

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Edmund T. Peckham = EP

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on May 22 & June 17, 1991 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Ruby Antosh

Edited by: Philip Walsh

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Biographical Note:

Edmund Peckham was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1924. He served in the US Army during World War II. He earned a bachelor's in European history in 1948, and a PhD in American history and foreign policy in 1954. Though he taught history at the University of the Pacific and elsewhere, he spent most of his career in administration. He served as assistant registrar and acting director of admission at Rice University, and as dean of student life at Raymond College at the University of the Pacific. He was hired as Dean of Student Activities at San Fernando Valley College in 1967, becoming Dean of Students in 1969. During his tenure, he oversaw the opening of the University Student Union and the Klotz Student Health Center, and helped shape Associated Students. As Dean of Students, he was often the first person to speak with students protesting racial inequality, the Vietnam War, and other issues. Though he retired in 1991, he remained active on campus. He passed away in 2016.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, side A

JB: You arrived here in 1967, and by training you are an historian. You studied at Brown and at Harvard. Under whom did you do your major work at Harvard? Who did you study with?

EP: Uh-huh. Well, actually I studied under a lot of really great people. I was very lucky to be there just the very years that I was. I was a teaching assistant for Arthur Schlesinger, Senior. Also, I worked with Samuel Eliot Morison. But my major professor was Frederick Merk, and the, the emphasis that I had at Harvard was, uh, a combination really of my interest in the West and also the, uh, foreign relations. And so, my doctorate actually is a field they consider to be a bridge between history and political science. So that in all the teaching that I've done, it's been in combined departments, both at Royce and University of the Pacific, although I have taught a lot of history during summer sessions as well. I still consider myself a historian and my interest is that way, but it's very difficult to keep up on one's field or fields, and that's particularly true, and I have to do a great deal of reading every night on, uh, Student Affairs things, which are really a discipline in themselves.

JB: Phi Kappa Phi. My understanding is you established Phi Kappa Phi on the campus. Is that accurate?

EP: Well, yes, I think that it is, certainly I was one of the ones, and actually the interesting thing is that is the second campus where that was true, because I was instrumental or with a small group of other friends and colleagues in creating the Phi Kappa Phi chapter at the University of the Pacific as well. I have always believed in recognizing the accomplishments of our students, and if there's one crusade that I had all the years that I have been here at Northridge is to find the vehicles for that, whether it be in Phi Beta Kappa, trying to get that chapter here, which has been a long lasting but very fruitless kind of goal thus far. Although I have seen so far we are beginning to reinvigorate this-effort. Phi Kappa Phi, I felt to be much more appropriate for our type of university. Phi Beta Kappa tends to be a very closed, uh, very, uh, in group kind of an organization. They really don't respect schools that have, uh, programs like ours and that are not really, uh, Liberal Arts studies, but, uh, you see Phi Kappa Phi welcomes the diversity of a program like Northridge. And so anyway, Phi Kappa Phi was very receptive to our overtures, and we've had I think quite a successful Phi Kappa Phi chapter since. But, uhm, also other groups that we've tried to, if you don't mind my just branching out for a second, John, but we (unintelligible) have other groups as well like, uh, ODK [Omicron Delta Kappa]—we created the honors convocation, which I think to be the most exciting and really rewarding thing that I do all year long. The outstanding students' competition, trying to elicit interest in the Alumni Association and in the President's Associates to fund these scholarships for our outstanding students. But it's just a joy to, uh, to recognize the brilliance, really, the intelligence of our students. And again I hope you don't mind my branching off when these thoughts come, it's going to be sort of a free flow kind of interview. But thing, the fact is that I don't think people really appreciate the caliber, the worth of students at Northridge. When I came twenty-five years ago—twenty-four years ago, the thing that appalled me was the feeling in the faculty and the students, indeed the entire campus, that we were a second-rate institution, that if people had their druthers, of course, they would be over at the hill and, at UCLA, and I have tried to stress throughout my years here, the fact that we are a campus of real significance and real greatness, and I think that we are! And I think that the fact that our students do as much as they do, when most of them work twenty-four or forty hours a week as they manage, still can maintain good grades, uh, earn qualifications to go on to medical, and dental, and legal schools, or wherever it might be, throughout the country, and engage in all the outside activities that they do—and I think they are just a remarkable group of people, and I feel very prejudiced(??) towards them.

