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UA68/8/2 Ken Honchel Oral History

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This is an interview with Ken Honchel, made in Covington, Ky., on Wednesday the 16th of July, 1980.

J.B: Ken, when did you first enroll in Western?

K.H: In 1961.

J.B: Kelly Thompson was president then, right?

K.H: yeah.

J.B: How did you happen to have picked Western? Did your family have connection there or ...?

K.H: Well, not my family but a family, John and Mary Burch. They had two sons that went to Western and played football and I went down with them one time in the summer or I guess it was spring, early spring I guess. They were going down to look at the school, to sign possibly for a football scholarship.

J.B: And they were from Ft. Thomas, right?

K.H: Yeah, they were actually from Melburn, a little community on the river outside of Ft. Thomas. We had known each other since the second grade. So anyway, I went down with them on a visit and I think they signed either that visit or one soon after that. I don't remember if I went down there twice or not, but anyway. This one particular visit, they signed and then Mrs. /Burke/ was instrumental in getting me a scholarship as a student equipment manager for the football team. Because of the scholarship and so forth and the friendship with the /Burkes'/, was the reason I chose Western.

J.B: They moved down and Mrs. /Burke/ became Dean of Women for a while, correct?

K.H: Yes, yes she was. Mid 60's or somewhere around in there.

J.B: John and what was the other?

K.H: Jim

J.B: Yeah, John is the M.D. now?

K.H: No, that is Jim.

J.B: John is on the faculty at Western, so they are still with us.

K.H: Yeah, they're grandparents, Mrs. /Burke's/ parents, live

outside of Bowling Green, near Auburn.

J.B: What was your first impression of the campus or the people?

K.H: Well I thought it was a beautiful campus and everyone was really friendly. That was when Coach Diddle was there and in the old gymnasium and they were all there because of John and Jim /Burke/, is really why the athletic director and everyone, Nick Dennis and the football staff. They were all there that day to entertain or to visit with the /Burkes/. Everyone was real friendly and I was just down as a visitor.

J.B: You were still in high school?

K.H: We were seniors. They treated me just like, I guess, John and Jim, because I was able to go with them. The tours they went on, I went with them. Everyone was real friendly. It wasn't a hard decision to make.

J.B: You were pretty well convinced after your first time there, then that you wanted to go to school there?

K.H: Yeah, we went down again later, I think, and visited. I guess it was during basketball season, because we saw a basketball at the old field house.

J.B: I didn't realize that you were there before they had the arena.

K.H: //Panny Sircasonas//? was a basketball player at the time and he was from here. We went to watch him play one night and all the excitement, enthusiasm, all the noise in that gymnasium.

J.B: Yeah, it was so small compared to what we have now. I remember people in the balcony sitting around there with their legs hanging out, just a solid mass of people. You never get quite as much spirit in the new arena.

K.H: More people, but everybody is spread out.

J.B: So you came down then in that fall?

K.H: Yeah, we actually came down for football camp. So we were there in August.

J.B: By the time school started, you were pretty well into the thing and all set up. Where did you live?

K.H: The first year, the freshman players, I lived with the football team the whole time I was down there. The freshman

year, the football players stayed in a dorm and we were in North Hall, I think.

J.B: All the time you were there, they had the athletes together in one dorm, didn't they?

K.H: Yes, the upper classman were in the rock house. We enjoyed staying there.

J.B: Yes, that building is still there, they use it for foreign students.

K.H: We enjoyed staying there. We stayed there our sophomore and our junior year, I think. We were either there one or two years.

J.B: Who were some of the people with you, say in the same class or that you knew in football?

K.H: Well another person that was instrumental was a boy by the name of Paul /?Fenesant?/ who played football. He was from Ft. Thomas, so we knew him. Denny /Maccanty/, they were in the same class. Paul, unfortunately, was killed last year. He got killed in a boating accident on Lake Cumberland, I think. But he was very instrumental. Whenever we came home, freshman couldn't have cars at this time, so Paul brought us home.

J.B: Was Mike Thomas there? Do you know Mike?

K.H: I think so, I think I recall the name.

J.B: He is coaching wrestling now in Union County where he has won the state title a couple of years. I don't think he ever wrestled himself. Ken Waller?

K.H: Yes, Ken Waller, we saw him at the homecoming game this last year.

J.B: Yes he was here. I had been out in Los Angeles the week before and was trying to see him and he was on his way up here and then we accidentally met at that homecoming.

K.H: A player by the name of Taylor, Bobby Mitchell, Joe Bugall. A lot of those guys really made us feel at home. Joe is assistant coach for the Houston Oilers. I saw him a couple of years ago when they played Cincinnati. We beat them in one of the few games we one.

J.B: Any other that you can think of?

