

EXPLOR ATION RA DIO

Episode 6

**THE ROVER BOYS...
USING WHISKEY AS A LION
REPELLENT**

with

David Kingston



EXPLORATION RADIO is a podcast focusing on the past, present and future of exploration. Hosted by Ahmad Saleem and Steve Beresford, the show is impartial with the content produced, intending to unearth fresh perspectives on issues and challenges faced by the global resources industry. This podcast is free from vested interests, is self-funded with limited sponsorship, and is freely available on iTunes, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher Radio, Google Play, Spotify, or through our website:

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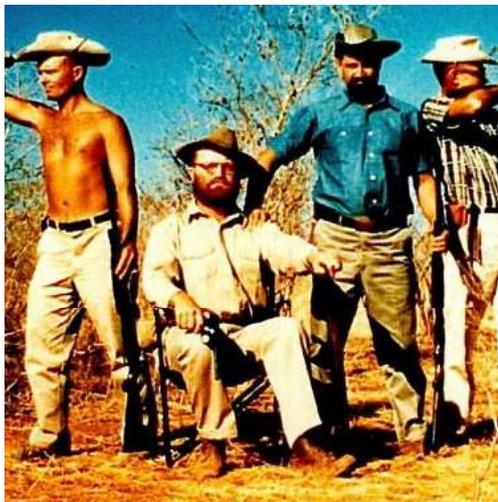
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The audio recording of this episode can be accessed at www.explorationradio.com



DAVID KINGSTON (1927-2017, seated above photo) was a member of the Exxon Rover Boys, an elite team of geologists who in the 1950s and 60s scoured new frontiers around the world to assess their potential for hosting major petroleum deposits. The Rover Boys were infamous for their ability to adapt to harsh conditions and unfamiliar cultures, while at the same time executing exceptional technical work.

David held a PhD in Geology from University of Wisconsin. He authored numerous technical papers and co-authored a book, *The Oil Finders*. He was considered an expert on worldwide basins, and was an American Association of Petroleum Geologists Distinguished Lecturer.

Exploration Radio was privileged to interview David in 2017 only months prior to his passing.

My name is Dave Kingston. I'm a geologist, retired from Exxon after 34 years. The company had selected me particularly to do the job of this roving geological assignment they called it. And it was called the Rover Boys for short.

What happened to the rest of the Rover Boys? Well, they're all gone, of course. I'm the last one alive as far as I know.

Ahmad: Hi, I'm Ahmad.

Steve: Hi, I'm Steve.

Ahmad: And welcome to Exploration Radio.

Steve: Ever fancied a trip into the future? A trip to a future world to see how life pans out? Our world is changing fast around us. What does it feel like to go through that transition? After all today, right here right now, feels like it did yesterday. I've lost all reference to any transition. A nostalgic look backwards enthralls me no end. "What have I forgotten?" "What did I never learn in the first place?"

I'm an exploration geologist and what I do is changing. I hear the words about the need for change. But everyone around me is still working the same way, banging their head against the same wall of dogma. I feel like I'm a prefect at school again, who after years of working their way up the rung, finds themselves in-charge and behaves exactly the same way as he did as when he or she was treated. A lifetime of accumulated lessons forgotten as the system pushes against them. No room for Mavericks here – except for another LinkedIn top 10 list of things you need for successful exploration. Please click here.

Is what I do still useful? I'm a rock licker. I love geology. Non-geologists look at you sideways as if anyone could love the science of inanimate objects. People can relate to stargazing or botanizing. But rocks? It's never been about rocks. It's about the stories they tell. Listen to what drives our guests. It's catastrophic this and carnivorous that. We're fortunate to travel, to seek new places and go where people don't volunteer to go, to stand on the edge of ice sheets and to climb mountains. But there's one thing that we all have in common – our love for our science. But as observational and emulation data explode in volume, we can now answer previously intractable problems without rocks. So, what do I do now? Change or stubbornly hold on? For anyone out there sitting on a drill rig asking themselves, "Why do I have

to do this the same way?” Remember the Einstein quote about insanity.

So why did we talk to someone from the petroleum industry? Because we in the minerals industry are now in the equivalent of 1965. We’re exploring the third world at the surface. The Rover Boys went through this transition. Type Rover Boys into any search engine and you’ll be whisked away on a boy’s or girl’s own adventure story. In today’s episode, we talked to Dave Kingston. He led the real Rover Boys – a crack team of Esso geologists who explored the world. These guys explored the world for the last surface discoveries of petroleum. This is an adventure story, showcasing exploration at its finest. The romance of what we do. Great geology, real adventure, field geology, exploration on the limit. They went out to the developing world. Every child has dreams of exploring our world. The same romance and belief systems that inspired the Hillarys and Amundsens live on in people like Dave Kingston. It’s hard not to have our strongest of admiration for these guys. The industry transitioned offshore as it needed to do, and with it new skills were required.

