

Edmund Peckham, Track 5

Tape 3, side A

JB: We are on tape—

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: At last!

EP: If you say so. (John laughing)

(long pause)

JB: Commencement 1991. We had talked of it in anticipation, the last time we were together. What happened? How did it go?

EP: Well, I was just delighted with commencement, or the commencements of 1991. I think that what we've done is to, uh, find a formula that works, that's within budget, which prevents the myriad of problems that we've had in the past, uh, seems to satisfy the wishes of everybody. Individual recognition of graduates, the opportunity of family and friends to be closer, and feel a part of the program. Larger participation on the part of the faculty. In toto, we had eight programs, and I'm sure although there wasn't a head count of those eight, that we exceeded the total that we had last year in the one program at twenty-seven thousand, because the last two programs on Wednesday, for example, we had seats for seven thousand in the area just south of Oviatt Library and I think we had between thirteen and fifteen thousand present just for those two events alone, plus the others. So, really, in effect, I feel very, very gratified. We spent an awful lot of work in trying to devise this plan, in trying to sell this plan to the president, and to others. I went on a very long limb to the president and the senior executive group, and the dean's council, management plans, and everybody else. Uh, but I really felt that it was going to work. We had good support from the commencement committee, from the special committees that each one of the eight schools created, and early(?), in effect, I think it was a very, very gratifying event. I'm glad you were there.

JB: It was, it reminded me very much of some our commencements of earlier days, (EP agrees) fifteen and twenty years ago in terms of size and in other things—

EP: Yes. I think that, I still think that it can be tinkered with to be improved. I still am not pleased with the absence of, uh, bleachers, for example. The bleachers would have made it possible for us to move the seating a little closer to the stand, the podium. Uh, I don't think they were too terribly far away, but certainly, in the three sites that the— actually, we had five programs inside the, uh, Oviatt Library area, and all of them, as I sat in the podium and looked around, the seats seem long way away, but the sound and

the sight lines seemed to be adequate, and I haven't heard a single complaint. That's the remarkable thing, John. Not one single complaint from anybody, about the commencement, whereas, believe me (slight laugh) the situation has been very much different in the past, uh, where people complained about traffic, about noise, about, you know, about just about everything. In this case everybody seemed happy (pause) including the deans (JB says good) because I think that the deans were gratified, and that what we did was to give the dean, in effect, the same position as the president at each one of these programs, with the exception of the degree, actually, and the handshake, uh, came by the president, but the program itself centered on the deans, and all eight of them were a little bit different, uh, depending on the school, and the personality of the committee and that dean. Uh, so that I didn't feel bored at any of the eight, because each one of them was sufficiently independent of the others.

JB: And the president shook every hand, by the end?

EP: Almost. Uh-huh.

JB: He'd wanted to, I understand.

EP: He did. At first, he didn't want to even participate in the school committee, uh, which is a thing itself, uh, he felt that this was really, uh, in effect, demeaning the importance of commencement. Taking away the centrality of it that we talked about, I noted the last time we were together. But as he saw that people began to like the idea, he came to like the idea, too, and he became very enthusiastic and was, uh, very much a positive force I feel in the success of all these programs.

JB: Was it an enthusiasm that was a product of the way it went, or had it developed before the first of the commencement ceremonies?

(00:04:54)

EP: I think the enthusiasm developed as he saw the success of the first day, and it was the first day, really, that was the key to me. I wasn't sure exactly how that format was going to work. We had two programs in the area just south of the University, uh, Club, one in the Oviatt area, and it meant we had to move literally the platform party, and the, all the security arrangements, and the jazz band, from the one site to the other, and then back to the original place, but it all worked very nicely, and the president was so happy, marching along from the school of education lawn for our first one, uh, to the Oviatt site, he was accompanied by a reporter from The Los Angeles Times, and he was talking happily about what a wonderful program this was and how he was so pleased that we moved in this direction. So, all is well. (long pause)

JB: Let's take a, uh, leap backward in time, if we may, to a less pleasant day unfortunately, November 4, 1968. We had taken up that day. (long pause) Okay, let's begin again.

