

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Ralph Prator = RP

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on May 29, 1990 at an unspecified location

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Biographical Note:

As the first president of San Fernando Valley State College in 1958, Dr. Ralph Prator oversaw the rapid growth of an educational community. From its humble beginnings, the campus was built from trailers and borrowed faculty. At the time of his resignation in 1968, Valley State had developed beyond expectations, though with it grew social tensions affecting many colleges and universities around the country.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, Side A

JB: Well let's begin. I'd like to begin if we may, in the broadest sort of brush strokes, general impression. And we could get into and will get into tales of these broad impressions later. But let me ask you, what expectations you held for San Fernando Valley State College when you agreed to come.

RP: First of all, I had the impression, from my talks with Roy Simpson, who was then superintendent of public instruction in California, that a new era was on the horizon for the State Colleges of California. During the early times of the system, as you are aware, they were primarily teachers colleges. And some of the old institutions like San Jose State, San Francisco State, San Diego State, Chico State, and so on, had a relatively long history of turning out the vast majority of teachers for the elementary and high schools in California. But when Roy Simpson talked to me at Christmas time, in 1957, about the potential, I guess it was 1957, about potential, I was impressed with probability that the scope of the State Colleges would broaden appreciably. And since I had gone through a kind of a study of higher education while I was a member of the staff at the University of Colorado, dove tailing on the responsibilities of the various institutions in that state. I was keenly interested in having an active part, then, in the potential that Roy Simpson pointed out.

JB: Again, broad brush strokes. Would you say that our campus at least have met those expectations as you originally held them?

RP: In reality, probably, to some extent, even in wider since then I had envisioned. We were well aware at the outset, as I've indicated a number of times by a number of people that the size of our campus, in terms of the student enrollment, was probably going to explode and explode very quickly. We did the number of demographic studies helpful to us, where agencies like the Telephone Company, etc. And we anticipated that within ten years, we would be at twenty thousand students. And if we were left to uncontrolled growth, we could reach fifty thousand students by the year two thousand. And this meant then, that we needed to put our hands on all the land that we could get hold of, as early as possible. The original site was one hundred fifty acres, and that of course, was with the expectation that the size of the college would be somewhere in the neighborhood of five thousand students. Well over this data that I just cited, we knew that we better get cracking at it. And so the most available large tract of land was the Devonshire Downs, which was a fairgrounds to the north of us. And therefore, what we immediately set about trying to do was see whether we could get any lean on that properties as a possible add on to the campus. The fair as an institution, was probably on its way out anyhow, because of the urban nature of the San Fernando Valley, and its prospects of becoming even more so. So we started, or I suppose I should say, I started talking with members of the community who were going to be influential in helping us getting this added to our campus. Among the most enthusiastic supporters, were the publishers of the two Valley newspapers of size, Van Nuys News and Green Sheet and The Valley Times. They were probably helpful in getting the entree into the members of the legislature who were from the Valley, and we had a population of size. And we had several legislators of course in the Valley. Julie Beck, who had been an enthusiastic supporter of the concept of having the campus, a campus, come to the San Fernando Valley in the first place, of course, was instrumental in it. And the one who was probably responsible in the sense for pushing to see the separation of California State at Los Angeles, and the creation of a new site campus for San Fernando Valley.

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JB: We'll talk to you in detail about land acquisition as well. It sounds as if that was your highest priority, seeing these demographic projections.