Listen to this story. This is a story about a crack team of field geologists exploring the world for the last surface deposits of petroleum. This story provides a real look into the future for minerals exploration. This is a glimpse into your future.

Ahmad: So now, did you spend your whole career in Exxon/Esso? Or was there another company before that you started with?

Exxon hired me specifically to do this job. I did a master’s degree up in a place called the South Nahanni River in the Yukon Territory. No one had ever been into this country doing geology before, so we made the first geological maps. Later, I took horses into the Canadian Rockies for three months to do the stratigraphy along the mountain front, which we would project down under the basin in Alberta. And I think that was one of the things that the Standard Oil Company thought would be a good idea to hire someone who could go into any of these places and get the job done. So the company got a hold of me several years in advance to hire me for this job.

Ahmad: Did you have a passion for geology before you started, or did you discover it when you were at university? How did that come about?

“No one had ever been into this country doing geology before, so we made the first geological maps”.

When I was in the army, everybody my age was. This was back in 1945. As soon as you got out of high school, it was zip right into the army – the war, World War II was on. I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic training, and they had big limestone outcrops in the artillery range. And they would go and shoot artillery during the week. On Sunday, nobody fired artillery on their artillery range. But all these limestones had been broken up and they were full of different fossils. So we would go out there – of course it was against the rules – we went out there and sneaked up and down the little creeks and arroyos, picking up fossils. And that's how I got interested in geology.

By the way, I didn't get into fighting. I was just too young. They shut the bomb off and I was just finishing basic training, so I...

Ahmad: Oh, wow.

I got to learn about the discipline, but not about any of the bad stuff.

Ahmad: How did your army buddies feel about you hoofing around looking at fossils when you should have probably been doing something a little bit more serious?

“We would go down into the swamps and catch trout in the rivers and hunt and fish, a lot of hunting and fishing. And this was good because we slept on the ground. We cooked over an open fire...and that's just being outdoors all the time and going into new areas. This was very good for us later on, when we went into these different countries.”

Well on Sunday, there was nothing to do anyways. So, they were home darning their socks or writing letters to their girlfriends and I was out doing geology.

Ahmad: Well you had your priorities right Dave. So that's good. I mean, obviously, you like the part about going into an unknown area and doing work and it happened to be geological work. Did that passion come from childhood?

I was brought up in the state of Wisconsin in the United States, and my grandfather had a logging business up in the northern part where there's big timber. So every summer, as a young man, I used to go up there and work in the logging camps. We worked up in the woods. This is wild woods, these are what we call big timber. On the stump of the tree, it may be as much as a one or one and a half metres through the stump. They're big trees. We were going into all different places. We would go down into the swamps and catch trout in the rivers and hunt and fish, a lot of hunting and fishing. And this was good because we slept on the ground. We cooked over an

open fire. We hunted and fished and so on, and that's just being outdoors all the time and going into new areas. This was very good for us later on, when we went into these different countries.

Steve: Did you get to travel while you're young or was this only when you started working?

When I was young, I was brought up under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and there was the Great Depression and nobody did any traveling because nobody had any money in the United States. So I just went up to my grandfather's place up in the woods, and that was about the only traveling I did. And so, I didn't do any traveling until after I joined Esso, and then they sent me off. My first place with Esso was to Cuba.

Ahmad: I guess one thing that I kind of see is that you ended up getting a job doing something that you pretty much love doing. You know as a kid you were exploring new areas, hunting, fishing, and then you ended up getting hired as a Rover Boy to basically do the same thing but for an oil company.

"They had no idea what kind of geology was in the basin. So, they would send us in to find out what it was like."

That is exactly right, that's just exactly what happened. The Standard Oil Company would find an area that they thought was going to be an interesting basin to find out what was there. They had no idea what kind of geology was in the basin. So, they would send us in to find out what it was like.

Ahmad: I think it'd be fascinating to hear how you actually did your job in this environment. How do you do geology when you're completely away from your office, from management, any support lines, for months at a time?

How we did this was we would go in, get a topographic map so we could at least locate where we were, and any kind of geologic maps there might be in existence. Then see if there were any aerial photographs taken of the area. During World War II, the United States Army did a lot of photography of different countries all around the world and these then were available to us. We could just buy these aerial photographs in deserts or mountain terrain. It was very useful. We could see rock outcrops and things like that. Of course in the tropical rainforest, you couldn't see anything but treetops.

Then when we went to the country, we would get our gear

all together – usually using jeeps if we were going to go into desert or semi-arid areas. And I would hire an airplane - a little two-seater single engine airplane with some pilot that would fly around over the basin. We would fly back and forth over the basin looking for rock outcrops. This is a much faster way than trying to do it on foot or with a jeep. So we would fly over the whole basin. When we got through with this aerial photography, we had a pretty good idea of where we were going to go to look for rock outcrops. And then, we would go out on the surface and visit these different places and see what was there.

