

JOHN BROESAMLE SUDDENLY A GIANT: A HISTORY OF CSUN COLLECTION

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN TANIS

May 22nd 1989

Interview location unknown

Interviewer

John Broesamle

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PROVENANCE

This oral history of Norman Tanis was conducted by John Broesamle on May 22nd 1989 in an undetermined location. This interview was conducted by Broesamle as source material for his book *Suddenly a Giant: A History of California State University, Northridge* (Northridge: Santa Susana Press, 1993). The first transcription of this interview was completed by Cameron Takahashi.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Norman Tanis was born in 1929 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As dean of the library at CSUN from 1969 to 1990, he oversaw its expansion from a collection of 300,000 volumes to over a million at the time of the interview. The library also added two wings to the library under his administration, adding one hundred and ten thousand square feet to the extant building, and implemented the Automated Storage and Retrieval System, in which books would be placed in densely packed deep storage from which they could be quickly recalled. He also founded the library's Special Collections and Archives, and created the Santa Susana Press, which published fine limited edition books. Tanis passed away in 2010.

NORMAN TANIS ORAL HISTORY

SUMMARY INDEX

TRACK #1a:

0:00-5:00 Tanis describes the state of the library prior to and during the time he was hired to be the Dean of the Oviatt library.

5:01-10:00 Tanis states some vignettes about how hectic the situation was when he joined, and the subsequent records of some of those events in the library. Then, he describes some of the goals that were intended for the library.

10:01-15:00 Tanis details some of the things he and his employees desired the library to eventually be in concept, and therefore for the students of the university.

15:01-20:00 Tanis discusses why the library looks the particular way it does, and the story behind it.

20:01-25:00 Tanis points out the various events and consequences from the 1971 earthquake that affected Northridge, but particularly the effects it had on the library.

25:01-30:00 Tanis finishes explaining the aftereffects of the quake and the subsequent modifications made on the library afterwards, and then describes the nature of employing people into the library.

30:01-31:40 Tanis briefly describes the consequences of budget cuts, then the tape cuts out.

TRACK #1b:

0:00-5:00 Tanis describes the nature of understaffing and automation in the library.

5:01-10:00 Tanis talks about the diversity of faculty in the library, the nature of how long the library is open, and more consequences of budget cuts towards both materials and faculty retention.

10:01-15:00 Tanis recounts how the library faculty teaches people, and how he wants them to teach more, then describes facets of library services that could be achieved by new technologies.

15:01-20:00 Tanis goes over how the new technologies would eventually result in the development of the AS/RS [Automated Storage and Retrieval System], stemming from failures in other institutions to develop such a mechanism.

20:01-25:00 Tanis recounts arguments and counterarguments for the AS/RS system, and says vignettes about the particular system.

25:01-30:00 Tanis starts to discuss the existence of Hand Burkhardt paintings in the library and why they're there.

30:01-31:32 Tanis explains how they moved to the library, then the tape ends.

TRACK #2a:

0:00-5:00 They describe the student's responses to the Burkhardt paintings, and recount a vignette about how someone placed a forgery.

5:01-10:00 Discussing the Santa Susana Press and what it does, where it gets its funding, and why it exists.

10:01-15:00 Discusses the financial backing of the Santa Susana Press and then Tanis specifies some works that have come out of it that he particularly enjoys.

15:01-20:00 Tanis specifies other works that he believes hold importance to academia and history.

20:01-25:00 Tanis states how good he thinks the university is, then both people talk about how while the students appreciate the university, the people around the area don't really get it, and some of the faculty is sometimes hostile to some students.

25:01-30:00 Comparing CSUN to other universities in terms of prestige, freedom, and the capability to have the AS/RS system.

30:01-31:39 Beginning to discuss the nature of freedom on CSUN, and the tape stops.

TRACK #2b:

0:00-5:00 Tanis describes the freedoms of the university, then develops thoughts on the prison labor used to construct the furniture and interior of the library.

5:01-6:23 Tanis finishes his vignette on how prison labor was used to make part of the library, then the interview closes.

INTERVIEW NOTE

Interviewer: John Broesamle, noted as JB

Interviewee: Norman Tanis, noted as NT

Date: May 22nd, 1989

Time: 1:41:16

Subject: CSUN History

00:00 NT: Okie doke!

