

10-5-1984

UA68/8/2 William Buckman Oral History

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Recommended Citation

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Lowell Harrison: This is an interview with William Buckman in Cherry Hall on the morning of Friday, October 5.

Bill, suppose we start off our second time around with a little bit about your background. Where were you born, your family and so forth?

William Buckman: I was born in Union County, between Morganfield and Sturgess in 1934. My father was a tennant farmer. We farmed 640 acres there, we had white-faced heifered cattle. I attended Morganfield High School and graduated from there. I came to Western for one semester and then went into the service.

LH: Bill, what year was it that you came to Western?

WB: I came to Western in the fall of 1953.

LH: Were there any particular reasons why you came here instead of going elsewhere?

WB: Most of my friends came here.

LH: I get the feeling that is often the reason why students come. You were just here briefly and then you went into the service, right?

WB: Right. I didn't have the funds to continue my education at that time. Going to the service was a good experience for me because I got the chance to go into electronics. I later decided that I wanted to go into electrical engineering.

Upon returning to college I took my Physics and my professor convinced me to go into Physics, which I have enjoyed tremendously.

LH: Who was the one that convinced you?

WB: Dr. Charles Wittle, who was a nutra-physicist.

LH: You came back to Western in what year?

WB: In 1957.

LH: What was the campus like then? Had the big building boom started by then?

WB: No, it hadn't started yet. The Physics department was located in Cherry Hall, the Math department and Physics were on the same floor.

LH: My office now is what used to be the Math department office.

WB: That's right.

LH: Dr. Yarborough's. When you came in '57, Kelly Thompson had just been president for a couple of years. Did you know him in your undergraduate days?

WB: I knew him, I was not close to him. I served on the Student Advisement Committee and being president of the Physics Club we met a few times. As student groups go today, we were not very involved.

LH: That would be the fore-runner of Student Government wouldn't it?

WB: Certainly.

LH: I recall in my days which was a bit earlier, we didn't even have that. What about the students of that error? For example, how do you feel that your generation was prepared for college in comparison with the freshmen today?

WB: I think we had a very limited curriculum coming from a small high school. I think everyone got the opportunity to get the necessary information to be prepared for college. I don't feel that we were prepared any better than they are now.

LH: Western still had Chapel when you came, didn't they?

WB: Yes, I attended Chapel.

LH: How often did it meet back then?

WB: As I recall probably bi-weekly on Wednesday.

LH: What type of programs were you likely to have had there?

WB: Happy Chandler came once. Other programs were public relations type programs.

LH: You mentioned earlier the teacher that convinced you to go into Physics, who were some of the other outstanding faculty members?

WB: I had several outstanding faculty members. One that comes to mind is Hugh Johnson. Dr. Yarborough was an excellent professor, not because he had great lecture material, but because he made you learn the material. I remember my first conversation with him, I came in and asked for an exception to take two courses at the same time. He said that it was against his better judgement but if I wanted to do it that he would allow it. I got A's in both classes. I had to go in and talk to him when I applied for The Atomic Energy Commission for a fellowship. He said, "Bill, I've never recommended anyone unless they were successful." That really put the monkey on my back, so they speak.

LH: Yes, that would.

WB: Dr. McNall, who was in chemistry.

LH: Where was the Chemistry department then?

WB: It was on the down stairs of Cherry Hall where the fumes all went up by the Physics and other departments.

LH: Any others you care to mention?

WB: I think George Page, his knowledge in Physics was very limited, but he did have the contacts and most of his students went on to do very well.

LH: What about people outside of the sciences that you came in contact with?

WB: I really enjoyed Mrs. Richards, who was in the English department. We had an excellent relationship. Dr. Olson, who taught in the Economics department stimulated me a great deal.

LH: Coming back to student life for a minute, Bill had the student center been built by that time?

WB: Yes.

LH: It was the first real student center other than the Cedar House that the students had ever had. Was the center pretty actively used?

WB: Very actively used.

LH: What about the off campus places such as the Goal Post? Was that still a big center?

WB: The Goal Post was the center of activity and every morning between classes students and faculty would go over and drink their coffee. I recall the professors that used to go over there, Dr. Poteet and Mr. Johnson. They would always flip for coffee and Dr. Johnson would always tell Dr. Poteet that he lost again.

LH: You graduated from Western in what year?

WB: In 1960.

LH: And then went off to graduate school immediately.

WB: I worked over the summer at the Taft Engineering Center in Cincinnati. I did some very interesting work at that time, at that time there was considerable concern about fall-out radiation from nuclear testing. My job was to come up with a method for detecting radionuclides in soy and milk so we could put it on an instrument and after leaving it on for some time we could detect how many sets of radionuclides were present at that time.