(00:05:03)

JB: We share that partiality.

EP: Uh-huh. (both talking at the same time) I know you do. One thing that we do share, you and I, is that we both are student oriented people, although we are academicians too. I still consider that I am an academician, and, uh, I relish the fact that the history department still considers that I'm a colleague. I just had lunch today, and there were a group of the

historians and they were of course welcoming me, as a friend. And I think too that part of the success that we have had here at Northridge and in creating what I consider being a Student Affairs Area that is a really outstanding one, has been the fact that people cannot just dismiss Student Affairs here, and say that it's just a fun and games operation, when at least many of us have all the academic credentials that people do in the instructional departments as well. And indeed, many of us serve as adjunct faculty in the departments. I am one in the School of Education, Educational Psychology, because we have a college student personnel program that we have been we are trying to create in Ed Psych for a number of years.

JB: I want to talk to you um-about some of the most memorable students that we have had here that you recall –um, let me, though the flow of this, though, pin down one particular point about Phi Kappa Phi, and that is, if we can, establish what year or approximately what year it was established, on our campus?

EP: Um-huh.

JB: Do you happen to recall?

EP: As an historian, I've got to confess something to you, John, that's that the years really blur into one another (slight laugh). I can recall a dates way back in history much better than I can dates of really recent vintage here at school. I say that Phi Kappa Phi on our campus is, um, (pause) perhaps (pause) sixteen to eighteen years old. I served as-as president of the Phi Kappa Phi chapter here for a couple of times. Once I was a president elect and the, unfortunately the president whom we had, was a well-known mathematician, remember Dr. Wren, passed away and so I became president by default. (pause) Then had a second year and then there was a another time I was president and of course you have been interested in Phi Kappa Phi too because you believe in the scholastic abilities of our students.

JB: Both of us-um had experiences at Pacific at the same time and-uh, we recall in loco parentis there, you as an administrator and I as the student, I would like to, um, relate this to our own campus, and quote from a passage in the 1969-70 catalog, entitled Minor Students' Housing Regulations. Uh, you can probably quote this back to me from memory, but it reads this way: "The college may require all unmarried minor students not living with a parent or guardian, to live in residence halls unless a request in writing to the student's parent or guardian or accommodations other than those furnished by the college has been approved by the Associate Dean of Students, Activities and Housing. Registration may be denied or cancelled for failure to comply with this regulation." Well, that statement, or a similar statement, finds its way back in our catalog (unintelligible) creation of Monterey Hall, which was originally a women's residence hall as you recall. To your knowledge has that provision ever been enforced?

(00:08:58)