“The geologic basin is like a history book...The only thing wrong with this history book was that it had a bunch of pages torn out.

The geologic basin is like a history book. Maybe as much as 500 million years ago, the rocks were deposited. The basin keeps subsiding, subsiding, subsiding over the years and each layer that was laid down was like some pages in a history book. And then, if the edges of the basin were broken and the rocks were exposed to the surface, you could go to these edges of the basin and find these outcrops and then predict what was going to be down under the basin. And that’s what we did. Basically, we would look for tectonic features on the surface, predict what tectonic features might be within the basin from what we saw along the edges. The only thing wrong with this history book was that it had a bunch of pages torn out.

Pull these things together and try to make a picture of the geologic history, and what was there and where we would expect to find it. Then we would write up a final report at the end of the field season and bring it back to New York and present it. Then the company would either say, “This looks like a really good place to go,” or if we said it looked like it didn’t have the right constituents, then we would probably say, “Well, we’re not going in there.”

Ahmad: So Dave, how much of picking the areas or coming up with this strategy of exploration was your involvement?

The company itself had different people looking at areas. Then they would send out geologists to drive through the country, go to the universities, talk to the professors, read the literature, and they get an idea of what might be there. And if things looked interesting, if it was a large enough area, if it was close to another basin that had a lot of oil – like many of the oil basins in the Middle East were adjacent to something had a lot of oil in it. So you think, well if that trend of that same oil producing conditions probably exist in this area here, let’s go and take a look over there

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and see what we find. That’s how many of the places were chosen.

Later on after we had done a lot of these basins, we then made a basin classification system of all the oil basins that we knew of in the world, and we classified them and we put down what kind of plays we would predict would be found in that basin. And then, also, an evaluation of whether we thought it was a good-looking basin or not. And then the company would take that into consideration, and we might go in and do some more work in the same basin to further evaluate the prospects.

Now also, the company had a couple of research labs. When we would come back from perhaps two or three years overseas and make a presentation of one of our reports of a basin, then the company would say, “We’re going to send you to the research lab to take a school that they’re giving.” It’s a two-week school, and it’s about the latest things we know about geochemistry, or tectonics, or even geophysics. So, we would be sent to the schools and go back and spend a couple of weeks and see what all the latest developments were. And therefore, we kept on getting retrained all the time, periodically and this kept us closer to the top of what was known about petroleum exploration than other people probably. Other companies that didn’t have this system.

Ahmad: Esso seems to be quite innovative in what they were doing with the Rover Boys. How come other companies weren’t doing the same?

Well I suspect other companies were doing something similar, but they didn’t do it on the same scale that we did. One company went into the République du Niger, that’s the Niger Republic. They went in there and they had about 20 vehicles and they must have had 15 geologists and a bunch of cooks and bakers and so on, and they had an airplane flying in, bringing fresh food into them and all this kind of stuff. It took them two years and must have cost them a ton of money. And we did the same job in five months. We were a lot cheaper. We were probably the cheapest thing that the company had for reconnaissance exploration. The idea of reconnaissance exploration, you know, goes back a long way. You may have heard about the British Long Range reconnaissance group in North Africa during World War II. So we got ideas from them.

Ahmad: What led Esso to start going down this path? So why did they go and select teams like Rover Boys to

go and explore and build this research, innovative hub inside the company?

“I’ve never run across a company with management and their board of directors that was as good as the ones we had in Esso.”

“Nothing we could do would surprise them. And nothing that we did, did they really complain about. Nobody ever questioned any of our expenses.”

I’ve never run across a company with management and their board of directors that was as good as the ones we had in Esso. And the reason for that was, these guys all started out when they got out of the university, the company hired them and sent them out in the desert, or in Mexico or in South America. They would lead mule trains up into the Andes Mountains. They lived the same kind of the life we did. They didn’t know nearly as much about the geology, but they had many of these same experiences that we had with things that happened to you when you get out in the bush. Nothing we could do would surprise them. And nothing that we did, did they really complain about. If I wanted to rent an airplane for a couple of days, I would rent an airplane. If I needed to send out a bunch of barrels of oil out into the Sahara Desert with an Arab transporteur, I just made the deal and set them out there. Nobody ever questioned any of our expenses. We lived 100% on expense accounts. Year in, year out, all the time we were outside of the United States because we were always on one of these expeditions.

Ahmad: That’s pretty interesting. I guess one point I want to go back to Dave, you said not a lot of other companies did it the same way you guys did. Is that because of how you ran the team or how the Esso management wanted to run it?

Well, it just turned out that way. The guys that did this job before I got in there were sort of almost the same way, doing work down in Angola. Small group, had three guys, and they got a small boat, and went up and down the rivers looking at the rock outcrops. So they found out that this was working, and they kept these people in there. The company said, “You can go in there, and if you want more men, we’ll send them to you.” But we didn’t need more. We just did it our way.