(pause) I mentioned talking with, uh, Professor Charnofsky about what he saw and what he experienced that day. I want to talk with you in what you experienced. Let's begin with a term that he used to describe the group, um, of faculty as it preceded under escort, to use as neutral a term as I can, from the Physical Education building to the administration building, he described it as a phalanx, you saw that phalanx coming.

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: You sounded the warning, here.

EP: It sounds a little bit as if I were the Paul Revere, but it wasn't, it wasn't necessarily that. I did see the group coming, that's true, and, uh, in a way they, you can use all sorts of figures. They certainly were being convoyed over, the faculty were, and it was quite obvious to me that they weren't necessarily just coming under their own will. They were really being escorted over here to the administration building and, uh, I think that we all had had enough warning that something might be taking place, uh, of an unhappy nature, uh, we knew about the meeting that was going to take place between Glenn Arnett and members of the Athletic Department and the Black students. In effect, it was the first showdown between the Black students and the, any part of the administration, and we were all very young at the game. Uh, I think a lot of the things that took place on November four might well be changed if we had the same ability and hindsight that we now have. I said to you last time that we were together that I felt that I had grown a good deal over these twenty-four years in the job, I fairly feel that the relationships that we had, that I have had, with minority students have certainly, uh, matured, and I think I would have much less likely to be afraid, that day, now, than I was then. But there were some of the events, and I'm sure we will get into that, that were really frightening to people who were unaware of the situation, and, you know, who didn't recognize the difference between sheer bravado and the attempt to establish points, as against really trying to instill fear, and whether one's life was really in danger, for example, is now very much in my, in doubt in my mind. Although at that time, I really felt there was, uh, indeed some likelihood of a grave danger to some people. Particularly in the office of, uh, the vice president for administration Harold Spencer.

JB: That's where you were, wasn't it? Ultimately.

EP: Yes. I saw the phalanx, as you were talking about it, coming towards the administration building, as they were coming across the engineering field. I went up to the fifth floor. I notified the vice president's office and the president's office, that this was going to take place, that the—that there was a group coming to see the administration building, and I could quite easily detect they were going to be coming up to the fifth floor. So, that, uh, there was not a real surprise by the time the students arrived. What did take place was that our [Acting President] Paul Blomgren had the opportunity to go down to the third floor rather than to stay in his office on the fifth floor. So, when the students arrived,

looking for the president, they weren't able to find him and they wound up in the office of the, uh, vice president for administration, Dr. Spencer.

(00:10:15)

JB: Was this the first place at which on that floor they allided as were, this is where they congregated?

EP: Uh-huh. I was out in the hallway. You talk about me as being in the core of things, but really, in effect, remember I am just a youngster, relatively, uh, I am not a senior member in the administration by any means at that time. I knew a number of people there, uh, they knew me, uh, they didn't really frighten me, the people that I knew, nor my presence bother them. What happened actually was that they came up in the elevator, as well as up the stairs, and hence they came to the fifth floor from both directions, and even if, uh, the fifth floor people had wanted to leave they were really unable to do so at that time. The secretaries were, uh, almost herded, and I think that's an accurate word to use, into the room that now is the conference room up on the fifth floor. Uh, they were kept under guard as they felt by a number of the Black students, and people who were not actually students, but who were there as, uh, supporters. Uh, many of these were women and, uh, some of our secretaries encountered such a fear as they felt that we actually had a number of resignations after this November four incident. One woman particularly, uh, who been the secretary to the president who actually felt deeply, deeply intimidated by one of the Black students, whom I actually later hired as a student assistant in my own office, Yvonne Robeson. Uh, but it was not a very happy day, John. It truly was not, and the intent of the students was not to really establish just a, uh, simple little dialog, it was to press their point and to, uh, get concessions, which they were, uh, anxious to attain, including, in effect, the dismissal of at least one member of the athletic staff. This John, Markham was the name of the, uh, (pause) I believe it—I think that's accurate. Who was the assistant football coach who allegedly had pushed one of the football players and had been, in effect, the inciting element in all these difficulties, which again is a story as I have looked into it that has two sides, certainly the Black student's side, that he felt demeaned in front of his teammates, and the other side, the coach's side, that this student was, uh, not being responsive to legitimate requests given him by the coaching staff. Uh, and it really in these days it's awfully hard to say who was right and who was wrong in all of these events. (pause)

