he died in, I think it was February 1940. So I worked for him 'bout two and a half years. [Pause] And he died, he had a heart attack and died.

SW: And what'd you do-

AL: And still was Depression on and so I went to work for myself doin' brokerage.

SW: That's when you, that's when you branched off on your own?

AL: Yes. And uh, I didn't have any money. My wife had saved up I think 37 dollars in cash. And uh, I didn't have a car, I didn't even own a typewriter. And, but I decided I was gonna go to work, so. Now [Clears throat] we had begun to get more oil people in here by then. And it was uh [Pause] they, they were still looked at some skeptically, but uh, we were being a little more readily accepted. Uh, some of 'em even went to church, you know. [Both chuckle] Like good people.

SW: Why did, why did this happen in Lafayette and not in Opelousas? You, you came down from Opelousas-

AL: They had, they had uh, two things. They had rail-, uh, railroad uh, out of here.

SW: Depot.

AL: And uh, and you had, you had, [main?] thing, you had a university.

SW: So that-

AL: And it's easier to transfer someone to a university town where they gonna live and raise their children, than it is to a non-university town. [Pause] That was one of the things that I think the companies looked at. And we're kind of centrally located. We're 130 miles from New Orleans, 75 miles from Lake Charles, 220 miles from Houston [Inaudible]. So we had, we're pretty centrally located for south Louisiana.

SW: So this city, this area was attractive for, for businesses, outside businesses, oil guys to move in here?

AL: Yeah, yeah.

SW: 'Cause they were comin' from Houston anyway, right?

AL: That's right, they were comin' from Texas and Oklahoma, mainly. And uh, when I was doin' brokerage work, and I didn't get that much, that many jobs, uh, 'couple of reasons, I was 22 years old, I was still quite young, I was very ambitious, and uh, and I charged more than anybody else. When the going rate for, for a broker was 10 dollars a day, I charged 15. And uh, so I didn't get much work. And people said, "Why you charge that much?" Say, "'Cause I work that hard. I'm up before anybody else and I'm down after everybody else gone to bed." And, and my wife says

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when I say things like that it sounds like I'm braggin', but I'm not braggin'. Like what [Dizzy Dean?] said, "If you've got it, you ain't, that ain't braggin'." [SW chuckles] And uh, but, plus, I spoke French. And there were many, many farmers who either didn't or wouldn't speak English to you if you were trading with 'em. 'Cause that's their second language, and you therefore would have the advantage. But they make you talk in French or get an interpreter. They then had the advantage. And uh, so-

SW: You learned French from your parents?

AL: No not from my parents, because my dad, he, he talked French, he learned French. And uh, but from livin' in Opelousas and I take it for four years in high school and a semester in college.

SW: Okay. So that had-

AL: When I got, when I got Illinois Western I registered for Freshman French, and they gave me a test, and put me in Senior, Senior French.

SW: Oh so you, you-

AL: I knew, I knew more than what they were, I knew what they were teachin' in college already. So anyway, I-

SW: So you were ahead of the game at that time?

AL: Yes. So I, I, I spoke French and bein' from Opelousas, everybody else was a stranger. And uh, I, in Vermillion Parish I [Inaudible] several times, I'd be in somebody's home and uh, they would be talkin' French and uh, usually the wife would ask me, "[Êtes-vous un Américain?]" "Are you an American?" I say, "Que [Inaudible, something in French]?" Oh no, no, no. [Inaudible, something in French] Opelousas."

SW: Okay and that was it, huh?

AL: And that was it. Now my French was as broken, as poor as their English, but they knew I was tryin', you know, we, we got along, we got along fine. And uh, because I'm talkin' to them in their language as I'm trading with 'em. So I could, I could out-buy anybody else. Come down here from Oklahoma or Texas. And I was worth more.

SW: So you had little bit of an advantage and you felt that they should pay you more because of that?