JB: You came here in 1969.

NT: That's right.

JB: What was the state of our library system? What did you encounter when you got here?

NT: Well, it was—it was a very fine, small collection, about three hundred thousand items, a core collection of books and a—in a very small library building to accommodate the educational process that was going on, you know? And a group of librarians who were somewhat disorganized and had loose ends and fighting with each other, and most of the library director's

staff had resigned and gone away, and so I started with everyone new. And we had to begin by finding the levers that moved things around the university and the people that can do things and build the trust that enable us—would enable us to move forward. And so, we spent about the first two years, in addition to the usual daily tasks, just attempting to read up on the files, and to understand what had taken—what the history of the thing. Because I—I contend that you can't run an organization unless you know its history or how it came to be where it is. So we spent a lot of time doing that, and a lot of time hiring new personnel. We hired a lot of—lot of new personnel in those first few years.

JB: I want to talk with you about that. But let's go back to the history, what do you find in the prior history of the library that's useful to you in reshaping it?

NT: Well, I found that in the past, there had been a library faculty committee which had a very dominant role in the library, particularly in its function of sitting on deliberations about the library collection and how it was built. So that when the library was small, there was a—there was a great deal of libr—library faculty input. And as—I guess it was the year I came, or a year or two before, the budget increased astronomically. And as there became more money to satisfy the faculty, they dropped back. And we began to build strong library area specialists who did the purchasing and the bibliographic searching and the work on building a balanced collection, library collection. So, our brag here at this university library is that it is probably—had more influence from the librarians and the staff of bibliographers purchasing books than most libraries in the country. And that accounts, we think, for the balance and kind of classic orthodoxy about the collection, because these librarians went to the best bibliographies and the best books to find out what was preeminent in the field. I don't mean to suggest they didn't work with faculty members, but—but I think the balance sort of swung back to the librarians building the collection.

JB: Where the teaching faculty had earlier had central input.

NT: Very central.

JB: Okay. Did coordination between the library faculty and the teaching faculty break down at that point just from sheer size and complexity as the staff was augmented?

NT: I think before I came, it began—it began to break down, just because the university was growing so rapidly that no one had time, out in the classroom there, to deal with library collection development, particularly on the size or in the dimensions that we were then proceeding. So, they—it was really a switch in the library, I mean, in the university teaching faculty from a concern about the library and how it was built, to other concerns in their schools. And I guess just the concern of surviving in this madhouse. So, it also, of course—at that point in time, the university was going through the turmoils of the San Fernando Valley State of—of dealing with the student uprising, and what I call one of the major American Revolutions. I suspect that I'm not original on thinking that America—American history as a country is a series of revolutions and I think they're about—I named them once, over a few beers, eleven or

twelve, and one of the revolutions was that '65 to '72 student uprising on campuses, which I think is one of the American revolutions connected to the Vietnam war.

JB: Did it affect the library?

NT: No, no it didn't. We tried to work very closely with the students and we'd always tell them, Look, you need one place where you oughta have a hospital and first aid station, and we got a room, we'd be glad to be your hospital. So, usually when they'd call for a—some kind of action, somewhere in there, they'd suggest to me, Can we use the library for a hospital? And I'd say, Sure, more than happy. So they get out there with bull-horns when the thing is going on and say, Stay away from the library unless you're hurt cause this is our hospital, our first aid station. Which broke my heart of course. (Broesamle laughs)

JB: Did they use it?

NT: Yeah. But I don't recall anyone getting all busted up and coming into the library.

JB: No bloody panties(??) or amputees?

NT: Not that I can recall. Then, at one time, they finally decided that they would take over the library. So they took over the library, and they sat all around the card catalog which got my blood pressure up a good deal, I'm watching, sort of peeking around the doorjamb, and getting more and more apprehensive, until I heard, I literally heard this, one—one student said to—they're all sitting there and they're all hunches, you know, and one student said to the other, You know, this isn't the center of the campus, we're not stopping this campus by sitting here (laughs). The other one said, I think you're right. And I just about fell over backwards laughing, because I agreed with him. And so, they did sort of a tour of the library and banged on a few metal shelves and left.