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Ahmad: So, was there a time when management was an impediment to what you guys did?

No, this is the interesting thing. And this is because these guys had done this job themselves before. So, they knew how tough and how difficult things could be. One of my previous guys that did this job before me was stuck in North Africa and trying to get his vehicles out of customs. And after a month, nothing happened. So he sent back a monthly report. He said, “Every day, a holiday. Every meal,

***“Every day, a holiday.
Every meal, a banquet.
Every night, a party.”
(a Monthly report)***

a banquet. Every night, a party.” Monthly report signed with his name. Now management got this thing, and they thought it was hilarious. And they put this in the exploration newsletter and they sent it all around the company saying, “This is the ideal for brevity and conclusiveness.”

Ahmad: That is brilliant.

So, you can see that almost anything goes. Once a month, the exploration management in Esso would send out a newsletter and they send it around to all of the different offices within the company all around the world. And their motto was, “All the news that’s fit to print, and some that’s not.” So, that tells you--

Ahmad: That’s perfect.

--what got into the newsletter. Sure where we drilled wells, but if somebody fell into the swamp or something if it got into your monthly report, they heard about it. Personal letters also went into the exploration newsletter.

“We ran out of pipe tobacco, a couple months ago. So, we’ve been having to smoke camel dung, dried of course.”

We were finishing our work in the Sahara or in Western Senegal, then we’re going back to write our final report. And I wrote a letter to the exploration manager, Bill Wallace. I said, “Dear Bill, I understand you’re going to Paris this spring. Would you mind bringing over two cans of walnut pipe tobacco? And we’ll pick it up in April when we come through. We ran out of pipe tobacco, a couple months ago of the regular stuff. So, we’ve been having to smoke camel dung, dried of course. But we don’t want you to think that we’re complaining about having to smoke camel dung, but we’re beginning to enjoy it. And the trouble is that when we get out of the desert, we won’t be able to find our desert tobacco and we’ll have to go back to the regular stuff.” So of course, this letter went straight to the exploration newsletter. “You see, you guys that are complaining about your jobs, if you’re out in the desert you’d be smoking camel dung”.

Ahmad: Your background, I mean the type of work that you did where you did your geological study, kind of made you really well-suited for this job. The other members of the Rover Boys, what backgrounds were they from? Were they all kind of similar to you or did they come from different backgrounds?

No one had done camping out and doing as much outdoor stuff as I had. But what it was, was mainly they had gone through school and they had a bachelor’s degree mostly

“One of our guys that worked with us was our mechanic, George Voutopoulos. He was a Greek...We were looking for an interpreter...we said, “George, how many languages do you speak?” Well, of course, Greek, English, French, Turkish, Kurdish, three dialects of Arabic, Italian because he learned that in North Africa.”

“...then we found out that he was a crackerjack mechanic. We break down out in the desert somewhere, George could always fix the jeep well enough so you could get back to civilization. So he was the most valuable guy I ever met. He was with us for 12 years...”

, or a master’s degree in geology, and they were really interested in doing this kind of work. And the company was the one that picked them up, not me. They would just get young geologists that they thought were very promising and send them out to sit on wells or do some fieldwork. And the ones that did look like they had a good future and were learning quickly, they would send them out with us for a season to see how they turned out. If they did a good job, then they could come with us again for maybe the next time or another time. They didn’t do a good job, it was out the door. Go back to your headquarters you know. You’re not going to make the grade.

One of our guys that worked with us was our mechanic, George Voutopoulos. He was a Greek. When war came, the German army was coming down like an avalanche, down the Balkans and he saw Greece was going to go under, so he got on a bus and drove down to Palestine and joined the British 8th Army. Well the Brits said, “These Greeks can’t fight. But we’ll make him a mechanic.” So they sent him to mechanic school. He learned how to fix diesel trucks, gasoline trucks, mobile artillery, tanks, whatever you can imagine. He went with the British 8th Army, attached incidentally to the Australians and the New Zealanders. He liked them the best. He said they treat you just like they treat each other. So, I don’t know if that was good or bad. But anyway, he went chasing Rommel back and forth across the desert. Then after the war, he was in the Greek brigade that fought against the communists and the civil war in Greece.

Then after that civil war was up, he had several jobs and we ran into him in Iskenderun, which is in southern Turkey. We were looking for an interpreter. So we went over to talk to him and yes he said he spoke Turkish and he spoke English. We didn’t ask him about anything else. Then later on, we went up further to the east and went into the Kurdistan country and where they all spoke Kurd. That’s the way you pronounce the word, by the way, Kurd. They spoke Kurd and George spoke Kurdish. Then we went over to Syria a little bit, across the border. We didn’t pay attention to where the border marks were – we just looked at the rocks. We went over there and he spoke Arabic, turned out he spoke three dialects of Arabic. Well, then later we said, “George, how many languages do you speak?” Well, of course, Greek, English, French, Turkish, Kurdish, three dialects of Arabic, Italian because he learned that in North Africa. So, he spoke all these different languages and he hadn’t told us that he could do this.

