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UA68/8/2 Paul Champion Oral History

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This is an interview with Mr. Paul Champion in South Fort Mitchell, Kentucky on July 19, 1979.

James Bennett: Mr. Champion you graduated from Western in 1947. Did you do all of your college work at Western?

Paul Champion: I started Western as a Freshman in 1942 and of course you know that was World War II was coming on rather strongly. It was the spring of 43 I went into the United States Navy and served in the Fleets for one year. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to go to Officer Candidate school so I spent one year at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, another year at Harvard College in Boston. Two years of my undergraduate work was done at separate colleges.

JB: What's your home town?

PC: Home town is Martinsburgh, Kentucky.

JB: How did you happen to choose Western?

PC: Well I was always interested in Western. Although I lived in the shadow of the University of Kentucky for some reason or another I always followed Western. My real desire I suppose was to play basketball for Western Kentucky University. I was fortunate enough to play in the Kentucky-Indiana Allstar Game, after that game was over, it was Diddle at that time who was coaching the Allstars, he offered me an opportunity to come to Western which I was actually delighted to do.

JB: You went on a scholarship?

PC: Yes, Basketball scholarship.

JB: To give us some comparison, what did a scholarship involve in terms of money.

PC: Well, at that time a scholarship was the deciding factor of whether I was going to college or not going to college. Of course everything was paid outside of my clothes and things of that nature. Room, books, board and tuition. That meant that I was able to go.

JB: Did they have a basketball dorm then? Later they had Diddle Dorm.

PC: We lived in a little area called the Village, which you've probably heard of.

JB: I've heard of it, yes.

PC: I go to campus now a days I see all the dorms built on the site of where the old village used to stand but they were pretty much ball cottages at that time. Football, basketball players, most of them lived there.

JB: Now that was down close to the college barn.

PC: Well, it was I suppose between the agriculture barn built then and right below where the old football field used to be.

JB: Not too far from the little community called Jonesville.

PC: That's right.

JB: I went to Western in 1960 and the first couple of years I was there we got a faculty apartment in McLean Hall which was the new women's dorm and Jonesville was of course in the process of being cleared out and that's where the arena and football field are located now. What did you major in?

PC: Social studies. My physical education emphasis.

JB: Well, you knew Dr. Stickle then?

PC: Yes, I did.

JB: What do you remember about him and his classes?

PC: I suppose in the social studies classes, Dr. Poteet is the one who stands out in my mind but all freshmen came in contact with Dr. Poteet. I think he probably indoctrinated freshmen a little bit better toward American history than anyone I ever knew. I think he thought some of us were pretty ill prepared when we arrived on campus. Dramatically in spelling and things of this nature, I think he would take a backburner to some of our preparation. But Dr. Stickle I did not come in contact a great deal with him because actually I did most of my background in social studies at Denison University and in Harvard. I completed most of my requirements in social studies by the time I got back to Kansas. During the war, in officer's candidate school, we were permitted to pick up academic credits in the officer's candidate school, so knowing that I was planning on coming back to Western, my major field would be social studies, I chose those as the classes I would take at Denison and Harvard. So actually I did most of my social studies work away from Western.

JB: Do you remember any of the other people in the history department in addition to Dr. Stickle and Dr. Poteet?

PC: No, not really.

JB: I didn't know if you had classes with Miss Egbert or not.

PC: Well basically when I came back most of my requirements were still left in and physical education. When I did come back Dr. Downing was, of course when I was there as a freshman he was a senior on the basketball team, and when I came back after the war, he was head of the training school, and I did my student teaching with him.

JB: So you did that in the training school? What differences could you see on the campus from the time you left to go into the service and when you came back?

PC: Of course I saw a tremendous growth, I think in the number of students who were starting to have the opportunity of going to college. I think that was primarily due to the fact that many of us were coming back due to the GI bill. Of course I had been there as a freshman, probably an immature freshman, a country boy, hadn't been away from home a great deal. After I came back I was a veteran of World War II, so I think my purpose was greater at that time. Of course I was with a group of men that had also served in World War II. I came back a married veteran, too. I suppose I saw things in a more mature way, I'm sure, then I did when I was there as a freshman. And the growth of the school was beginning to take place, of course nothing like it has over the last few years, but you could see the beginning.