K.H: I tell you really, the whole football team. I know I am forgetting names but Barry Poole, some of the older guys that

graduated a year after we were there, I haven't seen in twenty years. Really the whole team, Sharon Miller, Dave Peak, Fred Miller, Bob Holman. All the guys, it was really a pleasure, I guess we really didn't know what you had until you graduated. But living with those guys, being with them all the time, and travelling with them really was an experience.

J.B: The enrollment being what, about 4,000?

K.H: I think when we started, it was like 4,000 and when we graduated, it was about 11,000.

J.B: So you had a little of both of it, when you got there, it was sort of a family situation, wasn't it?

K.H: We liked that part of it.

J.B: You got pretty involved in lots of campus activities too, didn't you?

K.H: Yes, I was in a fraternity. I was a Sigma Chi. My brother was an SAE, he graduated in '74 or '73. MY sister, Janet, who now is a doctor in Louisville, she is going through internship. She came to Western and whenever my dad came to visit for Homecoming. That is how my sister and brother came to the decision to come to Western. They were three of us that went through Western. It was a family type thing.

J.B: You have been pretty active in the alumni association, haven't you?

K.H: My wife is from Bowling Green. She is the former Carolyn /Maclark/. She probably should be the one you are interviewing besides me because she knows a lot of the people down here. Yes, we keep active, we are going down this weekend. We go once every couple of months. I was president alumni for about five years.

J.B: Now Carolyn, was in a sorority, wasn't she?

K.H: Yes, ADPi. I think she was president. We try to stay current, unfortunately, we missed the club meeting this year.

J.B: What do recall about the social side of it, fraternity, sorority parties?

K.H: At that time, it was kind of a suitcase, you have probably heard of that term. Being with the football team, I really didn't get involved with that. I didn't have to go anywhere because we were actually a fraternity ourselves. We always messed around and socialized together, but I think the weekends were more like a suitcase college and I think it needed the

fraternities, something to keep people on campus. I know a lot of people from Louisville, and it doesn't take long... It used to take me 6 1/2 hours to get home, now it only takes 4.

***J.B: Who are some of the people, other than students, that you got to know?

K.H: Well my advisor was Dr. Hugh Thompson. He was in government and I recall him because he was very friendly and I was always able to go to him. He was my advisor the whole time I was down there. It was good to have one professor you could always go to. He told me when I graduated, "when you were a freshman, you were one that I thought would never make it." I was real surprised, but I guess it was a compliment too. You yourself, because I had you for history. Some things, like that history class, stick with me. You liked to get involved in sports and you were around the football team. Dean Cowan, I knew him because of his son Mike. Mr. Sagaber, he was our dorm director the first year we were there. I guess you remember people like that. I don't know if he is still around or not. Everytime I go down there, I hear or see something.

J.B: He is still around and since then, he has taken a law degree at a school in Nashville. I don't think he practices, he just wanted to do it.

K.H: We moved to Central Hall, which is now a girl's dorm. The dorm director there, he is an administrator in a hospital in Louisville is Mike Abell. He and his wife are really nice. I was a floor counselor for the football team. The friendly atmosphere carried through him, they would invite a couple of us down for dinner sometime throughout the year. We also worked there in the office. Coach Dennis was able to get me on there as a counselor, so with Mike Abell and his wife and of course the football coaches. Coach Dennis would do anything for you. Also Coach Griffin.

J.B: Coach Griffin is retired and Coach Dennis is dead. Mr. Elrod was there, wasn't he?

K.H: Yes, he was backfield or defensive coach, our scout. He was very instrumental. Jimmy Fike was number one assistant. I worked with him quite a bit. I guess he was in charge, more or less, of the equipment. So he and I worked together very close and I got to know him quite well.

J.B: Was he just very highly organized at that time? He impresses me as being the best organized man I have ever seen.

K.H: He was very, you can tell people that have confidence in themselves, the way they... He ran the offence and really ran the show. He was very organized. I was glad to see him get a

shot at it. He had all the qualifications. Lee Murray was another one.

J.B: Lee is back with the university.

K.H: Yes, but he is not coaching.

J.B: No, maybe he runs the student center or something like that.

K.H: Jim Taylor, I think that is his name. He and Lee Murray were in the same year. Pat Calse was my roommate at one time. He was with Kentucky Fried Chicken about ten years ago. He was setting up franchises of the fish division, H. Salt Fish and Chips, I think. He set up a couple of locations in Cincinnati. Then I saw him in the mid 70s at a homecoming. I don't recall what he was doing.

J.B: need to realize how long ago this has been.

K.H: I was trying to think of what to say, but I guess that once we get going here it kinda blows.

J.B: Things come back and one thing reminds you of something else. There is no way you can think of all the questions you need to ask. Were you there at the time there begin to develop some student unrests on the Western campus.

K.H: Yes, we were at the Rock house. We naturally wanted to stay out of it, but it was... I can recall one time, it was with the NCAA. They wouldn't let the students out of school. I think that is what triggered the one I am thinking about.