JB: Going back to it, there are as many accounts as there are people giving accounts (unintelligible) our students. It's hard to reconstruct in retrospect, uh, but you are in a position to see as much as anyone so, uh, one of the things that, uh, is important to me is your feeling that, uh, these weren't to be negotiations, but this was to be in effect, uh, a one-way affair. (EP agrees) That they were there to impose conditions (both talking).

EP: That is my feeling very strongly.

JB: That when—that when President Blomgren was alerted to their coming, uh, he moved from the fifth floor to the third. There is a story that comes out of this, that one hears and reads over and over again, that is when the students arrived on the fifth floor, he was there, they herded him in among the other staff—

EP: No, that's not true.

JB: That's not true?

EP: No.

JB: But he was there for an hour, before they finally identified who he was, and that he then came forward when they said they We're looking for the president, said "I am the president." That's not the way it occurred? (long pause)

EP: Well, one's memory does tricks with one, uh, and the older one gets, the worse one's memory becomes, and certainly I'm as antiquated as most people, but my recollection is exactly as I said to you, that the opportunity was there for the president to get to the third floor, and that our intention was quite honestly that there be that opportunity for a middle ground, step, uh, that we should be able to listen to the Black students. We were not sure exactly what they were going to ask or seek at that time. Uh, I do not believe that story of the— I've heard it too, but the only way to find out the truth of that, I guess, would be to put in a call to I think it's, uh, Big Arm, Montana, uh, lake, where Paul now has a house.

(00:15:13)

JB: Um.

EP: I think—just let me follow up on that. I think the story gains credibility only from the fact that he did eventually meet with the students, and they did give him their demands. And there was then this, uh, what they considered to be an implicit agreement on the part of the president that he would concur with the demands, if they were in turn to evacuate the building. Which indeed they did at one stage late in the afternoon, uh, but in the meantime of course the, all the people had been compelled to stay inside the fifth floor rooms where they had been. I was in the office of the vice president for administration, Dr. Spencer, who was a lovely man who was, uh, really, almost a father image to me when I came to this university, and things happened, that I thought were very bad, uh, he was, uh, not a young man, he was in a swivel chair, and he was pushed very sharply by one of the people who came into his office, slammed against the wall, uh, there was a knife in view. It was not a knife that was held by one of the students, it was a knife that was held by a person whom I not known before, and who was really, of all the people around that day, he was the one who caused, I think, the greatest fear in the mind of some, because he had a really quite a although, uh, I seen him some since,

uh, he had very wild sort of look in his eye. As if, uh, and, as I say, you didn't know what the purpose was going to be that day, and he, and Archie Chatman, were the two people who maintained control in that office. There were seven or eight of us in that office, and we were just not allowed to just leave. (long pause)

JB: You knew you were in effect hostages.

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: Did anyone try to test that, at all? Do you recall?

EP: You mean, tried deliberately to get up and leave? (both talking) I can't say that we did. Sam Winningham was there, uh, Glenn Arnett, myself, I believe Earl Wallace and just, uh, and another one who, at that time, was a junior member of the physical education staff, who's still here, whose name just totally escapes me. No, none of us actually, I guess, tried deliberately to burst out of that room.

JB: But you knew that if you—but you knew that you were being held.

EP: Yes.

JB: It was implicit in the situation.

EP: Oh, it was, and there was a menace in the way, particularly that this other man, I don't know whether I should even give you his name, for the record but, uh, do you want me to?

