

Robert Williams, Track 3

Tape 2, Side 1

JB: Alright. We were talking about faculty governance as being something fresh to this campus as against LA State. How so?

RW: Well, I'm just trying to think, you know. After all, I was at LA State there from 1950 until '56 as Registrar and then Director of Admissions. I'm trying to think of, you know, of curriculum development and things of that sort. I just have the impression we had the division chairmen kind of set up down there. I can't visualize, like a faculty senate concept. Of course, that was later here, too. We had general faculty. But I wasn't involved in some of that, except that I can only tell you this: that when I wanted to change something down there in the catalog, it probably was a lot easier than it ever was here!

JB: Because of faculty governance?

RW: Yeah, I mean here, I think there was a tremendous lot more power in Dr. Al Graves' hands and in curriculum. And less involvement of faculty, I just have that feeling. You have to remember, I came into higher education not from the faculty route. I came out of San Diego State, and so I'm not really was, at that time, wasn't privy to the way universities operate in many places. My feeling is, that an awful lot of decisions and most everything was done in the administration. But, even in curriculum, but I sure could be wrong. You'd have to talk with some of these, like Schlosser who came from the Theatre Department or Mitch from the English Department.

JB: About to ask you about that. I'm seeing him in a couple of week. (both talking at once) How was faculty governance established here in the first place?

RW: It was just there. Whether or not it was, I can't believe it, it was a copy, you know, of LA State. I think it was a retaliation against LA State's set-up. I sure could be wrong.

JB: I keep finding evidence that people use LA State as a negative as well as a positive.

RW: Unfortunately. It used to blame everything. Every mistake we ever made, well, we inherited that from LAC. One of the things I had to contend with when I was acting coordinator in '57, we were still San Fernando Valley campus of LA State, and I had to protest to Bob Lawrence, who was then Dean of Activities or coordinator, and Del. Others just constantly using the term San Fernando Valley State. Because I truly wanted to be loyal to the situation, and LA State, God, when you consider a pioneer school, the circumstances they lived under, it was always a good school. There was a far more negative comments about LA State than I think was fair. It certainly did exist, very definitely.

JB: I've caught wind of that.

RW: Yeah, very definitely. In fact, they were used as a scapegoat for our mistakes. You know, we inherited that, though that wasn't always the case. Sometimes it was just our own plain screw-up, you know. But there was a lot of that.

JB: One strong theme is a sort of, they're a trade tech school, we want to be something more elevated. Did you sense that at the time, or am I seeing this...?

RW: Uh, there probably was that, because it was in the title. And we had some abusive situations, sort of, at LA State. Historically, they had a work-study program where students got credit for working out in the field. You know, and the related job, so-called job, like we called internships now. And there were some abuses in that, I think, academically, and many people were aware of it. And so, but a lot of it was just plain immaturity on people's part here, or just plain snobbery. But don't forget, at LA State we got turned down, the first accreditation request, which is not the most pleasant feeling in the world.

JB: Really?

RW: That's why Al Graves was brought down. Um-hm. Yeah, we flunked accreditation.

JB: At LA?

RW: At LA State, um-hm.

JB: Is that right? Now, we never flunked accreditation here?

RW: Nuh-uh. Nuh-uh. We did there, though.

JB: Oh, that's extraordinary. Why, do you recall?

RW: I wasn't privy to it. It's undoubtedly in the report, but we... Major part of it, undoubtedly was facilities, resources. Because you can't just take a four year school on top of a community college without, perhaps, I don't know. I think that was probably the main thing, but there might've been other factors. But we did actually fail to get accredited.

[00:05:03]

JB: Fascinating. I didn't know that.

RW: I think there was snobbery. But I tell you the—heck, I can remember... it's so different now. You realize that it costs more to park here now than it did to go take a full program in the university, college? It costs more to park. The non-resident fee now is what, eighty-five dollars a unit, something. It was four dollars a unit then. We weren't the discriminators against non-residents that we are now. Um, it was just so different. But...

