

Ben Rude, Track 2

Recording 1b begins

JB: We're back up.

00:00

BR: Yes, the—the annual was—was edited by a man named Frank Saint Dennis, who succeeded me as student body president. He was a business major, and not a journalist, but he thought that somebody had to take on the job and he did. And, for a very, very, first effort, it was—I think it was a really remarkable achievement, but he had a tremendous amount of help, too. That had a lot of faculty support, particularly from the Art department, and as well as from others.

JB: The Art department was strong, right from the beginning—

BR: Yes, very strong.

JB: From the very start. One of the—one of the photos that I've been going through and back to is a sequence, really, of shots that come up at the outset, opening day ceremony. Let's see. Once, twenty fourth, September fifty-six—

BR: Mmhm. Oh yes!

JB: And there's a bar course, and there's Howard McDonald. Can you describe your recollections of that, or your thoughts about that day, in any detail? What comes to mind?

BR: Oh yes, yes. I can—I can remember very vividly, this was taken in front of, I believe what was to become Dr. Oviatt's office, one of the—one of the temporary buildings. There were maybe, oh, three or four hundred people there, mostly from the community. Very, very few students because school hadn't—hadn't really opened yet, as I recall. And I was given a book for the—for the library presentation of the first—first book for the library. I remember laboring over the talk that I was to give, I think I was given about one minute for an acceptance—acceptance speech. I remember laboring for hours over it, and I can't

remember anything except there was an allusion at the end to a—to what is going to become a great university within a—no, I think I used the term college—a great college, within a great college community. And, of course, both of those predictions have certainly—certainly come to pass. It was a very hot day, I was wearing a wool jacket and I was really sweltering because it was a very hot day indeed.

JB: It looks sunny, and it was September.

BR: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was wrong, that school had started. I think school had maybe been underway for a few days.

JB: No one would have shed a jacket.

5:00 BR: Oh no, nope. You asked earlier about sense of family, the dedication on the annual on, across from page five, shows a little boy and girl holding hands symbolizing the future, of course. The little boy was the son of Frank Saint Dennis, the editor of the yearbook. The little girl, I don't have her name anymore, but she was the daughter of one of the members of the staff. So that again suggests the kind of—the kind of family feeling, you know, underscores the fact that—that we—students were not college students in the traditional sense of the word.

JB: That—that's very interesting, that—

BR: I think there was a contest to select them, and I can't—I can't recall exactly the nature of the contest, but those two were the winners.

JB: I might've taken that as a—well, I did take that as a candid, but it wasn't—this had symbolism behind it, too.

BR: Oh, yes. Yes.

JB: We were talking about ties to the L.A. campus. And you were in this transitional year where the ties were very close. One of the things you pointed out in an interview that I came across from a couple of years ago, was that athletes would attend class in the valley but would practice, and presumably play, over at L.A. State.

BR: Yes. We didn't have very many athletes, but—but it was—it was one institution and it was possible for a person to take classes at both simultaneously. Not very many did because of the distance involved, but if one absolutely had to have a certain course this semester which was not given at the Valley, then the person could take it at—at what we called the Ramona campus. And it was after all, one—one institution. We had, I can recall, Bob Binder was a well-known football player who went and took classes at the Valley and practiced and played football on the—you know, for the—on the Ramona campus as we called it. So, there was cooperation, there was also a great deal of rivalry in a sense—now, we were tiny, of course, and the other campus was quite large. I remember, for example, there was a basketball game that was held at San Fernando High School—we didn't have a gymnasium of course—and it was felt that there should be some athletic events out in the valley for the valley students. We had apparently a fairly good basketball team that as the—as Cal State L.A. did, they lost the game, there's a very poor student turnout for the game, I was tied up I wasn't even there, but I can remember a letter to the editor of the—the L.A. state paper who was—one—I think the head cheerleader began with the sentence, "I'm mad, I'm damn mad!" Talking about going out of their way to have a game out in the valley that didn't get the kind of support that it might have had if they'd had it in—in Los Angeles. We existed, in part, that is the activities program, they felt that we were an arm of their student government. And, as a matter of fact, I can't recall what precipitated it, but there was a move to abolish student government on the—on the Valley campus which resulted in a joint meeting of the two councils and we got—we got things squared away. For a time, we shared one newspaper. I think they gave us a few columns in it. I drove to L.A. once a week to pick up the paper and put it on our—put it on our stands. I guess that was one of the sources of the problem, they wanted us to share a proportionate cost of the student newspaper. We didn't feel that we should. Our argument was that, whether you print, let's say, three thousand copies, and then you get, add on to it five hundred more for us, we will pay what it costs for that extra five hundred, which is very minimal. Their point was if we print thirty-five hundred, you get five hundred of them, you should pay one-seventh of the total cost. And it was that kind of thing that caused problems and resentments and—and what have you. But I think they saw they had the writing on the wall. They perceived that although we were a branch campus, we were destined to become a separate college. I don't think it's of any historical interest, but I'll throw it in anyway because you can always edit it out if you like: there was an organization called the PSPA, Pacific Student Presidents Association, I'm including Student Body Presidents from all over the west coast from

