

Interview with Warner Masters, track 1

WM: Should I—Do you want me to read the questions or what? You've gotta read this—

JB: I'll read them to you, or—

WM: Okay.

JB: I've just frame them as an outline—

WM: Alright.

JB: —and we can depart from it all we want. But let me begin with the first and perhaps most obvious question: when and in what circumstances did you arrive at Valley State?

WM: Oh, I was with Los Angeles State before. You see, I went to work, I was working for the University of Southern California, and P. Victor Peterson was the president at Cal State LA [California State University, Los Angeles]—or Los Angeles State as it was called in those days—which is a two year upper division school. Uh, go back a little bit, right after World War II, the Los Angeles City School system had aspirations for a four year city school, city college. And not unlike the CUNY [City University of New York] system, I think, the City College of New York, four year institutions. The State Board of Education and the Director of Education of the State of California Legislature said, "No way, we're not gonna start having community colleges grow up into four year institutions." Obviously, the University of California was opposed to that idea and so was the existing state colleges of that time. And there were only a few of them, San José, San Diego State, Fresno, Humboldt, Chico, I think were the only ones in existence then. And so, when the city found out that they could not get a four year institution, the idea was that they would set up a two year upper division school on the Los Angeles City College campus and that was in 1946. In 1947, the first classes, of upper division classes, were opened, on the City College on Vermont Avenue. That went on for one year, where the state college, the upper division, hired City College teachers to teach State College classes, upper division. That did not work. So that was during the year of '47-'48. In 1948-49—let's see, no I'm sorry, it was 1948-49 was their first academic year. In the Fall of '49, which had been the '49- '50 year, P. Victor Peterson was appointed president of Long Beach, a brand new institution. Nothing there, just a piece of land.

JB: I was living there with Tyler Caulazar(??)

WM: Is that right? And the State College, the State, the Department of Education said, "No more borrowing of teachers from the community college." That they would go out and hire their own staff. It was at that juncture that P. Victor Peterson tried to find a financial officer for, to start the state operations at Vermont Avenue, and so I was recruited through the University of Southern California. Now, I had quit the University of Southern California and was with Richfield Auto Corporation. I was in the credit department and I got a call from vice president of USC [University of Southern California] saying that there was an opening over at Cal State LA, a new college, and they had recommended me among a couple of other people as a possibility for this position, so I went over there and interviewed and I got it. So that was the beginning of my experience with the State University system.

JB: What year was that?

WM: That was 1949. August. August first, 1949. So we went to—we had eight faculty and a librarian, a registrar borrowed from the city, and myself and a few clerks and that was the institution. No president.

JB: What was your position called?

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WM: My position's called a Business Manager. That's what they called it in those days. And so one division chairman, a man by the name of John Morton, who was later a dean at Cal State LA. He's passed on now. But John came in to my office, which was a little classroom and said, "What are we gonna do?" (laughs) And so the books were a mess. The whole thing was just a total mess and so I said, "Well, I guess we'd better get some faculty here someday." So he and P. Victor Peterson, Peterson was now down at Long Beach, but Peterson said, "Well, I'll review the materials if you'll send them to me." So John Morton got the materials together and P. Victor Peterson came up and the three of us sat down. I was in those days to set the salaries because I had the budget and so consequentially!!!!, they went through and decided which ones should be a professor, an associate professor, and all this kind of stuff, you know. And had all of these forms which we're, I think they're still using the same darn forms, as I recall, showing the educational background, experience, and all that sort of thing. And we went through those, and then we said, "Well how much can we afford to pay?" So we took a look at the budget and offered them particular positions, you know. Well, this was hell of a way of doing business. This absolutely no time at all from August the first until the beginning of classes in September to try and get faculty on board. So we had a whole—I think we hired over one hundred fifty part-time teachers.

JB: Wow.

WM: And we managed to pick them up here and there and yonder, and probably no more than twenty-five or thirty fulltime people could we get out of all of this in that first semester. And twelve hundred students showed up, which was a mass of students for that time. They closed the library, and had all the librarians—and we had hired few librarians—and had them work on registration, cause we didn't have anybody to register—go through the physical process of registering these young people. So that was the way it started. And from that, it just grew fantastically. Howard McDonald was employed as first president and he came on board on November the first. So we were well into the semester before we had a president.

JB: Before you had a president. I've come across evidence that he planned to come over here as president of Valley State at one point. Do you recall that? What brought you over?