AL: That's right. And [Pause] so I just, I stayed on and I was doin' brokerage work until, 'til I went to the service during World War Two. And uh, I was gone for three and a half years. When I, when I came back [Clears throat] I got back in the oil business. And less successfully. There was, I, I, a lot of us had been gone, there was a lot of work to do. And companies were really moving in to south Louisiana then. And so I didn't, I'd lost all my contacts, so I'm workin' for another broker. Not on salary, but on a split commission. And again, I, they knew me and they knew how I worked, so we, we, we'd buy a block of leases. I bought a block of lease west of town of Maurice, 'bout six hours [makous?] in like two weeks. And we gettin' paid a dollar an

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acre commission, which we're splitting, so I make 3,000 dollars [Inaudible]. I'd been makin' 75 dollars a month in the Army and so I'm in big money now. And then I got an override, we split an override, which I sold for 15,000 dollar. By, by about September of nineteen... forty... [Speaking softly] when the war get over? Forty-five?

SW: Forty-five.

AL: I got back here January first, '46. By, in nine months, I had enough money to live off of for several years.

SW: Okay. You were in uh, Europe or, or-

AL: No, I was in the States the whole time.

SW: Oh, you stayed in the States?

AL: I didn't get sent overseas.

SW: That's good.

AL: I [can't/don't believe?] they knew my name, rank, and serial number, and my addressed 24 hours a day. [Chuckles]

SW: And you came back and that's when, that's when you took off for-

AL: Yes and, and then from that, what I wanted to do, now anytime I start ramblin' on and I'm tellin' you stuff you don't want to hear-

SW: No, this is okay. This is okay, I'm seeing-

AL: And ask questions.

SW: Okay.

AL: And uh, so there was a uh, a consulting firm here, geologists and engineers, Bates and Cornell, who were quite successful and they were drilling wells as independent op-, operators. And that's what I wanted to do. And, but I didn't know how. So I went to them. I had bought a lease that we needed to drill a well on. And I went to them and told 'em uh, what I had, showed 'em what I had. I said, "I need some help and if you'll do this for me, I'll give you a quarter interest." So they took me up and we made a well. And uh, they liked the way I worked and I liked the way I worked, and so I told 'em, "Look, I, you don't have a land man. I'll do all your land work for free. You don't pay me anything. Traveling expenses, you reimburse that, but I want a piece of everything I get. I want override, piece of the work [Inaudible]. And uh, but you can't pay me, 'cause you can't afford me. Okay, how much money you got? I'm not workin' for anybody that." So anyway, I went to, we, we had a, we had a great relationship for a number of years and we got some good production and, and I, I went to school and I learned what they were doin' and how they were doin' it. And all the time knowin', that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna mirror off of them. And they knew that. Had none, no problem with that. So-

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SW: Had anybody done anything like that before?

AL: Uh-

SW: Goin', goin' to a company like you did and-

AL: Oh I doubt it.

SW: Work out some arrangement where you guys would both benefit?

AL: I doubt it. Not that I know of. And, and I was in a position where I didn't need the cash.

SW: Yeah, because you had made some money off of leases.

AL: I made a, I made a bunch of money in Vermillion, in north Louisiana.

SW: So you could take a risk at this point and-

AL: Oh yeah.

SW: Come out ahead.

AL: Yeah. And uh, so uh, I learned how to promote [Inaudible]. So I, I got a uh, petroleum engineer who was livin' in Baton Rouge and uh, he was married to my wife's sister whom he had met while he was in the service in Illinois. And uh, and we knew each other, we were stationed together for awhile during the war. I got him to come over and join me and he was petroleum engineer. And so we drilled a well. And he had a lot of geology background. And we drilled bunches of wells, promotin', and drillin', and operating, and, and uh, did well. And then after about 26 years we split off from each other. And he kept doin' his thing and I kept doin' mine. And uh, we both did alright.

SW: Yeah. [Pause] And so what, what ha-, where did it go from there? We're, we're in the late '40s now, I'm guessin'.

AL: Oh, we're in the '50s and '60s and '70s.

SW: You just kept doing, you kept doing business like that?

AL: Oh yeah. Yeah. Now-

SW: Still workin' for-

AL: Now not with Bates and Cornell.

SW: No, but still workin' for yourself and contractin'-

AL: Workin' for myself and, and had uh, with uh, Sam Bennett, bein' my partner. [Extended pause]

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SW: When did uh, where, what office were you workin' out of at, at that time?

AL: The physical office?

SW: Yeah, you had downtown location or?

AL: Uh [Extended pause] when I first came back, I had, I had my uh, my office at my house.

SW: Okay, you worked out of home?