JB: We're talking about students, and it's very opportune that we talk about students. The should—The focus of your energies all these years on this campus have been oriented towards students. On getting students in here, acculturating them, getting them graduated. What were the students that you encountered in the fifties, and early sixties,

like? Is there anything that could be said that would differentiate them, for example, from students now?

RW: Well, we went through stages. In the very early days, primarily what we now call reentry students, older students, coming back or taking advantage of the opportunity. Very few young students, that would be in the fifties. And a lot of people wanting to become elementary school teachers, or already elementary school teachers on emergency credentials, seeking to get licensing. Then '57, we started our freshman class. A hundred and twenty-five approximately. All seventeen years old. All white. By the way, they had to wear beanies those days (laughter). You can't believe getting that in now?

JB: You wore beanies here for what, the first few days?

RW: No, for the whole semester.

JB: Freshmen beanies.

RW: We sold it on—well, I wasn't involved, but that was Bob Lawrence and, and the Student Activities people. But students didn't object, and we liked it, because I told them, when I'd get the chance to speak to them, this lets us know that you're new and you deserve special help. So, we used it as a sort of a plus thing. It was never a put-down kind of a thing, but that was perhaps the custom back in the fifties, I guess. But that was a freshman group, but we had a tremendously homogenous ethnic group until, we'll admit, until the '68 period. And then, now—We had, sixties, of course, is so full of turmoil. It's hard to even look back and think of the tremendous social consciousness of the students. It probably hit its capstone in '68, but there was a lot going on long before that. Just as the, I think, the national scene described the differences as from now. But now, the ethnic diversity—I'm not talking just Blacks and Hispanics, but the Asians and the Middle Easterners—so staggeringly different now than it was then. We were purely a, I guess you'd call it, a segregated school in the early stages.

JB: Did the policies or attitudes of this school, per say, have anything to do with that, or was that a function of the redlining, and the other things that had gone into the array of housing, and where people lived in Los Angeles and the Valley?

RW: I think, I'm certain there was no conscious effort. I think it was just an unfortunate by-product of the way things were in that day. We had no, in admissions anyway, we had a stated admissions requirement. We had no exceptions allowed. I guess two percent or whatever(??), that was usually rarely given. We were behind, undoubtedly, all of us, some later than others, on catching in to the minority movement and being more than just willing to give them a chance. We go out and look for them. But, um, we had a school that had a modest admission requirement as compared to now. Over fifty percent of the freshman that started at our place went on probation every semester.

JB: Is that right?

[00:09:25]

RW: And, at least this was—I'd look back as perhaps, if there is any justification, as mine for the narrowness of my perspective back then, we had no remedial resources or anything, and no slots to put them in. It wasn't until it took over on a state-wide basis that we could really do that. It was just the nature of the Valley! Grant—All you got to do is talk to somebody at Valley College -----10:00-----that has been there, and ask them, describe how Valley College was in the nineteen-fifties, as against now. Everything, it was—The residential conclaves were all Anglo. You had your San Fernando High. First president of our student body came from Fairfax High over the hill. So, it was just, they weren't coming through, giving any incentives of minorities in particular. There were no immigrants, Asians. That came later. But as far as the blacks and Hispanics, there simply were, at that time, still in the stages(??) at the high school levels, dooming most of those students to drop out or(??) nonacademic curriculum. I think that's the reason, and fortunately that thing has been dramatically changed here now.

JB: Well, the original students were largely mature students. That was the first phase, the fifties. They were coming in for upper division graduate training to reinforce oftentimes careers they already were in, notably, teaching. Um, Betty Brady has commented that she doesn't see a lot of differences in terms of the overall skill level of the students since that time. She said that a lot of people were there because, a lot of student were here because their parents wanted them to be. Did you sense that?

