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UA68/8/2 William Henderson Oral History

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Interview with Big Six Henderson by Dee Gibson, October 20, 1978.

Dee Gibson: Big Six, most happy to have you here at Western and appreciate you taking part in this Oral History of the University, 'cause I know you had a affiliation with Western for many, many years and you know some of our great people in the history of the university. You were very close, of course, to Mr. Diddle, President Thompson, President Downing, and you knew Dr. Garrett and knew practically everyone and, uh, let me ask you this. When was your first recollection of having an association with Western in any capacity, Six?

Big Six Henderson: Well, all my life since I was big enough to hear about it, uh, of course, I've heard about my father raising the flag over here on the hill on March 12, 1862, with the Union Army when General Johnson was over, Albert Sidney Johnson, was over here where we are now. And I'd heard that and I'd had an interest in Bowling Green from that, really one of the reasons that I did, I suppose. Then I came down here and pitched a ball game, a baseball game. I used to be a pitcher. That's how I picked up my nickname, Big Six, was from pitching baseball.

And I came down here and pitched a game against Bowling Green in 1923 or 4. But my first connection with Western was back around 1927 or 28 when I came down with the L&N PanAmericans and we played Western during the holiday season over at the old gym. In fact, I brought Chuck Hayden down here. He was - back in those days you'd pick up players. One time we'd go out of Louisville with a great team and the next time we couldn't beat anyone. And I persuaded Chuck Hayden, the All-time All-American from up east, to come down here and play under the name of White. I never did tell Diddle that, Uncle Ed that, until, oh, a few years before he died. I said, "I have to

make a confession." I said I knew you knew he was a ringer because he, I think he picked up about eighteen points or sixteen. I got twelve or fourteen, but he was the high point man for us and we blew Western out. Then we came back another year, of course, David Brigg was on the team, Turner Elrod, and Vickers. I jumped center against Vickers and at the time, I remember, that was back in '29. . .

DG: John Vickers, right?

SH: Yeah. I've seen him. I saw him up at Eastern one night. I was up there last spring. But I've been interested in Western practically all my life, really, to tell you the truth, although I never went to school here. I have loved it down here, and, of course, when I had the opportunity I requested them to transfer me to Bowling Green and they did. Brought me over here and then when they moved me to Owensboro, when I had the chance to come back in charge, I came back here in 1939, I believe, the investigator in charge of Owensboro after Williams, Investigator Williams, died. But I kept running the clock here when I was over at Owensboro. One night the water was up and I, I traveled 412 miles getting into Bowling Green 'cause the bridge was out at Morgantown and I had to go all the way around. It was 412 miles to get here to Bowling Green. I started that afternoon early or I wouldn't have been here. But I've had so many pleasant moments up on the hill here, memories of it that I've known fellows like Dero Downing and, of course, Uncle Ed, and everybody that's played on the team back here, even the boys that played against Western. And every time I've had the chance to be back I've ran the clock here for 34 years, I believe it was, and I quit on account of the gas shortage. As I've told President Downing, I thought on account of the gas shortage I shouldn't use it. I could get the gas 'cause I was a U.S. Marshall. I could get all the gas I needed but I

just felt like people needed the gas worse than I did and for my own selfish interests, because I came down here most of the time by myself.

DG: In your capacity there as working as a timer there for Western all those years and your association with Mr. Diddle, what do you feel strongly about from Mr. Diddle's standpoint that contributed to his, what, of course, all Westerners feel is the greatest coach in the history of basketball? What do you feel were the main ingredients that made him such a fantastic coach?

SH: Well, his color, his personality, and he was one of the most charitable persons that God ever put on this earth. I've been over in his office when people, farmers come in there dressed in overalls - never seen a game but they got in, see, over the entrance 'round here. He'd say, "Well," and scratch his head and say, "Well, we don't have any seats but we'll see that you find you a place to sit." And I'll never forget the night I came - I was running the clock for Kentucky and I was running the clock for Western, jumping back and forth. After I first came down here, and I'll never forget the night that I came by - it was crowded out here and I went out and got Beard and Rosa and three or four of them. There was six of them all together and I only had my wife's seat, she didn't go to the ballgame that night, and came around by Uncle Ed's pentshack. He looked up and he said, "Six, you got any tickets for the boys?" I said, "Coach, I got one ticket." He said, "You reckon they want to sit here?" You see, University of Kentucky was playing Bowling Green and they came down to watch them play. And Diddle made his substitutes, had his substitutes set out on the floor and move, and put the Kentucky boys on the bench there by the side of him during the ball game. Went on three or four years later when I went down to Bowling Gre-, Nashville to work the game and a couple of boys - I was living here and I was going to work the game down at Vanderbilt and Kentucky, and it was