And then we found out that he was a crackerjack mechanic. We break down out in the desert somewhere, George could always fix the jeep well enough so you could get back to civilization. So he was the most valuable guy I ever met. He was with us for 12 years. He was an invaluable person wherever we went. He could talk to anybody. He kept us out of a lot of trouble and listening to what people were saying about us behind our backs. They don't like you so much, they talk about it in their own dialect and George was listening. So, this was handy.

“Did anybody ever get sick when we were doing this Rover Boys stuff? And the answer to that is almost never. No serious sickness ever happened to us.”

By the way, we're hiring people all the time when we go out here. We hired truck drivers, we hired airplane pilots, we may hire lawyers, we may hire all sorts of people, and they tell you how good they are. The only way you can find out how good they are is to try them out.

We had specific things. Did anybody ever get sick when we were doing this Rover Boys stuff? And the answer to that is almost never. No serious sickness ever happened to us.

Ahmad: I mean, I find that fascinating. You spent a number of years in the field, I mean, I'd say decades in the field, and to come out of it with not a serious illness on the other side, I think that is incredible. And a real feather in your cap that you stuck to that regiment for so long so well.

The reason for that was during World War II, the army developed these wonder drugs – like penicillin. We would carry those things with us in case of an accident. So if someone got really sick or fever or something, we could take these antibiotics and cure them. Second thing was, we never drank any water that did not have any purification tablets in it. We would filter our water with a Swiss little hand pump filter and then put purification tablets in it. Never drank out of a spring. Never drank out of a river or a creek or anything like that - that was just not done.

And when we were out in the bush with our guys, we'd be three guys and maybe we would have a mechanic with us. Or we might even have a local guy if we were in some place we didn't speak the language, then we would get a guy who spoke something that we spoke then he would translate for us. But he was also the camp watchman to keep people from coming in our camp when we were driving out looking at the rocks. But we didn't have anyone there doing the dishwashing or a cook or anything like that. We avoided that like the plague. The reason we

“We were pretty strict with the things we did. But that’s the way you survive. You don’t make mistakes.”

didn’t have any cooks or people helping us in the camp was because these were people locally that we would bring in. We don’t know what kind of diseases they have in their village. Do they have malaria? Do they have typhoid? What do they have? Then it brings that into your camp. So, we don’t have these guys around.

I never sleep in the villages. I don’t sleep in those grass houses. You don’t know who was in that house before you, somebody with malaria or typhoid or something bad. So, the mosquitoes bite them, they bite you - it’s not good. So I always take my cot and sleep out about 100 metres away from the camp.

We had quite a regimen that we followed very strictly. In fact, everybody that got into our group had been in one branch of the military at one time or another. One guy Shelby had been in the Marine Corps, I was in the army. Other guys were in the army, one guy was in the navy. They’d all had military service, so they had discipline. This gives you discipline you know. We were pretty strict with the things we did. But that’s the way you survive. You don’t make mistakes.

Ahmad: Is that one way you’ve maintained cohesion in the Rover Boys? I mean you’re working in a pretty tough environment, you’re doing a job that most people aren’t. How did you maintain team dynamics and team unity? Is that basically what was the overriding principle?

“Everybody pretty well knew what they were supposed to do.”

Yes, everybody pretty well knew what they were supposed to do. I’ve been out on other field trips with people at some other time where there were people that didn’t get along with each other. In fact, up in the Canadian bush, they say, “If two old prospectors go back in the bush for a winter and only one comes out,” he says, “Oh, he died. He froze to death.” He didn’t freeze to death. They got bushed and one of them killed the other one. This is not uncommon in these places, especially in the Canadian bush. It’s interesting that in the Canadian bush, you go back there nobody knows where you are. You go out in the spring, you come back in the fall. A bush pilot takes you out, drops you off, picks you up 200 miles downriver in the fall, and you get along with the guys you’re with. If anything happens of course, you’re going into ground right there because you can’t get the guy out. He’s finished. You better not have any accidents because there’s no way to get somebody out.

Africa is completely different. In Africa, everybody knows who you are. Sometimes you do something, you shoot a buffalo somewhere, give the meat to the chief, the drums are talking. The guys who go walking between villages are telling the stories. And the next time you go to the next village, they're happy to see you because here comes patron. "Oh Patron, why don't you shoot us a nice big antelope?"

Ahmad: So how did you go being in these new cultures, did you have any issues? Did you find that exciting? Did you find that challenging?

"We learned very quickly things that you do and don't do in some of these cultures."

Well, we learned very quickly things that you do and don't do in some of these cultures. Most of the time, if we're working in different countries in Europe or places like that, there's no problem. We get into countries where the women cover themselves up, we don't have any connection with women almost always. We just avoid this because you don't know what the rules are in each country. So there may be no rules, there may be some rules - the best thing to do is we only talk to the men. And we like to only talk as much to the chiefs because those are the ones with authority to tell you what to do. Some places there are lot of the things that you eat, they don't eat. Some of the things they eat, you don't eat – or you don't particularly care to eat.

