

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Robert "Red" Williams = RW

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on October 23, 1989 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Katherine Sirca

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#### Biographical Note:

Robert "Red" Williams was one of the founding members of CSUN. Originally Director of Admissions at Los Angeles State College and its branch in the Valley, the future CSUN, he came over to the branch full time in 1957 as associate dean of students in charge of student personnel. He later served as Registrar and Head of Counseling. He passed away in 2013.

#### Interview Transcription

##### Tape 1, Side A

JB: You arrived here at the outset, Red, the very beginning of our campus.

RW: Well, in a sense. Not in a pure sense, however. When the campus started in 1956, I was really not here on a regular basis. I was Director of Admissions for what was the two campuses, Valley and the one down at where LA City College is. It started in one, the Ramona campus, where Cal State LA is now. So, I still was maybe dropping by here once or twice a week. And it wasn't until, I guess it would've been the spring of '57, that I was put here full-time on this campus. So, there's a small group that probably has a claim to being a little bit more of pioneers than I was.

JB: But not much-

RW: Not much, no.

JB: Is the term Ramona still used?

RW: No. No, I don't think so. That's a term we used for the Ramona campus. I think it's because the freeway was called the Ramona Freeway. The Highway Ten, now called the San Bernardino Freeway.

JB: What led behind your decision to come here, or the decision to assign you here?

RW: Well, the decision for me was pure and simple. I had bought a home in Granada Hills and was commuting down to Hollywood. And it would've ended up commuting to Alhambra where Cal State LA is. But you know, when I bought the home, I had no dream that there would be a college this close to my home. And that, I'm sure, was the primary motivating force for me, because I was quite content and happy at LA State. And

would've looked forward and had some people that, you know, got up a petition asking me to stay. But it was just, those were before the freeways, and so my choice was mainly based on that. But it wasn't just something you ask for and got. There was a lot of, you know, a lot of people that wanted to come here that didn't get here.

JB: I want to talk with you about that, in a moment. When you first arrived on what is now the campus, what did you see? What was here when you came in '57?

RW: Well, when we came all we had was some little bungalows that are over where the Student Union is now. There still are two or three of them left. That was the campus. Zelzah Street was uh, flooded any time there was any rain. It was just a little, small operation of six or seven bungalows and the rest was—of course, surrounding territory was quite beautiful; orange groves and horse farms. But I guess for some people that were used to the ivy walls and things, it would be quite a surprise, because it wasn't impressive, at all.

JB: Fair to say the campus was unimpressive, but there was much more of a country club environment in Northridge.

RW: Oh, it was a gorgeous physical environment in the Valley. Odors of orange groves, and Balboa Boulevard was just all horse farms. It was a gorgeous atmosphere.

JB: Wonderful setting for campus to be on—

RW: (Both talking) Oh, yeah, yeah.

JB: Had you been involved in running the campus when it was temporarily assigned to San Fernando High?

RW: Oh, not in a direct sense, all we had there were really just classes. I was involved with getting the students registered, would go out in the evening and other people with me would get them registered in. Pretty simple operation to do. But that, to my knowledge, wasn't much of an administrative thing. It was just primarily education classes.

JB: And just a few of them—

RW: (Both talking) Yes, a handful, yeah.

JB: The state Department of Education was originally resistant to establishing a campus in the Valley. Do you recall that? Do you recall why there was so much resistance to putting a campus here?

[00:04:17]

RW: Well, what happened really was that the campus had to get off the LA City College campus. That's where the whole thing started, and there was a big search for where to relocate or where to put LA State. And there were periods of time when it looked like it might be the site of what was then Chapman College—who, by the way, are now down in

Orange—but they had a site practically a block or two away from LA City College. There were visitations at various high schools. Warner Masters and others would fly over the LA Area with a helicopter, and there was never any talk in the original scheme of things about a campus out here. It was all directed towards finding a home for LA State, and then they picked the site out there near Alhambra. And all of sudden, I think it was primarily the legislative group up here, and Judge Beck, and people of great influence, then somehow mustered up the—and part of it, I think, personally was, and I think maybe there were aspirations of some people even in the state board higher up that might've wanted to be here. I wouldn't be surprised if Dr. McDonald himself envisioned the possibility of being here. I've got no evidence to support that, but it just suddenly happened, to my knowledge. I don't know whether it took it very long, whether it was a long battle or not. I don't recall it as being that.