southern California all the way up to Alaska, and including, at least Arizona, I think Nevada, and Washington, Oregon, of course. At any

rate, at one of the meetings, I was there representing the valley campus. And a very important vote was taken. A vote that carried by one. And there was an immediate challenge, that each institution gets one vote. And there was an immediate challenge to the right of the valley campus to vote, because we were only a branch of the Los Angeles State College. And if our vote was—had been taken away, then of course the vote would have gone—would've gone the other way. And that precipitated a debate for about an hour, finally being resolved at Cal Poly had a campus at—had two campuses and two student associations and two presidents, not to mention the University of California system, and so it was resolved, finally, in our favor. But, this was simply illustrative of the kind of, not so much rivalry, we were too small to be rivals, but kind of jealousies that existed between the two institutions. We felt, of course, far superior to our—our campus downtown. And I'm sure the same is absolutely true now.

JB: Faculty surely felt that way.

BR: Oh, absolutely. As I recall, the faculty was selected to come to the Valley from those who applied, and not everyone who applied was able to—was accepted.

JB: As best as I can reconstruct it, about a hundred applied and some forty were chosen.

10:00 BR: Something, something like that.

JB: A lot wanted leave, at that time.

BR: And it was a small—it was a very small campus too, then. All in temporary buildings, it had been on the L.A. freeway, the Ramona freeway we called it, for only one year at that time. Or had it been less than a year? I think maybe only a semester at the time the Valley campus was formed. Prior to then, it had existed for seven or eight years sharing facilities with L.A. City College on Vermont Avenue.

JB: You get a lot of friction there, right? There was friction, multiple—

BR: Yes.

JB: As between campuses, like mitosis takes place, like divorces—

BR: Yes, because we had—we called it, then, the Vermont campus and the Ramona campus, and we had the Valley campus added later.

JB: Did—In that year that you were president, you were elected in your own right in January.

BR: Somewhere around there, yeah.

JB: There was a move to abolish our independent governments on campus.

BR: Right.

JB: You survived that, obviously.

BR: Yeah. We all did.

JB: But you'd been chosen, initially, as student body president, pending student body president, actually coming over from L.A. before that [unintelligible].

BR: Right. Right.

JB: And that had been a kind of decision that was made by Bob Lawrence—

BR: It was—it was a decision that had been made by everyone, really, I had been junior class president the year before, and—and it was—it was made, actually, I think I was probably officially appointed by the student council to be interim, they called it, Chairman of the Student Activities Board, or something of the sort.

JB: That sounds like it kind of tentative title in it of itself, instead of giving you a reign as it were.

BR: Yes. And I think after the first election there was resentment over the idea of forming a student council and over the, what they considered the, usurpation of the interim student body president.

JB: Interesting.

15:00 BR: Another interesting aspect of that, if you go back to early, early documents, stationery, I mean student body stationery, our official name as I mentioned was the San Fernando Valley campus of Los Angeles State College. And in things that we printed, we would have in very, very large letters, San Fernando Valley, and then in small letters, Campus of Los Angeles, then in large letters, State College.

JB: (Laughs) They must have loved that.

