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UA1B2/1/9 Oral History Part II

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Western Kentucky University

UA1B University Wide Committees / Events

Series 2/1 Anniversaries Western Kentucky University

Item 9 Owen Lawson Oral History Interview, Part II

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Biographical/Historical Note:

Records regarding anniversaries celebrated by the university includes founders day, 75th and centennial celebrations.

Description: Interview conducted by Paula Trafton with Owen Lawson former WKU Physical Plant director.

Dates: July 27, 2005

Formats: 2 audiotapes, 1 wav file, 1 mp3 file

Subject Analytics:

Agriculture (WKU)

Anniversaries

Audio recording

Bennett, George

Boardinghouses--Kentucky--Bowling Green

Bowling Green Business University (KY)

Canon, E.H.

Centennial celebrations

Cherry Hall (WKU)

Dormitories

Engineering & Biological Sciences Hall (WKU)

Farms

GI Bill

Industrial Education & Technology (WKU)

Jones, Lee

Kentucky Building (WKU)

Mass Media & Technology Hall (WKU)

Natcher Parkway

Ogden College (Bowling Green, KY)

Ogden Hall (WKU)

Peace, Raymond

Ransdell, Gary

Registrar (WKU)

Residential facilities

Schneider Hall (WKU)

Snell Hall (WKU)

Taylor Agricultural Center (WKU)

Thompson, E. Kelly, 1909-1993

Veterans

Wallace, George

Western Kentucky University

Wright, D.M.

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Oral History Recording List UA1B2.1.9 ~ Records

10/09/2013

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
Tape 2	1	00:00:00	<p><i>PT: Okay you can start.</i></p> <p><i>OL: Okay it was chaired by Herb Smith a man here in Bowling Green. He's still living. And I think he maybe he and Cooper Smith or one of the Smiths are chairman of the Ogden Foundation. See Ogden College was established back in 1870 or '80 and we occupied Ogden. And the Ogden College still stands today. Ogden College they still have a board of directors or whatever. But anyhow, they own Snell Hall and they owned Ogden Hall. And when we got ready to build that building and finance it we had to have ownership of the property. So what we got from Herb Smith I don't know whether you ever heard of Herb Smith or not but he's still here president of a bank he and his son I think. Herb Smith and Cooper Smith were the regents and they entered into a 99 year lease which is forever with Dr. Thompson. And once we got that lease we could finance the building on that property.</i></p> <p><i>Now Ogden Hall was built, was a building built by 1850 or '60 stands where the Science Complex is now the big building, the front building. We tore that building down which I now know that I should have protested that. I did not do that. I should have. That was a building an antique home that you have never seen one like it. We had classes in it oh for fifty years. It was a classroom building. It had all of our ag, biology labs and everything in it. We should as I look back on it now I never complained about that but it should never have been torn down. It was a beautiful it was a lovely old building built in the 1850s.</i></p> <p><i>But anyhow, we built the north wing on it. Then we kept Snell Hall and [Gary] Ransdell can't tear down Snell Hall without Board approval. He probably found that out by now, but he didn't ask anybody, but I could have told him. He can't tear it down. He can let it rot down, but he can't tear it down. And it looks like he's letting it rot down. But anyhow, he's not doing it, it's happening.</i></p> <p><i>The Italian Gardens belong to the Ogden Foundation. And I've noticed they've taken those up which I probably would never have done.</i></p>
Tape 2	1	00:02:54	<p><i>PT: What, the statues?</i></p> <p><i>OL: The statues yes.</i></p> <p><i>PT: That's because some were . . .</i></p> <p><i>OL: They were beautiful I thought.</i></p> <p><i>PT: I think someone stole . . .</i></p> <p><i>OL: Oh yes. Well, we had problems with them all the time that I was here 35, 35, 36, 38 years. I had all kinds of problems with them but I think they may have placed them in the Kentucky Building is where I want them to go, but I don't know whether they did that or not. Did they do that?</i></p> <p><i>PT: I don't think so.</i></p> <p><i>OL: Well they need to be in the out in the garden at the Kentucky Building. See I built the Kentucky, I was chairman of the committee on the Kentucky Building Addition. And we built it with the architect Frank Cain. We built that garden out there and it's beautiful. Best move I ever insisted on. Because a lot of people didn't want to have it, but I thought it was a great thing. And it is fantastic. Best, best piece of work we've ever done I think because it has all kinds of possibilities.</i></p> <p><i>But anyhow, those statues should be there. I don't know whether they are or not. I haven't been back, but they could be very well placed there. That's what I, nobody ever asked me so. I'm not going to insist I tell them but nobody ever asked me that. I know that's where they ought to be because the Kentucky Building is a building I can contributed pennies to during the Depression because that's how it was built. It was a Dr. Cherry canvassed the whole state to have children, school children give pennies to build the Kentucky Building.</i></p>
Tape 2	1	00:04:43	<p><i>PT: And you contributed.</i></p> <p><i>OL: I contributed back when I was a little bitty boy in the '30s and we didn't have the money but you know mom would give me a penny or two and I'd put into it. And I never knew I would ever see it. You know I thought well I didn't know where it was when I was a kid but later on I would come to appreciate it because I worked in it and built it, did a lot of the work in it after I got here and before we built the new building. It's one of the most and it stood empty from 1933 I believe until 1937. It didn't have a roof on it. They got enough money to build the walls Dr. Cherry did and it stood gutted for many years during and maybe it wasn't finished until early '40s or it was done when I got here in '46 the first time, '45. But it stood there with no windows or doors or roof for many years in the '30s because of the Depression years. But Dr.</i></p>