JB: How long were they there?

NT: Well, they were there probably for an hour, about an hour and a half before this—this thing dawned on them.

JB: Any recollection as to how many there were?

NT: Well, sitting around there, there must have been about a hundred, at the time.

JB: An obvious miscue—

NT: But, that's the only, that's the only time where they really focused on the library as a library.

JB: They saw this as a retreat.

NT: Yeah, they, they really did. And—they—or above the fray, or off to a side, or something, and we weren't part of the contest, so.

JB: They ever hide in here?

NT: They may have, but I don't—I just don't know about it. I didn't inject myself into their affairs either for them or against them. Although I must confess that I was always very interested in their—it was the most interesting period of my life here, was those years. Cause I was in the enviable position of hearing the administration and their point of view and their series of actions, and I often heard the students also. So, I heard, sort of the whole picture and it was very amusing and interesting to me.

JB: You arrived at a tumultuous time.

NT: Yeah. Well, I accepted the job in October and then a month or two later, I looked into *LIFE* magazine and I open up *LIFE* magazine and here's a corner of one of the buildings at the school I've agreed to go to burning, you know, in two-page spread, and I thought, What the hell have I gotten myself into?

JB: That was a very famous article. We have copies of it in the archives.

NT: Yes, yes. Did you know we also have the legal proceedings against all those students in the archives?

JB: Summer reading. They're sitting there, like cold meat waiting to be warmed up.

NT: And now we're just acquiring, from AV, twenty thousand pictures from that period and even before, to the present including when Kennedy was here, and all the pictures taken during that period, I assume, I haven't seen the collection, all I've known—know is its described to me with twenty thousand negatives or whatever slides or whatever in it. So I've been wanting to mention this to you, cause it's [unintelligible], Im sure you could put a lot of pictures in this book if you got some good ones, and had some [unintelligible].

JB: Problem has been tracking some good ones, trying them down, the *Sundial* morgue is limited, the archives are limited, this sounds like—

NT: Your problems are at an end, I hope—

JB: I certainly think so. They're coming in from the instructional media center?

NT: Yeah.

JB: When will we have them?

NT: Where? Where will we have?

JB: When will we have them?

NT: Oh, when, this summer.

JB: Alright. They were the next place I was going to look, obviously, I can look here now. When you arrived, what were your goals and expectations, what did you plan to do with this library?

10:00 NT: Well, I was very naïve then. And I thought that I was going to be the person that headed—would head up a transition of the library from an undergraduate or slightly graduate library to a— to a Ph.D. library. Research, a research library. A true research library. That was going to be backing up the education of Ph.D.'s. And I thought it was only a matter of a few years before— before that's what we'd be engaged in doing here. And we hired a group of consultants from UCLA to help us think about this. And so, this is what I thought I was going to be doing, is turning the library into a research library. Like my alma mater the University of Michigan.

JB: When did you begin to realize that it wasn't going to be happening?

NT: (laughs) Took me a long time, because, you know, people get mental sets and they really hang on to them no matter what happens to contradict them. So, I think it was easily ten or twelve years before it finally came home to me that it's not going to happen in my time, I still think it's going to happen, but it's not going to happen in my time. It's not going to happen on my beat.

JB: How close are we? That is to say, if we were to take that direction now, what would we need to do?

NT: Well, we'd have to—we'd have to buy awful lot more periodicals and serials than we have. Probably about a million dollars a year for a long time, forever as a matter of fact. We have a pretty good book collection that would back up Ph.Ds in education, geography, and perhaps English and American lit—American history. And English and American literature we have quite an upstanding beginnings of a collection in those areas, and European history, a pretty good start, but I think we'd—we'd have to buy, and complete a whole group of serial runs, in the various fields that we were gonna offer in doctorates because the real difference between, in my opinion, between a Ph.D. granting institutions library and our own, is in the—is not so much in the book collection because we're kind of odd ducks, we've had more money than the average small undergraduate library, so we have a pretty decent beginning of the fundamentals in the book collection, but we don't have the serials that the large university libraries have been building on for years. And which are used by faculty and students in the Ph.D. programs, in education or psychology, or history, or g, or something else, philosophy, philosophy was another one we were hoping to turn into a Ph.D. program.