RP: And that was the first priority, now then the second priority, which was immediately evident, at least to me, who had anticipated that we probably needed a new administrative structure for the kind of institution that we envisioned. It was clear that the broader scope of the institution would entail a administrative structure that was somewhat different from the structure that we were working under at the moment. Where we had, divisions, and that they were amorphous, they were not really clearly

defined divisions. Each institution is a little different among the colleges of the system. But my concern at that particular time was to provide the services needed at the time they were needed. And this meant then that we're probably gonna have to develop some concept of colleges and schools within the university concept. Now, the university concept was not a very popular concept, with the University of California, of course. And obviously, we could expect, and I suppose we got some objection to this idea as the study for the higher education of California evolved. But we moved ahead on our campus with this concept and had what we called the committee of seventeen, which started rather early in the history of the institution. Chaired by Charles Chaplin, and the administration representative on it was Leo Wilson, our Executive Dean. That committee came forth with recommendations that we, in fact, become a collection of schools and colleges, school of professional studies, for example, school of business, school of engineering, school of letters in science, and so on. To the extent that we could then compartmentalize and cope with the growth that was coming, this proved to be providential in a sense. We were one of the first colleges to advocate this in the council of State College Presidents. And these, well I suppose, one of the supporters that we had was [inaudible] down in San Diego, who was also anticipating this kind of need. But in my opinion, we needed to do this because we might lose at any time any one of our key administrators, like Del Oviatt, who was a key factor in the history of the intuition. Or Warner Masters who had his finger on financial facets of the intuition, or Leo Wilson, who was Executive Dean and a marvelous peddler of detail. If we lost them, we were going to search, obviously, for a successor, but where would we get the successor? And my feeling was we better have them right here on the campus. We better have somebody who was coming up through the ranks, as it were, as dean of one of these schools and colleges, who would be a likely prospect to serve, in light of our losing any of these key people.

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JB: So the move to the structure of college is called for by the committee of seventeen, seeking schools, but otherwise with same. And getting away from a divisional organization was a function largely of perceived growth. And the fact you had very talented individuals on the campus, like Leo Wilson who could fit into administrative and executive slots right now, as the growth took place.

RP: Truth, that's very true. Yes, we originally had two other factors that were troublesome at that time. The faculty that we had inherited to some extent from Cal State L.A. were, in some instances, filling spots for which they were not particularly qualified. And I was thinking primarily about critical areas, like science and mathematics. They were people

who were geared to the teacher college concept, but not to the university concept, where research and interval studies that relate to the development of discipline itself. We didn't have those kind of people. So we initially started off with the concept we must get people, first of all, who had a PhD Degree or a Doctorate in their discipline. And that promotion wise, we must insist that those who are going to be promoted, if they didn't already have the terminal degree, be making diligent strides toward it or promotion was of course, limited in their case. And this was not a particular popular concept at the time because these folks were anticipating the growth would push them into leadership responsibilities, you see. Now this didn't mean that we didn't have someone eminently qualified, a number of people were. But when we got into the concept of the schools and colleges, a number of the people that would normally have fit into slots of Division Chairman, where obviously not qualified. Let's take engineering, for example. So we were fortunate in getting a person like George Harness, who was already a skilled administrator in the field of engineering and had his tentacles into the accrediting agency for schools of engineering. We were very fortunate in drawing him on to our campus, and we were also fortunate getting people like Lundgren in business. He was already a relatively known person in the field of business, at business administration of course has become a critical part of the institution as is engineering. And initially were pretty strong in the field of arts, letters and sciences, letters primarily, not in science. And initially, then we were fortunate having Ellen McCuren, who was Dean of the College, Our first dean I believe, of the College of Letters in Science, and his successor, Jim Woodrest who was eminently qualified for this kind of post. Now, these people then attempted to draw strong members of staff, when we went out recruiting, they were, they impressed the people that we were interviewing. And of course in the early years, the recruiting was done primarily by myself, and then we grew Del Oviatt into it, and the two of us did practically all the recruiting for the first three or four years.

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JB: We've raised a number of questions that I would have built up to. Let's begin by backtracking a bit to individuals, one of whom I think I know very well. One of whom I don't know it all, originally not at all. Let's begin with that one, Leo Wilson, what sort of person was Leo Wilson?