RW: Yeah, I think there was tremendous pressure in those days. Probably still exists, tremendous parental pressure to get a university or college degree. And, I think that our freshmen class, the beginning group, was pretty much motivated that way. You've got to remember that one didn't necessarily go to Valley State in the late fifties and early sixties because of any great reputation or any great campus. I mean, we really didn't have that much. But they wanted to go to us as freshman—and no dorms, either, except later that women's dorms. But there was parental pressure, but my guess is, there was less parental pressure then than there is now.

JB: Is that right? Did you—

RW: Let's put it another way. I think now, a lot of these kids themselves have decided they better go to college. I think that there's always been many students whose first choices wouldn't be to be a university student. And another thing, they're not really that inquisitive or that seriously scholastic, but they're realists and they feel that they just better go.

JB: A fifty percent probation rate is extraordinary.

RW: Yeah. Very high. Very high.

JB: Now that's since gone down appreciably. Do you know what it is now?

RW: I don't know what it is now.

JB: When did it, or do you recall, when it started to climb?

RW: I recall when the admissions requirements were changed, I was particularly curious to see what would happen because I was fearful that all we do is continue to put on probation half the student body, regardless whether the basic caliber has improved. And my memory tells me, when I did check it, there was a significant change in the attrition of the per semester performance when we got a bit more selective and went into that upper one-third concept.

JB: When did that happen? Do you recall?

RW: I can't remember.

JB: But essentially, before that, it had been open admissions, or virtually?

RW: Well, not open, but modest, to say the least. Seven or ten A's or B's at a high school, or five with a twentieth percentile on a test. So, it was very modest.

JB: What were the student attitudes toward the campus?

RW: Oh, I think, I wasn't—You know, we've always been sort of a commuter school, but I think we had a lot of fun things. We used to call it 'the friendly campus.' Smiling, a lot of friends, friendliness on the campus. The student body life, right from the beginning, Ben Rude was the first president of the student body. He's now an English teacher over at—about ready to retire, I guess—at Pasadena City College.

JB: Guess that dates us, doesn't it?

RW: Yeah, right (laughter). You know, they had a nice bunch. And we had little red and white girls, used to give campus tours and volunteer to wear their little uniforms around, bought for at their own expense. They had local fraternities and sororities. It was very friendly place, in that respect. I, myself, have not been a—I loved to help students, but I'm not one that—I never got active in being an advisor. I was advisor to a fraternity very briefly, and found that to be sort of not my cup of tea. So, I really wasn't as close to the students as I should've been. And I can't therefore give you a good feel for it.

[00:15:15]

JB: I'll ask a few of them. I'll ask a few of them. Um, there's a marvelous tale that you told when you were interviewed back in the early seventies—which I would love to have you tell again, if you will—that at some point, early in the history of the campus, you'd set up a table filled with cards-

RW: Oh, registration, yes.

JB: —Registration table. And it collapsed. Would you tell that story?

RW: Well, it was early. It was probably the second semester or so of our existence. We registered in the, what we now call the South Library, upstairs, everything in one room. And we were registering the freshman. We brought the freshman in early, and we had registration cards. They were IBM type cards, all for each class, all assembled there, and the freshmen were in there registering. And darn, if the whole thing didn't collapse, and no way to restore them to a manageable order. And Bob Lawrence, who was registrar—tremendous ego, by the way, Bob Lawrence. Former actor. He died like a couple years ago. But he stood up with great courage and said, "Folks, we can't do anything. Come back tomorrow morning." And he actually got away with it.

JB: How many students were out there, do you remember?

RW: Oh, you know, it would've been a hundred, two hundred, I guess. We had some things we did quite dramatically, some were related. One semester, we were so crowded at the end of the fall term, that we really wondered how we could get to students in to the spring semester. A modest number of new freshmen. So, I sat down, and I actually took the list of all the general ed courses and the open seats and manually worked out programs for all of them. And we sent them a letter saying, you have the choice. You can take this program, and you know it fits, or, you know, you can take your chances. Another time, we found after the enrollment, it was first day of student enrollment, there was something wrong. Our FTE was kaplooey—I mean, the unit load was way down. So, we immediately had to resort--we manually contacted every student and immediately, and extended the registration. Gave them an opportunity to come in and register again. We felt something was wrong.

