

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

WKU Archives Records

WKU Archives

10-23-1984

UA68/8/2 Dero Downing Oral History

James Bennett

WKU Oral History Committee

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bennett, James, "UA68/8/2 Dero Downing Oral History" (1984). *WKU Archives Records*. Paper 697.
https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records/697

This Transcription is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in WKU Archives Records by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

10-23-1984

UA68/8/2 Dero Downing Oral History

James Bennett

WKU Oral History Committee

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bennett, James, "UA68/8/2 Dero Downing Oral History" (1984). *WKU Archives Records*. Paper 697.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records/697

This Transcription is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in WKU Archives Records by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Bennett/Downing

This is Jim Bennett interviewing Dr. Dero Downing, President of the College Heights Foundation and formerly President of Western Kentucky University on October 23, 1984.

Jim Bennett: I think maybe the best place to start would be with the question of President Thompson's resignation itself. Were you anticipating this or did it come as a surprise to you?

Dero Downing: I think it came as a surprise to me. I could detect some deterioration in his health. I was with him on so many occasions where the demands and pressures were such that I was amazed the way he could continue over extended periods of time to hold up under that strain. I wasn't surprised because of those observations, on the other hand, I guess there was hope that his health would allow him to go on for an indefinite period and unfortunately that was not the case.

JB: You weren't that surprised then of the actual announcement of it?

DD: I think if you had been where you could observe day after day the pressures that were put on the President during that time it is a cumulative type of thing. During the early years of his administration the resources for operating the University were very limited. He made due with less yet he was faced with the necessity of reinforcing the University for annual increments in our enrollment that were unbelievable. In 1961 we had 33 and 1/3% increase in our enrollment. When you think about what is required to accomodate that kind of rapid growth,

he spent alot of long weekends and nights working as well as trips to Frankfort. I was registrar during that year and the impact that increase in enrollment had in those years the registrar served is now the Dean of Admissions. I became well aware of it in the position of registrar and then after that an unbelievable increase for almost 2 to 3 years. Dr. Thompson felt that the registrar part should be separated from the admissions part because admissions was going to become more important. He asked me to take over as the Dean of Admissions part time but I want you to help me also alot of the time he said. I was able to watch it day after day.

JB: As I recall, the first we heard of it was one morning after we were all at the school he called for a General Assembly in the Ballroom. We were all wondering what on earth had happened. An announcement like that today would set in motion a rather elaborate process we have for selecting a successor. What was the process then, how did it go about? Did you apply for the job or were you recommended?

DD: I was never an applicant for the position. Some members of the Board of Regents came to me and asked me if I would accept it if it did move in that direction. Contrary to what many people might have thought I gave them encouragement to search for that big head that might come over the horizon and be the perfect person for the job. I did tell them that in the event that they did choose to go in that direction that I would maintain my philosophy from over the years. When I was Dean of Admissions and Dr. Thompson came to me and said we need some help in the business office, I agreed. He said that it would only be for thirty to sixty days or

until things stabilized in that particular area. I said I will do whatever is necessary. The time passed and he said he wanted me to stay in that area. I would like to have stayed as Dean of Admissions but I have felt over the years that a person that intends to serve the University should if at all possible serve in whatever capacity. I took that approach and the search was more far-reaching than I think people may have thought. A committee from the faculty came and talked to me, a committee from the alumni association came and talked with me and the Board of Regents interviewed me. I would not have been disappointed if the selection process had gone in some direction where a person was appointed to that position other than me. When the process did begin to focus where it appeared that I would be asked to take the position the Board came and talked to me and said if it resulted in that decision I would be willing to give it a shot. I guess it was September 11th or 12th when the Board met and formed that decision. I feel honored that they arrived at that decision. I do feel that Dr. Thompson was supportive of that decision because we had worked very closely over the years. I think he had sufficient confidence in me. His support has meant a great deal to me. I might inject here that contrary to what some people may have thought there have been those that have implied that Dr. Thompson retained an influence and that might have been a reason he was recommending me to the position. At no time during the ten years that I served as President of Western did Kelly Thompson as far as I have been able to determine criticize anything that I had done. I have never had a person come to me and say, Dr. Thompson wondered why you did so and so. There has never been any of that. He has never come to me and said I think you ought to do this or that. There have been occasions when I have thought his insights would be good and I

have gone to him for his advice and counsel. He has been gracious and willing to provide that. I felt that I should not apologize to any other than him for being so gracious and helpful to me. I have attempted to pattern my actions and my relationship to President Zacharias, in fact I told him I hoped that I could remain as supportive, professional and stay in the background in the highly professional way that Kelly Thompson did for ten years.