LH: You went on to Vanderbilt in the fall of '60.

WB: I went on in the fall of '60 on the Atomic Energy Commission fellowship. After spending a year at Vanderbilt I went to Oakridge National Labs for training during the summer. Then I went back to Vanderbilt and finished up my masters program the next semester.

LH: Is this getting up to about '62?

WB: Yes, '62. I was then contacted by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and they had started a program and asked me to instruct there. I accepted it, my advisor at Vanderbilt got very disturbed, in fact it made it very hard getting my masters thesis accepted. He had set up a Ph.D. Fellowship for me and he wanted me to stay there to work with him. I no longer wanted to work with that professor.

LH: So, at Chapel Hill were you both teaching part-time and then going on with your doctoral studies?

WB: I started out teaching full-time at that time but we made the agreement that I could work on my doctoral.

But it did work out so that I could take two courses a semester, and also be a full-time instructor.

LH: Which does prolong graduate programs, because I did almost the same thing. You finished up with your doctoral in what year?

WB: I completed everything and got my degree in 1967. I did take off in 1964 to do my research and finish up my dissertation and I got a United States Public Health Service training shift.

LH: What was the subject of your dissertation?

WB: It dealt with thermoluminescence and associated physical phenomena of bionic crystals. In essence, this related to the method of using these crystals to measure the amount of radiation in the environment.

LH: Which perhaps had its birth back in the work you had done your senior year.

WB: That was very interesting. I went to talk to my advisor and he told me that I was just wasting my time with that, today it is the most widely used technique around the world.

LH: Even faculty advisors can be wrong.

WB: I can recall several instances where I have told students wrong too.

LH: I'm sure all of us can.

You got your doctoral, I guess the next step was the job hunting.

WB: Job hunting at that time you didn't really look you just let people know. My advisors were very disturbed with me. They wanted me to take a position at Yale University and I wouldn't even go in for the interview. I decided to return to Kentucky due to family ties. I accepted a position at Ky. Westland.

LH: You went on to Westland in '67?

WB: In the fall of 1966.

LH: And how long were you there Bill?

WB: I was there for one year and it became obvious to me that I was like a fish out of water.

LH: They didn't have a lot in equipment did they?

WB: We had some good undergraduate equipment because General Electric had cooperated. I received 2 federal grants and had plenty of money. We had a better electronics laboratory than we do here at Western. It was clear to me that if I had stayed there that in 8-10 years I would be totally dead professionally.

LH: Out of touch. So you stayed one year.

WB: Yes, Dean Owsley, who had attracted me to Ky. Westland resigned and I later offered my resignation.

I had signed a contract for the next three years but I knew that it was a waste. The president even threatened to take me to court if I didn't stay.

LH: That makes you seem wanted doesn't it?

WB: Yes but you prefer not to go to that extent. After that I let it be known that I was interested in another position. I would say that it took Western a great deal of time to respond to this.

LH: We're talking about '66 and '67, what sort of selection process did Western go through in recruiting faculty?

WB: It was pretty much if the department head wanted you. You didn't go through all the guidelines and advertising or anything like that.

LH: During the period that you were here as a student and came back as a faculty member Western had gone through the boom period of building and enrollment, do you have any idea of how many faculty members that came in?

WB: There was a large number of faculty members. Did you come here in that year?

LH: Yes, I consider that a quality year, I seem to recall that there were about 100 or somewhere in that neighborhood. Looking back now to what is dangerously becoming twenty years, how would you describe Western in '67?

WB: It was exciting, money was coming in at Western more than it had seen in along time.

In the Science College you had a new big building going. I had the opportunity to set up one of the best laboratories in the South Eastern United States to measure thermoluminescence and fluorescence. There was a lot of interchange between faculty members and sometimes even arguments.

LH: That was quite possible.

WB: It was a very exciting time.

LH: You said you could have set up a laboratory, could you do it today?

WB: No, we're very far behind. One of the things we lack is faculty members, say in the Physics Department. We've had about half our staff to leave. It appears to me that the lab equipment is out of date. We can't expect to keep up with the modern frontiers.

LH: With the equipment that you have.

WB: Right, we don't have the support facilities to research. In the library you find that reprints and this type thing are just not available. It takes a long period of time to obtain these reprints.

LH: Bill, on this matter of research, when you were you coming in and they were talking to you about joining the faculty, what sort of emphasis did they place on you doing research? Were they really interested in it or did they just want you here to teach?

