



Oklahoma Bank and Commerce History Project

a program of the Oklahoma Historical Society

**Interview with Bill and Guy Berry
American Heritage Bank
Sapulpa, OK, 4/18/2012
Interviewer: Michael J. Hightower
Audio taped and transcribed by MJH**

MJH: It is Wednesday, April 18, 2012, and I am with Bill Berry, and soon to be Guy Berry, at American Heritage Bank in Sapulpa, Oklahoma. Good morning, and thank you again. What I would like for you to do is go back into your memory and tell me a bit about your family, about how you arrived in Sapulpa, and how you became involved in the banking business, and then take it from there.

BB: Our bank was chartered in 1905. It was the result of a bunch of oil men who were here wildcatting at the time, in the Sapulpa area, and then, of course, in the Glenn Pool, which turned out to be a huge oil play. There were a number of banks chartered in Sapulpa about that time.

Our family first came here around 1912. The Berrys were originally from Chandler. James Berry Sr. came here about 1912 and went to work for the bank, and ultimately became president of the bank. His brother was a fellow by the name of Guy Berry, and Guy Berry was my grandfather. He got out of the service following World War I. He was coming back to Oklahoma, and his older brother said, "Don't go back to Chandler. Come to Sapulpa. It's a boom town, and there are plenty of opportunities for you here." So our grandfather moved to Sapulpa, and went to work at the gas company as a clerk.

In the mid-1920s, Jim Berry, who was Guy Berry's older brother, died from complications from an appendectomy. And when he died, the board of American National Bank, at that time, hired my grandfather to come to work at the bank, which he did. And he eventually worked his way up to become president of the bank. Over the years, our family has acquired stock, from time to time, and we have just kind of been hanging around ever since.

MJH: So your grandfather was Guy Berry...

BB: Guy, Sr.

MJH: Okay, Guy Sr. And how about your dad?

BB: My father graduated from OU, and came back to Sapulpa. He was Guy, Jr. And now, my brother, Guy III, is here. He is president of the bank, and he is essentially my partner in this bank.

MJH: Is it totally owned by the Berry family?

BB: No, we have broad ownership within the communities that we serve. Our family has controlling interest in the bank, but we don't own a hundred percent of the bank.

MJH: When did you come to work for the bank?

BB: I came to work in 1973. I graduated from OU, did a short stint in the Army, got out of the Army, and came back in the fall of 1973. Guy came back—Guy was an examiner for the Comptroller's office—bank examiner—he left there and started a bank auditing firm, and he came to work here full-time in 1980.

MJH: What sort of old stories did your grandfather tell you about the early days in the area?

Guy Berry entered conference room. Introductions...

BB: One of the stories that I recall is that, during some of the tough days of the Depression era, there was concern about the solvency of the banking system. The story, as I remember it—I'm not sure how factually correct it is—but we had a good customer who was also a large shareholder and a director of the bank named Lewis Jackson. One day, when I guess the bank had a lot of concerned customers in the lobby, Lewis Jackson came in with a suitcase, and had some bills sticking out of the edge where the suitcase was closed, and threw his suitcase up on the teller stand and said, "Deposit all my money in the bank!" This had kind of a calming effect, as he was known to be a very successful oil man at the time. Whether that's factually correct, I don't know.

MJH: Some stories get repeated so many times, they become true.

GB: I heard it a little differently, but it's the same story.

BB: I think another story of the banking business was, in the early days, of course, bankers wore coats and ties at the office every day, and they didn't have air conditioning. Our grandfather often told us that the greatest invention ever known to man was inventing air conditioning. The bank put in an air conditioning system as quick as possible!

GB: There were five banks in Sapulpa going into the Depression, and when it was over with, we were down to one, which was us. And we were the only bank here from, I think, 1929, to 1955. That's how long it lasted. There were five banks...

BB: ...and four went broke. All of them went broke except us.

MJH: Was it originally chartered as American Heritage Bank?

BB / No, it was American National Bank. We changed the name of the bank, and changed our
GB: charter, I think, in 2001.

GB: It was always American National.

BB: We had another bank that was in our holding company called Heritage Bank. We merged
the two banks into one, and when we did, we took part of both names.

MJH: When was that merger?

GB: I think it was in 2001.

Another thing I think you need to know on our deal is: One of the main guys that worked here for a long time, and it is kind of odd when you hear his name—his name was Mr. Thrift. His name was Brook Thrift. We knew his as Mr. Thrift. When we were kids, and he was alive, he was the same age as our granddad, and he worked here throughout the 1920s and 1930s and way into the—hell, I don't know when, the 50s or 60s.