EP: No, I don't think it has. (pause), um, (pause) what you have done is to, uh, again trigger off a lengthy kind of answer to this genre(??) And I think it's a very important one. I had the fun of, um, speaking to a group of people, last week, really it was the first baccalaureate service we had at Northridge in all the years I can recall. It was created by the campus ministry, was held in the new Hillel house, with a Catholic and Protestant, and Church of Latter Day Saints as well as the uh, as well as the Jewish, um, ministers there, rabbis. And I spoke very much about thi-this theme about, um, about life at Northridge and I tried to bring in as well life at Pacific. See, I came to know you and-duh your beautiful wife, Kathy, when, uh, you were both students at University of the Pacific. Indeed, I know I had Kathy in class and I think maybe at one time, I may have had you in class too, but I can't recall. But anyways I can recall you as a student there, a graduate student at Pacific. You'll remember as well as I the kind of a school Pacific was, very proud of its Methodist heritage. A school that was really strongly influenced by the church people that we had on the board of trustees and the influence that they had on the administration, President Burns, and Vice President Myer, and many people like that. It was a jumping off spot for presidencies at Methodist schools, as a matter of fact, but there, it was a mindset that was there that our students were supposed to behave with decorum. And the years that I was, ah, at University of the Pacific, '58 to '67, I became, um, Dean of Student Life at Raymond College, our first cluster college, our honors college, in 1962, and served there for five years, but those were the very years—the fact is, of Pacific and Stockton just, uh, hop, skip and jump away from the Bay Area and the, and Berkeley, the syndrome of the marijuana, and the LSD and the Timothy Leary, and all the other excitements of the time. And you couldn't expect Raymond students, who are very individualistic, not to bring back with them from the Bay Area, uh, these ideas and sometimes their paraphernalia as well. And we were the bane of the University of the Pacific. I did indeed, as Dean of Student Life, I was responsible for four dormitories, we had two for men, two for women, never the twain shall meet. We had—of course, they didn't live in the same buildings in those days. We had parietal rules at first, which women had to check out and check back in. There was visitation rights and rules, all sorts of regulations of that kind. So our students resented that, and they rebelled against that, and was one of the reasons I think why, uh, there is no longer a Raymond College at University of the Pacific, it's very difficult to try to operate under several different parameters. Well, coming from a background like that to this school (pause), uh, I'd never been at a public school before I came to the university, before I came to San Fernando Valley State College. I had taught at a couple of, uh, public schools during the summer, but, and at first it wasn't my responsibility for the first year, I was not the chief Student Affairs officer. I was brought here by a Dean of Students named Bill Thomas, who came to Stockton, and really talked me into coming from UOP [University of the Pacific]. I was getting a bit disenchanted there. I felt that I had given as much to that university as I could, and I felt the need to try to, uh, grow professionally and I thought that ours, this particular campus of ours at Northridge, would be a good place

to do that. My first semester here, I lived at Northridge Hall, which was, uh, now the Northridge campus residence, we were much closer then, uh, than we are today, we are more rivals than we are friends, but they made a room available for me on the top floor, free. I ate all my meals, or I could eat all my meals, with our young women at Monterey Hall, quite right, I had a lots of fun during those days, because I would be the only male eating with all these nice undergraduates females. That's a wonderful way to get used to the campus, and my wife and family didn't come down to join me for a whole semester. But when it came to try to-to create rules, I really did not believe, you see, because I had been, uh, influenced negatively by the lack of success of the rules at Pacific. I didn't think that that was the way you should to try to govern the, uh, social life of our students at Northridge. And another important fact, too, is the fact that, remember we're dealing with here at least at that time, except for the young women at Monterey Hall, there at most two hundred of them and those living at the Northridge Hall, and there were about two hundred and fifty over there. All the rest of our students were commuters. I know we're going to be talking about, about that as a theme in just a little while as well. I mean, the importance of trying giving a sense of reality to life on this campus, uh, which didn't exist when I came. But we never believed in trying to enforce rules, about parietal rules, let's say check in and check out, at Monterey Hall. We had a host mother (pause), uh, and she was a, uh, an older woman and the girls, because they still liked being called girls in those days, the women who lived at Monterey Hall had a lot of respect for her, but they never really felt constrained by rules. Uhm, (John coughs in the background) so residence rules are not really a part of our story here at Northridge, certainly either then or now, when we have the burgeoning of what now is fifteen beautiful residence facilities on our north campus, plus the university tower and village apartments. We really now are a residents' campus, but young people, I think, there is a little bit of a return to it because parents now would like to make sure that the university can guarantee security, safety to the young people on campus, but, uh, they really are now adults, and we really expect more adult behavior. (long pause)

(00:16:00)

JB: I'd like to make another comparison with Pacific. Pacific had a Greek row, uh, and a very strong Greek system. We had never developed a Greek row on our campus, and I wonder when the decision was made not to do that, and why it was made. Makes us very different from Pacific.