WB: I was encouraged to take research. One of the things that I wanted

to do when I came here was to be able to devote some time to research. I think that encouraged me and kept me alive professionally. I don't think much distinction was made toward the teaching or whether the person was productive in obtaining grants.

LH: It was nice if you pretty much went on ahead and did it on your own.

WB: That's right.

LH: You did of course continue your research.

WB: Yes, I did. I had some excellent students and I still have some good students working on projects. That's probably the most enjoyable aspect of my position.

LH: I believe you won the university award--what about '72 or '73?

WB: About then, we received a patton, two of my students and myself, on using sapphire as an ultra-violet radiation dicimator. We really enjoyed the last two years working on a project. This project was supported by the Air Force.

LH: Somewhere in there you published a book, THE PRINCIPLES of PHYSICS.

WB: This book was to emphasize the practice aspects of Physics in Medical and Health sciences. About that time I took a big interest on application on physical techniques. This book was for people who were

involved in Pre-Med and going to physical therapy.

LH: You mentioned earlier that you did not have much contact with Kelly Thompson as an undergraduate, did you get to know him any better as a faculty member?

WB: We didn't have a great deal of contact as far as a faculty member. He was always pleasant to me.

LH: How would you evaluate him as a president?

WB: He had some positive characteristics. He knew how to interact with other individuals. Most of the decisions were made by him, one of his weaknesses was the high regard of academics.

LH: I've heard that Thompson concentrated on the building program and left the academics up to Raymond Cravens, did you get that feeling?

WB: I think that was the situation, he had a great deal of confidence in Mr. Cravens.

LH: Were you surprised as a faculty member to learn of his resignation?

WB: I guess in a way I was. I knew that he was having some medical problems. I think that when he went before and announced it to everyone that it stunned the campus.

LH: As I recall we had a special meeting about that right after he had announced it to the Board of Regents.

WB: That's right.

LH: After he resigned he later went to the College Heights Foundation, is that right?

WB: That's right.

LH: And as I recall you had some question about that arrangement.

WB: He made the mistake of saying that he was going to be working for a dollar job, but as I was looking through my packet I found that it was not a dollar a year job. I brought this to the fore front and I was disappointed to find that you could make so much public relations by being a dollar a year man, at that time you were collecting a very high salary.

LH: Was it half of what he was getting as president?

WB: I think it was like \$28,000.

LH: And also school housing.

WB: That and other little benefits. He and I had some conflict, he was very upset that I would question things about him. To this day he has been very nice to me.

LH: Comment if you would on the other top administrators that were here in your early years as a faculty member. You mentioned Cravens, I suppose Downing and a bit later Minton.

WB: As a faculty member it's difficult for me to make judgement. I think Cravens took over as a very young man, I think he had limited visions, but what he lacked in vision and knowledge he made up for in hard work and persurverence. John Minton was probably the last administor to have all those posts without going through a search procedure.

LH: I suspect you're right on that.

WB: He's a very different type of administor than you would expect on an upper level. He doesn't come forth with policies and things to shake people.

LH: Did you get the feeling that Cravens and Downing worked well together?

WB: They did not work well together, and after Downing became president he wanted to control all the cards and things such as the budget. Cravens only saw the budget after all the decisions had been made.

LH: Bill, I guess we'd better Downing elected president then. We talked earlier about Thompson's announcement and then there was a selection process were you involved in that?

WB: No, thank the Lord I wasn't. I think Kelly had already set up who he wanted for president and they had a little selection process and he convinced the majority members of the board who should be president. Dero Downing was president.

LH: I have heard this, one of Downing's strong supporters was Dr. McCormick.

WB: No question about that, he was.

LH: So he was selected without a very elaborate search policy. Herb Shadowen was the only one who protested it.

WB: Herb protested, of course he didn't have a vote and all the other board members ignored it.

LH: So Downing was then selected. You were describing a while ago Kelly and his method of operation, how did Downing differ from Thompson?

WB: Downing didn't have the talents such as public relations. I think the major asset that Dero Downing had at that time was he had fairly decent health and he had a great desire to be president. Downing had to face all those issues and I think it was very difficult for him.

LH: Do you think Thompson would have done a better job of handling them?

WB: I think he could have if he had been younger and in better health. As his health was I don't think he could have.

LH: What were some of the manifestations of student unrest on the campus here? How wide spread and serious did you see it?

WB: I don't think we had any serious problems compared to major universities.

I think it's the first time I have seen youth involved in thinking about the world politics and the war. Not only did I see it on campus but also in my classes.

LH: Bill, another thing that came up that stirred some of the students was the "fly" incident.

WB: That incident and what was the student newspaper off campus.