JB: In terms of numbers of volumes, we're approaching a million now, aren't we?

NT: No, we're over that actually, we're a bit over. We zipped over a million in September. I've been deferring the party thinking that it was just a matter of time before we have a groundbreaking for the addition to the library, and it was just a few months off where we would have an online catalog. So, I would combine those three things, but the only thing that's come along is the online catalog.

JB: And here, the building is still two million dollars over budget for phase two?

NT: Yeah, two million one hundred thousand, something like that. And even that isn't—isn't—is large, or isn't built to the formulas at which the other school—which schools are using now to flesh out and write down their requirements for buildings. Using the baseline formula that they are using, we're entitled to another sixty-five thousand square feet of usable feet, or about eighty-eight thousand gross square feet. Which is another great big wing out the back, towards Engineering.

JB: Going back twenty years, were there other goals you had, you mentioned a central goal. Were there subsidiary goals that may or may not have been met over the year?

15:00

NT: Well, we were—I was very interested in the—in the habitat of the library, the library looked at as a group of scientists might look at a jungle, or a small community or something else. That is, how do you build and plan a library so that it's comfortable, it is inviting, invites a scholar, as well as a browser, a casual browser, or someone that's just coming in and out and doing a brief amount of business in the library, and so we've spent a lot of our time on building, on the building and then planning this building, even though it came on quite early, we treated it as a new building when we came and re-did a lot of it. And we've spent ten or twelve years on these—on these additions, these two wings, that we can't seem to get off the ground. So I think the other goals we had were—were to construct a habitat which would promote scholarship and learning and the love of books.

JB: You think this habitat does that? How pleased are you with the Oviatt?

NT: I think I did it up until a few years ago, and now it's an overcrowded habitat, which is causing a lot of difficulties. It's no longer as congenial and is well—it doesn't serve as well as it did a few years ago. But I think up until the enrollment suddenly took a bounce upward that it was doing a pretty good job.

JB: What are the origins of the—of the design and architecture of the structure, you had a major impact in altering those blueprints, but, who planned it, how was it planned, what was the architectural origin of it?

NT: Well, the president of that time, Doctor, what was his name?

JB: In '73?

NT: No, back in—no, this is—this began in '67, '68.

JB: On the drawing boards.

NT: The first president of the institution.

JB: President Prator.

NT: Prator. Conceived of the library as a treasure box. As a box of jewels. It was given to the state architects, but they—they sent out a lot of the work, including the exterior design, to private architects. And so it's come back like this, and oddly enough, if you come here at night, and walk up to the library starting some distance away, and not just come out of a parking lot in the back, but you see it coming out of a parking lot over there on Nordhoff, it does look like a jewel box at night as the lights move down from the roof and cast the right shadows on the pillars, it really does look like a jewel box. Which was exactly what he had in mind, and which he'd talked the architects into.

JB: Was that right?

NT: So I have to tell you that's Prator's idea.

JB: That is to say, he persuaded the architects to create that look?

NT: This was—this was what he wanted.

JB: That's remarkable.

NT: And so we have merely, of course, made changes in the interior. I've heard people call it, "Early Nazi" (Broesamle laughs) and "Late Egyptian", but its real character and look is for nighttime, oddly enough, and it does accomplish exactly what it's set out to do.

JB: It seems to me to have classic aligns as well, say, there's definitely a great motif around what you've said.

NT: Yes.

JB: It seems—it seemed particularly—when it was built, to be the odd duck of campus architecture because it was so elegant compared to the rest of then-campus architecture.

NT: Yes, it caused a lot of criticism, and there are a lot of faculty members who were thoroughly and completely disgusted about the money that was spent on these pillars which was considerable, compared to the—compared to the way buildings were built on campus. We

spent a lot more on how the exterior of the building looked than anyone else had. But at that time and probably since.

JB: They thought that—

NT: But that was part of Prator's concept, again, of being this central jewel box, treasure, treasure box on the site of the campus, which—what radiated—which, kind of—you could see from all different directions as it lit up at night as a jewel box.