BB: He had an office here through the 1970s.

GB: Yes, and he really was a super guy. He was one of the main guys in the history of our bank. He definitely was one of the guys who got us through the Depression.

MJH: What was his background? What sort of stories or colorful tales can you tell?

GB: Well, I don't want to say. When I was a kid, he was always pinching tellers, the women, on the rear, but I don't think I would want to put that in a [book].

Laughter...

I mean, he still have relatives who are stockholders of our bank, I think, in Tennessee or somewhere. He was quite a guy. He was an interesting guy. I knew his wife. She lived to be a hundred years old or something. He must have been in his late 80s, or so. His wife lived to be, I think, a hundred. Mrs. Thrift.

MJH: That's a great name.

GB: It's a great name. Don't we have a plaque down at the OBA that he is on? I could go to our directors' room and show you our little plaque.

MJH: I have spent a lot of time at the OBA. In fact, knowing that name, I could go back and look at the old *Oklahoma Bankers...*

BB: I think they might have taken those old plaques down. I'm not sure.

MJH: Sometimes, when I get a name or date, I can go into the old magazines. They have all of them in that board room.

GB: I'd say, in the history of our bank, he was one of the main guys. I don't know how long he worked here, but it was pretty long—forty or fifty years.

MJH: He would probably be in the OBA Fifty Year Club.

GB / Oh yeah.

BB:

MJH: What else can you tell me about your granddad or Mr. Thrift? Depression stories?

GB: He was born in 1895. So, if you do the math on that...1929 was more or less during the Depression. I think the Depression hit here, quite frankly, before then, because they closed the roundhouse. This was where the trains...There was something like 700 or 800 jobs, and all the train engines were maintained here.

BB: This was the end of the Frisco line.

GB: Yes, in Sapulpa. And they closed the roundhouse. Now, I may be wrong, but I think it was in 1928. I wasn't around then. I think that kicked our deal into the Depression immediately. You know, the stock market crashed in 1929, but I think, when they closed down that deal, that was a huge loss of jobs in our community. I think the difference between Sapulpa, then and now, is that, a lot of these places that are suburbs now, were not very large communities at all. But Sapulpa was a pretty large community. We're a county seat; we had over (in the 1920s) 10,000 people. I mean, Broken Arrow did not have hardly anybody, for example. Bixby...Jenks wasn't even a spot on the map. Nor was Glenpool.

BB: Glenpool was just a place where they discovered the Glenn Pool field. Sapulpa was kind of where they built the town. So we were a real oil boom town, much larger than all the other communities. I think that's why we are a much larger bank than any of the banks in the other communities.

MJH: I lived over in Glenpool for about 10 years. I had a place over there, through the 1990s. It always kind of stuck me that there is not really a heart of the town. It just sort of merged into a suburban, bedroom community. But Sapulpa is not like that.

BB: No, Sapulpa was a town of 12-to-14 thousand people in the 1920s and in the Depression era. It was a much larger community than, say, Broken Arrow or Sand Springs.

GB: Well, the county seat was here.

BB: Right. So this was a much larger town. It's partly because, I think, when they found oil in the so-called Glenn Pool, Sapulpa is where they built the town. Sapulpa is where they built the city. That was in 1905. That's the same year our bank was started.

MJH: I know Red Fork was pretty well swallowed up.

GB: We call that "West Tulsa."

One of our original shareholders, charter members, was a guy named Harry Sinclair. He became Sinclair Oil. He was one of the founders [of the bank].

BB: I'll tell you what happened: That's who our granddad bought the bank from—Harry Sinclair. Don't put this in there, because I'm not real sure, but I think he went to prison in the Teapot Dome scandal.

MJH: I think that's true.

GB: Yes, I do. I think he went to prison, and he came out of prison, and the Depression was hitting, and he wasn't really interested in owning a bank in Sapulpa.

BB: We had a relative—an older brother of our granddad—and his name was Jim Berry. I think he was about 12 years older than our granddad. He came here—I don't know, maybe he was 12 years, maybe 8 years older, we probably have that written down somewhere, maybe in our board room, I don't know—he came here, I am almost positive, in 1912.

GB: He's the one who died...

MJH: of appendicitis...

BB: Yeah, in 1924, or something like that. But he came here, and he was more, running the bank...I'm not sure he was running the bank...

GB: He was president, when he died.