the first year Cliff Hagan was playing, I believe, or his second, and Marshall, and Turner, I believe it was, came to me and said, "You reckon we could get some seats?" And I said, "You sure can. I'll have you a couple of seats down there as much as Rupp did for Kentucky." So I went down, going in I said something to Adolph, 'course I was very fond of Adolph and he was a great coach, but to show you the difference in dispositions, I said something to him. I said, "I need a couple of tickets for tonight." He said, "Well, I'll have them for you when you get back." I'm taking Cliff up to the restaurant out to dinner before they played. And he said, "I'll have them for you." And when I started out the door he said, "Who's it for, Six?" And I said, "For Turner and for Marshall." He said, "Why didn't Uncle Ed call me for them?" or something like that. I said, "Well, hell you say. I'll get their tickets. I don't need your tickets." He said, "Well, I'll have them for you." I said, "Never mind." So I went up there to the admission and paid \$10 for two tickets - \$10 apiece for two tickets. I had them when I went back. He said, "Here's your tickets." I said, "I don't need them." I never did get any free tickets from him and Diddle was always willing. He'd come to me and want to pay for them himself out of his own pocket and I wouldn't let him do it. But I've had several tickets were given to me by him. I had one ticket for Kentucky in 22 years. I wasn't a question of wanting them. I was generally running the clock and didn't really need them, but the difference in the attitude, the color and the disposition of the two men. There's no question about it - was so different. 'Course I met Rupp out in Kansas when I started to go out and play with the Washington Tigers in 1923. He came over next door. I was going to play with Washington and he came over next door to Kansas. I used to see him so mad and I'd take up to him and say, "You ought to think the world of me because if I hadn't gone to Washington - if I'd a gone now I'd a been All-American with you trying to guard me as short as you are." And so I said _____.

But Diddle was an all together different man and the same way with all these old fellows that came in here. 'Course Kelly, you know I think the world of Kelly Thompson because he was so fine and so interested in Western. Everybody you had here were dedicated to the university. That's the thing. That's the whole story. And I can tell you the feeling is alive today. I never, as I say, went to school here a day in my life, but there are more people interested in Western Kentucky, I say this from the general trend of people that I meet every day of my life, going out, than there are in either Kentucky or Western. This had been a big build up on Kentucky because they've been up there in football and there's been a change around and in fact it's closer to up there than it is down here. And, of course. . .

DG: Well, I tell you, we, we know that that's the truth and it's always glad to hear from a person like you who lives in Louisville, 'cause you're there every day knowing the pulse beat of the people and did you have any association with Dr. Cherry, to speak of?

SH: I knew him. I had some, not as much, of course, later on, after we. . . I believe Dr. Cherry was the one that. . .

DG: He left, I think, he died in about 1936, I guess. What about, you mentioned Mr. Stansbury a while ago. What were your recollections of Brother Stansbury, of course. . .

SH: Well, I think it's him, when I came down here to play in 1928 or 9 and he was on the team. And I fouled him and he got up on the foul line in the middle of the free throw line and I turned around I said, "Listen, _____." . . .missed the free throw. But I've known him since out there, see, I played out there against Shepherdsville when

Dock Ridge, Sam and all of them were out there.

DG: Well, Mr. Stansbury is, uh, was crazy about Mr. Diddle and, uh, we've got this, has this on a tape so I won't take long but Mr. Diddle came to Louisville to get Stansbury off the - he was working for on the railroad and told him he was either going to come back to school or Mr. Diddle said, "I'm gonna whip you right here on the spot." And he - Stansbury said he'd a never gotten a college degree if it hadn't been for that. He said he knew Mr. Diddle meant what he said. Uh, well, Six, I'll tell you what. You've, in your time that you've, all these with Western and, uh, what do you feel from that's really made Western? I know you've mentioned people here. You've mentioned President Downing and Dr. Thompson and Mr. Diddle, and the people certainly have, have been the main ingredient over the years that's made Western so unique and it's great spirit and, uh, the charitable efforts there and, uh, Mr. Diddle and the others here who, of course, Mr. Diddle was a, a, one of a, was probably about like you said. In my opinion the same thing. One of the most charitable persons of all time. But there are other factors involved that make Western so, so loveable by all the alumni and just people who never went to Western but they love Western.