WM: Well, I had my choice, you see. By that time, I was—the institution had three branches operational. We had the one on Vermont Avenue. We had acquired the site underneath Los Angeles, and had temporary buildings over there, and classes were in session starting in 1954, two years before the first classes started here in 1956. So, in 1954, we were operating off of what was called the Ramona Campus, that was the Ramona District where they—was in there. We labeled it the Ramona Campus without realizing where we were headed regarding that place. About that same time after we had gotten started over there and had the one on Vermont Avenue, Howard McDonald and two or three other of the people from the administration—had then Chet Milham, who was vice president. He was an old marine colonel, interesting(??) guy, and then we had two or three other people that had been with the State Department of Education in the city and myself and we had our heads together and decided that there was no way this was gonna satisfy the needs of the city of Los Angeles, to have one way over on the east side and nothing out on the west. So, uh, we decided to get all of the assemblymen and the state senators in the Los Angeles Metropolitan area together and we managed to find the money and hosted a party, a dinner party, at the Brown Derby on Los Feliz Boulevard. And we had twenty-one assemblymen there, which is a big block of the voting in this portion of Southern California. It's dominant. But twenty-one assemblymen and a couple of senators came to the dinner and we worked out tables where one of us was at each of these tables with these state legislators, and we talked about the whole problems of the growth of the metropolitan area, and we had some demographic charts that we'd prepared. So we had a little show for them, a screen(??), everything. Talked about what was gonna happen here in the next ten to twenty years regarding population growth. This was basically where we were centering our efforts to point out that this was never gonna, uh, was never possible to have one institution of five thousand, limited to five thousand students. There was a doctor—I think his name was Strayer—that was employed by the State Department of Education legislature, legislature provides money to, uh, form a master plan for state colleges in the state of California. A report came out that saying that we needed fifty or sixty of these institutions throughout the state, limiting all the enrollment to five thousand.

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JB: Were they serious about that?

WM: Well, he was, and the legislature accepted it.

JB: I see. So, they were serious initially about this campus being five thousand.

WM: That's right. That's exactly the standard that they established statewide, and said every institution except one would be limited to five thousand. The one happened to be more than five thousand, that was San Jose.

JB: It already was, probably.

WM: It was already, uh, pushing five thousand, so they put the limitation of six thousand on in. And all the rest were to be limited to five thousand. Now, if you read the Strayer's, Dr. Strayer's study, he basically had the idea of regional liberal arts and teacher training institutions, limited to that. And also that he felt that the, after a student body grew beyond five thousand students, that they lost some kind of a communal activity, the students didn't know each other as well, the faculty became too large, and that there was a loss of a congeniality of the campus life, by having an institution larger than five thousand. Obviously, the figure is kind of arbitrary, but nevertheless, you know, there's something to be said for that, in spite of the fact that economically it just didn't work. It wasn't gonna happen that way. And the idea was, it would save money in that the students could commute to these institutions, and there would be no residents' halls, or no necessity for that. Well that alone kind of contradicts the idea of congeniality and everybody coming to the campus and having that kind of a live way from home concept because there wasn't gonna be any residents' halls. We were just gonna have mass parking lots and cars coming into the place and leaving after class more or less like a high school, like an overgrown high school. So consequently, that's what we were stuck with. So the only answer to this was obvious that they had to build some more institutions in the city of Los Angeles. And the Legislators of that meeting as a body agreed that there would, they would go in with legislation in 1955 to, uh, acquire a second site for a state college in Los Angeles area.

JB: The dinner having occurred in 1954?

WM: Yes, I think '54 or '55, yeah. I think it was '54.

JB: Okay.

WM: It could've been '53. These dates are very hard to remember from that standpoint, it wasn't one of those things where you wrote it down on calendars, so to speak. It might've been 1953, cause there had to be some span of time there they put, introduce legislation to get it through.

JB: Right, right.

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WM: But it went through very rapidly, as I recall. And a very modest amount of money was appropriated to acquire a site—if I recall nine hundred fifty thousand or a million dollars, somewhere in that vicinity. And so, uh, with that legislation on the books, McDonald said, told me, "Why don't you start looking around for one." I had just a casual acquaintance that was in a real estate business, had an airplane. So we flew all over the San Fernando Valley, all over the area, and came up with about three or four sites out here in the west.

JB: You and your friend.

WM: No, well, he wasn't my friend, he was—in fact he was just a real estate guy that I'd had the occasional meeting with. I belonged to the Industrial Association with a number of things and so this guy was pretty well known for this real estate development business. And so, he said, "Well, if you pick out the places, I'll make the proposals." And so, fine. So, that's what we did. Well, it came down to a selection of about five or six sites. One was Hansen Dam up here and that was too dangerous with regard to the possibility of a—it was a flood plain. And we thought that that wasn't good. Another one was over in Tarzana, where there was a country club over in there, and that looked pretty good. The only trouble was we had to go up Reseda Boulevard; Reseda would have to have been extended through and although the Ventura freeway, was then programmed, had not been built. Looked like it gave considerable access to the site, but they found an earthquake fault in there. And, uh, turned that down. Then, that's when those two went down—and, uh, oh, yes, west(?) of the Glendale Airport was a possibility and, uh —

JB: Right next to the airport?

WM: Yes, there was a Rodger Young Village, or something of that sort, something, I think that was the name of it. And what it was, it was adjacent to the Glendale Airport and it was a veterans' housing project, emergency housing project, bunch of Quonset huts and that sort of thing. And, uh, then the other—there was a fourth one in that area and that was where the Griffith Park Cemetery was located, up in the hills there?

