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UA68/8/2 Bill Sykes Oral History

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. BILL SYKES

DATE: MAY, 22, 1984

PLACE: PRINCETON, KY.

INTERVIEWED BY: DR. JAMES BENNETT

Produced by Oral History *Project*
Department of History
Western Kentucky University

INTERVIEW NO. 7615

James Bennett: This is an interview with Bill Sykes in Princeton, Ky.
May 22, 1981.

Bill, when did you first enroll at Western?

Bill Sykes: In 1968.

JB: In 1968.

BS: Right.

JB: Let's see, your father was in the service at Fort Campbell.

BS: Right. We lived there for 12 years, we moved there from Germany. We lived in Germany for 3 1/2 years, and came back to the states in 1958 and I ended up at Clarksville High at Fort Campbell.

JB: You went to Clarksville High rather than, well they didn't have the high school on the base did they?

BS: No, I went from the fourth to the ninth grade and he got orders to Korea and left for a year, and then I had to go off base so I went to Clarksville High and ended up there.

JB: How did you get in touch with Western? Did Western recruit you?

BS: I found the coaches, Coach Feix was assistant coach at the time and I think he saw every game I played as a senior. I didn't know

it at the time but there were plans that Nick Dennis was going to resign and he was going to take over, but I didn't know it at the time I was going to sign with Western. Joe Bugle and Jerry Glanville were the ones that recruited me and I had never even heard of Western Ky. Being in Tennessee everything revolved around the University of Tennessee and how it was to play for the orange. I was offered a scholarship, a renewal every year at the University of Tennessee. They were impressed with not my size, but with my speed and quickness. I was recruited by about 13 or 14 schools. Alabama was one of them. I would of loved to have gone there, but, I went to Western and I just didn't realize how beautiful the place was, I really took to the place and it stuck in my mind after I left there.

JB: Jimmy Feix was your first contact with Western.

BS: Right.

JB: And then he brought you up to Western.

BS: Right, there were six of us, we had an outstanding football team my senior year, and all six of us went to school on scholarships. We all six and the head coach, Johnny Miller who is head coach now at Austin Peay, came down. You remember him don't you.

JB: Yes.

BS: We went to Western and I was the only one that stayed, the rest went to school at Tennessee.

I guess it was because I never really had any roots in Tennessee. I felt like it was a good move. I wanted to go somewhere so my father could watch me play, I didn't want to go far away because he retired from the Army in 1968, the year I graduated. I felt sorry for my sister, she was in high school at the time, and they drug her all over the country to watch me play ball. She really didn't have a life and I never thought about it until we got older and we sat down and talked about it and she said, "You don't know what it was like, all we did was follow you around for four years." But I wanted to go where he could watch me play because he loved it dearly, and that's what he wanted to do but wasn't able to.

JB: Well, he was close enough.

BS: Oh, he went to all of them, the only one he missed was Eastern Michigan.

JB: Let's see, you started in 1968, so you graduated in 1973.

BS: In 1972. I did my student teaching the fall of 1972.

JB: In 1973 was the year we had that Tangerine Bowl, so you missed that.

BS: We missed Bowls two years in a row. They took Tennessee State over us in the Bowl, they took them twice and we had better records than they did. That was disappointing but I don't feel like I ever even played college ball because I never really played my position. I

was asked to move to offensive center my freshman year. I was an All-State linebacker in Tennessee and that's where I wanted to play. I had never set the bench before and I also wanted to go somewhere where I could play as a freshman, and freshman did not break in the SEC.

JB: No they didn't.

BS: They told me I would play, but they didn't tell me I would be playing center. I'll never forget Coach Feix called me into his office and we talked about 15 or 20 minutes and then I called my father and asked him if I should make another move. But I'm just glad I stayed.

JB: So you were well satisfied once you got there.

BS: Yes. I think I was a late bloomer, I wasn't mature enough when I got out of high school, I think another year would of done me a lot of good. I look mature but I was just very timid. I don't think half of the guys on the team even knew I could talk. I was one of five children and I stayed home the longest, and I thought it was a great life. I was living that sporting life, you remember that don't you?

JB: Yes, I remember that.