JB: That would be a difficult thing to do, wouldn't it?

DD: I am sure there were times when Dr. Thompson wondered well what in the world are you people thinking about. In spite of that, he didn't criticize or second guess.

JB: Dr. McCormick was on the Board, what was his role in this transition from Dr. Thompson to your administration?

DD: Well, actually Doug Keene was the Chairman of the Board at the time of my appointment. Dr. McCormick was a member of the executive committee. For over 30 years, Dr. McCormick has been our family physician. It is something of a coincidence that at the same time I was recuperating from what developed into a serious physical problem I had massive varicose veins in the right leg that Dr. Grise and Dr. McCormick felt that surgery needed to be done. The veins were stripped in the right leg and in the process of recovery I didn't take care of myself. I tried to come back to work too soon and I had blood clots in them. I was in the process of recuperation and he came to my home to see whether I would be able to assume the position again. Doug Keene, Dr. Gilbert and Dr. McCormick were the ones that

came to my home to visit me. Dr. McCormick had been a long time personal friend and he has been our family physician for many, many, years. He was the physician for my mother and was so gracious to her. There came a time later in my administration where Dr. McCormick had remained a member of the Board of Regents. We had a difference of opinion on some matters which had to do with the administration. He continues to be a friend and I value his friendship. In fact, at the President's dinner last Saturday night I had a lengthy chat with Dr. and Mrs. McCormick. They are very supportive and during the conversation he said as he has many times, I love Western.

JB: What particular goals did you have in mind to accomplish as President of Western?

DD: I was fortunate that Dr. Thompson had brought the University to a point of refinement that maintained the excellence that had been achieved up until that point. There were some needs in the area of organization of the University in terms of the colleges being developed. I think it is important to recognize that our University status had been achieved relatively recently. We had aspirations and they were announced at that time to bring continued growth and improvement and refinement in the area of library services. We had some physical facilities that we were still hopeful we might bring into existence as we continued to follow the master plan for campus development. We were hopeful that we could maintain and improve the salary structure for University faculty. We had a number of needs in the area of budgetary aspirations. I guess the most hope that I had was that we wouldn't at least regress in any way and we would hopefully be able to continue to look forward. Western has been for some decades a very fine first rate

institution. It has not come about through any single individual but through a combination of development to a great extent has been unique at Western. There were years when we could not have met the challenges that confronted the University had their not been a spirit of cooperation and dedication across this campus that has continued to prevail. These are qualities that are exceedingly important for an institution such as a University. I am happy that was preserved as we continue to be an important part of the life of Western Kentucky University. I think one of the things that we were already beginning to anticipate and beginning to observe was that atmosphere of social turmoil. I went to Berkeley campus of the University of California in 1965 to a national meeting. Dr. Thompson was attending it and he asked me to accompany him there. When we went about the campus I could not believe what was taking place. On the Plaza of Stroud Hall there was table after table after table of left wing movements of one kind or another. Drugs were obviously rampant over the campus. The students were either mentally unbalanced or under the influence of drugs. I thought well if this ever spread to campuses across the country what kind of higher education will we have. I was not completely unaware that activists were spreading over the campuses.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