JB: What about was the enrollment at the time you were there.

PC: I'm not real sure of that. I'm sure it doesn't seem like there were over two or three thousand.

JB: I was going to say probably two thousand or maybe less is about right.

PC: I know looking at the old annuals, and the graduating class looks pretty small.

JB: Now there were no dormitories except for West Hall. That was it, wasn't it?

PC: That was it, yes.

JB: And was the cafeteria in that building then?

PC: Yes the cafeteria was there and most of the students, I guess, did eat in the cafeteria.

JB: There was no student center at that time.

PC: We used to sometimes get a sack lunch for Sunday dinner.

JB: Oh, really. You gave the cooks the day off.

PC: Yes.

JB: What was the social life. I guess it would be different the two times you were there.

PC: Well, it's kind of interesting to go back now and see what has taken place there socially compared to the opportunities given us. I suppose you're probably familiar with the old student house?

JB: Yes.

PC: That was almost, just about the center of activity. There were a few campus dances, special dances, at special times of year, but not nearly the numbers there are now. Hiring a name band or something to come in was unheard of. That just didn't happen. But the social activities primarily were ones that required you to plan something yourself. There wasn't much planned for you by the college.

JB: Did they have a Dean of Students then?

PC: Oh, not really as such.

JB: You had a compulsory chapel as a freshman, I guess.

PC: Yes I did.

JB: Was that once a week then?

PC: Yes, yes it was.

JB: Started out as a daily thing, and then went to three days a week and then they cut it down.

PC: I don't think this was all bad. I understand why they can't do some of the things today that they did years ago. Numbers. But I think they've created a loyalty and spirit that Western has had down through the years. I think sometimes you have to learn how to be a Hilltopper.

JB: Right. That must have been something they did. Everyone mentions that, so it must have some effect.

PC: In my profession I talk to people from other colleges in the state of Kentucky--Morehead, Eastern, hire some of these people--and, you know, they know this kind of thing exists, too. They don't understand why it exists at Western, and I'm not sure

anyone does, but they do know it exists, and they said "How does this spirit come about?"
You know I'm not so sure I *can even tell them.*

JB: But there is something there, isn't it? I can see that everytime I talk with alumnus. What buildings were on the campus then?

PC: Well, there was Cherry Hall and of course that would have been the central building of the campus, and of course the old gymnasium which I is now, I believe, the present library. The education building was there.

JB: Now that was the Training School you're talking about?

PC: Yea. And the building where the assemblies and chapel were...

JB: Van Meter.

PC: Van Meter Hall. That was pretty much the extent of it, outside of the dormitories, the gymnasium.

JB: Now there was nothing, no building, between Van Meter and Cherry Hall?

PC: No.

JB: And you mentioned the Cedar House which is sort of the social place. That's been everything. It was a library at one time and it's the faculty house now. We go there for coffee. We've used that for a long time. Can you remember any of the other professors? You've mentioned Dr. Poteet and Dr. Stickles.

PC: I suppose Miss Richards was one that certainly comes to my mind and I feel had a great deal of impact upon my life because of her extreme friendliness. I felt that she understood people, and I know I read an article about her when she retired the statement was made that the thing that summarized her most was that she was a gracious lady. And I think it was very complimentary of her. Because this is the way she was with all of her students. Of course I remember Sherry Yarbrow and Dr. Yarbrow. Sherry Yarbrow I did my practice teaching in English under her. Dr. Yarbrow, I had him for class. And of course Mrs. Diddle and Mr. Hornback, so there was a good number of people at Western who had a profound influence, I suppose, upon my life.

JB: You have any favorite Diddle stories, Diddleisms?

PC: I suppose anyone who played for Mr. Diddle has a lot of stories on him, but I suppose the one that I remember best, and Mr. Diddle had an old shepherd dog, I don't know whether you heard this story about....

JB: Don't know yet.