JB: It's interesting you mentioned Dr. McDonald because he did mention at some board meeting or other at one point that he was coming over here, but then he changed positions or positions were changed for him, and I know nothing more about it than that.

RW: Well, the only thing I remember is that I was—this was after the campus was sort of beginning out here. I was still at, as I say, at LA State, only here periodically. And I was talking to a high official of LA State, and he said something to me, "Who do you think will be president?" And I said, "Well, you've got to be kidding—Del Oviatt!" He said, "Why?" I said, "You've got to get out there and see what's happening! He's all over, he's in every newspaper. He's worked his tail off to build this place up. He's known by everybody, and revered by all the staff. I mean, it's just a foregone conclusion in my mind that he's going to be the president!" And this administrator's face dropped, and I could just see the—all of sudden I knew I had said something that really injured him, because I realize, now, that he'd envisioned himself to be in, perhaps, that role.

JB: Is that right? That's remarkable.

RW: But it just seemed to me, because Del took the Valley by storm! Just absolutely incredible. There wasn't, you know, a service club, or anywhere that he wouldn't go. And don't misunderstand me, not for personal benefit. I mean, just, did he believe in getting community support for this school.

JB: What sort of man was Del Oviatt?

RW: Well, Del was a great man. He had a tremendous intellect. He could've been any number of things. He was a gifted elementary school teacher and principal. That was actually his background; he'd come from Canada. In fact, there was a little problem of his being retained at LA State because of a citizenship problem that they had to unsnarl, but he was a Mormon, as many, many people were at LA State. But he was not a Mormon's Mormon, like so many were. Frankly, there was a lot of, I think, favoritism, given in some departments for religious connections, but not Del Oviatt. I recall one person recommended a person for his department and used the religious affiliation as the main

thing, and I heard Del say, we got too damn many Mormons now. But he was devout though. He was a devout, religious man, but he had a more eclectic outlook on things, I think. Tremendous father, had two adopted daughters, and just a remarkable guy. It was a real loss to many of us when he died.

JB: He would put in endless hours.

RW: Endless(??). He could do anything. I recall being in his house one time, and he said, "You know, I think I'll build a fireplace." And I said, "Gee, Del, you're not—how you gonna do that? You ever done it?" He said, "No." Well, I think it was two or three weeks later that I happened to be down again—I spent, we used to socialize—and there he had a fireplace already built. I'm convinced he invented the tent trailer, because I recall he showed me a little thing he put together which was exactly like the tent trailer idea became later on. And I'd been almost willing to bet he had the first tent trailer ever made.

JB: Remarkable.

RW: Very, very talented.

JB: Did you find that the Mormon influence at Cal State LA spilled over here, or did it not—

[00:09:42]

RW: Not at all. Not at all. Never, never felt it here. And I'm not saying it was at LA, but it was rather astoundingly percentage of, because coming up from San Diego State and San Diego where I had spent my life. It certainly was a different experience. But not here on this campus, as far as I know. Certainly, there were some several people who were, but they weren't taken here, if I could put it this way, because they were Mormons; they were selected here, I think, on another basis if they'd been at LA State.

JB: Do you know why Northridge was chosen as the site? Were you involved (both talking) in any of the politics behind that?

RW: No, not at all. Not at all.

JB: The campus; what were the original expectations that were held to this campus? What did those that were involved in the founding of it—Del, and you, and the rest—what did you expect this would become?

RW: I think that there was a great emphasis and belief on the liberal arts orientation, for one thing. One of the things that LA State had struggled through was—Even their name at one time was Los Angeles State College of Applied Arts and Sciences. And I think that Del and I think the rest of the people here really envisioned a liberal arts program. In fact, I'm convinced that we would not have had, probably for many years, a home economics department here if it hadn't already been on the drawing board in buildings planned, you know, before there was the faculty meetings were conducted, certain elements of the curriculum were already in place. But I don't think any of us, though,

had a sense of the dramatic expansion that would take place. Otherwise, we'd have bought more—We'd have all found a way to buy some property around here. I don't think any of us envisioned that. On the other hand, we were caught—I was caught napping in the sense that when we first started our freshman class in 1957, we were still a branch of LA State. And we felt we only wanted a couple hundred freshman, it's all we had room for, and you know, we thought that—I thought—it would be a breeze to get that many students. But the fact is, that in those days, [Los Angeles] Valley College had a tremendously strong reputation. It was a fine academic institution, just filled with sharp students who didn't want to commute over the hill to UCLA. Heavy Jewish population out of Grant High School in that area. And I didn't realize that the competition that a fine school like that would be for us.