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
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Cherry finally found money to do it and they did it.

I don't have a lot of and I say this never said it to anybody except my wife but I don't think there's any question but what Van Meter Hall, Van Meter Auditorium should be maintained as it is forever because it is the premiere building on this campus. There will never be another one like it. The architect was great. The limestone came from I think Warren County, Whitestone [Quarry]. The workmanship in it is rather unique for its time I should never even considered doing anything to that building but time changes all that. That's just one person's opinion.

During the last eight or ten years of my tenure on the campus we didn't do much building had no money. Our enrollment hadn't gone up to 10 or 12,000. See there were only, when I came to Western 1500 students. And I didn't tell you how I got here did I? I hitchhiked down here.

Tape 2 1 00:07:28

PT: Oh, did you?

OL: Yes. Well I didn't hitchhike. What happened was can I tell you this story? You don't have to repeat it. I don't tell it very often but when I got out of high school I was drafted in the military. I came back from my military in '46 and 7. 7 I got back for good. We were sitting up in a restaurant in Etown where I grew up in Hardin County with some guys. We all got out of the service and we had nothing to do. There was no money. There was no jobs. There was nothing. And I was nineteen years old you know and I'd been overseas and back. But anyhow, I was twenty I guess by that time. We were sitting there and a young man came in who we had known in the military and he had dated one of our high school classmates. And he came in and he had relocated in Kentucky. And we asked him what he was doing and he said, "Well I'm going to college." "Going to college? You're not smart enough to be in college." He said, "Yes. I'm going to Western. You guys ought to be going on the GI Bill." He said, "I'm going on the GI Bill." So we sat around there and talked and a few minutes and he left. We got to thinking about it and so maybe we ought to go to college. So the three of us the next, we said "When does it start?" He said, "In the morning, on Monday morning." He said, "Well." We sat around there and talked and we said, "Well you know we might go. GI Bill we got the GI Bill." Make \$60 a month, \$65 a month they pay our tuition. So we're all ex-GIs so the next morning, that night we decided we would come to Western the next day. So we got in an old car and drove down 31W came down and we got we went down to the BU, the Business University. You know where that campus is now or where it used to be where those dorms are. And we parked there and we thought that was Western. We'd never been here, see. So we went in there and it was a business university. And the guy said, "No, Western's up the hill." So we said, "We want to go to Western." Well he said, "I'll talk to you about the Business University." We said, "No, we want to go up to Western." So we walked up the hill. We could see Cherry, we saw Cherry's Statue out here standing. So we walked up there. He said, "See that statue up there?" He said, "That's Western." So we came up here came in the front door and Dr. Lee Frances Jones occupied the first office on the right as you go out the front door. He was standing out there in the lobby looking around. He was an old guy. We thought he was old. He was probably 55 you know and he spoke to us. He said, "How are you boys doing?" "Doing fine, sir." He said, "Would you, are looking to go to college?" We said, "Well no, we just came down to look around." He said, "Well do you want to go to college?" "Well we've talked about it." He said, "Well come on in to my office." So we came in to Dr. Jones' office and he was head of the Education Department. He was later on my master's committee when I got my master's degree, but I told him that story and he said, "I remember a lot of guys like you guys, but I don't remember you." But anyhow, he said, "Come on in, sit down boys." So we sat down. "What do y'all want to do?" We said, "Well we don't know. We just got out of the army." He said, "Well you got a GI Bill?" We said, "Yes we got a GI Bill." He told us a World War I story what happened to him while he was in France. He said, "Now if you want to go to college you can go to college on the GI Bill. All you do is you go back to the Registrar's Office. He's standing back there in the hall. And here are the cards." And we said, "Well we don't know what we'd take." And he said, "Well I'll suggest you take English, History, Math and Science four courses." That will be and he said, "Fifteen hours." So fifteen or sixteen hours we didn't know what that meant but he said, "Take that." And he said, "Here are the registration cards" and he said "here's the book." And we filled them out 101 and 101A English and 101 Ancient History and Math and Science signed all. A little card just like that filled it out. And he said, "You take that back there to the Registrar's Office and Mr. E.H. Canon and he'll sign it. And I'm the Veterans Counselor. You bring it back up here to me and I'll put you on the record. Then you go over to the Business Office," which was in Van Meter at the time. And he said, "You'll see Miss Schneider over there she'll take care of you." He said, "And you don't have to do anything else just show up for class on Monday morning."