PC: Anyway, he had an old shepherd dog, and this dog's name was Champ. And just about every place Mr. Diddle went to he took Champ along with him and Champ rode in the front seat. One day for some reason Mr. Diddle put Champ in the trunk of the car. He rode around with Champ in that car in the trunk for a long time. Finally, he forgot that he put him in there and he came to all of us players and wanted to know if we'd seen Champ. But we hadn't seen Champ. And he had us all looking for his dog, and of course we couldn't find his dog. But finally we raised up the trunk of the car, for something, and there was old Champ sitting there, and he said to Champ "Where the hell have you been? I've been looking for you all day!" This is kind of the way he was. I could go on, I guess, with a lot of different stories, everyone has them, but he was a great man, and developed a lot of men himself who probably would not have been what they are today if it had not been for Mr. Diddle. He was a special person, particularly special to me.

JB: Who were some of the other men on the basketball team?

PC: Well, John Oldham and I started there together when as freshmen, and of course there was Due Gibson, Don Ray, Buck Sydnor, Dero Downing, Martin Cane, Charlie Lavenheart, Horace Spears, all that...

JB: Now you played a pretty extensive schedule. Traveled a good deal. How did you travel?

PC: We traveled some in the state bus and mostly by train, to other places. Flying was unheard of at that time, for us, anyway.

JB: I guess those train trips were quite a big thing, weren't they. You'd be gone for several days at a stretch.

PC: Yes we were, and keeping up with your academic, well it was a problem. Was for me.

JB: I imagine it would be for anybody. Did you play in New York.

PC: Yes. Played in NIT. That was the big tournament at that time. The one we looked forward to getting into.

JB: How did Mr. Diddle, or maybe Mr. Hornback, organize those trips? When you were going from Bowling Green to New York. Did you go by train? What was it like on that train trip?

PC: Of course we all looked forward to it. Mr. Hornback was always the one who was primarily responsible for the players, their conduct, and stuff. Mr. Diddle expected us, I think, to have a good time, but he also expected you to conduct yourself like gentlemen. And we did. We knew what his expectations were, and we pretty well conformed to those kind of things. Of course he expected you to win, also. But we were fortunate that Western did win. A good share of the games. But the trips were always exciting to us. Of course sometimes by the time the year was over they were beginning to wear on the players I think a little bit too. Going to school on an athletic scholarship may appear grandiose to some people but it's not the easiest way to go to school. They expect you to perform, and they were right, they expected us. And if you were really interested in achieving an academic record creates quite a demand on a young man.

JB: Was the faculty pretty sympathetic and cooperative with you about missing work and so forth?

PC: Yes sir. I think, you know, one man I would like to mention anyway is Dr. Wilson who was in the art department. I've told many people, a lot of the athletes became involved in first year art, Art 1. I believe he was the most sympathetic, understanding individual I've ever come in contact with. He had, naturally, a great love of art, and he could appreciate what some of us guys could do that did not have very good skills, very limited skills. And I have an interest in art today, and never had any skills as far as art is concerned, but I think he did teach me, too. I appreciate art. And I'm sure he had the same effect on a lot of athletes that come in contact with him, because he had kind of an understanding that everyone was not an artist.

JB: He seemed to be one of the kindest, gentlest people I've ever known.

PC: Undoubtedly.

JB: I'm just amazed.

PC: He had a real feel for art, for the individual.

JB: He was a pretty good artist, too. I have a few of his watercolors. What about Mr. Diddle's pep talks? How did he get you ready for the day?

PC: Well, I think he used a lot of on built in enthusiasm and his intense desire to excel. His competitive spirit, I think, at that time Western was playing the University of Louisville. And of course, Dr. Hickman who was then coach at the University of Louisville has since went up to Mr. Diddle's former players and students. I think Diddle motivated us by that His relationship with Dr. Hickman, I'm sure he loved Dr. Hickman very dearly, but when we played Louisville you would not have felt this. I'm sure Mr. Hickman wanted to beat Western as badly as anyone on the schedule, that's always the situation when you play your former coach, regardless of your friendship and

so forth. He used to tell us how badly Mr. Hickman treated him, and I'm sure it probably wasn't true. But, anyway, that was the kind of message that we got. At that time we may have believed that.