BB: He died when he was in his forties. And then, my granddad and, I think, Mr. Thrift, kind of took over. I think Granddad bought the bank...I think, after my uncle died, they sold most of their stock to Harry Sinclair. And then I think he went to prison. I may be wrong. You can look it up. But it was the Teapot Dome scandal, or Harry Sinclair. And Granddad bought most of his stock from that guy.

MJH: That is pretty interesting.

BB: That is kind of interesting.

GB: If it's true!

You'd have to look up Harry Sinclair. We think it's true. I'll tell you told me that: It was Herb Johnson. There was this guy named Herb Johnson. And was like, the cashier here during the Depression. He was alive way into the 1980s. He made me go to lunch with him every Thursday. And would tell these stories, and that's the story that I got, was that Harry Sinclair owned the bank. He went to prison... You can Google Harry Sinclair, but I am almost positive...

MJH: I am going to hit the library today, too, and they probably have something.

GB: Are you any relationship to the Hightowers that were related to the Johnson family in Chandler?

MJH: Yes.

GB: That would be your relative. Herb Johnson.

MJH: Wow.

GB: Herb Johnson's family was involved in the First National Bank in Oklahoma City. And so was your family.

I think the Hightowers...I'm not sure where they came in...I don't know how they are connected.

BB: Was it part of the Vose family?

MJH: It's all part of the club?

BB: Are you part of the Vose family? The Hightowers? Didn't somebody marry into the Vose family?

MJH: Yes, my uncle married a Vose.

GB: Okay, well, Herb Johnson's family came from Chandler. And that's the connection with the Berry family.

BB: Our granddad was from Chandler, and so was this guy, Jim Berry.

GB: And Herb Johnson's dad and uncle and...Herb, I think, grew up in Chandler. But the Johnsons...Herb ended up in Sapulpa, but part of the Johnsons ended up in Oklahoma City, somehow, connected, in the banking business, with the First National Bank of Oklahoma City—somehow. I don't remember all those details, but all I remember is the Hightower name, and being involved in the First National Bank of Oklahoma City.

MJH: Frank Johnson was Hugh Johnson's brother.

GB: Hugh and Herb...It's all in the same family.

MJH: What they did...

GB: They went to Oklahoma City and started a bank and ended up merging with the First National Bank.

MJH: My great grandfather was Frank Johnson. He started the American National Bank in Oklahoma City. And then his brother came from Chandler, moved there, and bought controlling interest in the First National Bank.

BB: And somebody here is probably related to Herb Johnson.

MJH: That's the first time I have heard of Herb Johnson. But Hugh was my great uncle.

GB: Herb's family are still shareholders in this bank. Their name is Atkinson. Herb's daughter married a fellow by the name of Art Atkinson, who is Herb's [business] partner here in town. He passed away, but Mrs. Atkinson, Herb's daughter, is still living, and she has two children: Mary Webb, who is our superintendent of schools now; and Art Atkinson, who works for Express Personnel in Oklahoma City.

MJH: The world just got real small.

They merged those two banks to form the First in 1927, and then they built the big tower in '31. My great grandfather died in 1935, and Hugh Johnson took over into the 1940s, and when he died, my grandfather, Billy Hightower, who came from a bank family down in Altus, and he was president of the First National for about a month, in 1944. He was in a plane...

GB: He got killed in a plane crash. I remember that.

MJH: Yes, in February 1944. That was my dad's dad.

GB: Do you have a brother that's been in the banking business?

MJH: He's the only one in the business. That's my brother, Johnson. And he's been with Stillwater [National Bank] since about 1995. He worked at First National early in his banking career, back in the 1970s, and some other places. But he's at Stillwater National [Bank].

GB: And his name is Johnson?

MJH: Yes.

GB: Well, there you go! Herb Johnson had to be your family!

Herb worked here in the 1930s. He had a lot of stories, and he remembered a lot of stuff. He was the guy who came up with the Harry Sinclair story.

BB: So your brother is Johnson Hightower?

MJH: Yes. I got it as a middle name, but he has always gone by Johnson.

GB: Do you Google stuff?

MJH: Yes.

GB: Okay, you can Google Harry Sinclair and see if the guy went to prison in the Teapot Dome scandal, because it had something to do with the Harding Administration, when these guys were bribing the government so they could get leases, I think. The Teapot Dome area is in Wyoming. And I think that's what happened to Harry Sinclair, and he owned a big chunk of our bank.

MJH: There are always treasures. It's usually what I am not looking for that I find. That's a really interesting story.