JB: [Who would've thought] that Valley College-

RW: That's right. And Pierce College, not at the moment. They were pretty much just an ag [agricultural] school. An ag junior class. But, you know, we just—I thought surely, they'd want to go to the four year school. But, by then, Valley had a regular campus. We just had bungalows, and so we were surprised, we were not from the very—we had some ground work to do ourselves, let's put it that way, to earn a reputation. It didn't come automatically. But I don't think any of us visualized the complexity and expansion that took place here.

JB: The original projection was for five thousand FTE [full time equivalent]. Did you feel that was realistic at the time? That in the foreseeable future it would be about a five thousand student campus?

RW: Well, I'll tell you the truth. While I was one of the first administrators here, I really wasn't privy to the discussions about long-range plans and everything. I knew, certainly, once we got under gear, that we had to be—and I think we probably were—the most rapidly expanding four year institution in the country. I mean, it was just—once we started rolling, the growth was tremendous. So, I don't think I would've ever, I would never have thought we'd only have five thousand, but I really wasn't—never thought about it. That was probably more Warner Masters job and some of the other people.

JB: We were talking a minute ago about the liberal arts focus, that on one hand you had LA State, the College of Applied Arts and Sciences. This was to be a liberal arts institution, and you referred to the fact that home economics was, for example, on the drawing board as a kind of transitional department that would be there, and that there was a building slated for it. What was the general phenomenon that led to the change of emphasis from the original expectation that it would be a liberal arts campus to the much more professionally-oriented campus of today? Where'd that come from?

[00:14:40]

RW: Well, I think it came—we'd had right at the very outset, we had a Division of Business and Economics. Don Raun was the chair. And at the very outset at this school, it was a strong

group of people. Apparently, the choices of faculty were made, and Don himself was a good planner. So, that was already there, but we had thriving liberal arts departments for many years. Primarily, not—not—we were never a liberal arts institution. In spite of the fact that a lot of people liked to describe it that, we were really training teachers. And, it was an expansion of the public schools, secondary education that really fed the liberal arts departments. And I used to chuckle, because there was always a failure here to recognize that very crucial role that we had. And that never, to my way of thinking, this university never really was an Occidental [Occidental College]. While people may have talked about it, it was the teacher-training role that provided healthy departments, and certain trade-offs in curriculum development. Hud Fleming and Bob Lamb would make a deal on certain packages. We had lots of history majors. Very few geography majors. Too many history majors. Hud made a deal that let the students have, they could have six units outside history, and geography was always recommended, and so the geography department—

JB: (Both talking at once) You recall that well?(?)

RW: Sure. But then what happened is, the teaching market dried, at approx.(?) the same time when the job market, and the thinking of students is all on the job getting basis, with business, and then the computers came along, and engineering. I guess those are the three primarily professional programs you're talking about, with the Health Science too. But I don't think we ever really established ourselves, the departments, as a place that could continue to attract liberal arts oriented students.

JB: But it never was that kind of campus?

RW: I don't know. It was the dream, and it was certainly built into the curriculum in, at least the first two general ed programs.

JB: What years, do you recall what years—? (both talking at once)

RW: Well, I'm talking about the ones that existed before in the sixties when they cut everything down to what we now call the old Plan A.

JB: Right.

RW: But in those former years, there was a tremendous emphasis on liberal arts curriculum. And President Prator himself, while he didn't directly get involved too much in curriculum, he monitored it. And I recall his refusing to sign a particular recommendation which permitted double counting of the major and the general ed committee. So, I'm not saying we weren't liberal arts in the sense that we had thriving liberal arts majors. History, English Department, I think, at the beginning could've matched—at least in the first the years there—we had faculty that would match a UC campus right across the board. But I'm saying, is, I think that the primarily reason for the students was they wanted to become secondary school teachers.