AL: Yeah. And then uh [Pause] then I moved downtown. And Bates and Cornell were upstairs and I was downstairs, and we still did a lot of work together. And then [Clears throat] when uh, Mister Heymann built the Oil Center, which is around in 1952, uh, my partner and I moved into the second building that he built over here.

SW: Okay. You, you were one of the first of the wave of people comin' in there.

AL: Yeah, right. Right, and I would, hell, I was already I'd been here, you know. And uh, we were the ones that talked to Mister Heymann about building a place for oil people.

SW: [Inaudible]-

AL: We needed, oil people needed offices, they needed houses. 'Cause they're movin' in now.

SW: Yeah, things were growin'.

AL: Yes.

SW: There was a need.

AL: And, and uh, and oil people basically like to be reasonably close to each other because we exchange so much information that we're, we're, we're uh, vicious competitors uh, if we're on the same thing, but we, we uh, you drill a well you have an electric [pump?]. [I want the rod?]. So I, "Hey, Steve, how are ya? Nice to see you. Listen, can I have your log old buddy?" You know, it was, and we'd all know each other. We [way separated?] you don't have that same rapport to get the information.

SW: Got it.

AL: So it, the uh, the nearness of the people-

SW: That helped.

AL: Was, was uh, was on purpose because we needed each other. Even though, now tomorrow you might give me your log, today or tomorrow, I'm competing with you on some, buyin' some block of leases. But that's the nature of the business.

SW: Yeah. That's just how you do it. [Chuckles]

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AL: Yeah.

SW: What was your, what's your opinion of Mister Heymann?

AL: Ah, he was a wonderful old gentleman.

SW: He did a lot for the town?

AL: Oh he did a tremendous amount of stuff. He did stuff for the town we don't even know about. For the schools and for the community and uh, during the Depression, during when, like in 1929 when everything went to hell, and uh, teachers weren't gettin' paid. Schools would give 'em paper, a promise to pay 'em. And you can't eat paper. [SW chuckles] But Mister Heymann at his store in downtown Lafayette and Opelousas, would take that paper and let those people buy stuff. Buy food, clothing-

SW: Credit basically.

AL: Huh? What did that do? He knew he was gonna get his money, he was sure of that. He, he helped these pe-, he made friends out of these people and their family. And he helped the community. He was, he was a, he was a magnificent man. [Pause] I bought this property from him where our building is now. And I bugged him and I bugged and I bug-, he had sold a couple pieces. But he told me, he said, "Lambson you don't have enough money." "You don't know that Mister Heymann. I don't have as much money as you, but you don't know how much I got. Maybe I got enough." Finally one day as I, it was a Jewish holiday, I'm at work, I, I see him out here, this was all camellia bushes that time, it, it was nursery, a million dollar nursery. And I'm followin' him around and I, "Mister Heymann, sell me a piece of land, I'll build a building." And he said, "Boy, you done bothered me enough." And I said, "Well sell me a piece of land." So he did. So we bought this, built the building. Now, but he, he was, I just bothered him to death. [SW laughs] I was the only, I was the only small guy that he sold a piece of land.

SW: Really?

AL: Sell it to the bank. [A Dallas firm?]. Some of the big oil company. But I'm the only little individual that was able to buy a piece of land from him.

SW: You pestered him enough, huh? [Laughs]

AL: I guess I just pestered the [Inaudible] the man. Then he was a nice man. His son, who died here a year or so ago, was a nice man.

SW: Herbert?

AL: Herbert, following in his father's footsteps. And he and I were friends. I-

SW: So you knew both generations?

AL: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I'm older than Herbert. But we were still friends. We were [Slight pause] we were good friends.

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SW: That's [Pause] that's pretty interesting. So you, you're here in the Oil Center in the '50s and you're seein' all these companies move in and the oil industry's taking off.

AL: Uh hm.

SW: What uh, now as a land man, you don't do, you don't do offshore? Anything offshore so you-

AL: I, I did one offshore well. And it was, it was close to land. But basically, uh, my drilling was all on land.

SW: Working on land.

AL: Yeah.

SW: What, what has happened recently? I know the land speculation is what came first and then they started moving offshore as the, has your work on land uh, diminished at all in, in recent years or over the years, what, what was the progression?