GB: It is to me. It's not much of our history, except that, otherwise, I don't know that our granddad would have bought the stock, or had the ability...According to Herb Johnson, he paid not much on the dollar by the time...I mean, the Roaring Twenties in Oklahoma was a pretty big deal. Like I said, Sapulpa got hit really badly when they closed the roundhouse, which was like a big factory. It was where all the trains that had anything that needed to be fixed from all of this part of the state. It was a factory. And they had, like, 7 or 8 hundred jobs. When that deal blew up, the whole town blew up. And from there, we went right into the Depression.

And Herb, he told me, he said that we went something like 15 years when there was not a house built in Sapulpa. Like, from 1929 to 1944, or '45, at the end of World War II. We didn't have a damn house built!

I can remember a story from Mr. Thrift. He said, if you had to loan money in the Depression, it was ridiculous. Nobody came in to borrow. He said, all we did was to work with people to pay back what they owned us. Nobody borrowed money for years.

BB: I remember one time, talking to him, and he said something to the effect...I guess the Depression was pretty interesting, with all the runs on the bank, or bank robberies, Pretty Boy Floyd, and all that—and he said, “Well, we got robbed one time, and the main thing about the Depression is that it was real depressing! Nothing happened! That would be what I would tell you about the Depression. There was nothing!”

MJH: And the dates when no houses were built were...

BB: I think 1929 to maybe 1945, or something. But it was a long period of time. Now, this was from Herb Johnson, your great-great uncle! He was honest as the day is long!

Laughter...

GB/ He was a story teller!

BB:

GB: Yeah, he was a story teller! And he smoked cigars, and he was a pretty interesting guy. But he was pretty knowledgeable of that era. I mean, when we knew him, or I knew him, was in the late 70s or early 80s. He lived to be in his late 80s or so.

MJH: So he lived here...

GB: He lived here, and he had an insurance agency. But he worked in our bank in the 1930s. He was, like, ten years or so younger than our granddad, and Mr. Thrift. Mr. Thrift and our granddad kept our bank going during the Depression.

MJH: And Mr. Thrift's first name was...

GB: Brooke. B-R-O-O-K-E.

MJH: I lived in Tulsa from the mid-eighties until 2001. He would have been a great guy to know.

GB: Herb Johnson...He had a lot of stories, and some of them were true, I think.

BB: He would take his lunch, and he smoked cigars, and roll the windows down, and the wind would come through the window so hard, and blow ashes from his cigar, it set his tie on fire...He was a dandy!

GB: The history of our bank, though is: the bank started in 1905. I think, in 1912, Jim Berry came to work here. I think in 1920, right after World War I, our granddad came to work here. And he was from Chandler.

BB: He joined here after Jim Berry died.

GB: Right. I think he got here before he died...

BB: He was working for the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company...

GB: Okay, I can't remember.

BB: They hired him from the gas company, after Jim Berry died.

GB: Now, our dad took over, came here, in 1946, and worked here until he died in 1980.

BB: Guy and I took over in 1980.

GB: Yep.

MJH: Are there any other family members involved.

BB: Well, we have another generation starting right now. We have my son-in-law, and Guy's daughter, working in the bank.

GB: We are into the fourth generation.

MJH: That has been one of my big motivations to do this—we have so many banks that started in a family, and they are now into their fourth or fifth generations. That's kind of unique. Particularly in this state. That takes us back to the foundation.

BB: It gets harder and harder...It's just like any other independent business. It's hard to keep everybody's interest going in the same direction. Your family gets bigger and bigger with each passing generation.

GB: And the other thing—I'm pretty sure the dates are correct—we started in 1905, but I think our uncle came here in 1912, and so this year, it's been one hundred years. It's kind of hard to stay in the same business for a hundred years.

MJH: Now, Jim would have been your great uncle.

GB: Great uncle, yes, he was our granddad's brother, his older brother.

MJH: Tell me about some of the milestones that you have had. I am particularly in the boom and bust, and the disaster, of the 1980s. What was your bank doing?

BB: We were very fortunate in the 1980s. We had come out of the seventies, which was good in the banking business, and we had remained conservative, very competitive, and quite a bit of capital—dry powder, so to speak—when the eighties came. We went through the oil bust in the state of Oklahoma. That's really what propelled our growth. We were able to buy...

GB: We bought some banks. We bought some banks that were somewhat troubled.

BB: We were the first bank to make an acquisition under multi-bank holding company law, when we bought the Mannford State Bank in 1983. After 1983, there were so many bank closures that they passed a law that allowed you to buy failed institutions as branches. We purchased three banks during that time frame.