SH: I'll tell you, Dee, it's most amazing. Of all the people that I've ever met in my life, I don't remember one person ever saying a word derogatory towards Western. I've heard it on every school there is in the country. I've heard it on Kentucky, Notre Dame or other schools, something. But I've never heard that one person make any remark like that relative to Western. Everything - it's unbelievable. It's just like the time I had a few days off from the - down in the - when they played your thousandth game up here. Well, I got the idea I was going out and collect a thousand silver dollars. And I went out here. I went first down here and swiped about

twelve of these big red towels out of here and I went out here in about three days I had - I already had the thousand silver dollars. I'd go up to a person and say, "How about giving five dollars?" How about me giving you twenty and I said I don't want twenty. I want everybody in on this deal. And in two days time in the rain I had \$1400 and back then money was a little bit scarce. \$1400 in money, but I wanted 100 silver dollars so they had to send in a load in one of their armoured cars down here with those thousand silver dollars and then we had the girls, you know. Each cheerleader came up and put \$100 in the - we had the twins from over at Scottsville pull a little red wagon. They gave me the red wagon - donated that down there and we had that and then they dumped that 100 silver dollars in that, in that little red wagon, and then go over and give Diddle a big hug and kiss and it was his towels they were using. (Laughter) I had swiped them out of there unbeknownst to him. But to me that was the biggest thrill. . .

DG: . . .being used for that purpose?

SH: I could have picked up \$10,000 that day if I'd a needed it. People - that's the way they felt about him. Makes you want to - well, a lot of them was mad 'cause they didn't get to pay. But fifty, I have the list of the people that contributed. I still have that list right there. I made it up at the time. It was the most amazing thing to go out here just in part time and get that money. I gave him a check for the rest of it but we took that thousand silver dollars down to the bank and that was one of the biggest thrills of my life. When I went down there to the National and gave it over well, that's the only time I ever choked up where I couldn't say a word and I looked over at him and him with that towel to his eyes and he was crying and I just - I couldn't speak and everybody started laughing. I know that. I've got a picture of him and Kelly sitting there side by side at the time.

But there's so many beautiful things about Western. I, of course, I've remembered times that I haven't been thrilled but regardless of weather, we've always been up there at the top and there's no question about it. Western deserves up there at the top and the attitude and the people at Western is just an exceptional institution and I wish to God there was a million of them in this country, or if they had a hundred like Western I think it would help a whole lot. Well, I can't say enough about Western Kentucky, 'cause that's the way I feel about the people. Same way today. That's one thing hadn't changed. They kept the spirit of Western here. It hasn't - times hasn't changed it. It's changed this country, I believe, in three generations, as I told you. Of course, I told you my daddy would be 139 years old and my grandfather's buried up here. He was born in 1814, my grandfather was. He's buried up here, and that's the cemetery and so on. My people came in here, 'course Colonel Richard Henderson, my great-great uncle, came across, went down that a way, but he came across the Cumberland in 1775. And I've known the people who was my background. I never, as I said that, figure what I did was more important than what my ancestors did. I have to live with what I put out in this world. 'Course I haven't put out a lot but I've tried. I tried to do the best job I could, 'course I believe in law and order all my life. . .

DC: Well, I know there's been some, several articles and, written about you and you've lectured all over the country - just attended a big national story telling festival down in Tennessee and we appreciate the fact that, uh you do get around so much because we know that you are telling the Western story and I just most happy to talk to you today but I tell you, let's take one or two more people here before we conclude this if we can. Did you know Gander Terry very well?

SH: Yeah. I knew Gander. I didn't know him. . .

DG: Do you know any specific stories on him that, any recollections?

SH: No, I tell you, that was before I was living here and I didn't know too much about Gander.

DG: What year did you come back here?

SH: I came down here to live in 1942, I believe it was.

DG: All right.