JB: Did he get pretty dramatic sometimes, say when he had you back in the dressing room at halftime or something?

PC: Yes, we sometimes felt his wrath at halftime, particularly if we weren't performing very well. I don't know if offensively we made a few mistakes or defensively either, but he had a way of getting his points across, and usually they weren't the most complimentary in the world. But he also had a great way of after the game was over, in the public's eye, we were always one of the greatest. And you may not have been the greatest when you were all assembled together at halftime, or after the game or something like that, but when the team was together, if you went to a banquet or he took you before the public, he never had anything but good, great things to say about you. He made you feel like an All American all the time. We liked that. Of course you didn't always feel that way in the dressing room.

JB: What other sports did they have?

PC: At that time baseball, track, football, basketball were pretty much the sports, tennis, tennis was of course played at Western at that time. Western has always had a good tennis team.

JB: And they didn't have boxing or wrestling?

PC: No, not on intercollegiate.

JB: I knew, Frank Griffin had been there when you were there. And he had been a great boxer.

PC: Yes. But intercollegiate there wasn't at that time.

JB: Still don't have it. And boxing is one of the things I keep hoping they'll do something, but it's just not popular. Wrestling is making a big comeback in the state, I think.

PC: It's a big sport in Ohio.

JB: Most of the northern states.

PC: Northern Kentucky has become pretty dominant in the state of Kentucky.

JB: Yes, a former student of mine at Western, Mike, I can't think of his last name. was down at Union County, and he had state championship, maybe three or four years...

PC:has been very impressive throughout the years. We have a Western graduate with our band, Jeff Hood. Our band was kind of on the decline here. In fact we were wondering whether we were going to keep it afloat or not, so we went out and hired a new band director. I've always been impressed with Western's band, and I really kind of made an effort to get a Western boy. Sometimes my board accuses me of hiring all Western people. That really isn't true. I did a little, after they made this accusation, they said to me one night, "Joe, why don't we hire from Western," you know. I really have a great group on my Board of Education, but they were needling me a little bit about this, and so after this happened I did a little research on this, and out of our small faculty of about 44 people we have something like 23 or 4 different colleges represented.

JB: Can't ask for better than that. Now what is the name of this, this is Beechwood?

PC: Beechwood School District.

JB: Now what does that include, is that separate from Fort Mitchell?

PC: It includes most of Fort Mitchell, but part of the community of Fort Mitchell is not in our district, but there is only one street outside of the Fort Mitchell area and that's over in Fort Bragg.

JB: This town is so close together and not being from this area, I'm a little confused what town I'm in.

PC: It's very easy to do that in Northern Kentucky, in just one little town out they all run together.

JB: What do you remember about Kelly Thompson?

PC: Dr. Thompson, he used to, when I first went to Western he was in public relations, public demand at Western, more or less business manager and things of that nature, but he made all the trips with the basketball team at that time. He was very supportive of the athletic program, and of course he always had a tremendous interest in Western. He knew about all us kids by name. I think he'd be, to the students, about as much direction as to where they go, or where they were going, as any other people at Western. It was always amazing to me that as many students as have gone through Western that you can go back and meet people that you were associated with 35 years ago. And still say hello and call you by name. I wished I had the same ability, I don't have it.

JB: It's so hard for names of mine. I know the people and know about them, but getting the name and that's bad.

PC: But Dr. Thompson could always do that to any, and can still do it. I run into him and he'll still call me....talk about the era in which I was there, know exactly the young men that were participating in the sports.

JB: You would have known him pretty well then from being on the ball team.

PC: I think Western owes a lot to Dr. Thompson, it's important to what he gave to the school, and....

JB: Now Paul Garrett was President when you were there, right?

PC: Yes.

JB: What do you remember about him?