AL: Yeah, it, it has uh, the drilling on, on, on dry land has diminished for several reasons. [Pause] One is there's not as many places to drill now as there used to be. We've found a lot of it. Producing or did produce a lot of it. And uh, so offshore had some advantages and disadvantages. Disadvantage: very expensive to operate. Uh, and then you have the hurricane season to contend with. Uh, but you had no titles to worry about.

SW: Right, it was either the state or the federal government.

AL: That's right and-

SW: Depending on how far out you were.

AL: And so you didn't have to go to 200 people to put a block of leases together. You made a bid from the federal government or the state, and if you got it, you own it. And uh, now, it's more expensive to drill and produce offshore. But this was virgin territory then. And they're drilling deeper, Steve. And, and uh, in so doing, they're getting more gas and liquid petroleum and oil. And now, but [Pause] offshore, 'course of the industry has slowed down since the '80s. We, we took a big bump. Oh yeah. Oil got up to ha-, 35, 40 somethin' dollars a barrel. Gas got up to eight, ten thou-, eight and 10 dollars a barrel per thousand cubic feet. Excuse me. Both of those prices were wonderful for people like me. But it's not good. Price is too high. When it gets too high, folks are gonna do one of two things: find another, an alternate fuel or quit usin' it. And they did both.

SW: And it comes back down.

AL: And then it goes back down. It goes from 40 dollars a barrel to 10 dollars a barrel. Somebody asked me if I'd ever seen it that low before. I said, "When I got in the oil business it was a dollar a barrel. And you had to scurry around to sell it." Gas, if you could sell it, you'd get anywhere from three cents a thousand, big price was seven cents a thousand. Right now we're gettin' 'bout

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a three dollars a barrel. They're gettin' 26, 27 dollars a barrel on your crude oil. That's how it's been doin'. But we used to burn up gas. You'd-

SW: Yeah [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

AL: Be producing oil well and you had, they had the gas which lifted it. And you just vented the gas and burned it.

SW: Before they realized they could sell it.

AL: Steve, you could drive, this, this is a slight exaggeration, but you could almost drive from Lafayette to Houston, Texas, at night, without puttin' your lights on to see the road because there was so many wells with flares burning.

SW: I've, I've heard that story before. They said you could read a newspaper out there-

AL: Oh yeah, and just uh, unbelievable. And then somebody started layin' some gas lines.

SW: Yeah. That's what it took.

AL: And you got to harness it. You, but it's all you want to here. But if they need it in New Orleans, you gotta get there. And then they, they uh, I don't know whether it was government uh, help or what, but then they laid what they called the Little Inch and the Big Inch. Big uh, pipe up to, to, uh, up to the north, New York, New England, up in through there. To the big industrial areas. [Clears throat] And they uh [Pause] that brought on, that brought on some better prices. And uh, all of a sudden oil started increasing. And uh, goin' up rather rapidly because we were using more of it. And uh, in, in the olden days, if you were sellin' gas, you sold it as [spot?] market. Company needed gas, they, they'd take million cubic feet a day from your well or five million, whatever you're capable of doin', they send whatever they need. And uh, all in [long?]. Then come summer, they drop back to just a little bit. So your income was sporadic from that. And then, then the uh, producers got to think, "I, I want, I want steady. You've got to take this many cubic feet a y-, a, uh, a month. At this price. Winter and summer." So then we started sellin' [Clears throat] on, on uh, on contract. And we'd have a uh, we'd try to get a 10 or a 20 year contract.

SW: Yeah, and so it was more regulated.

AL: That's right. And so, and, and the industry was regulating itself. Uh, and then, then the uh [Pause] then prices started runnin' up and the guys that wanted the 10 and 20 years, and just forced the companies to take it, and they sellin' it for 18 or 20 cents a thousand or 30 cents a thousand. All of a sudden found out that if they didn't have that contract they would get a dollar a thousand. So then everybody want to break contracts and nobody'd sell it on a long contract.

SW: Whoever it was good for at the point-

AL: That's right.

SW: If the company made that contract and it was a high number-

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AL: That's correct.

SW: And then the gas price changed, then they would lose money on, they didn't want to break contract.

AL: That's right.

SW: Yeah. Always a game, right? Like your father said-

AL: Part of the game, part of the game.