At the time, it was very scary. We were so young, we didn't know enough to be scared. As things turned out, those turned out to be pretty good purchases.

GB: We didn't have significant problems in the eighties. Our dad passed away at the end of 1980, and he ran a pretty tight ship, and he had really good people on board who kind of mentored Bill and me. I had been a bank examiner, and Bill had been working here for six or seven years. We had a guy named Bob Powers, who was my dad's age, who really

was the main guy in terms of lending. And he kind of ran the loan portfolio. And we had another guy who was younger, his name was Tommy Hudgins, and he was an outstanding guy. He just retired about, what, five or six years ago?

BB: Five years ago.

GB: Five years ago.

Tommy Hudgins. He was a very outstanding guy in terms of lending, and just knowing the community. I would say, as much as anything, those two guys got us through the 1980s, or way into the 1980s, and kept our bank pretty solid. By the end of the 1980s, we were pretty solid. We had gone through a lot of stuff. We did alright in the 1980s. I mean, we could show you the numbers. We never had a bad year. We never had a year where we lost money, to my knowledge. Now, maybe back in the 1930s or something, we lost money. But I got directives from somewhere.

BB: The 1980s were so bad in the overall banking business in Oklahoma—I mean, half the banks went broke!—that it makes the current financial crisis seem like peanuts.

GB: I think there were 130 bank failures. We started out with 520, so a fourth of the banks, approximately, went broke. Everybody had some degree of trouble. I've got an earnings and size of our bank deal that goes from 1980 to the present. I think I've got it upstairs. That would be kind of interesting. I'm not sure I have updated it with 2011 numbers, but it shows the size of our bank, and what our earnings were, and has comments like, "This year we opened up a branch in such-and-such town." I'll see if I've got it.

MJH: Any other files that you might have, too, about some of the characters you're talking about, newspaper stories, human interest stories...

GB: Do we have a history file?

BB: We have a history box. We just throw stuff in a box. Somebody's supposed to organize it someday. Would you like to look in our history box?

MJH: Oh, man! Is that okay? I'd love to!

GB: I'll run upstairs right now and see if I've got it...

Turned off tape recorder...

GB: Now, we're in Tulsa, Keifer, Mounds, Beggs, Kellyville, Glenpool, Sand Springs, Berryville, Mannford, Yale, and Cleveland. I think that's 12 towns. We were in two in 1980, and now we're in 12. We have several branches.

Counted...Checking on number of banks...

GB: We're not in Jenks... West Tulsa!

Those are the communities we're in now. So we have expanded from two to 12, and we have multiple branches. We have two branches in Sand Springs, and three locations in Sapulpa.

MJH: So, American Bancorporation...

GB: That's our holding company that owned American National Bank. We changed our name in... I think it was in 2001. I think that's when we merged our Mannford bank... I know what it was. You couldn't have, in Oklahoma, you couldn't branch, you couldn't have more than two branches per bank, so we had two banks in our holding company. And then they did away with that limitation, I think, in 2001. And that's when we merged our bank in Mannford, Oklahoma...

Google Harry Sinclair. I am pretty sure the guy went to prison, but I am almost positive that that's who my granddad bought his stock from in the 1920s. I think it was right after Harry Sinclair got out of prison, and right as the roundhouse closed here in Sapulpa. And this guy decided, "I don't want to own a bank in Sapulpa." So my granddad was working here, and his brother had died, who was much older, and he had been kind of running the bank, I think—Jim Berry. Jim Berry had a son named Jim Berry, and he went on to become the chairman of the board of the Republic National Bank of Dallas, which was the largest bank in Dallas. Now, it's... I don't even know what they call it anymore. But it merged with the First National Bank of Dallas in the eighties, and went broke in 1988. It merged with First National of Dallas, and they called it First Republic. I was working at a deal the other day, and up until Wachovia went broke, the largest bank failure in the history of the United States had been, I think, Continental Illinois Bank in Chicago, and the second [largest] was First Republic in Dallas. My uncle was chairman of the board. It was a very large bank, the largest bank in Texas.

MJH: Uncle Jim?

GB: Uncle Jim. He graduated from Culver Military Academy in Culver, Indiana. Jim came to work in Sapulpa for awhile, but then he went to Dallas, and he was the head of a very large bank. Republic National Bank...

Continued to talk about Uncle Jim, Texas banking, small talk about Culver Military Academy, First National Bank of OKC, historic restoration in Sapulpa. etc...

We have grown quite a bit. We are ten times larger than we were in 1981. Unfortunately, our income hasn't grown by ten times, but it has grown quite a bit!

End