JB: So that the liberal arts emphasis was a background for a teaching career.

RW: Yeah.

JB: And we were fundamentally a teacher training institution, even from the start.

RW: That's what I think.

JB: Uh huh. That's fascinating.

RW: I think we never really...We did that in most of the years(?). This is not true in the sciences, however. Right from the very beginning, I think, we have not contributed to the preparation of science teachers. We did a marvelous job in history, and in geography, and the social sciences. Literature, English, but not in the sciences.

JB: What accounts for that?

RW: The rigidity. Conservative approach to curriculum. I recall when they used to have these special emphasis—when the country wanted to upgrade science teaching, and they would bring back science teachers to give them additional training. Most universities would take these people—all of whom, by the way, had bachelor's degrees, many of them elementary school teachers—and they would create courses for them. And, geez, I'd give them at least upper division credit, and we gave Biology 150 credit. We just never—the majors were so heavy that, at least this is my thinking, we just never really—as I think, as statistics would probably bear me out if you went back—we just didn't produce the science teachers, and the math teachers.

JB: We never have, then?

RW: Hm?

JB: We never have?

[00:20:00]

RW: Never have. Because we've operated those departments like we really were truly a liberal arts school.

JB: Isn't that interesting. You mentioned that President Prator didn't take the leadership in framing curriculum. Where did that leadership role lie? That is, where was the initiative in framing all the curriculum that's developed on this campus?

RW: I think that there were three elements there. You had a lot of bright, young faculty. Mal Sillars in the speech department, Mitch Marcus in English. A very verbal, then, and Jerry Richfield. You just had a lot of people that loved this whole town hall approach and could serve as catalysts. Del himself was a pioneer in that regard, always moving forward. We had a curriculum coordinator then. We actually brought in, or Del brought in, Fran Senescu from the English Department, and she was in charge of curriculum. And she, I'm sure behind the scenes, was somewhat a motivating force. And she'd have a strong role in the development of these general education programs. Prator didn't get

actively involved, but he did a lot of things undoubtedly behind the scenes that I wouldn't have been aware of, because he was not the kind of administrator that very many people had direct contact with. He had Leo Wolfson there as executive dean, and Del and Warner, but I do know that he watched things, and I think that he was directly involved in a lot of the hiring. But I think that the curriculum development was because it was a group of faculty who still had, you know—every week there'd be a new major finding its way in. And if you go through the minutes of the committees, you'll see the tremendous jobs that had to be done.

JB: Very quickly.

RW: Yeah, very quickly. We had to build up a whole lower division curriculum, because we hadn't had any at LA State.

JB: So, this had to be created fresh. There had been none.

RW: That's right, that's right.

JB: —it was strictly an upper division institution, and even then, with a strong technical focus.

RW: Yeah, we had enough courses when we were at LA City college. We had the junior college there to provide a lot of the lower division stuff, but we really had a lot of bootleg upper division courses. In those days, one to ninety-nine was lower division, hundred-above was upper. And so, we'd have things like Psychology 100 and courses which, you know, as soon as we put in a lower division, they were moved down. But I think it's just part of, heck, ya—bunch of people, not very many, but thirty or forty people, move out with an opportunity to be listened to and have something to say, and we could do it in a town hall environment, and it just shows, in our gut,(??) that these people were strong enough to have PhDs or be academically oriented. And they just took off and took advantage of the opportunity.

JB: You mentioned earlier that there was a certain amount of esprit in that founding faculty.

RW: Um-hm. Yes, really was. Just determined to make this thing go. We had no reason to think it wouldn't, but everybody was just—it was a team effort. In fact, for many years I used to pride myself on, I never ran into a situation where one administrator seemed to be stabbing another one in the back. We never had that. When I'd go to my conferences, it was sort of common to understand that this was par for the course. We never had that, for many, many years. And it wasn't you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, it was just, there just didn't seem to be all that kind of stuff going on. It was just, everybody had their goal set on making this a great school.

JB: When did you start sensing change in that sense of cooperation?

RW: Oh, I don't know. I'm not that close to things now to even admit that there is a change, but I suspect there is. I think it probably came with size more, than any other thing. I don't think it would have anything to do with the changes in president from Prator to Dr.