LH: The one earlier was the "SCOUR."

WB: No, there was one before the picking of the president.

LH: The Ex-Patriot.

WB: Yes that's the one.

LH: You were elected into the Regents in '74.

WB: I believe so.

LH: Had you given that much thought or did it jut happen?

WB: I really hadn't. I was in my office one day and Norn Hunter came in and said they had counted the votes and I was one of the finalist. I went on an active campaign and that changed my life considerably.

LH: What happened in the first election, it was tie or something.

WB: This was very interesting, I was called up by Raymond Cravens and I was told to go down town and have my picture made. I had been down to have my picture made and I went back to my office and as I walked into Ogden College, I saw Bill Stroby and something was said about regent money and he said, "Well you might have won it." A little while later Dean Cravens asked me to come to his office. I went up there and he said that I had won by one vote, but we have a vote that shows that Dr. Monroe voted late for you. I then started finding out the criticism of the election and I was stunned to find that it was Dean Russell who was tempting to under cut me from this whole thing. I made recommendation at that time that we have another election. The next year we had the election and it wasn't even a close election.

LH: In other words a sizeable majority.

WB: That was the first time anyone had taken on all the headaches to be a faculty member. You'd have to almost be out of your mind to take on that kind of responsibility.

LH: As I recall the ballots from one college didn't even come in until about three days after the election.

WB: That's right. The thing that disappointed me was after the counting and all that, days passed and no one ever contacted Dr. Laird. When I called him up and told him what the situation was he had been kept totally in the dark.

LH: Is that right?

WB: Or at least that's what he lead me to believe.

LH: You mentioned some confusion with a later election too.

WB: Do you remember anything about it Lowell?

LH: Not a great deal, the one that is most vivid is the one you were just talking about.

WB: The campaign that went on was very interesting. Administration was trying to get certain candidates and each day the names would change. It finally ended up being Minnie Beech.

LH: I don't recall the figures but I think you won by an even larger margin than you had the first time.

WB: I really appreciated it because I felt that I had worked hard for the faculty.

LH: You went on the board then in the early part of the fall of '74?

WB: That's right.

LH: Let's talk a bit about the board when you went on it. Do you remember who were the key members of it?

WB: Dr. McCormack, Dr. Embry, Mr. Poland, Mr. Ross, who was from Cam-bellsville.

LH: Now McCormack was chairman wasn't he?

WB: Yes he was.

LH: Would you care to comment on his role on the board?

WB: Well, he was very upset at that time because of the dormitory issue. President Downing knew before he came to the meeting that he had the votes to pass the policy that he wanted. Dr. McCormack opposed tremendously and felt that Downing should have informed him that this was coming to the board. I don't think he ever forgave Downing for that.

LH: No, probably not.

WB: Could you describe what transpired at that time, I'm not sure but it had a lasting effect.

LH: It's interesting because you said McCormack was a strong supporter of Downing for presidency.

WB: That's right.

LH: Any other reason for that other than the visitation? I know Dr. McCormack was opposed to open house.

WB: I felt that in his view he was right.

LH: I think one of the things that surprised the board was the survey done among parents.

WB: I think so too. I think as a faculty representative I tried to stay with the things that involved the faculty.

LH: What about Dr. McCormack as a chairman, in his parliamentary approach?

WB: He tried to carry things out his way, and he did carry them out his way. I think the Herald wrote an article entitled "Who is Chairman."

LH: We're almost at the end of this tape so let's continue on another one. This is the continuation of the interview with William Buckman on Thursday, October 18, 1984. Bill, the last time we talked we were talking about the search for a president. Let me make sure this is correct, the general committee had narrowed the list down to about 20.

WB: About 20.

LH: And then turned that over to the board.

WB: That's right.

LH: What does the board do?

WB: The board paired it down to about 15, later they visited each one and then narrowed it down to 5.

LH: I'm assuming when you say visited, you mean 2 or 3 people to each one and not the whole board.

WB: That's right. From that evaluation we invited 5 candidates in, and we had our top five.

LH: By the time you get down to those top five all home campus people have disappeared, is that right?

WB: Right.

LH: I was interested in another point here where you said last time as you recalled on that list of 20, that Zacarious was down to about the 17th or so.

WB: I think they had a screening committee of about 17.

LH: What keeps bringing him up then, as you get into it?

WB: Some individuals were lobbying around on the board. He communicates well with people. His application was not a very strong one. He wrote, "Here is my application, please consider me".

LH: I think you indicated the other day that one of his weaknesses was the absence of a real administrative experience.

WB: To many of the board members most of their reservation they had came from that, he had never been in a line staff position.