SH: While you were away at the service. Oh, let's see, when you came back, I'm gonna say this while I - you wouldn't want me to say it but I'll tell you, you were an All-American man. You've been All-American for Western ever since and before, too. And so is your wife and her sister. To me, the Cook twins, I never. I worked at high school tournaments that time and they stole the show out there. No question about it. Happy Chandler, he's about to jump out of his seat up there 'cause he wanted them on Kentucky but he didn't get them on Kentucky. But they were dolls then and they're still dolls, 'cause I have the pleasure of seeing them occasionally. And if there was ever two greater cheerleaders, then those was the Cook girls. I'd like to, I've never met them. I have a picture here of the six girls and back here and I headed it up the Six Prettiest Cheerleaders in the World, and I meant that - at our university. It's one of them. I have to show you sometime today.

DG: All right. When we get through here I'd like to see it and. . .

SH: One of them now is the assistant commissioner of high school commissioner.

DG: Yes, Kay's her name now. I know who you're talking about. Well, uh, Six, we appreciate this and we might end up. . .

SH: Oh, I want to tell this one on Odie Spears. Odie Spears was, of course I knew Odie real well, but I want to tell this on Odie. See, I played basketball against Doug Holman when he came down here with the original Celtics. There at Louisville they played us and I had to jump center against Doug. Doug looked like a mountain then and he was throwing the ball in between his legs and I didn't - I put the squeeze on him. He said, "Son, you want to play like that?" And I said, "No, sir," So I changed my way 'cause I was responsible for them beating us. They didn't beat us about 4 or 5 points but that was the old. . . Joe Lapcheck and Deanard and all that bunch.

DG: Davey Banks.

SH: Davey Banks, yeah. And that Holman, he came up to me at the Hall of Fame and said, "Big Six, I remember you." And I said, "No you don't. You're lying." I said, "I remember that game but you don't remember me. I'm the one that lost the ballgame not knowing how to handle you." But he came down here a few years later, Doug did, and called me and I brought him up on the hill here to talk to Odie Spears. He was trying to recruit Odie and I told him, I said, "Doug, there's something wrong here. When I played against you you was the biggest looking man I ever saw and now I'm about an inch or two taller than you." He said, "Well, Six, you've grown a little bit and you've been out in the country and I shrunk up." But he was the

biggest looking thing to me, to have changed so much when he was down here to recruit Odie. But that team that you brought back at that time I was running the clock, Kentucky was rated number one you were rated number two. But I guess the biggest thrill I ever had in my life and I was there when Babe Ruth called his shot, and different places, was the night, Cliff or anybody else knows this one - when Western beat Kentucky up there, 'cause I told Rupp when I fell out with him over Cliff, I said, "If Western ever plays you they'll beat the hell out of you." And he said, "Six, you're crazy." I said, "Well, just wait and see." So that night I was in the hospital and I'd talked to the boys on the phone beforehand that morning and I laid there and cried and the telephone rang about sixteen times. And I told my wife, I said, "Don't answer that phone, they can call back tomorrow." I'm, I guess the one thing I ever enjoyed really was more or less the friction, a little bit of argument, over that deal and I was so happy over that. It was a bigger deal to me than Notre Dame beating Ohio State. I saw that - eighteen to thirteen - or when Babe Ruth called his shot up there. I was sitting up there in the box and he'd given me the seats. 'Course that's why I was so fond of Babe. But Ed Diddle and Western institution and Presidents, all of them down the line - quite a success story. There's no - I don't think any university can - I say with all due respect to all of them - I don't think any school can. . .

DG: Well, Six, I'm the first to tell you that we appreciate very much that you've taken this time. We'll be getting some more tape from you probably later. We're specially thankful for the great love you've had for Western and the support you've given us, the help you've given us, throughout the years. You might not ever have gone to Western a day but you're certainly considered a strong alumnus of Western. Because I don't know of anyone who has shown and demonstrated the love for Western any more than you have. We

thank you for taking this time.

SH: Well, I appreciate it. Once more I want to mention this boy that's up on the - announcer for WHAS, that you have a couple that are from Western. He don't get up and say a lot for Western but he's the boy I used to pick up and send down here and you have some over here now that I miss and I've got one up to Elizabethtown to see that she comes down this way next year. She's a drum majorette or something up there. Real pretty girl and she's interested in studying and getting an education. I'll sure be interested in seeing her come down here.

DG: We know you've sent a lot of them our way and still like you to send some more.

SH: Well, I keep it on as long as I'm here to. . .

DG: I know you will. Thank you.