Cleary. In fact, I think Cleary came in at a particularly difficult time, and certainly has never been a recurrence of that. But I think very likely, size. Although, one might say that Oviatt's being moved out of the leadership role, even before he died, might've been a contributor. But I think the primary thing is just plain bigness. And also, the creation of the system. The CSU—

[00:25:19]

JB: Now, what effect did that have on this campus, on the way in which it was thought of, the way in which it was shaped? Did you detect a transformation when that happened?

RW: Well, I think that a more obvious thing when the, ca-, all campuses were all present independently reporting up to the State Department in Sacramento, lobbying individually for their places in the sun, that was different from a system where everything went through the headquarters. I'm not even sure that that would be a contributor, but I think it put one more barrier into the curriculum development, possibly. It might've been a factor, is all I can be sure of saying. But I think that we've got a group of people now, here, that many of them still having to get up every morning and go to work, and they're all now thirty-some years older than they were when this place started. Or twenty, most of us real old-timers are gone. And I think that we haven't had a steady supply of new blood, young people, creating new ideas. And most people are full professors. So, it's just sort of a stagnant situation, and it's probably not healthy for any institution.

JB: Where thirty years ago, everything was rush, rush, I know this. I'm reading senate minutes, going back and talking to the people who were involved as you were at the time. Reading old copies of the Sundial and Sunburst. Everything is in a hurry. And it seems everyone is in a hurry, to establish committees, get the curriculum going, site the campus, site buildings for the campus and the like. Did it really seem as frenetic, was the pace as intense at it looks to me, looking back at the records? Did you feel the pace was extraordinary?

RW: Oh, yeah. It was, as I say, we didn't just have the EPC [Educational Policies Committee] committee. We had three, and my role in admissions, while I wasn't always a member of all of them, I had an opportunity to contribute and observe and be part of. So, I spent a lot of time just in meetings. Everybody, as I told you, I think Ray Rydell and I put the catalog together, the first one, in a week, you know!

JB: Now, what was Ray Rydell's [role]? (Both talking at once)

RW: Well, Ray Rydell was a historian who became the dean of Liberal Studies here. And he first came on as, I think, as the dean of the evening and graduate program. But he was a very distinguished person who played a major role here at the institution in curriculum with Frances Senescu.

JB: What was your role at the time he was—(both talking at once)

RW: I came here first as associate dean of students in charge of student personnel. But, you know, we had an activities coordinator, and a testing office, and the counseling, but then shortly I was just admissions and records. They did hire a dean of students who came in '58, I think. Prator hired him.

JB: So, that first year, you and Ray Rydell framed the catalog.

RW: Yeah.

JB: How long did it take you to do it?

RW: Oh, I don't think very long, you can be sure.

JB: (Laughs) How many courses were offered at that time, any guesses?

RW: No. In fact, I have a '58 catalog. I don't have a—well, '57 would be the LA State one. I can't recall. But well, I know that we only had, because I was looking through the catalog, we only had one or two historians. We had one or two, one journalism professor, I know Erlandson. Well, when you look through it, it couldn't have been very many classes, you know.

JB: Thin line of people. Now that's something we have to do when I go back and count, and-

RW: (Both talking at once) Yeah, yeah.

JB: —see if it adds up to it. It couldn't add up to very many. Before we leave LA State altogether, what sort of person was Howard McDonald?

[00:29:33]

RW: Howard McDonald was probably one of the most decent men you'll ever meet. If anybody looked like a university president, I'd elect(??), he did. He had many fine traits, I'm sure. But, in certain situations, well, he never really conveyed, to me, and I don't think to most people, that he was on top of things. He was fairly elderly when he got there. And we had a very strong second-level vice president, I guess, type, Al Graves(??), who was probably as qualified to be a university president as anybody. But, McDonald, he just didn't have the, didn't convey the feelings that he probably deserved. And he'd make mistakes during commencement and things. He's the kind of fellow that if he was coming through his prepared text, would skip a page and not realize it. And so, sometimes he portrayed an image that was undeserved, because he was really a, probably a, he'd had a tremendous history in administration. He'd been a school superintendent and stuff. But he was not really that highly regarded as a capable person.

JB: Let's switch the tape now.

[END OF TRACK 1]