I thought we were in a lot of trouble and we were. On the other hand we were so much more fortunate than most any institution I am aware of and I think the reason we were is because of this attitude I spoke of a few minutes ago. There were times when there was the potential for turmoil on our campus that people were never aware of the intensity of it as far as the potential for serious problems. The reason for that was the outstanding job of Student Affairs and some 40 or 50 people on this campus who would come to the hill on a moment's notice. Basketball coaches, registrars and some faculty were among these. We had a list of people, we had a system where two people could be called by the President and they had a number that they could call and it was something of a network of 40 or 50 knowledgeable, committed people. I observed a lot of other institutions through some of those times and most of them that I knew anything about, the Registrar didn't want to do anything but their job, the Dean of Admissions was just the Dean of Admissions. But at Western if you call on the troops they are there and I think that is what brought us through that with the kind of dignity and effectiveness that has prevailed. We had some very difficult times. I recall one occasion that sort of set the tone for what was to come when the student activists had invited a well known speaker from Louisville to speak on campus. The Board of Regents had established a speakers policy, a location where people with varied views could go and speak. That location was the old football stadium. He came with the obvious purpose of arousing animosity and creating problems. He was received on the campus without any outburst from the University. There was 100 to 150 that gathered at the stadium. His first comment was well they are not going to tell us where we can speak are they? A few people said, no. He said we will go over to the lawn of the administration building won't we? They said, yes. They went

there and we had a plan if that occurred we were going to deal with it. It turned out when Dean Cowan approached the group he said they were trespassing with the normal operation of the college. You are to go where we have set aside a place for you. I was standing in the window of Weatherby looking over the group and Bill Biffy was sitting with a judge downtown with a court order prepared to be signed right there. When Cowan gave me the signal I picked up the phone to the judge's office and ordered that it was executed and in three minutes the sheriff was on his way to the campus. When the sheriff's car pulled into the back of Van Meter the visiting speaker took off his coattail flying and he left these students holding the bag. We had no interest making it difficult on the students but there were six of them who were determined they were going to carry out that mission and they refused and were arrested. Mr. Sedler who was an activist attorney and member of the law faculty at University of Kentucky came and represented them. The judge came out of that with the students on day to day probation and the order in effect said, that those who were charged with the responsibility of administering problems here were to be held responsible for their actions. I think that set the tone which let us get through that period of time less scathed than most any institution in the country. I think the great dedication of our faculty had a lot to do with that. I think the quality of our students had a lot to do with it. We had a new PHD. that had arrived recently on campus in the Mathematics Department and I will never forget his name Dr. Dennis Anson. Dr. Anson made an appointment with me soon after this had occurred and came to my office. He was a parent and he was pretty far to the left with his views and far more liberal than I was willing to endorse. His first question to me was, President Downing how does it feel to be a Presid-

ent of the University without the earned PHD? He had just recently received the Doctorate of Mathematics at Florida State University. I said to him I cannot make the comparison because not having had it, I don't know how I would feel if I had had it. I feel that if I can't do this job without it it would not make a difference if I had all the degrees in the world. I am convinced that my success as President of the University is not going to depend on whether I have earned a Doctorate but whether I can do the job or not. Let me tell you something friend, you are fairly young in the profession and your success as a professor in the Department of Math is going to depend on how well you do that job. Two semesters later, Dr. Anson was teaching in some small college in New Jersey. He was no longer a part of Western Kentucky University because his philosophy and attitude were such that students would not tolerate some of his views. He had a rubber stamp of some obscenities and he would just stamp on a student's test paper some of these obscenities. The majority of students at Western are not going to tolerate that sort of thing and I as President was definitely not going to. I use that as an example of the kind of atmosphere that prevails on campus and also to express some feeling that I was always considered to be rather conservative. I think that this was one of my stabilizing qualities that enabled us to deal with some effort to undermine and keep the University running in a professional manner.

JB: That is the first time I have ever heard the name Anson. That is totally new to me.

DD: In many ways I am sure that he was a fine person. He seemed to have views and values that were very unprofessional at times. There

still must be values that remain in the framework of professionalism and dignity.

JB: It would seem then that one of the things that really helped prepare you for this series of problems was the trip to Berkeley. That advance time to think about things and plan for an eventuality here.