Ahmad: So how much work would you do before you went into an area? Did you do a lot of research before you went into an area?

Well, we did whatever we could. Lots of times there was nothing done. We would always go through the medical books. Read through a whole medical book to find out what to do in case something happens. People get sick. What perhaps you should do with them? What the diseases might be? And then, we also look at books about what are the animals there. What kinds of snakes are there? How dangerous are they? How do they act? And so, you're a little bit on the alert.

When we were down in Africa going up some of those rivers, we didn't pay attention to the old hippos. We thought they were quite quaint, you know. They'd be on one side of the river, we'd be paddling down the other side. We didn't think it was dangerous. Later on, we found out the hippos were quite dangerous. I found out that one time. I was walking alongside the river and I was in the grazing area of an old bull hippo. And he started grunting at me,

“That’s when I find out that hippos weren’t such quaint little darling piggies as I thought.”

“People say what about the bigger animals? How about lions, do you ever run across lions? Well, yeah we ran across lions.”

and then start trotting towards me, so I turned around and trotted off. And he’s got into a gallop, so I started running. He can’t run too fast and I didn’t know what do I do – do I climb a tree or something? Because they were all farm trees. Then, I came to a log that was about maybe one meter high, so I jumped over the log. Well, he can’t jump over the log – his belly is only six inches above the ground. So he grunts, grunts, grunts then he runs around the corner of the log to get on your side and you jump back over the log. So, I spent 20 minutes jumping back and forth over that log with that bull hippo on the other side. Until he got tired of this game and wandered off. That’s when I find out that hippos weren’t such quaint little darling piggies as I thought.

And then, people say what about the bigger animals? How about lions, do you ever run across lions? Well, yeah we ran across lions. But most of the time, lions are pretty shy. All the big animals, if you’re in hunting country, they try to avoid humans. This was in a national park, was in Southern République du Niger, so nobody hunted in the park. So we would have to drive through the park and we were going to look at some rocks. And as we went into the park, we had shot a gazelle. But it was hanging on the back of the jeep. We’re going to eat that that night. And as we drove in, the warden said, “there’s a place to camp down there, about maybe 15 kilometers down into the park and you can camp there. There’s a place between two creeks, there’s a couple of grass houses, and the lions hunt there. So you may hear some lions hunting at night if you want to stay in one of the houses.” He put wax plugs in the end of our guns to make sure we weren’t going to shoot anything, and we drove down into the park.

Well when we left the warden, his dog came along behind us. He had a mangy old big dog, that smelt that gazelle that we’d hanging on the back of the jeep. And he thought he’d get some of it so he followed us along. We tried to chase him back and throw rocks at him and stuff, but no he wouldn’t go back. So okay, take your chances. We drove on down into the park and we came to this campground with a couple of grass houses. We’re not going to sleep in there. Who knows who’s been sleeping in there a week ago? So, we put up our cots. We cook the gazelle steaks and had supper and got ready to go to bed. We had a campfire going there. You could look out and see along the road, which was about 30 meters away, could see the eyes of animals – some kind of animals that you could see. Then we heard the lions starting to roar. They were hunting.

Before we went to bed, that dog came up. The dog was trying to come in and get under George's cot. George said, "this mangy dog is going to put a bunch of fleas in my cot. I'm not going to have him sleep under my cot." So he got up, got a big club of wood, put it down next to his base. "If that dog comes around here, I'm going to give him a whack. I'm not going to have him sleep under my cot." We talked about George's dog stick you know, and then we turned the lights out and we all went to sleep.

The next morning, I got up just at daylight, I was putting my boots on and I said, "George, where's that dog? There's no sign of any dog anywhere around the camp. What happened? Did he try to come under your cot?"

He said, "Yes, that dog tried to get under my cot last night and I woke up. It was pitch dark when I reached down and got my club and I took a big swing and hit him right on the nose. And he had a yowl and ran off".

So I walked over there then to take a look at the tracks and they were the tracks of a full-grown lion. So we told George, "George, you just whacked a lion with a club. That's the first guy that we've ever heard that had enough courage to hit a lion with a club."

George said, "This job is too dangerous. I'm not getting paid enough. My life is in danger out here with you guys."

So I said, "Okay George. I'll give you one bottle of whiskey added to your pay."

George said, "Okay, good deal."

When the lions were out roaring around the camp, George would open up his bottle and take a few drinks and say, "You know this stuff, if you drink enough this whiskey," he said, "it gives you courage. You know what really it should be called... it should be called courage water. If you drink enough of this stuff, you got courage. You're not afraid to tackle anything."

"Well, what happens, George, if you drink too much?"