JB: You may or uh--

EP: Well, I mean, for the record.

JB: Sure.

EP: Because he was charged with an offense, and his name was Eddie Dancer, and he was a person who I'd not met at all before that day. Uh, he was not a student.

JB: He wasn't?

EP: I don't believe so. (John mumbling in the background) Uh-huh. In retrospect, we found that a number of the people who were involved that day, were not students. Remember these were days, John, as I said to you were, we had very, very few people who were Black students.

JB: This is interesting. The, his role that day, of course, has been the subject of some contention, and specifically the way in which he kicked or pushed vice president Spencer has been, uh, whether it was a relatively harmless act of demonstration or remonstrance, or whether it was an aggressive or belligerent act. Uh, a degree of violence, all of that has been in some dispute. How did you see it? You were there.

EP: My recollection is that Eddie Dancer put his foot on the front of Harold's chair, and shoved with all his might, and so the chair went flying backward against the wall. And Harold's head hit the wall. I guess in the scale of things, that's—in today's LA Times would certainly indicate that that's not a violent act, but it was certainly a very demeaning thing to do to the vice president of the school, at a time that, theoretically at least, the students were there to meet with us, to try to express what their wishes were and to have some kind of an audience. (long pause)

(00:20:15)

JB: What else did you see that is (pause) of pertinence, as you look back on it? You're a trained historian, I'm a trained historian. If you were writing this story from the perspective now of nearly a quarter of a century, what more that you saw or experienced would you want to know? Beyond what we've said.

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: What I'm I not asking (unintelligible) that I should be? (pause)

EP: Well, what I wish I'd been able to do, as a Student Affairs person, and actually the opportunity did not come to do that, but what I would really have loved to have done, is to do what I did later on in 1970 and '71, have the opportunity to be the front person, to meet with the group, to try to find out what the group wished. To try to reason with them as much as possible about how to attain what their wishes, how best to realize them. But we didn't have that opportunity, because people came in a surge in that fifth floor and, uh, we were really, in effect, jammed into different rooms, without much opportunity to do more than just sit, and indeed that's more or less what we did for quite a long time, we just sat in this office. While, uh, (pause) Eddie Dancer and, uh, (pause) and some of the other students, uh, came in intermittently. (long pause) We didn't really have an opportunity, and except for the fact that they kept on saying the evil things that the athletic department had been guilty of. (pause)

JB: You mentioned, as we began this, uh, discussion, of November fourth, that there is a distinction to be drawn between bravado on one hand, and genuine physical threat on the other. That in retrospect, it's clearer than at the time it was, what was intended. And that's, of course, a natural thing in the course of events. You don't know as things are unfolding how they're eventually going to turn out. Um, but I wonder if you might

extrapolate just a bit on that. For example, Stanley Charnofsky has said that he knew, uh, the students who were students anyway, he certainly knew Archie and, uh, he never felt threatened, but then he knew them, and he never imagined they would threaten him. He knew very well there was others in that room, and in that setting, and he felt quite threatened.

EP: Uh-huh.

JB:, uh, is that the way you saw it?

EP: It is. I really didn't feel any threat from the people that I knew, and I knew a number of them, as I say, because, remember you and I talked about the origin of the EOP on the campus, and Stan and I did indeed work with these students, but it was, uh, it was really the non-student, that, and, as I say it was the deliberate intent of Eddie Dancer, I do not doubt that in the slightest, to try and to create this feeling of, uh, intimidation, just as some of the people inside the room with the secretaries, uh, delighted in the fact that they in effect could toy with the emotion of the people that they had there. I don't think they deliberately were trying to hurt them, by any means, but they were trying to establish their own sense of importance, and make the others feel insecure because of that. (long pause) And, as I say, uh, although there has been the question whether or not weapons were actually used or in evidence, I can attest at least, as I did have to in court, that there was at least one knife that was visible, and other people corroborated that. (long pause)

JB: It was not being, or was it being, brandished or wielded against any particular individual?

EP: No.