DD: I talked with alot of different types of people at this time and there was a numerous amount of freedom movements going on. There was a sizable group that advocated free sex. There was a young fellow dressed neatly with a cap and dark glasses and he obviously was the one running this establishment so I walked up to him and asked, Tell me a little about yourself. He said I am working toward a degree in a few areas of sociology, psychology and philosophy. He looked older than most of our students. Are you currently a student I asked him? He said, Oh, no I am not continuing right now, I dropped out for a period of time. Then he handed me literature and asked me if I wanted to buy some of the buttons they had for sale. They had a group called Students for A Democratic Society. That was a very honorable sounding name. They were emerging pretty rapidly as a far left highly activist group that had some goals that were not socially acceptable. Some very fine students I think got caught up in these movements, but I believe almost every campus around the country had situations such as these in some regard going on at the time.

JB: I keep thinking about how valuable this trip was. Did you and Dr.

Thompson go to Berkeley just as visitors or did ne make contacts there or what?

DD: We were out there to attend a national meeting. There was unbelievable physical growth going on at the time. We visited about a half dozen campuses while we were there. The growth gradually gravitated across the country. In that part of the country though they were putting out more Doctorate degrees than the rest of the country. I think it was unfortunate that some of them developed bad attitudes. It was unfortuante because many of them were very bright and they embraced a philosophy that was detrimental in many cases to higher education.

JB: We turned out to many ill prepared students at that time. They got their degrees but they did not have the knowledge or wisdom to go with it. They have had a pretty rough time since then they never have fully adjusted. The fly controversy was an issue at the time, what do you have to say about that?

DD: Well, I have a great respect for Dr. Thompson and the manner in which he handled that. My recollections of it have dimmed to some extent but as I recall the fly came about through what at the time probably would be more objectionable than would be the case now. But even with the continued increase in the level of tolerance on the University campus I would view it as objectionable. I think Dr. Thompson handled it in a very professional way. I happened to be very close to how that eventually concluded and I think without exception those students and their parents respected Dr. Thompson. Without exception every one of those students became friends of Kelly

Thompson.

JB: I was never sure what the basic thrust was there. They wanted a means of expressing their ideas was that it?

DD: Yes, and they wanted it to be as risqué and liberal as possible. Dr. Thompson said you have this opportunity you express it as long as it remains within acceptable standards. I agreed at the time that this particular article was unacceptable. I don't think I would have changed my views today even though I am more tolerable. There was a time when I was really agonized at the hair and the dress of some of the students but I have become more tolerant of it. I think your responsibilities here at Western can be similar to what it is like to rear a child at home. Whatever they do has some effect on those around them. When you let them do whatever they want to I think you do them a disservice. A lot of people through the years thought that I placed too much emphasis on citizenship, conduct, cleanliness on campus etc. I tend to believe that those items are a very valuable part of their education. You can't live like a pig in a pig sty and have debris across the campus, treat a classroom like you want and it not have an effect on other people from a service standpoint. One is that the cost of rectifying that takes away from the resources of the institution. The other is if a person does not develop some sense of appreciation for the climate and environment they miss a lot in life.

JB: I grew up during the depression and you were taught to save and not tear up things. The students at this time have no sense of how to save or take care of anything and this was greatly noticed by me in

the classroom environment. I was shocked by their behavior.

DD: I think we have an obligation to turn over our facilities to the next in line with a degree of cleanliness and thoughtfulness. To advocate that responsibility I was more than willing to make sure that it took place. I have no apologies for that. I have never felt that you could turn over to a group of young people an institution and expect them to exercise the maturity and judgment they need to have.

JB: I think the surroundings in which a person lives tells you a great deal about the people. I am amazed at the carelëss way students throw debris around in the classroom.

DD: We have a great tradition I think at Western and a sense of pride that has helped us to develop one of the most beautiful campuses in the country. I think that every person on the Western campus ought to have some level of pride which causes them not to litter. I feel as though this is very important and I don't apologize for it.

JB: We had some trouble with the Blacks on campus at one time. There was this incident with the cheerleaders and at least one time a controversy with an election and it involved Black voting. How do you feel about this?