He said, "Well if you really get skunk drunk and the lion comes over, he'll smell you and you smell so badly of whiskey, he won't eat you. And even if he does, you don't care."

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I sent it back to New York, and it went straight into the newsletter, you know. So we got all sorts of comments later on with letters from other people about what happened to George and his whiskey and this lion.

Ahmad: Dave, when did you start in Esso? When did your career in Esso start?

It started in 1953.

Ahmad: And when did you finish up?

I finished in 1958, I think it was. Sorry, did I say 50? I meant 78.

Ahmad: Yeah. Okay, that makes a lot more sense.

No, it's 80. No, it was 87.

Ahmad: Eighty-seven? So, that's 34 years you were in Esso. How did the company change while you were working for Esso?

Well, it changed. It got more, more... what happened was that we had done most of the surface fieldwork by the middle 1970s. By that time, most of the basins we had looked at. We were still finding them. We were still finding basins, going into areas. But now, they had started doing seismic work offshore. What have happened was that the Humble Oil Company, which was an affiliate of Esso, had a geologist that said, "We should make regional cross sections all across Texas." So he made a series of regional cross sections all across Texas using wells that had been drilled all the way out to the coast. They had to stop on the coast because at that time, they hadn't drilled in the Gulf of Mexico. So then he said, "Why don't we make these things out into the Gulf of Mexico? We'll shoot long regional seismic lines way out into the Gulf just to see what's out there?"

Well, they didn't think that was such a good idea. It was a lot of money to spend on something completely unknown and there wasn't even any laws about how you can explore in the offshore or anything. But they went to the New York office and they said, "Well, that sounds like this is a new area. What if there's more of these basins in the offshore that we haven't considered?" So they decided to shoot these seismic lines and they shot seismic lines way out into the Gulf, next to the territorial border with Mexico and stopped. They shot them out there and what

"They decided to shoot these seismic lines and they shot seismic lines way out into the Gulf, next to the territorial border with Mexico and stopped. They shot them out there and what they found was the most fantastic series of structures and types of geology that they had never seen before."

“The potential for huge oil fields was right away important. So then they went after and they got the government to set up a series of laws where you could bid on offshore blocks. And then go out and explore, shoot seismic and drill wells. That’s how the exploration started. It all started in the Gulf of Mexico.”

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they found was the most fantastic series of structures and types of geology that they had never seen before. Out in that Gulf, they found places where salt domes had been squeezed out and flowed horizontally and then come up in another area. All sorts of huge reservoirs. 5 meters of sandstone onshore would turn out to be 50 meters, or 100 meters, thick offshore. So, the potential for huge oil fields was right away important. So then they went after and they got the government to set up a series of laws where you could bid on offshore blocks. And then go out and explore, shoot seismic and drill wells. That’s how the exploration started. It all started in the Gulf of Mexico.

I was in London. I was doing both Europe and Africa for surface exploration. The company said we’re going to take a look at the North Sea. It’s perfect, it has got land on both sides. We get a few wells in Holland, some wells in England, and we’ll make regional cross sections across the basin. So they did that. And then, we shot seismic lines between these drilled wells onshore, so we could tell what the ages of the rock were onshore and project that out across the North Sea. That’s when we found these big structures and all these great big Jurassic sandstones, that got us going in the North Sea. Other companies saw our regional cross sections and that’s when they picked up this regional cross section stuff – which is something that we were sort of doing only by ourselves at that time. Then this kept on going. It kept going from one place to another. Since most of the really good basins onshore were taken up, they started going more in the offshore. Where they had oil onshore, why don’t you have oil just in the offshore, too? This was logical and that’s how exploration has progressed ever since then.

Ahmad: So your job would have definitely changed from where you started in the company to where you ended?

The company has changed. It has become more of a geophysically-driven company than a geological company. In fact, now we train our geologists to be geological geophysicists and geophysicists to be chief physical geologists. So that they can both interpret what the rocks are, what the play should look like, and then what the seismologist sees in the offshore.

Ahmad: Did you have to become a little bit more of a geophysicist by the end?

Oh, yes. Everybody became a geophysicist. Some of the

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last things we did with the company, we still formed our same group. but we had a couple of geologists, we had a cracker jack geophysicist and that’s how they operated in the end. But it became much more technically oriented, with seismology rather than surface geology.

Ahmad: What has been the downside of this technology? What’s been the upside? The upside I think is obvious, that you were able to go into offshore environments. What’s been the downside in your opinion?

Well, it’s not as much fun. Of course there’s not much hunting out there. The fishing is... they’re too big to catch and eat, you know. The offshore is much more technically oriented. It’s ships now, it’s drilling ships. There’s more engineers and geophysicists than it is any surface geology.

Ahmad: Do you think there would be a role for you in an oil company today?

I think I’m so far over the hill.

Ahmad: Well even your skill set, do you think that would be something valued?