EP: Um-huh. I'm a very strong fraternity person in the sense that I believe that there are far more positive attributes to fraternities than there are negatives, although I don't deny the existence of both. I think particularly in a campus like ours where, um, a young person is sort of tossed into the midst of a, of an enormous mill, college is a very dangerous place in many ways, and it's a very lonesome place, but thing, but the fact is that fraternities and other social groups I think they play a very, very important role on a campus like ours. You don't necessarily have to be in a Greek fraternity to get what I'm

talking about, you can have other sense of commonality and, uh, flying clubs, or sailing clubs, or whatever it might happen to be, but I think a student needs to have something beyond himself, socially. At least we feel very strongly that way in the Student Affairs. But I worked with the fraternities here for all the years very closely that, even when I came, my role was a dean—was my title Dean of Student Activities and Housing, and right from the beginning, fraternities were very much a part of our responsibility. Indeed, in those days campus activities, really almost entirely was, uh, subsumed by clubs and organizations, like the Greeks and student government, but now, of course, campus activities, much, much more mature and meaningful on the life of the campus than it is, than it was then. But we worked very hard, and you asked why we do not have a Greek row program on the campus? The answer is certainly was not the fault of the university, uh, we worked and worked to try to bring about a Greek row. Walter Bollinger, who was my director of housing when I became the Dean of Students and I both tried. We had at that time a campus-oriented area, uh, east of Zelzah, quite a large one, it's now pretty well built up, but at that time, it just consisted of empty land and farm areas. It was an area that was zoned for fraternities, or for college use.

JB: Was this in the late sixties, early seventies--  
(Both talking at once)

(00:18:43)

EP: This was in, yes—yes. When I came in '67 it was still, it was true, it had been zoned before that. It wasn't until the late seventies that it was rezoned away from being college oriented, but the land was there for the taking, and Walter and I tried very hard, working with the individualized houses, to try and see the utility of building up a land base for themselves on the east side of Zelzah, which is now fully occupied by big apartment houses, but it didn't have to be that way. Uh, the houses were, uh, weaker than they are now. This was a time they didn't have a great deal of money. Uh, our fraternities had never really been wealthy the way that the ones that were at UOP or the houses in the South, for example. They were struggling for membership. They didn't have funds for building. They didn't have a large group of alumni to help to support them as advisors and as financiers. Uh, and this was a time, too, that fraternities very quickly became out of favor. We are talking now about a time that, very soon after my arrival, we were plunged into the Vietnam War, and fraternities were considered to be beneath the pale for young people in those days. We went through a time when student government and, uh, student activities were very different from the way they are now. We—those were the only years where we've had trouble with our student government. I think that we have a question on student government leaders, and as we go along down this list, but, uh, as I say we—we even created even plans for them. I can still remember a plot plan that we had east of Zelzah that showed houses all along east row and just, uh, one or two lots inside, uh, different types of houses, because we knew they couldn't afford house of their own, and so we devised a plan, in which two houses, and indeed we had one where four houses, each one with a big wing of its own, could use a

common set of social room, and—and a kitchen dining area and cut down their cost, but we were never able to get enough support from the houses to do that. A little bit later, we had a what was called a 51st agricultural district, you may remember this, John, uh, when we use to be Devonshire Downs in the northern part of our campus, it was an old heritage of the fair syndrome(??) that used to be a part of the central Valley and, um, when that land was deeded to the state and then given to our university, at that time our college, because it was still before 1971, when we became the university that we are now, there was still a plot of land that was left west of Lindley and south of Devonshire that has a, uh, it used to be part of the electric, uh, system and there is still some overhead wires that are close to that, but there is still a beautiful amount of land and again now it's all filled with apartments. We had at one time jurisdiction over that property of the 51st agriculture district. We tried to get the houses to agree to it, uh, Dan Rigby,(??) who was a developer, was the advisor to the Sigma Chis was able to draw a plan by which was all of our houses were going to be accommodated in that area. We would have had a beautiful Greek row, but when the chips were down the houses (John coughs in the background as Edmund continues to talk) were unwilling to buy into that plan, and it had to be dropped. And lastly, the last vestige of hope that we had was this land that we called the saddle. Our campus is a zig-zag formulation to it, physiologically, and this is an area now just west of where the baseball field is, where again a beautiful set now private(??) homes where—are in the location where we hoped the fraternities were going to be. That was an area that was owned and operated by a private school when I first came here, uh, the (unintelligible) School that is now is relocated farther south in Canoga Park. So, we don't have a fraternity row, and the interesting thing is that despite all the efforts we made as university people, there is still are people who in the fraternities, some of the alumni, still blame the fact that we still don't have a fraternity row and the lack of support of the president, or the Student Affairs area, which is just totally false. We even went to the point of going to the trustees at one stage with a proposal that would have sited about eight of our houses on university land. In a way, it's lucky we didn't do that, because it would've messed up the total development of the plan of the university as we see it now, but these would have been all sited on the west side of Zelzah, north of the tennis courts in that row between the tennis courts and Lassen. Would have been a lovely location and we wrote a beautiful proposal to the trustees. Uh, we convinced the Student Affairs-oriented people at the chancellor's office to support it, and then we ran into a, uh, a totally intransigent view of opposition to this plan on the part of chancellor Ann Reynolds, who just didn't believe that having fraternities on the campus was a good idea, and persuaded her legal department to say that it was illegal to have just fraternities on their, on campus, because you couldn't discriminate against students, and therefore if you had houses built on the campus, they would have to be open to others than members of the fraternities, and you couldn't single out any particular fraternities, because for example, the Lesbian and Gay Alliance would be just as, uh, empowered to have a house on campus as would Tri Delt [Delta Delta Delta]. So, it's been a very aggravating thing. There are a number of things we've succeeded in, I think you'll see as we talk today, uh, I'm very proud of some of the accomplishments we have made at Northridge over these