BR: One of my early achievements, which I guess I shouldn't be so proud of now because I'm really more of an anti-billboard person now, was to call Foster and Kleiser and ask them to donate a billboard for the corner of Nordhoff and Zelzah with the name of the college. Probably is a picture in the yearbook or one of the early newspapers of the billboard, and that billboard reflected the same thing. The aspect of the campus of Los Angeles State College is in very, very small letters. From a distance, you see San Fernando Valley State College and that's all you see. That stood where, I don't know what you call them, it looks like a bunch of snakes to me—

JB: The CSUN—

BR: The CSUN—The CSUN snakes, at what was then a gigantic orange grove, by the way, now that was the first student dorm was built there.

JB: A lot of trees still there, it's now called the memorial orange grove.

BR: What?

JB: The memorial orange grove. It symptomizes what's happened to the whole area, the faculty club sits in the middle of it.

BR: Yes, I've been there.

JB: One of the things that you anticipated in that billboard and in your stationary was, as you say yourself, this will become a major college in time. And you pointed out that Northridge was expected to become something like Westwood, and they really have. What did you ultimately foresee, I mean how clear was your vision? How clear was the vision of those you were talking and working with in the student body, what would they have anticipated looking to 1991, would you guess? Anything like what really ultimately has developed? Pretty close to what's developed?

BR: I think that most of us might have envisioned something maybe as large as half the size of what had developed. It was in no one's mind that university status would ever come—to that institution or to any of the Cal State—in the Cal State system. It was a foregone conclusion, I think, that it would become an independent institution. That—that the tie with the Los Angeles campus was only a temporary tie. And of course, that came about the following year. I was telling you about a conference that I went to Sacramento with Jenny Ellen Ferguson, who was a teacher in Political Science, and although there was another official reason for the conference, I went along largely to lobby for a separate name, as we called it, that is, to get the legislature to—to officially grant the name of San Fernando Valley State College. And that, by the way, was also a cause of major controversy. The Northridge chamber of commerce, of course, wanted Northridge State College. And San Fernando, of course, is a separate city, it's miles away from the school. The San Fernando city fathers and chamber of commerce, of course, wanted San Fernando State College. And

ultimately, San Fernando Valley State College was chosen, then of course it later became CSU Northridge.

20:00

JB: But San Fernando Valley State College was a kind of compromise term that would embrace the umbrella of the whole valley?

BR: Yes, it was the appropriate word for it. It did not give the publicity to Northridge that the Northridge boosters would have wanted, of course.

JB: Which they ultimately got.

BR: Which they ultimately got.

JB: A lot of people feel that something was lost when that happened, to this day, you still hear about it.

BR: Everyone knows where the San Fernando Valley is. If they know where Northridge is, it's only because of CSUN. Yeah.

JB: One of the things, that our conversation has been rich in, is human interest. And I wonder if you have any favorite human interest stories about your year or really your years at what becomes CSUN that maybe we haven't touched on?

BR: You know, I feel a little bit like Eisenhower when—when he was campaigning for Dick Nixon and he was asked, Can you tell me anything, by a reporter, What did Dick Nixon do of significance as your vice president? And he said, If you'll give me a couple of days, I'll come up with something. (both laugh) Probably I'll get on the phone tomorrow, and then say, John,

I really should have said this. So, if you keep your tape handy, I'll—I'll probably come up with something, but off the top of my head, I think we've covered it pretty well.

JB: Good. Good. I just thought there might have been some particularly notorious occurrence or event or particular [unintelligible], one that, for example, that Red Williams told me, was—had to do with a registration table. With all the cards laid out very neatly and he had this huge table, he and Bob Lawrence, this huge table with all registration cards for all the students and all the classes, all laid out, and somebody kicked the trays and something happened, and the whole thing came crashing down, and the cards went all directions, so these two had to cancel registration for 24 hours, [unintelligible]. It's that kind of thing that doesn't happen anymore because it's all computers and it's all anonymous and it's all done by mail, but in those days, there's a kind of humane side to the campus, because its small and it's kinda grassroots, trying to get itself—

BR: Yes, and I think Red was talking, no doubt, about a little later period when registration was more of a hassle.

JB: In the south library.

BR: When I registered, I think we got everybody registered in the morning. As I recall, we provided, interim student government provided free coffee and donuts and cokes for, for, not only the new students, but anyone else who happened to be around. Course, one memory that I'm sure will shock students today, on every campus if you were to ask what the major problem is, even during the period of the Vietnam War or during the Gulf War, they would not be the major problem. The major problem would be parking. At that time, we had a dirt parking lot and you could come at any time of the day or evening, and find a parking spot with no trouble at all within a city block of your classroom. And, of course, all the classes were located within a much less than—much smaller area than a city block. That disappeared, I think, after the first year.