I’m still working, you know. 90 years old and I haven’t reached retirement age yet. So I’m still going. And I’m working for a small company down in Texas. And what I’m doing is, I’m evaluating areas in basins where they might pick up acreage and do some exploration and wells. So you never give up.

There’s an old saying and that is, “Old geologists never die. They just slowly petrify.” That’s me.

Ahmad: Spoken like a true petroleum geologist. That’s perfect. So are there any lessons from the Rover Boys that you think are missing from exploration nowadays? From modern exploration?

Yes, I think so. One of the big things we found out was that when we first went into Libya, some of our geologists did a field study, a regional study of Libya, and then the government put up blocks and everybody bid on the blocks. We were in the Cyrenaia basin over in the eastern side. Next to us was Mobil Oil and other oil companies bid on blocks and won them. So when we started doing seismic, we resurveyed the blocks and found out that there was a gap in the original surveying, which between the two

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blocks – between Mobil and ourselves – there was a part that had not been put on a block. So the government I guess they went to Mobil, they said, “Do you want this strip in here?” And Mobil said, “We don’t want it. It is too far from the basin edge, might be too deep to drill out there.” So they came to Esso and said, “Esso, you have to take this block. We’re not having any empty blocks in here.” So then we shot some seismic lines and lo and behold, in this unwanted strip was this Zelton oil field – 4 billion barrels of oil. So, that was one of the lessons we learned - always pick up the unwanted acreage that nobody else wants. That’s probably where the oil fields are going to be found.

Ahmad: So, the question for you is... the Rover Boys, were you good or were you lucky?

I suppose it’s a little bit of both.

Ahmad: So ultimately Dave, do you think the Rover Boys were successful?

Oh yes. They found oil in many of the places we were working. They found oil in the North Sea where we had done these regional cross sections to start things off. We looked at other basins, found other basins in Angola and so on, where the company found oil or later found oil. A lot of the times we would do the surface geology on land, and then years later, the company would go back in and shoot seismic offshore using our studies of the geology onshore to project it into the offshore and then they would find oil. So yes we were, in that respect, we were successful.

Ahmad: So, what would you do differently with the Rover Boys?

Well, there’s no place for them now. It’s good to keep small groups of highly trained specialists working together. Got to have geologists and geophysicists and maybe even engineers to make the right decisions. The oil company decisions are made more and more on more advanced technology than they ever were in those days, so there’s not much I could add. They’re going to keep using the surface geology we did on land for years and years to come, because that’s where the original people saw the actual rocks and described what they look like.

Ahmad: I guess one of the things that I liked about the work that you did is, it’s a foundational work that some-

“If you like hunting and fishing and climbing up to the top of that next mountain to see what there is on the other side, then this is the place for you because that’s where you have an opportunity to do it. No question.”

“I don’t have any regrets at all. I think we had the best job in the company. And most of the geologists in Esso thought we had the best job in the company too.”

“The Rover Boys, they’re all gone. I’m the last one alive as far as I know.”

one can always go back to and build upon. So I think from that point of view, I would judge the work you did as successful because I think it’s going to be the baseline work that people are going to rely on for a long, long time.

Oh well, thank you, thank you, thank you. I appreciate that. Most people don’t thank me for what we did. They just thought we were having a lot of fun out there. Who’s to say, you know, we ought to be paying that company for this job, and not the other way around?

Ahmad: I think I know the answer to this. Do you think fun was an important part of your job?

Oh, no question about that. If you like hunting and fishing and climbing up to the top of that next mountain to see what there is on the other side, then this is the place for you because that’s where you have an opportunity to do it. No question.

Ahmad: Do you have any regrets about your time in Rover Boys?

No, absolutely not. I think we could have been a little bit smarter than we were in working out the geology of some of these basins looking back at it afterwards. I don’t have any regrets at all. I think we had the best job in the company. And most of the geologists in Esso thought we had the best job in the company too.

Ahmad: Were they envious of your job?

Oh, yes. They said, “How do we get into that?”

Ahmad: Being in the Rover Boys, how did you manage your family life, your family structure, friends? Did you have to sacrifice something on that side?

Most guys weren’t married. We were all in fact, all of us were single. Because if you were married, you couldn’t take your wife with you out in the bush. Women don’t want to sit around six months or a year while you’re in some foreign country and they’re by themselves. So, nobody was married. And our friends, you leave your friends. You have friends while you’re there but when you leave that’s a part of your life that’s over. You might run into him again, but we don’t hang on to our friends for a long time.

Now, the Rover Boys, they’re all gone. I’m the last one

alive as far as I know, and I still have a job and I'm still working. I haven't reached retirement age yet. And I'm remember this old Turkish proverb that goes, "Life comes to an end, but the road goes on."

Steve: We thought long and hard about how to ask Dave what this transition felt like. Surely someone who's done what he has, achieved what he has, would feel some longing for how things were. Maybe even angst as the world changed around him.

His answer? Just get on with it.

His advice? Never give up.

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