JB: What was it, did you find out?

RW: Probably just, my memory, just some screw-upper that we don't know. But we did things like that.

JB: When you would hand-tool those students' G E [General Education] programs, how many students were there, roughly?

RW: Oh, that'd probably been about fifty.

JB: Amazing.

RW: And, you know, the interesting thing is that I suspect most of them didn't buy my program. But I was just saying, you know, I had them all set out in cards and I'd take this one to what his major was or hers and I filled the program. Because I was really nervous as to how we would fit them into classes.

JB: I can't imagine that happening today.

RW: No. No. Well, in some ways, it does.

JB: I guess (??).

RW: Yeah, yeah.

JB: But to hand-sort that, to hand-tool those programs. One of the pleasures of listening to you recount these incidents and events is a lot of human interest finds its way into the way in which you talk about what we've been discussing. Are there any other favorite human interest stories you have? Anything that's particularly telling about the story of our campus, or anything that's just intrinsically amusing, funny, or humane, perhaps?

[00:19:03]

RW: Oh, I, gosh. There are some stories, that some of them aren't really possible(??) to tell too much about them. In the old days, I had lots of power as a director of admissions and records. And I had, I think I had good trust from the, you know, the faculty and stuff. And there were some cases where you—I'll tell you one. It's one that I get most kick out of. There was an old fella, one of these emergency teachers that I'm telling you about. He was teaching elementary school, music, out in Palmdale. He's in his forties and fifties. All he taught was music. And he couldn't pass Biology 150. He tried it two or three times. He even went over to the junior college. He just couldn't pass the course. That's all he needed for graduation. And I didn't know what to do, because I didn't want to violate the rules. I called—first of all, I established that at the elementary school all he taught was music. I checked with our music department and they said he was a good enough musician, you know, for the level that he's teaching. So, then I got his transcripts out. He transferred to us from Kansas State, where he'd been twenty years before. And I looked over that transcript, and lo and behold, I saw a course called Poultry Production. So, I called him in, and I said what'd this course consist of? And he said, oh, you know, we mated chickens, hens, and roosters. And I said, my god, we've made a terrible mistake. That's genetics. You don't have to take Biology 150. (Laughter) I didn't want to tell him that I was giving away the store, but he graduated. Now, the sad part is, I don't think it could be done today without, perhaps, somebody questioning one's ethical standards. But in those days, we did things like that.

JB: It would go before a commission. The associate—(both talking at once)

RW: It would go before us, and they'd turn it down. Without any question. Without any question. (Laughter)

JB: Great story.

RW: We had some stories. Some of them have ethnic overtones, and so—But I'll tell you one. We had, if you can believe this, at LA State, we had a writing proficiency test for admission. You had to write an essay and there was this student, I still remember her name, but I won't mention it to you, who I noticed during registration down there seemed to be struggling with that part of the requirement as she was filling out her booklet. But she completed and turned everything in, and Del came in to see me. He was then head of Elementary Education, and also had some hand in this, as was her major, so he got her writing proficiency sample. He came storming in, wondering how