DD: I think here again the quality of our students from fine families both Black and White enabled Western to provide an educational opportunity for both in a way that is fair to both. I think if we had handled one or two of those controversies in a little different way I would have felt a litter better about it myself. I think particularly

on one occasion when I should have been more firm in the position that I took. It was in regard to a cheerleader controversy. When you have an issue such as this it becomes about as emotional as you can find. The process that was used to elect the cheerleaders I genuinely thought was not fair. For that reason I acquiesced when I think it had developed to the point that it probably would have been better for the University had I not done so. I still have some of the people with whom I confided back at that time who tell me now that they feel I made the right decision. I never did feel comfortable with the fact that I had what on the surface appeared to be compromised. These are things that as you reflect back on them you realize that you don't have the luxury of making a decision and seeing how it works and then make another one. You make a decision and live with it. I have great respect for most of the Black students that have attended Western as well as the Whites. We have had some not because they are Black or White that have had a vested interest to selfish motives who were not concerned with the welfare of the entire population. Anytime you have that you have problems. I can remember a big Black young man from Glasgow named Baxter Crenshaw. He was sort of emerging as a Black leader on campus and in order to manifest that rôle of leadership he had to engage in activities that I think deep down he knew were not right. Here again, any individual functions at any point in time within the framework of what the conditions are at that point in time. Even though I may look back now and say "If I knew then what I know now I would have handled that different", but inasmuch as you don't have that luxury you have to make that decision and not take cancellation from the facts. In no time did I make a decision that was in my mind with any vested interest or prejudices that I was aware of that would be anything other than

in the best interest of the people who were involved. I didn't intentionally or knowingly make a decision at any time that had to do with Western that I would apologize for.

JB: Is there anything else that you would like to comment on to do with this same sort of thing before we go on to another topic?

DD: There is an observation that would be appropriate here and that is we are talking about a very minute element within the overall life of the University. So many times in the affairs of the University something that will attract a large amount of media and public attention does not amount to a hill of beans when it comes to the real important operation of the University. Do you have enough funds to operate on? What kind of financial organization do you have to insure the smoothness of operation of the University from the standpoint of physical affairs? All of these type of questions are so important and the structure that you have to make sure they are carried out. I think that one of the things that I am most grateful for is the unbelievable dedication of the great majority of the people who run the classrooms, fill staff positions, and do it with such dedication over the years. I will always be grateful to a person like Harry Largin. Harry Largin came to the University in 1963 and has from that time quietly gone about fulfilling the responsibilities which later became physical policies for the University. He has carried a great load since that time and he has done it quietly and with great dignity and professionalism. We have alot of quality education here at Western. What we need to do is to continue to improve them and preserve them and keep it a great institution. The quality of education at this University depends on what goes on in the classroom.

Western's mission has been and will continue to be, "How well do we carry out that function of learning?" If we ever depart from that I think we will lose sight of what has made Western great and what I feel will continue to make it that way.

JB: The quality of the work that some of the faculty has done considering their circumstances is very good. The funds were just not available at the time but their dedication and their determination to give their very best is just outstanding.

DD: I will give you a good example of this. Dr. B.C. Cole who graduated from Western was highly thought of as a student here and then he stayed on as an instructor. He went away and got his doctorate and came back to Western. Dr. B.C. Cole was not just a good teacher he was a master teacher. He taught Biology when I came here in 1939. He left and went with 7-UP as a bacteriologist in 1945. He later became a Vice President of 7-UP. I told someone not to long ago when he returned to the campus to give a lecture, I wish that could be filmed and every faculty member could have a copy of that film and with the subject matter grasp the enthusiasm that he has. He was motivating with the way he presented the material to the audience. I think this is the quality that through those years made Western an unusually fine institution. Mr. George Page who taught Physics I suspect was not an outstanding physicist but he was a great teacher. He motivated more students to go on and get their doctorate than anyone could ever dream of. You take an old country boy like Dennis Jones from Adair county who is now a leading professor at Vanderbilt University in the department of physics, this is great. After he graduated in 1943 he went to a Columbia project and helped develop the atom bomb. He was at Columbia

University working on that project. He later came back and got his P.H.D. These are examples of what this educational process to me represents. By the way Dr. B.C. Cole because of his belief and work in education he and his wife have developed a scholarship fund which would move it right up to \$50,000. Here is a guy that made it a quality institution years ago and his continued interest and support he wants to preserve that quality. Those are some of my observations.

JB: That is what I wanted.

End of Side 1, Tape 2

END OF INTERVIEW