SW: What about um, you keep talkin' about the gas prices goin' up and down, how does the, that uh, you know, that cyclical part of the oil industry is always the boom and bust cycle, how does that effect uh, people like you, the land speculation part?

AL: Well [Pause] 'course anything that happens in the industry as a whole happens to everybody. It affects everyone. Now uh, I don't do that, I haven't done the brokerage work since... first year I got back from the war. Because then I got into being an independent operator and drilling wells and operating those that we were fortunate enough to get to produce. And uh, but it, it affect-, it affects how much money you can raise. And we, we put a, we put a deal together and go to a company. [Clears throat] And, and I like to deal with the major oil companies, because you had one entity to go to and your, you were always gonna get your money.

SW: They were good for it. [Chuckles]

AL: And uh, we'd go to them, yeah, very important. And they might not pay you as fast as you want, but they gonna pay you. We put a block of leases together and had the geology and the geophysics and brought it to Gulf Oil Company and Shell or Texaco or whoever. And show 'em our deal and tell 'em, "We'll sell you three-quarters of this deal and we'll drill the well to x depth and give you an electric log of total depth for this much money. And if we don't do that, you don't owe us anything." That's what you call a "turn key." And you take a big risk. Because you may not be able to get that, you might have to drill that well two, three times, to get it down and do what you agreed to do. So the bigger the risk, the more you have the right to charge. You know, the more people understand the charge. Uh, so we would, we would sell this. And we'd go to major oil companies and they'd look at it. They could not buy that block of leases or drill that well to that depth [Pause] 75 percent of what it would cost them was way more than what they were payin' us. [Pause] They didn't understand how we could drill 'em that cheap. But you buy 'em, I'm buyin', I'm out buyin' leases from landowners. I'm puttin' deals together. My engineering partner was a very, very good drilling engineer. And we would drill wells, if you're workin' for a major oil company, as an engineer, and you gonna drill a well and, and say, "Let's, we can use J-55 pipe," was a certain strength. And you do that and it gives way, something happens to it, and you should've used N-80 [Slight pause] you've made a bad mistake. You might get, you might get fired for that. But if we're doin' it and we're turn keyin' it, every decision is ours. You have no say-so. Every decision is ours, we guarantee it. Until we give you that log and you take over the operations, if that's what you want to do, everything's on us. So we could drill that well with a lighter mud weight than the major oil company engineer would dare try. With a lighter mud weight we can drill faster than he can. With a lighter weight pipe our costs are less. And so we put, we put a price on it as though we were drillin' it like a major oil company. And

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put somethin' on for the gamblin' and somethin' on to get my money back at some higher profit. And we would, when we were through, we'd own a quarter. And ours would be paid for and we'd get profit. If, if it worked out-

SW: If it worked, yeah.

AL: Sometimes it didn't work.

SW: You win some, lose some.

AL: That's right. But, but mostly we, we, we did alright.

SW: Yeah and that's what you try do is win more than you lose. [Laughs] To stay ahead.

AL: That's right.

SW: What uh, you mentioned the name of that woman, Gloria Knox.

AL: Yes.

SW: Did you see a lot of women um, in your sector of your industry?

AL: No, no. Uh, secretaries, yes, but no, no land men.

SW: Land men, or land women. [Laughs]

AL: No, land men. They're land men. They're lady land man.

SW: Okay. Did not change-

AL: Now my current wife is a land man. My son married a girls who's a land man.

SW: No politically correct speech there, huh. Lady land man.

AL: That's right, no, it's a land man. If you ask 'em, you say, "You a land woman?" "No, I'm a land man."

SW: I like it. [Chuckles]

AL: Yeah, it just. [Pause]

SW: What about um, so there's not many of 'em, but there's a few, what about, did you ever see any Black people doin' that kind of thing or any other um-

AL: No.

SW: Mexicans?

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AL: I have not uh, I've seen some uh [Pause] a few Black engineers. [Pause] Uh, but very, very few. And, and I'm not sure why. [Pause] They, they, they certainly, the smart ones are just as smart as the smart White people.

SW: Sure.