did she get in, because she couldn't write. And I checked it out. She came to us from one of those unaccredited—in those days, all the flat schools colleges back in the South, there weren't opportunities for accreditation. And I had made up my mind early on that, accreditation or not, we weren't going to deprive them of admission, because there was no opportunity for them. So, we'd take their credits continued. Well, we wrote places like Howard University and the accredited schools as long as they said they took their students. That's what I was doing. So, I said Del, she's admitted. Well anyway, it turned out that she got herself enrolled in two classes at the same time. And in those days, I used to go out and work the counter, we call it. So, she was sent a note, come on in, see us, so I had to be there when she got to the counter. And I said, "You can't—you've got a problem with your enrollment here." And she said, "What's the problem?" And I said, "Well, you're enrolled in two classes at the same." And she said "What's wrong with that?" I said, "There's really nothing wrong with it, if you can arrange to be in two places at the same time." And she said, "That's a good idea, I'll work on it." And she walked off. (Laughter) We had another student one time. Remember now, we were upper division upstairs, and they were lower division downstairs. We had a guy come up there in the upper division one time when I was working the counter, and it was obvious after we talked to him for a minute that he didn't really belong in our school, he belonged downstairs. And I said, no you don't belong up here, you should really be downstairs. He said, I know that, but their lines are too long. (Laughter)

JB: Was the upstairs-downstairs arrangement—now, I've not heard of this. This was in the old—

RW: —administration building on City College.

JB: I see, I see.

RW: We were all upstairs, to my knowledge, except the big three downstairs. But all our offices, at least that's where Al Graves and John Morten and Warner Masters, everybody else. In fact, we sometimes had to register in the auditorium balcony, which, try registering a group of students in a balcony sometime.

JB: You know, you've very patiently let me ask you probably thirty questions. And you've been very forthcoming in answering them. I wonder if there are any questions that you wanted me to ask or wish that I had asked, which I didn't.

[00:24:57]

RW: I can't, I...I can't think of any. You might've asked, and I'm glad you didn't, what's my assessment of the current state of the situation. I would say, just in general though, I will answer it this way. I think that those of us that had a chance to be a part of that school the first five or ten years had a much richer experience than the people who are here now and never had it.

JB: Because there were people in administration in—

RW: Anywhere. Anywhere. (Both talking at once)

JB: —Students, all.

RW: I suspect if you talk to any of the people that are still around, that they will pretty much say the same thing. That it was a wonderful—it's just an opportunity, and perhaps, to some degree, will be available to those that in the end go on out to Ventura. Although, it depends on how they set it up, but that's just a tremendous opportunity. And I saw people reestablish themselves as human beings—

JB: Here.

RW: —and professionals through just the sheer effect of having a chance here. People who really were nothing at LA State, or even endangered species, who coming here because of the thrill and professional nature of the work. Just got their house in order personally, if that was their problem. Got off the booze, or got an opportunity to get some respect from their colleagues and it just turned out great. Here, now, just picture, if there are any new hires—which, by the way, is one of the major problems at this school, is the lack of new blood—but what a difference it must be for some new faculty member coming here now.

JB: One of a very large crowd.

RW: And, a crowd pretty much settled in.

JB: Yeah. With a huge age gap between you, if you are just out of graduate school, and in a department such as mine, the next one up who's going to be in his late forties.

RW: Yeah. Well, I was twenty-four years old when I started here.

JB: On this campus.

RW: Um-hm.

JB: Is that right?

RW: Let me see, twenty-two? No, I was thirty. Thirty. I was born in twenty-two. I can't even, thirty-four, yeah. But I was young. And that's, of course, I think you and I talked about that. A mistake was made at this school was not having—having too large a group on the youthful side of things join the faculty. That's why, like, in history, you haven't had a vacancy in twenty years. And I think in retrospect, most people would agree that's not so good. A few more old-timers in there would've been beneficial. They'd have been gone, and some new people would've come in.

JB: See, you raised this question you were happy I hadn't asked, and now I'm raising it, point by point. Are there some other ways in which, particularly central ways, in which you find this, an institution where, whatever, arterial sclerosis has set in, has gotten too large, however one would describe it. If you were identifying the most central differences beyond those you've mentioned, that made it a more desirable place to be then than

now, what would those other factors be? I keep hearing the same thing from everyone I talk with who was here.

RW: Well, I don't know really how you can overcome the sheer difficulties that this size creates. You know, distance.

JB: Stop, I've just noticed my tape recorder is-

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]