JB: It was in evidence, though?

EP: It was in evidence.

JB: It was in evidence.

EP: With the eye that people realize that it was there and—(slight laugh)

JB: At the very least, perhaps a part of the display or the bravado.

EP: Yeah, well, I thought it was more than bravado. Remember, I'm talking about someone it as who's been in the army for three and half years too. (both laughing)

(00:25:00)

JB: Byrne Fernelius came out of that, and was quoted as saying that he had been in the South Pacific and PT boats and he felt fearful for his life that day.

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: He was swept up in the PE office—

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: As part of the pack.

EP: And you see Byrne is a person who is an easy going man, too, and as—I'm glad you mentioned that, because that's very much the feeling that I had, too, that, uh, you just didn't know what was going to take place in that office, and it was a setting in which, even though there were several of us, in effect, we had always had the people out numbered in that sense and, uh, it was not really a case of, uh, (pause) well, it was a very unpleasant day.

JB: Let me ask you another question which is almost counterfactual and, as historians, we don't like, uh, hypotheticals, we are not comfortable with them, but let me do this anyway, if I may. Uh, if this happened right now, today, uh, (pause) we're a little past eleven o'clock, but let's say it's eleven o'clock, and this same thing happened—

EP: Uh-huh.

JB: —would it be any less shocking today than it was? (pause)

EP: Well, as I say I don't even think it would have taken place today. We've been able to establish a relationship here with our students in which they recognize the fact that there would be that role of the Student Affairs office and my own person, for example, to meet with them and to talk with them and to try to, uh, get things done in a much more logical and, in effect, approachable manner. Uh, I just think that we've been very lucky over the years on this campus, very different from San Francisco State, which still does go in for this bit about forcible occupation of buildings, and so on. And the president's office has not been available to the president this spring a good deal of the spring, because it's been occupied by students. It seems to me that's a very sick way of proceeding, uh, and one can approach things and problems in a very mature way and talk them through. As I say, John, I just do not think that November 4, 1968, would happen now twenty-four years later.

JB: It's a very important point in its self. Uh—

EP: Uh-huh. (long pause)

JB: Do we retain, does your office retain files on the disposition of these cases?

EP: Well, you asked me that, I'll be happy to, uh, give you what I have, John, I don't really have very much. I had a couple of, uh, folders. One thing that's always been very sad to me is that, you know, trained as historians, as you said that you and I both have been, that our school just doesn't maintain integrity of records, even twenty, twenty-five years ago, even on significant events like this, and I can imagine your task in trying to recreate the history of the school has been very much difficult, and much harder than it would have been for Samuel Eliot Morrison to look into the 17th century.

JB: I venture to say that is true.

EP: Yeah.

JB: It couldn't be done other than orally.

EP: Yeah.

JB: I do not believe. (pause) Let me ask you a final question about November fourth. Overall, would you say the trial had a fair outcome? Did you have qualms about the outcome? Did you feel, in balance, that it was fair?

EP: I had major qualms about the trial. I've, uh, even now, I've major qualms about my own role in the trial. I'd certainly didn't enjoy the, what had to be the, uh, my responsibility to give evidence about what I saw that day. I don't like the idea of students being on trial for something like this. As I say, I think the whole thing was wrong. I think the approach of the students was wrong. They had not gone through anything like this, either. They were establishing brand new, uh, terrain for themselves. We, as administrators had not been responsible enough to try to meet these students and their needs, and talk them through. Uh, I really feel that the Student Affairs approach was badly needed in those days, and we didn't have that chance. We had not matured to the degree that we have now. What we do right now is to, uh, meet with the students, uh, talk with them about what had actually happened on the football field. Uh, we would be able to bring together the students and the athletic department staff, to try to meet the situation head on. There would not be the instantaneous recoil that everything was the fault of the players, and not of the coaches, because very seldom do you find anything where all the fault is on one side and none on the other.

(00:30:08)

JB: Let's pause just for a moment and change sides and go back.

[END OF TRACK 5]