So we walked out the front door of Cherry Hall and said, "Where are we going to stay?" You know we didn't have any clothes. We had our GI clothes and that's it. "Where are we going to stay?" So we walked down to the bottom of the hill now which is right down there. There was a barber shop and a rooming house and two restaurants down there. Down at the bottom of that hill.

Tape 2 1 00:12:52

PT: On College Street.

OL: I tore them up. I tore them down. I tore all those down while I was here. It was one of my last duties. I tore those buildings down. Anyhow, walked down there we walked in there and there was a barber shop. And a guy named Raymond Peace was in the barber shop and he was cutting hair, one guy one chair. And he was sitting out on the front. He said, "What are

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
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you guys doing?" "Well we looks like we're registered in college don't have a place to stay." He said, "Well this is a rooming house." Said, "George Wallace runs it." Said, "He's probably got some rooms in there." He said, "I'll take you in there and introduce you to him." So we went in and here's Mr. Wallace. He said, "Yes. I got two rooms and you guys," there were four of us, "you got two to a bed." He said, "It'll be \$4 a month." Well, we said, "Mr. Wallace we don't have any money." He said, "Are you ex-GIs?" We said, "Yes." He said, "Well pay me the first of the month." He said, "Just move on in." So we had all we had what we owned with us. So we went in and then we came out and talked to the barber again named Raymond Peace and he's dead also, but he's a good friend. And his son's a dentist now who I got in U.K. for him, couldn't get in without my recommendation and I got him into dental school. Anyhow, that's later year, another story. We said, "We don't have any money." He said, "Well come on in here. We'll talk to Mr. Wright." D.M. Wright was the owner of the restaurant. He said, "We'll talk to him." And we went in and we said, "We don't have any," Raymond said, "These guys don't have any money but they're living next door with George Wallace in the rooming house." And he said, "Well meal tickets are \$5.50 and that includes a meat and two vegetables and a drink, 55 cents per meal." And he said, "We'll just." We said, "We don't have any money." He said, "Well are you GIs?" And we said, "Yes." He said, "Well you pay me when you get paid." So we got a place to eat, got a place to sleep and we're in school. All in the same day and we didn't come down here to do that.

PT: Wow! What a story.

OL: Isn't that something? And Peace was my barber until he died. And his son I got into dental school. And then three or four months later I met my wife to be. The rest is history.

Tape 2	1	00:15:29	<p>PT: What do you think is your legacy to Western?</p> <p>OL: I think probably the development of the campus and the acquisition of the properties along the Nashville Road including what was left over of the interstate cut through. We got that property. I had a part in that because that was a big thing because when they got ready to build the [Natcher] Parkway they had the parkway right where the state police barracks are today. You know where that is? Okay. Carl Bradley who was the Right of Way Division head and a graduate of Western and an army buddy of mine during the Korean War we served together had become the head of the Right of Way Division. And I told Dr. Thompson what I knew and he said, "Well you go see Carl Bradley and you bring him down here, but he's a graduate of Western." He said, "You bring him down here or I'll go up there if there's anything we can do to provide the land where it is in such a way that we can cut off the segment" that is now between the interstate and the Ag Center and move that highway. And so he said, "I don't want to use any pressures to do that but are they considering where the, have they firmed up the location?" So I called Bradley and he said, "No we have not firmed up the location." I said, "Since the university owns property out there Dr. Thompson would like to be a part of the plan." So Bradley who was the Right of Way Division [?] all the interstate division for the state of Kentucky came down. And said, "Well you know the engineers are going to have to tell me where it goes, but," he said, "they are looking at alternate locations." So I always thought that made a lot of difference to whether we got it or not and ultimately did. So that's how we got the property annexed the property. No one you're probably maybe the first or second person I ever told that to because but that's the way it got there. And that's why the highway is where it is and that's why we have the property where it is.</p> <p>Now George Bennett a teacher at Western and a retired person you may know of him. George is a fine guy but he owns about seven or eight acres back in there and we surround him. And that driveway that goes from the road to his house is our responsibility because it's his road to his property. Now George is in bad health. Mr. Bennett Dr. not Mr. Bennett he taught in the Ag Department he is in bad health. But Sue his wife, still they still live there but George didn't care because it really landlocked him but we have to maintain that road. That's the agreement we made.</p>
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Tape 2	1	00:19:19	<p>PT: As you drive through campus do you feel pride?</p> <p>OL: Oh yes. I'm pleased that what we have. I like some of the new things that Gary [Ransdell] has been able to do. The one thing that probably I guess if I had one criticism it would be maybe the lack of continuity about how we build and place buildings and maybe some of the outside treatment. The new building [Mass Media & Technology Hall] down on Normal Drive where I used to live I lived on that site in a tar paper building government. You've seen the pictures here. Is out of place because of its exterior treatment it's all stripes. It looks like a zebra. That's not consistent with anything else on the campus. A beautiful building, don't get me wrong nicely done everything but I would never have done that. As part of the building committee I always had a say so about that.</p> <p>The newest building on the science campus [Engineering & Biological Sciences Hall] does not match any way what's good design. I taught building design in the Industrial Arts Department building and construction design. And I've been to school on design characteristics. I did that while I was at the Physical Plant because I wanted to learn about architectural went to Japan, went to China, went to Europe I've been to all those places. Every time I go I always look at the buildings, in Beijing and also in London every place, France that I've ever been, South America. That building does not have any repetitive work of any other building on Ogden Campus. That building down there does not repeat anything does not have any lines, architecturally speaking lines that would match anything else on the campus so that's my criticism.</p>
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Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
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I think I was chair of the, those committees I chaired most of those committees the arena, I did the arena. All the buildings you see I did 35 or 40 of them. But what we tried to do with the original campus in some cases we just didn't do a good job but in most cases we were able to keep some kind of continuity with brick, concrete, materials and some kind of lines. That building down there is all round all rounded corners. We don't have a rounded corner on this building on this campus. The building over here has all of this you know. I'm not taking away from the building. I think the buildings are you know functional, work good and everything like that.