LH: I remember that there was a lot of comments made at the time it was discussed, that one of the finalists were having trouble with some of the faculty members on campus.

WB: I think that Park City Daily News, through telephone calls, obtained more news than I did on campus, which is embarrassing for me. As they narrowed it down, it came down to Baxter and Zacharias as the final two.

LH: What happened to the other three?

WB: I think they thought they didn't have the opportunity to become president or they no longer desired to become president.

LH: By this time the procedure had taken a considerable amount of time.

WB: Yes, it had.

LH: Looking back on the search procedure, how would you have speeded up the process?

WB: I would have had the visits much sooner. I would have brought the candidates on in and attempted to make my decision.

LH: Would you have the board to consider as many as twenty?

WB: No, that was far too many. I argued against that. The board thought they were doing a good job by letting the screening committee take it down to twenty.

LH: So it dragged on and on. Would you comment on the final selection of Dr. Zacharias?

WB: Dr. Baxter called me one weekend as said that he was planning to withdraw his name.

I told him that there were only two name left and that he had a good chance of winning he left his name in. I couldn't promise him anything but there was a considerably amount of discussion about getting candidates at that time.

LH: Also reopening the process.

WB: Many people were talking about that we should abandon the process that we had undertaken at that time. The board felt that they had pretty much backed themselves into a corner.

LH: So the choice was to make the decision with the two candidates left.

WB: Right.

LH: I take it that there wasn't much doubt when the decision came.

WB: No.

LH: Was it a unanimous vote?

WB: No it was not.

LH: Was it two votes against?

WB: Either two against or two extinctions.

LH: Okay Zacharias became president. How were you impressed with him?

WB: I felt that he was quiet open, his biggest strength was his communication. He seemed to have the aire about him that good things were going to happen.

LH: Do you feel that after he became president that he overcame his lack of administrative experience?

WB: I think he was confronted right off by the physical workers. They were about to have a strike and he certainly handled it with a firm hand.

LH: Not too far into his administration we did have the elimination of one of the colleges.

WB: We restructured there, most of the Dean's office was eliminated. You just don't eliminate a whole college.

LH: Let's talk about the athletic situation. What about the decision to leave the OVC and go into the SunBelt?

WB: We obviously thought it would give us more exposure. We felt that the competition would be better.

LH: The point remains that the SunBelt is not a football conference, it seems to me that the implication was made that if we're going to the SunBelt to improve our basketball image and the other teams in it don't play football, than we don't expect to continue our football program on the same level. What happened to that assumption?

WB: That was the decision that was made. We should have went the other way in my opinion. The president and board was totally opposed to our point of view.

LH: Another complication was being made as a regard to womens athletics. What sort of problems did you have?

WB: The women should have sufficient support and I think that's why we devoted such attention to womens basketball.

LH: Another problem that came up was the growing strength of the council of higher education and perhaps more specific, the bluegrass pain.

WB: Some people got it in their minds that they were going to make the Flagship University and primarily the University of Kentucky, this caused a great deal of controversy.

LH: Just by walking over the campus today you can see neglect. Things have changed so much today.

WB: It's a shame. I agree with you Lowell.

LH: Do you see anyway of getting out of this status in the near future?

WB: We made our mistakes by not deciding where we were going to be strong. I think one of our problems were that we tried to do so many things and to cover all the basis.

LH: Let's go back to the relationship between Zacharias and the board of regents. How would you characterize his relationship with them?

WB: He came in and at first he did not have the complete support of the board, later he did have most of the boards support.

LH: Was the board continued to be active on its own?

WB: I don't think they put as much forth as they did three or years prior.

LH: In the last few years we have had a lot of administrative changes, how would you explain this flurry of activity?

WB: We have gotten our expectations up so high that we think an individual is going to do wonders.

LH: Bill, you were re-elected in '80, had you considered dropping out?

WB: I probably should have, but I felt that I could accomplish things by being on the board.

LH: Would that have been the end of Zacharias's first year?

WB: I guess so.

LH: In 1983 you resigned, let's comment on that for a moment.

WB: In 1983 I looked on two things that I was going to have to make some decisions on.

Whether to run for re-election or not, so I chose to do that.

LH: Bill, you mentioned the budget process, let me come back to that. I remember you said in the Downing age that he controlled everything, the budget that Cravens saw, only after it had been put together. Is that true?

WB: The regents had some input.

LH: How do assist the future for W.K.U.?

WB: I would like to say we have a great future, but you never know what's around the corner.

LH: Bill, that's all I have to ask you, is there anything else?

WB: No, let's go have some coffee.

END OF INTERVIEW