PC: Well I think all the people that I came in to, had contact with at Western, had many of the same characteristics. I don't know, maybe that's the way Western chooses your people, I don't know. But they all seem to have a great deal of warmth, friendliness, and kindness about them. And Dr. Garrett, you'd go into his office as easily as you could anyone else's office on campus, and For some reason we were sitting in his office one day, I'm not sure, but there was a friend of mine who knew Thomas Smith. And Tommy's dad taught mechanical drawing, industrial arts here at Western. Tommy and I were sitting in Dr. Garrett's office one day, we said "Dr. Garrett, we are getting ready to go fishing, do you have any fishing poles?" He said, "Yes, fellas, they're hanging down in the garage, go get them." So it was just kind of a warmth, you know, and friendliness that Dr. Garrett had. And I don't know whether you ever knew Dr. Willie or not, but he was in the Department of Education. But Dr. Willie was out of this and he had a little farm, had horses out there, and occasionally you'd see one of the football players come riding on in to the campus on one of Dr. Willie's horses. And it was this kind of situation that was going on at Western at that time, and it was those kind of people they had working there with students.

JB: I suppose at the time you were there just about all the students would know the president, all the faculty and administration on a personal basis, wouldn't they?

PC: Just about.

JB: We've gotten awfully large now.

PC: I'm sure. I think this has changed the attitude of a lot of things. It hasn't always happened on the college campus, this happened at the high school as well. One thing,

one of the reasons I came to Beechwood School is because of its size. And I think I'm able to hire people on our faculty because we're a small faculty and we do get to know our students and our students get to know us, and it makes a lot of difference in the attitude and thinking of your student body and of your faculty, I think, as well. Our faculty, I think, has warm feelings for the concern of one another and has warm feelings for the concern of the students. And I think small colleges....

JB: I understand that because my Centre of course is still a very small school. I like that situation. You could to know everybody. I really enjoy that. I'm amazed at how large we are now. I think we had about 4,000 when I went to Western and we've got 14,000 something thereabouts. I'm amazed every day. I used to know everybody. I don't know half the faculty now. We've got several hundred faculty members, and the campus is spread out now. I'm in Cherry Hall and you just don't get out of that building too often.

PC: Norman Bee is in your department, isn't he?

JB: No, he's in education.

PC: Oh, is he in education? Did he come there in social studies or did he come there....?

JB: As far as I know he came in education. He was over at my house about three weeks ago. I had just built a screened in porch and he wanted to have a look at it.

PC: H.B. Clark.

JB: Yes, he's retired now.

PC: H.B. and Dulcie are one of our closest friends.

JB: They're real nice. My wife was a home economics major and Dulcie was, so they're in various clubs together.

PC: He served 25 or 30 years at Western.

JB: I would say at least 30. I don't imagine he would have retired without the 30 years.

PC: When he first graduated I think he went and taught there to Bowling Green High for a while, came back and taught maybe college and I suppose the maintenance area.

JB: He was assistant director when Owen Lawson was and is head of that. Did you know Owen Lawson?

PC: Yes, Yes I did.

JB: He's head of maintenance now. Lives right around the corner. In fact a lot of Western people. Johnny Oldham is just up the street from me. Charlie Keown is on the same street. Harry Largden, the vice president, is across the street. Owen is around the corner. It's sort of a Western area.

PC: We were down in Florida, spring break, and in one of the restaurants and my wife says to me she says, "I believe that's John Oldham up ahead of us." And John he went and got seated and went up around to the oyster bar. And so he was surprised, and of course I was to, to run into each other, there in Florida.

JB: They pop up everywhere. I keep seeing people. I'm really surprised. Did you belong to any clubs?

PC: No, I really didn't. I'm not sure what clubs were going on when I was there.

JB: I know they had no sororities or fraternities. They had county clubs, I think and clubs, academic clubs, the history club, there was an English club, home economics, and I guess the outsidies club.

PC: There was so little time in my schedule when I came back and after the war. I wanted to graduate with one additional year in college and I was carrying a rather heavy academic load, plus being married plus playing basketball.

JB: You didn't have much time for club activities.

PC: No I never had much time to get involved in any other activities.

JB: I can understand that. Are there any particular students that you might recall that we haven't mentioned that you knew well while you were there?

PC: Well, I suppose my circle of friends were primarily around the athletes.