AL: It, it's not necessarily an industry that attracts uh, uh, one thing many of us worked on rigs. I did for awhile. Dur-, during the war. When I waitin' to get discharged, I, I roughnecked for about six or eight weeks in south Texas. I'm still in uniform and I got a, got a uh, pass to work off the field. 'Cause the war was over and I'm waitin' to get discharged and I've got nothin' to do. So uh, but it's, it's uh, it's dangerous work. It's hard work. And not that the Black person is afraid of dangerous or hard work, but they just, the oilfield has never been a integrated as other, now I understand there's some, some Black people worked offshore some. But uh, I mean, if you Black, it takes guts to work with a bunch of White people who are just blue collar, half-ass mean people to start off with. "Especially offshore. My god, he fell overboard, eww!, terrible." [Both chuckle] "Let's go get him." "No, [here's two] sharks already got him."

SW: Kind of rough, huh?

AL: It could be.

SW: Did the, the women that you see, that you saw in your, did they ever experience any problems at all because of being women?

AL: Because of being women? [Slight pause] Not that I have heard. Not that I have heard. They're, they're very professional. Uh, they're smart. They're, they're uh, they're in to take care of themself. [Natalie?] is not physically [Inaudible].

SW: Was, it's a different situation, I, I asked that same question to people who worked offshore with women and you get a different response. Because it's a little bit different, but I, I would guess that they would have less problems here in the, more of an office-type environment.

AL: They, well, it's not just the office. These women are out buyin' leases from-

SW: That's true too.

AL: People. They out, they out in the project at night buyin' leases. That's dangerous. [Pause] And uh, they're on the highway, they're on, out in the country by themself in their car. And they have had some scares. [Pause] They've had some scares. Uh. [Extended pause] But uh, overall, I think that, I think they get along alright. And they're good buyers. They work hard, they're, they're uh, they realize they're a minority in the industry and they're competing with some old boys out there. Uh, I think, I think the pay is the same for the women as the men when you're doin' brokerage work. Now the better you are, the more experience you have, the better per diem you can get. That's usually what you're doin' buyin' or, or doing title work on day rate basis. And the women, and this is a broad brush statement, but the women seem to have more uh, talent for detail than the average man who's doin' that sort of work. [Pause]

SW: [So look at that?], they may work for themselves when they're-

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AL: That's right.

SW: Just if they're ambitious enough.

AL: That's right. And-

SW: But that could be said for a lot of people.

AL: That's right, now, if you're, you're, if you're doin' title work, if you're checkin' records in the courthouse and running the history of a property, of a family, you have to be detailed. And day in day out 10 women are more detailed than 10 men, just at random, I believe.

SW: I, I'm inclined to agree with you. [Chuckles]

AL: I have, I have a great admiration for these women that are in the industry.

SW: So they made their own contribution?

AL: That's right, and, and uh, you owe it to yourself to talk to Gloria Knox.

SW: I definitely will give her a call.

AL: She uh, and, and you can tell her that I suggested you call her.

SW: Okay. I appreciate that.

AL: We're, we're friends and we've been friends for 65 years. And as I said, we're about the two oldest still in the oil industry in Lafayette. I don't know anybody else that's here that's, there may be some that-

SW: Charles de Gravelle is, is-

AL: Yeah, he's older than I am.

SW: He's 89, he's 89.

AL: Yeah. He's older than I am.

SW: He's still workin' a little bit.

AL: Yeah. I forgot about Char-, well Charlie wasn't in Lafayette back when we were.

SW: Yeah. He came a little later.

AL: Yeah. And uh-

SW: I'll, I'll definitely go talk to her.

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AL: Yeah.

SW: And, and it seems to me, you told me that you guys had a reputation of being a rough bunch, but uh, I talked to Bill and he said, "Call old Alfred Lambson about," and I called you and I said his name, and you said, "Come on over." So I get the feeling if I call Gloria and I say, "Alfred Lambson," she'll say, "Come on over." That's not quite that rough reputation-

AL: Well no, it's, it's uh-

SW: Y'all are some good people.