JB: I was gonna say—

BR: Never to return, never to return.

JB: It disappeared quickly, but that first year was wide open.

BR: Wide open.

JB: Huh, interesting.

BR: And there's no way to get to campus except by car. There were no buses, and virtually no one lived within walking distance. There were very few homes within walking distance to the campus.

JB: I hear the mud around those temporaries and floodwater on Zelzah in the rain were legendary, you just about had to row over Zelzah and put on rain boots.

BR: Yes. In the heavy rain it was awful.

JB: Are there any, the risk of being an oral historian, I'm finding, is I'm learning to be an oral historian, you may very well not ask the big question or questions you should have asked, are there any that you'd expected me to ask which I haven't?

BR: No, I can't think of any, John. I'm glad you didn't ask me to dredge up more names, because, after all, all these years, you know, so many of them—so many of them have gone. I—I think my—if I were to look back on my academic career, I would say that that one year was, without question, the richest year of my—of my student life. And I would include in that the, you know the three undergraduate—or the three low—undergraduate years that preceded my senior year out in the Valley, and my graduate years in the Valley, and my years in [unintelligible] USC. This was certainly the most—the most memorable, and the busiest year of my life, perhaps. But, without question, the richest year.

JB: That's a nice summation.

BR: Yeah. It—it brings back wonderful memories, but not only that, opportunities like this one today that, whenever there's a twenty-fifth or thirtieth anniversary or something memorable happening, somebody says, Well, let's dredge up some people from the past, and I'm—I'm invariably dredged up and of course I'm delighted to be dredged up.

JB: It's been a pleasure for me dredge up this time.

BR: You know we haven't mentioned, although it's purely in passing, after graduating, I inherited the job performing the Alumni Association. And I was also the first Alumni Association president.

JB: What year was it?

BR: That—let's see, that was after Ralph Prator was there, and I believe that would have been maybe, maybe about '59. I don't think it was—maybe it was as early as '58? Our advisor, or our official connection to the college was Leo Wilson. Do you remember that name?

JB: Yes. Very clearly. I never lose a name.

25:00 BR: He was an academic vice president, did not come from the L.A. campus. Imported after Ralph Prator had come, and very, very, kind, brilliant man, who attended all of our meetings, we made him an honorary life president of the Alumni Association, to raise a little money, and to get memberships, we sold life memberships in the Alumni Association for twenty five bucks. I wonder what it costs now. But I thought that—that would be worth—worth adding just as another note.

JB: Indeed. That's remarkably early to establish an alumni association.

BR: Well, I think the feeling was, we have alumni, let's grab on to some of them before they disappear completely and get, you know, get an organization going. It really floundered for a long, long time. And to be honest with you, I don't—I'm not really sure how active they are now, you probably know better than I do.

JB: There's a major—has been, in recent years, a major effort to build back, or to rebuild that organization. The problem is, that in those years that had floundered, as you pointed

out, there was no apparent effort to make any list of names or addresses. And so, our institution, which now has, as I understand, a third of a million alumni, cannot contact, has no means of contacting enormous numbers of those students, they're just lost. And they're all over the place.

BR: As I recall, the history has been pretty much a history of attempting to reorganize as they get a group who are really gung-ho, and then something happens and it goes into the doldrums for a while and bounces back and so on.

JB: I'm just only distantly aware of what they're doing, I think one of the things they're doing is intending to employ the Alumni Association the way alumni associations typically are, as a benefactor of the university. And it's high time people are in their peak older(??) years, not that this is something that's appropriate, it's just something that's been rather rough in terms of the way we maintain records. And as I say, I'm running out to the person to ask about this, is normally kind of a bleak—

BR: Yeah.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add before I leave?

BR: No, it's certainly been an enlightening experience to me and I'll be very interested in seeing the results of the whole thing in three or four more years. I don't know if I want to go to the archives and listen to all the tapes, however.

JB: Well, that's where I, can have future generations—

Tape 1b ends

[END OF RECORDING]