J.B: At that time, what was it, three cuts you were allowed in a class?

K.H: Yes, I don't even remember what the result was. Maybe they, maybe you were allowed to count it as a cut or maybe you could have four cuts. I don't know what it was. I remember that they wouldn't let students go to the NCAA with an excuse or something. Even if you had a ticket. I think that is how the first one I recall. I remember a bunch of students were at Cherry Hall. We were at the Rock House watching them. We didn't really want to get involved in it. But that was probably minor, that was the early 60s.

J.B: Were you there when they had the famous incident, sort of outlaw newspaper? This was a little off campus newspaper fighting with the administration and it came to be blown out of proportion. They may have been successful getting some of the students connected. I guess it came a little bit later in the last half of the 60s. But as I recall, there wasn't much.

K.H: Really if you look at it now, that was a little minor incident. I guess you got more complicated later on.

J.B: There were a lot of confrontations with the student body and...

K.H: Western was small and family type thing, there were some radical changes going on in the 60s. I think the administration was conservative. There was nothing wrong with it.

J.B: No, but they just were not prepared for it. They just didn't understand it or know how to deal with it. Suddenly, they got seemingly different types of students. They were pretty strong. It was a frightening kind of thing to be those people. They never had any experience in that sort of thing. When did you first meet Dr. Kelly Thompson?

K.H: When we were in high school, his son, the one that died, he visited Mr. and Mrs. Burke. I don't know how long he stayed, but I was always out there quite a bit. I remember, I don't know if Dr. Thompson was there or not, I remember meeting his son. I think the Thompson's were there, I don't really know. I do know I met them when I came down with Mr. and Mrs. Burke.

J.B: Did you have any particular impression of him?

K.H: He was very friendly, like everyone else down there. I had no idea of what a president of a college was like, but he appeared to be the mold. He was friendly, but yet you could say he was still on the serious side. I was very impressed.

J.B: Then after you began travelling with the football team, I guess you saw a good deal more of him, didn't you?

K.H: Yeah, he was very involved, very interested in the athletics.

J.B: He had a great interest in athletics. Of course that is what got him to Western in the first place. Mr. Diddle recruited him.

K.H: Yeah, he was a student equipment manager at one time, I understand.

J.B: I think he was down to play football and was injured even before the first game, as I recall.

K.H: That was almost my situation, but I got hurt in high school. I wasn't big enough to play anyways, I would have gotten killed. His door was always open. He said it and he meant it.

J.B: Yeah, I was surprised when I first came, coming from a different college situation, that everybody wondered in and talked with him about anything at all. He always seemed to have time. Did he make many football trips with you?

K.H: The most memorable football trip I can remember was going to, well the two. One was going to play Tampa in 1963 and I think he was still president at that time. We went down on a train and I don't think he was with us, but I remember that trip very well. It was an exciting...something new, something different.

J.B: What was probably one of the last athletic trips made by train?

K.H: I could talk two hours about that trip. The train was a South Wind or something. Getting everything ready for the trip was very difficult for me, but we got everything down to the station. I can remember this big silver train pulling up, real nice. Well, we started to get on and they said "no, the last car down." We went down to that last car and I swear it was like a wooden caboose. It was a painted car, very old. It just was not what we had thought. Somehow, they had tacked that car on or two cars, whatever it was. We were in that car and it didn't take long goint that far to get bored. At first they wouldn't let us go through to the other cars. I think there were enough complaints to where they finally let us mingle and get up and go to the other cars. I can remember somewhere we changed trains. They made a mistake and put our car, not at the end, but in the middle of the train. People from the other cars had to go through our car. You can imagine forty guys and there were people that went through that didn't want to come back. It was quite an experience. I think that there was enough cain raised that we were finally able to go in and sleep in other cars, relax in other cars. It was really bad, the air conditioning didn't work. It was hot and humid in Tampa. I forget the hotel we stayed in, but it overlooked the field. There was a high school game there the night before on the same field we were on. It was raining and they dug up the field. Actually we were fortunate to get out of there with a tie. Tampa were thinking about closing down their football program. I think they have know. I think it was revived in the 60s and I don't know how long it lasted, but I don't think they have it now. It was hot and there was a haze over the field. I remember the quarter back for us, he was in the Vietnam war and I think he got killed in a helicopter crash after the war was over. The guys were in shape, but because of the heat and humidity coming off that fiels, they had to have oxygen. It was that bad. That was our only blummage that year and it was a tie. The team went undefeated and played in the Tangerine Bowl and beat the Coast Guard. That time we flew in, so that was my first airplane ride.

J.B: That must have been the last train ride.

K.H: Gosh, I hope so. It is funny to go back and talk about it now, because when you get about two, three or ten of us together... When we get on that subject, we go for hours talking about the things that happened on that trip.