BS: Eat raw meat and wine. I would go to the gym and do what I wanted to do, and then when I had to go it kind of broke off.

JB: Let me see how this is coming. What was your first impression when you got to Western?

BS: I think I was like everyone else, we all had mixed emotions about being away from home. Especially the freshman. We all had a lot in common but nobody would talk about it. We were all trying not to let it show.

JB: They'd never let on about it.

BS: I guess that was the masculine thing to do. I can remember the first team meeting we had, the coach said are you homesick and we all said, "No we're not homesick." With me it was a feeling I had never experienced before.

JB: People look at you and couldn't imagine you being homesick.

BS: I don't look like the type. They think I'm insensitive just because of the way I look and maybe the way I act.

JB: Where did the football team live?

BS: We lived in Keene Hall, that was the first year that Keene Hall was built.

JB: Did you all stay in that dorm the whole time you were there?

BS: Yes, I stayed my freshman and sophomore year in Keene, and then Rebecca and I got married the summer before my junior year.

JB: Had you known her before Western?

BS: No, believe it or not she was my first date. When we had orientation I wore my football shirt and that was the first night the freshman were there so they brought us in and talked to us and she picked me out of all those people. She had told another football player that she wanted to go out with me, so I finally got up enough nerve to ask her out. We went out a few times and then we kinda went out separate ways. A football player asked her out once and she told him that she was engaged so that made me curious, so I called her and she said she didn't want to go out with him so I said how about going out with me and we got back together. Our first date I didn't have a car or I didn't know where to take her so we walked over to the football stadium. She started smoking and I said how can you do that to your body and she said that most of the girls on her floor smoked. I said have you ever run a mile and we ran two laps around the track and she wanted to stop but I wouldn't let her and finally she made it but she almost threw up.

JB: So you got squared away pretty soon and the homesickness went away?

BS: It sure did.

JB: You majored in P.E. didn't you?

BS: Right.

JB: Who were some of the teachers that you remember?

BS: Mrs. Landers, I don't know if you remember her or not but she

was tough. We had her for level 400 courses, I'm not talking about the activity course I mean some of the things in Physical Education like Administration, these type things, and I pulled a B in her class and I told her I said Mrs. Landers I just want to tell you you're not as bad as everyone makes you to be and she went straight to Feix and told him that I had done well in that class and that she appreciated the feedback she got. Another teacher, Jerry Wilder, I enjoyed his class. I took him for that History of Education and we got to talk about the sports and the Romans and the Greeks and I could really relate to that.

JB: Yes, you would have liked that class, you would have made a good gladiator.

BS: And Yogi Meador's class. I really enjoyed it. I use some of the things that he taught me in my classes.

JB: What about outside of P.E.?

BS: I minored in Psychology and I took 18 hours for my minor. I don't know if you knew this or not but I was repeating History and I made straight A's in high school. The teacher was a slim kind of guy and he was pegged as a radical and he didn't like athletes and I knew that. I just didn't didn't do very well on his test, you had to fill up those blue books. But I enjoyed your class due to the fact I liked your teaching style. I didn't see many professor's stand out in front of their class and greet people and you did that, you just don't see many professor's do that.

JB: I think they miss something that way.

BS: You really do, they talk to you in the calssroom but after that that's it. They'd give you the information and if you got it fine and if you didn't that was fine too. But you took an interest in me and that made me do well.

JB: People want to do better if they feel someone wants them to.

BS; I'll always remember you because we worked out together and I do that with my students.

JB: It really does help.

BS: You get to know them and see a different side of them that you don't see in the classroom, and they'll say this guy is okay, he's fair and that's how I like to come across to my students. I think in Public Education there has got to be a line drawn to no first name basis. I don't see how anyone could function. You can be their friend but there has got to be that line. Kids aren't able to handle that kind of relationship.

JB: No, and they really don't want it.

BS: But I enjoyed you class and some of the things I remember in your class is we talked about the mountaing men and no matter what we were discussing something would always bring us back to the mountain men. But I did like History but it was tough for me.

JB: What about your social life? I guess most of your time was spent on football or lifting weights wasn't it?