JB: Well, can you think of any other things, any highlights or outstanding events that took place while you were at Western that we haven't touched on.

PC: I was involved in track my senior year out of necessity. Gus Thomas, the track coach. Gus Thomas, he was track coach at that time, and they were looking for a pole vaulter, and of course I wasn't particularly interested in pole vaulting my senior year but they needed someone to do that, so Thomas came to me and said "Son, I understand you used to pole vault at Denison University." Well the only reason I was pole vaulting at Denison University was because if you participated some in an athletic program they could stay out of a navy physical education program, which I was interested in trying to

do. So I became involved in track at Denison as a pole vaulter, so I became Western's pole vaulter that year, not a very good one. in fact I was a rather poor one. But they couldn't put somebody out that was on the track team to pole vault, and I guess I was But I really didn't have time to do that, but it was to be out there with the other guys. So basically most of my time at Western was spent with the athletes. And I suppose I had a tendency to have that circle of friends around me. I think the athletes that were being recruited at Western at that time, and I've said this many times, I can't recall an athlete that was playing on the team at that time I was there that did not graduate from college. I look at those fellows today and a good many of them have gone on, in fact every one that I think of and know about has gone on and assumed responsible positions and some of them are at Western, I believe.

JB: Was Lee Robertson in school when you were there?

PC: Yes.

JB: I'm sure you know him. He's my brother in law.

PC: He's done an outstanding job for Logan school also.

JB: He has, he really has. He's very good at that. Do you have any recollections of Bowling Green itself when you were there? About its size or anything about it?

PC: Of course I look at Bowling Green today, of course I knew Bowling Green in 1942, it's spread out like every place else, but of course coming from Lawrenceburg Bowling Green looked like a metropolis to me. Lawrenceburg, I guess, had about 2000 people. I suppose Bowling Green's population at that time was about the area of 14,000. So it looked like a real large town. Getting up to the top of the hill was a problem in those days. There weren't many automobiles around the school. And certainly very few students had a car. I notice nowadays you can't hardly find a place to park. There's no place to put the car. To observe the dormitories, too. You couldn't hardly get inside a dormitory when I was there....

JB: And the number of them is amazing.

PC: But both of my daughters graduated from Western. I have one that still lives in Bowling Green. Teach in Butler County. So I get to Bowling Green pretty.... I've seen it grow.

JB: It's amazing when an alumnus gets back and he's been away from the campus ten or 15 years. It's really something when he sees the building, the size of it. But you've sort of kept up with it over the years.

PC: Well I was kind of away from the campus I suppose until my daughters started back going to Western and I try to make two or three trips a year. I try to get back to the Homecoming Football game in the fall, maybe one basketball game sometime during the winter. It's always attracted me, and you get back, and one thing I enjoy most is my students always made me sit when them in the student section and I was glad to see that the team maintained, I think, as well..... probably better than most, the spirit among the student body for the athletic programs in some schools.

JB: Well, I can't think of many other things to ask you. I'm sure I will on the way back to Bowling Green. But right now I can't think of anything else but if you have anything at all that you would like to say, I would certainly be glad to have it.

PC: We hear from our school when the opportunity arises and we think we have a student that will fit in at Western and we feel that this student can add something to the college, we guide the student toward Western Kentucky University.

JB: We appreciate that.

PC: A young lady's going to Western that I know that when she graduates from Western, Western will be very proud of her. And Coleen Pose here, our drum majorette. She's got a lot of talent, academic ability, and a very fine, impressive young lady, and I'm very pleased to know she's going to Western.

JB: I hope I get to meet her.

PC: I encouraged her in that direction and she wanted to go there and I gave her all the help I could. I think the folks at Western will be as proud of her as we are here. We've got a number of students who have chose to go to Western. Hopefully I've helped some.

JB: I'm sure you have. Without your help and others like you, we wouldn't be able to do very well.

PC: Our counselor is a Western graduate, also, so that doesn't hurt anything.

JB: No, that wouldn't hurt a thing. That makes it very nice. Well, I certainly thank you for your time.

PC: I appreciate your thinking about us.