JB: Reminds me a bit of the Beinecke at Yale, draw the image, you know, it too has that sense. In a very different way. How do you feel about the building, in terms of its art—of its exterior architecture? Does it please you?

NT: It's reasonably pleasing, my personal tastes are a little wilder than this building is. My favorite library building—I don't say it works the best, but my favorite library building is the University of California at La Jolla, their library which looks something a cross between a sci-fi saucer taking off and a—and a building that they put at the center of airports to direct traffic. (laughs) But I really like the library, the look of it. Doesn't always operate so well.

JB: I want to take it back to 1971, speaking of looks. What did you say when you saw the aftereffects of the '71 quake? What struck your eye, in the library?

20:00 NT: Well, I think, I really went into shock. I don't think I had very intelligent thoughts except that this was a major disaster, and at the time, I thought it was much worse. It looked much worse than it eventually turned out to be. But you've got to remember, a lot of people didn't see it at first as I did. There was glass all over, which, I guess gave me, one of my feelings was a great sense of relief that the thing didn't take place during the busy parts of the day because there was so much glass that shattered down from upper windows, on the exterior and on the interior—blew in on the interior. Because as this movement starts putting stress on that glass, the glass can blow either way. And it went all the way across the room and it—well I would—I—so I guess another thought I had was gratitude that it happened at the time it did. And, so I spent my first few hours, after taking a look of it, keeping people out of the building. Everyone wanted to go to work, I can't believe it! I almost had to get a big stick and whack them over the head because everyone wanted to go into that building and I didn't want anyone to go into that building until someone had given me the information that it was safe. As a matter of fact, it wasn't safe on the upper floors because of the glass and the books all over. So, once we got the glass cleaned up, we then had to take most of the books off the shelves, because a lot of the shelves were bent in various directions, and we had to, at a minimum, tighten up the shelving. They have sway braces, and these sway braces all had to be tightened. What books were still standing on the shelves were taken off, so we actually ended up with the whole collection on the floor. And it was appalling, and I was in some kind of shock and stress, because I was so tired, and there was so many questions, and people had so many problems about what to do next and how to do it, and what was a priority, I finally had to sit down because I couldn't stand it anymore, and I'd sat down on those steps going downstairs on the south library. And there I

was, available to anyone, and I tried to keep the flow of activities going so that we could get it cleaned up. And we did finally, after about, must have been about forty days, everyone was very cooperative, faculty members sometimes took their whole classes over to help us, put the books back up on the shelf, and the administration, wonder of all wonders, cooperated in getting more shelving and helping us to fix our shelving in a very, very rapid fashion, I didn't think the machinery could work that fast, and—but the most astonishing thing about the whole event to me was, while I'd been spending the years of my life, cause I didn't come here as a young librarian, I was forty, and I was always saying how important the library was to a campus, but I can't tell you how shocked and surprised I was to see all the people hammering on me, When is that library going to be ready? We've gotta get in there! My class is gotta get to the third floor or the fourth floor! And they would take note, and they were very upset with us because they felt we were being very dilatory and backward in putting this thing back together again. And so, I would say to many of them, bring your class over and help us, and they did! They did. Then there were faculty members and staff, people from counseling who spend time—their spare time in the evenings here in the library putting books up on the shelves to help us. There was a tremendous sense of community after the event. Which I haven't seen since.

JB: Commonality of disaster.

NT: Yeah, pretty much.

JB: Tell me more about the process you had volunteers, you had classes, you had faculty, could you say a bit more about the process that is, what was involved, some of the books, as I recall, had damage, particularly rare books had damage.

NT: Yeah, we had some damage, because the rare books were housed on the fourth floor, I believe, third or fourth floor. The building really did move quite a bit back and forth, on the fourth floor and on the third floor. There was a lot of movement, so they got shaken off. So, some of the older books really did get their bindings banged up pretty badly. But we were given a federal grant, and we—we got all that repaired with federal money, additional federal money, by a conservator binder by Santa Barbara, by the name of Tommy Tompkins. He also rebound some things—some bindings we couldn't replace at all. Some of the things were rebound. But I would say, probably, half of the collection at that time sustained some damage in that earthquake. The only thing that didn't get any damage on it was a couple of cuneiform tablets, which were housed so beautifully in cushions and velvets that they fell down on the floor but they weren't hurt. Which seems a little strange because that's the first thing that's supposed to go.