RP: Leo Wilson was a longtime friend of mine, that's a longtime in terms of my residents in California. If you're interested in the background I could tell you what his background was. He was, what I knew him, in the early years, he was superintendent of the Reedley High School and Junior College District. He was a very active member of the California Association of Junior Colleges, which I was affiliated with, when I was at Bakersfield, and

subsequently president of the association. He went to Fresno State, from this position that he had at Reedley, as Dean of Students at Fresno State. When I decided that I should take the position at San Fernando Valley State, I called him on the telephone to find out whether he'd be interested in filling the slot of Executive Dean because he was imminently qualified and knowledgeable about California school finance. And that was an area in which I felt some need, because I wasn't particularly informed in this area. Secondly, he was a member of the Jewish community, and of course, that is a very highly representative group in the San Fernando Valley, particularly in Studio City and these other areas. I don't know if we were pressing at that particular time for that, it just happened that he just fit into this category beautifully. And he's a master of administrative detail. And of course he had administrative detail that was a pretty cool factor with us from the inception of the institution. And his successor, Carol Spencer, when Leo passed away, was also eminently qualified in this consideration. That was one of the areas which I felt least competent that is handling administrative detail. And these people were very necessary, in the early history of the institution.

JB: Someone I think everyone knows and has given insights into is Del Oviatt, what I ask you about your relationship with Del, he had wanted the job that you secured.

RP: Yes.

JB: Did that make things difficult in your relationship with him?

RP: He was a marvelous person in more ways than one. He was a pillar of the place to start with, highly regarded in the San Fernando Valley, he was a very active community, and civic leader, was incidentally, a fine speaker to. He was very good at repartee, and the kind of give and take that took place in the number of community meetings. He was particularly strong with the Parent Teacher Associations of the San Fernando Valley. He, when I was selected as President, was one of the first to come by and say, I had his wholehearted support, and so far as I'm concerned I had it during the whole time that I was there. He was marvelous colleague and always very supportive.

JB: Do you know from your conversations with him, the answer to a question that has baffled me, and of course he's not here to ask. How was it that he and Howard MacDonald went about dividing the L.A. State faculty? Did he ever tell you that?

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RP: As a matter of fact, I don't know how confidential this should be in that consideration. Turn this off for a second.

JB: We're back on.

RP: Alright, we probably ought to bear in mind as we think about some of the problems that were unique not only to our campus but unique to the times. Faculty members were hard to come by, they were at a premium, particularly in certain disciplines. Science it was very difficult for us to find qualified people within the field of science and was difficult for us to find qualified people in the field of mathematics. I would go from coast to coast on these recruiting adventures, we would list a large number of vacancies in these areas and I've be lucky to see one or two people what I visited mammoth institutions like the University of Minnesota, University of Illinois, Harvard, and so on.

JB: You go from institution to institution.

RP: Yes as a matter of fact, in this regard to kind of interpolate, I would leave the San Fernando Valley on Sunday and fly to Chicago, and that evening from O'Hare, I would go down too Urbana and start my interviewing at University of Illinois. That night I got on the train and went to the University of Minnesota, and then the next night, I went to the University of Wisconsin. And I was ready then at the crack of dawn in each of these places the next following day, of course, to start interviewing. And I would see as many as thirty-five to forty people, at each of these places because they were large institutions. This routine I followed for approximately two weeks, each winter in January. January is a good time for us to recruit, the weather's bad back there and the California crush. I could show you pictures of the registration on the campus where people were wearing short sleeves, so it helpful. But it was very aggravating for one thing, and secondly, people were making increasingly high demands that we saw. Therefore, we begin rather early in the recruitment process to list our candidates in terms of our desire to get him on one, two, three, four, five levels. And unfortunately, in some cases, we were only able to get our third and fourth choices. So, that was a factor under the circumstances, the new people, and many of our people were young, because they're coming off of graduate programs, were activist oriented. They felt that their talents were very much in demand, and they were going to make as much of it as possible. That's why we needed relatively experienced people in our administrative posts because the evaluation process, was a very important one to us. If they came and we kept them for more than three years, they were sort of automatically on tenure. Consequently, we have to be certain that these people who served for three years and were reemployed for the fourth year, were going to fit our particular needs. Under the circumstances, we had a fairly high turnover of personnel, because in some instances we obviously made serious mistakes in the people that we brought on to the campus. We have to find other people to take their place.