years, but this has just been a loser and our fraternities, and sororities are still weak because they do not have a structured home base. Most of them live illegally inside the community, either that or they (unintelligible) their real purpose because they are limited to just six people unrelated six, uh, and you can't have more than six in a house without breaking the code. So, uh, the houses just exist, they don't have any place for their social activities. That's one reason why we've tried in creating a student university union for them. And tried to create not only meeting rooms but also social areas for them, (pause) but (pause) so that's a downer, the one about the Greeks.

(00:26:05)

JB: Their existing illegally in view of the fact that they have more than six living in these houses, or that it's not zoned for the setting that they've parked themselves in, umm---

EP: No, they have come to the realization that you can't, uh, openly flout the code by having more than six in the house.

JB: Oh, uh, I see.

EP: There are two houses that I can name where this is done, but in each one, there is a variance that that house has been given. There are other parts of the variance that the houses are not obeying, but this particular one, at least, they are entitled to have more than six. Now, then, the big problem has been the relationship between the house and its neighbor. Our houses are just scattered throughout Northridge and of course this means that nearly always whenever you try to amplify your music or have more than a dozen people at your house, there's nearly always going to be a call to the police or a call to the Dean of Students' office or both. We tried to address that by setting up rules for the fraternities and sororities, which we call the Halsted plan, because most of the problem for a while at least was on that short street between Zelzah and White Oak, it's, uh, it's now a built up area, too, but this is where we had one time five of our fraternities plus, uh, two of our major religious organizations on this one street so, nearly every weekend, there would be sure to be problems, and indeed one of their neighbors was a man who owned a shotgun, and who used to come out frequently, weekends, brandishing the shotgun and telling people to stay away from his property. So, I was really petrified for a long time that we would have some kind of a major incident. Luckily, we did not and, uh, I think that this man still is there. He been trying to wait until his property increases in value to the point that he can be a millionaire when he departs but uh—

JB: When was he brandishing his weapon, how long ago?

EP: Oh goodness, this was, uh, fairly recently, John, this was, uh, maybe six years ago, five or six years ago. His wife uh, they claimed that they were surrounded by, uh, by three houses, actually one was across the street and a house was on either side of their property they



were on the south side of the street on Halsted. I'm not going to mention the man's name because we certainly don't want to do is defame him in this kind of memorabilia that is going to be kept for posterity (slight laugh) but the fact is that his wife also use to, uh, have a handgun and when she would, uh, leave the house this pistol would be in the, uh, very much on display, on the dashboard. (long pause)

JB: (Unintelligible) idyllic, sylvan setting for a fraternity house.  
(Edmund is laughing in the background while John is talking)

EP: Well, what this is turning into is sort of a recounting of, uh, all the old days and I lived through an awful lot of them. (long pause)

JB: You are-- as you mentioned you arrived just in anticipation of some really tough days late in the '60's. Um, let's talk about those after we turn the tape.

EP: Mm-hmm.

[END OF TRACK 1]