25:00

JB: Did that building take the quake well or badly? What's your reading of the structural integrity of the building?

NT: It took it very well. And the reas—and because it took it well, it was hard on the book collection. It moved a lot, and a good building will move a lot without sustaining any kind of important damage. And it moved in two different pieces, because we found that the staircases

were like separate buildings. They'd move one way and the rest of the building would be moving another. But the building moved a lot. And that's good for the integrity of the building structure. It's a little hard on the books and the shelves. So we spent a lot of time studying that, a lot of time working, and a lot of time writing reports so that we can change that, and that we now have most of the stacks anchored on the floor so that they can't skip along when there's an earthquake, and anchored at the top, so that they can't wobble one way or another. And, so we think probably we could—we'd be in much better shape today if a similar earthquake came. However, when a real big one comes, of course, it's anyone's guess what will happen.

JB: Were some of the lessons learned in South Library applied to this in the construction, double bolting, this kind of thing?

NT: Yes.

JB: One of the bulwarks of this library, and you already touched on is the staff, essentially, you started over, or close to it when you arrived in '69.

NT: Well, I—No, I didn't. Well, I had a lot of strong, pe—on the staff, and a lot of people came with me that same year, we were sort of like a class. No, what I meant to suggest earlier was—was the staffing, the clerical staffing, support staff in my—in my headquarters office. That I had to redo. But, no, a lot of the rest of the—rest of the library faculty were here and were very strong people. And I owe a lot to my predecessor, who helped hire them, and put them in place.

JB: Well, as was a user, and not an infrequent user, one of the striking things about this library, just the time I arrived, which was about the time you arrived, was the strength of staff. How have you gone about building that staff since you arrived? That is to say, how do you ensure a strong staff, how do you strengthen it? How do you hire a good library?

NT: Well, you spend a lot of time at it, and you go about it in a very leisurely fashion, and you're proactive. And we used to camp out at UCLA and USC and other library schools and attempt to talk to the library faculty there, the library school faculty there about their strong students and who might like to come to institutions such as this. But, if you think this is a good staff, you should have seen the ones that got away from me.

JB: Oh really?

NT: So, I guess—I don't know—I have any particular strategy other than casting a net wide and being very active in recruitment and being very persistent and giving a lot of time. We were very serious about staffing, we gave it a very high priority. I once had a boss, first job I ever had, and he said to me, The reason I'm spending so much time with you, Norman, is because I think I've done 90% of my job when I hire a person for an academic institution. And he said, After that, you can affect them a little bit, ten percent little bit here or there, but essentially, the administrator has done a lot of his job right that—that—on that particular day when that

decision is made. And I've always kept that in mind, and I believe it to be true, and I acted accordingly.

JB: You're pleased with the results?

NT: Yes. And then we—once we lean very heavily on UCLA and local library schools, and then we began to see the need for getting people from other parts of the country which would leaven the whole with other points of view, so we then—we then sort of took a turn, and started to go across the country and try to persuade people to come here who—who would have other points of view.

30:00

JB: So, there are regional schools of interpretation, different universities prepare librarians differently?

NT: Yeah. I mean—of course—people come from other parts of the country so they have other points of view and other interests—so each wave, cause we've had a lot of people leave us, also to go to better jobs, and, so each group makes their kind of contribution. We opened—the whole adds up to something good and useful, we trust.

JB: The library, since the '60s or the '70s, has been through repeated budget cuts. I'm not sure when those began. When did they begin?

NT: They began in 1970, I believe. Yeah, 1970, my first year. And we had a hundred and sixty-nine positions and we lost thirty-eight one afternoon. Up in Sacramento. And then when I came home from the conference I was at, why, we had to cut—we hadn't filled all of them so there—there was some leeway there and I persuaded the administrators to give us a little time. Now this isn't—this is librarians and clerks and all that sort of thing, full time positions. And so, we cut—we had to cut on the basis of seniority and I had to inform all these people if they were part-timers or if they didn't have—

Pause in recording as tape 1, side a ends.