BS: I found that Western was a party school and believe it or not I did not drink in high school, and I didn't think athletes drank either, but I was in for a rude awakening. But I enjoyed myself, we used to have some really good parties, especially after football games.

JB: Where did you have those parties?

BS: Most of the time we would go out in the country and rent a cabin or have it in someone's apartment if it was big enough. I enjoyed my social life, I think it opened me up some.

JB: What was the outstanding game you played all the time?

BS: Outstanding game, I guess when I played the All-American at Eastern Kentucky when I was a freshman. I guess one of the best games I played was against Eastern. I think I was in a dream my first two years at Western. But I started realizing after Rebecca and I were married that I wasn't going to play pro football and that I needed to start using some of my energies toward getting out of school and getting a job doing something I wanted to do.

JB: You were married at the beginning of your junior year.

BS: Right.

JB: Two years there you were married and after that you were thinking about what you were going to do.

BS: Right.

JB: Now you came directly from Western here to Princeton didn't you?

BS: Yes I did.

JB: As what, assistant football coach?

BS: Assistant football coach and head wrestling coach.

JB: So you moved here and have been here ever since.

BS: Since the summer of 1972. It's been 9 years.

JB: Sort of like an old timer down here. You're in an ideal situation.

BS: I am.

JB: You're close to the lake, you can hunt, or do whatever you want to do.

BS: Yes, you think of money and things like that but when you have these kinds of things, it's a small town and a nice place to raise children. I couldn't imagine being in the city.

JB: And you know all the people don't you?

BS: Yes and I'm thinking about running for a public office, everyone else around here is.

JB: It set a record in Bowling Green this year for the number of candidates we had.

BS: We have I think 9 running for Circuit Court Clerk this year.

JB: At home everyone is running for Sheriff and Jailer.

BS: You remember Fred Clayton, he used to be the head football coach here and then he went to Christian County. He's running for County Court Clerk over there.

JB: Is he?

BS: He resigned as head football coach so they'll probably reside over there if he wins. I think his wife has a shop over there.

JB: Are there any particular highlights you recall at Western?

BS: I think the highlight for me was just playing football, that was my sole purpose for being at college. I did pick up some cognitive things on the way.

JB: Do you think you picked the right school?

BS: I think so and I recommend it quite often. The kids down here know how dear that school is to me. There has been a lot of people from here go to Western. After all, this is Western Kentucky.

JB: Jimmy Feix became head coach about the time--.

BS: In 1968, the spring of '68 and then I came in the fall.

JB: So you worked under him. Who were the other coaches?

BS: The first year it was Joe Bugle and then he went to Annapolis after my freshman year. Bob Franklin, he came from the University of Tennessee. And then Coach Gilbert came my sophomore year and it was like night and day. Of course Coach Bugle was a little younger and he had fire in his eyes. When Coach Gilbert came he was the fatherly type, but he got guys to play for him. He was a very sincere person, and I respected him as well as all of my coaches. They were all good people.

JB: Jimmy Feix is one of the most organized fellows, when he goes out on the field he knows what's going to happen.

BS: He really is.

JB: He does a really good job. Bugle has gone to Washington D.C. hasn't he?

BS: I don't know, he was at Houston. After Bumm Phillips was fired I don't know what is going to happen.

JB: He's one of the coaches with the Redskins now I believe. Did you get to know many of the people in Administration? A lot of times football players have more contact with them.

BS: As far as administrators, Kelly Thompson would come down and talk to us before a game, but not on a friendly basis.

JB: Do you make it up for many games?

BS: I've been making it to homecomings, and I think that my son Shawn is going to have so many things he can pursue that I couldn't do. He is a super athlete.

JB: Through the Alumni do you keep up with what's happening at Western?

BS: That and the directory I bought.

JB: That's quiet helpful.

BS: I was looking through there the other day and saw some of the guys I hadn't thought about in so long.

JB: It's fascinating how you can pick it up and before you know it you're looking for someone else.

BS: Yeah, you say I wonder if so and so is in here.

JB: I can't think of anything else to ask you, we've sort of covered the water front I think.

BS: I have enjoyed it, it's nice to talk about those good old days and they're getting to be old days too.

JB: Time really slips away.

BS: It sure does.

END OF INTERVIEW