PT: Are you talking about the new engineering building?

OL: Yes, the new engineering building, yes. It doesn't match anything. It's got too much of this you know and I understand you know, nobody asked me. You're the first person to ask me but I didn't volunteer that to Gary because I don't think he needs any advice.

Tape 2 1 00:23:23

23:23
PT: Well this has been extremely informative interview.

OL: Well I probably bored you with a lot.

PT: No, actually you did not. I did not know how much you were responsible for in the buildings on this campus.

OL: I was responsible for about I don't know, 45 or 50 of them. Either remodeled or yes I watched the re-, I watched the McLean Hall built. I was courting my wife who lived down in Schneider Hall it's not Schneider Hall anymore but what do you call that? Whitestone, Whitestone, what is it now? [Mr. Lawson is talking about the current Schneider Hall which was originally known as West Hall and Whitestone Hall]

PT: Potter Hall?

OL: What?

PT: Potter?

OL: No, Potter, no Potter was already here. Potter is 1920, '20s building. It's the stone building down by the President's Home.

PT: Okay.

Tape 2 1 00:24:13

24:13
OL: I don't know what the name, they named it something. It's got a new function. She lived in that building. But I've been to every campus in the state of Kentucky. When I was working in Frankfort I brought you my resume. You can have that. I still work on buildings but I still do. I've got about a hundred buildings all over the United States that belong to Teachers Retirement that I deal with but they're all commercial you know, drugstores and whatever, Lowe's and all those buildings.

My quick reaction is, I'm not an architect but I taught architectural drawing at Western have dealt with all the architects, the master planners, I guess the criticism that I have if it's maybe not justified that there is not there should be more continuity in what you have. Even though it's not pretty some of it you could do some things that transition that good design judgment would mean that you would have some transition to these buildings instead of just like that or you know like the new building over here that has all the points in it big old stairways and concrete steps that somebody's going to have to sweep and clean snow off of and fall on the ice no handrails nothing you know. I don't know how it's going to work and that bothers me. And I guess the no continuity bothers me because I had more to do with these buildings than any other one person around, Dr. Thompson and I did. We did it for I did it for 30 some years and some of them aren't pretty but blended together they aren't bad. Even on the Kentucky Building I was chair of that committee too. I wanted to make sure the architect did a good job on the building inside but I also wanted him to treat it in such a way that it didn't look like it was an orphan building you know. It looks like inside it flows all as well.

I did the old gym I chaired that committee to the library. I did the library building I chaired that committee. That doesn't mean I did it I just had people who did. I think, I think that what we've got is great inside. I'm worried about or I'm concerned about the transition that's happening so there's not just an edifice here and one here and an ugly one in the middle. But I taught that design class so much, so many times on architectural, not on technical part but just. I'd architecturally had Frank Cain and guys who did the stadium.

[Telephone rings]

That must be me. I'll just tell her to go home.

Hello.

PT: Okay we're about to conclude this interview and I appreciate you taking the time to come and talk to us and giving us so much information about the buildings that we have on campus.

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
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*This is going to be a big help I'm sure to people who are interested in how Western developed.
Thank you for coming.*

OL: Thank you. I'm glad to do it.

[end of side 1, nothing recorded on side 2]