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JB: What, what caused resistance to coming to The Valley? Why would it become necessary to get down to number three or number four, was it high teaching load, was it large class size?

RP: I think this primary was a problem of supply and demand, and we were a new institution and in some cases, able people wanted to see facilities already there, and we didn't have the facilities, of course. That was that was a critical factor, probably the critical factor. Now then The Valley itself was a pretty attractive place, but the prestige of our institution, even in The Valley, was not what we would have wished, if we had our brothers. So we had to build a place for ourselves among the people of The Valley as well as, among the institutions that were growing to supply us with the kind of facility that we required. Now UCLA was very helpful, I must say that, at the outset. Not only were they helpful in terms of people, but they were helpful in terms of encouraging people to come to us. And that was a plus factor in our favor, of course, very much so. Our relations with USC were not nearly so good but because they're a little farther away for one thing, and a different kind of institution, our relationships with the so called Claremont Colleges was also very good and that was helpful to us, in this complex of trying to get faculty, you see, who were eminently qualified to do this sort of things that you need done. So early in this interval time, painting a rather gloomy picture of it, we were able to draw outstanding people in the face of these difficulties, for example, in the field of mathematics we've got a person who had been Chairman of the Mathematics Department at one of the eastern universities. We were able to draw two people in science, one in physics, and one in chemistry, Foster Garden in chemistry. These were imminent people and they were mature people, and as soon as we were able to draw those people on the staff then the recruiting process began to easy a bit. And I was able to bow out of it to some extent, and they were able to come in. Then we were able to operate like an institution of higher education.

JB: They began as department chair, and started to do the hiring.

RP: Yes true, they gravitated to, they didn't come in immediately in some instances, as department chairs but the people who were there recognized the superiority of these folks in terms of experience and so on, and advocated there, goes to chairman of the department

JB: What year did you bow out of the hiring process? Approximately.

RP: I stayed with it for about the first five years, gradually, easing out of it.

JB: With you and Del?

RP: Yes.

JB: Substituting one for the other.

RP: Right, He would go to a selection of institution in the east one time, and then I go to the Midwest, the big ten, and then next year, I would go east and he might go to the institutions of the big ten. Ohio State, Minnesota, Michigan, and so on.

JB: My impression is that you took a roll in most of what was going on campus that might be a direct role, it might be quite indirect role, but whether you delegated authority or not, you were in the thick of it. For example, you provided ex official over the college curriculum committee, in the late nineteen fifties. Let me ask you, what would you regard as your direct administrative responsibilities? What were the things that you were hands on responsible for, as it were?

RP: I felt particularly competent in the areas generally described by administration that is organization and certain of the other details as I mentioned earlier. Finance was not one of my keen interest, and was not one of the areas in which I was particularly competent. I knew this, and therefore I had to get people who were strong in this area and was very fortunate in having Warner Masters, of course. But I had to be sure that if Warner someday left; we had somebody to back him up. And this was one of the reasons we recruited Richard Persale, who was from the University of Denver. And I've known him when I was at University of Colorado, I was aware of his competences there. And I was not particularly; I didn't feel particularly interested in administrative detail. This is one of the reasons that the Leo Wilson was such a help and subsequent and as I mentioned earlier, Carlo Spencer. In the other areas, that is what it took to make a strong university. I felt I had some, important contributions to make. I have been at the University of Colorado and watched that institution change.

JB: Pardon me for just a moment, were about to run out of tape.

[END OF TRACK 1.]