AL: Oh I think so. We have changed. Uh, see one of the things that happened to Lafayette with the oil industry comin' in, the people in the oil business, I'm gonna make up a number, but I'll say 90 percent of the people in the, in the oil industry, in, in exploration, have been to college. Perhaps like me they didn't graduate, but they've been to college, they've got some college education. And when you move, when you move a whole segment of people into a community, who are college-oriented, and come to your community having gotten an education from coast to coast, and border to border, and sometimes overseas, you build a, you have a building of a very good uh, community. [Coughs] I was on the Lafayette Parish school board in the '50s. I was to my knowledge, I was the first oil man in south Louisiana to hold a politically-elected job. Now I did not run for school board. Doctor [Happy?] Davis was school board member and he had about four, four and half years left on his term and he was movin' to New Orleans, [here's Kent Bacon/he just came beggin'?] and uh, couple of powerful people in town, uh, asked me if they could get the government to appoint me, would I accept it. And I said, "Yeah, I'd like to do that. Who am I gonna be beholden to?" They said, "Nobody." I said, "Not to either one of you guys?" One was a state senator and one was a powerful lawyer here in town, said, "No." Said, "Not to Governor Bob Kennon?" Said, "No." I hadn't even voted for Kennon, he's a good man, but I had not voted for him. So I said, "I'll do it." I liked to do it, so I was on for about four years or so. Where'd you go to school here?

SW: Here in town, I went to [Turling's?] Catholic High.

AL: [Inaudible]. And uh, but it was, I, I enjoyed my tenure on the school board. I got to be too busy, I got to be too busy toward the end of my term, decided to not run for election for [Inaudible]. But uh, and I was on the school board with 14 members. I was the only one born outside of Lafayette Parish. I was the only one that was not French. I was the only that was not Catholic. Now I come from Opelousas, and I speak French, and I'm Protestant, but I was regarded as the stranger on the board. [SW chuckles]

SW: The outsider.

AL: I c-, I'm an outsider, I come from adjoining parish. [Pause] And that, that, I had a-, I good uh, good, good service on the board. I, I didn't uh, I didn't ask anybody for a job, I didn't promise anybody anything, nobody tryin' to put the bee on me for any. A few folks would ask me if I would recommend them, if I know 'em and I thought it was worthwhile, I would do that. Or if I would uh, help their brother-in-law with a job as a school bus driver, you know, things like that. But uh, but I had no, I had no pressure on me. I just make my living in Lafayette, therefore any decision, any vote that I, I made, was both for what I thought was best for the school. You can't,

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you can get mad a me, but you can't stop buyin' suits from me. You can't not buy no automobile from me. You can't buy ice from the ice house, 'cause I don't do any of that.

SW: Yeah. You weren't connected in that way.

AL: I was connected. So, and some people said, "Alfred we need more school board members like you, independent like you." "Well, maybe a couple, but you don't [get/need?] too many like me. You need some that are--"

SW: Just a few to keep the balance.

AL: You need the b-, the, the majority that are, that are elected, so you can put the bee on 'em. Say, "I don't like the way you're goin', you gotta change your voting on this situation." So you don't, you don't want too many independent rebels like me. [Pause] So.

SW: So. In your opinion, um, do you need to stop?

AL: No, I'm-

SW: 'Cause we can-

AL: We're gonna go have lunch, are you?

SW: Um, sure.

AL: You don't have to.

SW: Sure, sure we can.

AL: Huh?

SW: I can, I have another interview at one thirty.

AL: Oh, we, we just run to the Petroleum Club, eat fast, and be out.

SW: Okay. Do you think we should go now?

AL: Whenever you want to go.

SW: Okay. If you don't mind, I'd like to come back and interview you again. It seems like I've gotten part the story, but you have more to say. [Chuckles]

AL: Hell, my wife said I never shut up. [Chuckling] I always got somethin' to say. But as far as for the history.

SW: Ye-, but that's, I have some, some more uh, in-depth questions concerning uh, stuff here in Lafayette and things that you saw '50s, '60s, and '70s. And more development.

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AL: Oh, you wanna do that right now?

SW: It might take a little more than, than time we have.

AL: Okay, that's fine. You can come back.

SW: If you don't mind, it's-

AL: I don't mind.

SW: I'm, I'm really enjoying the information you've given me.

AL: Thank you.

SW: This is a lot of good information. And so uh, that's what Mister Craig said you'd be a, a great guy to talk to and he, he wasn't wrong. [Both laugh]

AL: Thank you.

SW: I like th-, uh, personally, I [Slight pause] let's see.

[END OF RECORDING]