JB: Um-hm.

WM: And that one looked like a real possibility, and I'll be darned if, the, uh, big cemetery that's located in Glendale—

JB: Forest Lawn?

WM: Forest Lawn, which owns the other one, didn't manage to get a couple of bodies in there real fast.

JB: (Laughs)

WM: And that killed it.

JB: As it were. (laughs)

WM: Yeah, they would not take those bodies out of that place. And the state was not about to go in there and condemn it and move these bodies out. So that was, that killed that one, and so—that was a pretty site, that was a beautiful place, very very pretty. But then, uh — so the West San Fernando Valley seemed the only place where we weren't gonna run into a lot of trouble, and that's why I was flying all over the place so I had this—I proposed about four or five sites. One of them, I had really thought was quite good was just to the south of the Veterans' Hospital, that whole area between Nordhoff and where the Veterans' Hospital is now sitting and it made a—it was a very, a bunch of horse ranches in those days. And it looked very good. There was one hundred sixty acres available in there. And that's what they limited us to, one hundred sixty acres. So, uh, then this one, but there was an elementary school, the city, uh, Los Angeles owned a ten acre plot right off of, well it's exactly where the temporary buildings are today, the Student Union is sitting on the site where the elementary school used to be and so that was a negative, but it was agreed that if we acquired a piece of property off of Zelzah and we give them ten acres in exchange for this ten acres, that the city would trade. And so the trade was executed. We purchased from the Halverson brothers the one hundred sixty acres of the original site of this institution. That was done in 1955, '56, somewhere along in there. In 1955, we were operating night classes under the name of "the San Fernando Valley Branch of the Los Angeles State College of Applied Arts and Sciences" in the San Fernando High School, and Del Oviatt had been hired in the School of Education as Division Chairman at Cal State LA, and Del went out there, and he resigned his position of Division Chairman, and accepted assignment to start the classes for this new college that was gonna come out in the San Fernando Valley. So Del went over there and I know I went over there at that darn night school and helped

register kids over there to see what was going on, you know, and here Del said, "But there's staff at the—" (laughter; unintelligible) Yeah, where's everybody else, you know? And, uh, we were, it was just a, you know—I hired a, we used to hire Los Angeles Police Department off duty officers in plain clothes, and I made those guys work at the registration bar because, why hell, we were paying them, so and they wasn't paid by the shoot(?), so they would get up there and work the registration lines and they had more fun. (laughs)

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JB: So they were essentially there to guard the operation.

WB: Oh, yeah, because we were collecting cash, you see—

JB: But they wound up stamping forms.

WM: Yeah, but that's alright. Nobody knew who they were, you know? (laughs)

JB: Let me go back to the siting again, just to get things clear in mind, just because this is very murky from the records we have in the archives. Essentially, the decision at Northridge was made by you and by—

WM: No. We made—only thing I could do, the institution itself had little or nothing to say about property acquisition, but we could get somebody to propose sites to the Land—what did they call it in those days—well, let's call it a "Land Acquisition Board" of the Property Acquisition Section of the State Department of Finance and so they would receive proposals. Now, soon as they got the proposals in, and they met some of the criteria been drawn up by the Department of Education in Sacramento, they would present them to Roy Simpson, who was the Director of Education of the state of California at the time, and Simpson would then come down, or bring them down, to Howard McDonald, and of course he would call a staff meeting, and, of course what we had done is gone around the—we were initially in, I would go around and explain it to McDonald. Then, he'd say, "That looks pretty good. Let's get this guy to propose it to the acquisition boards." So the real estate guy would draw up all the papers and the title and all that sort of thing on the prospect that he would get a commission out of this, of course, and send it to the state and the Property Acquisition Board. They would look it over, if it met the criteria, it would go to Roy Simpson and Roy Simpson would bring it back down to McDonald, and it actually originated down here.

JB: I see.

WM: But they didn't really care, you know, as long as it was something that would fit the need.

JB: Was there resistance to siting the campus this far west?

WM: No. Not what I know of.

JB: They understood that there was gonna be population growth.

WM: There was certainly no opposition from us because it was one of the sites that we had proposed.

JB: Was this your prime site?

WM: No, I had the one on to the east of us here by the Veterans' Hospital. The reason that one was discounted, incidentally, was it was in the flight pattern of the landing and take-off pattern from the Van Nuys Airport. If you go over there and look at it, you'll see that it isn't right there, but it's close enough that the planes—the landing strip is here and the site is over here, but nevertheless, the planes came in like that in to land and they normally landed to the south because the prevailing wind was from the south, except from the Santa Anas, which is when they come from the opposite direction. But in those days, they didn't think of air conditioning. There was a rule against air conditioning in state buildings, and so consequentially!!!! they were anticipating windows open and all the noise from the planes coming in or taking off would be a handicap. So that site was not selected and this one to the west was.

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JB: One of the theories that arose—

WM: My prime site, you've gotta remember, that was only in the institution's view.

JB: Not the state's, necessarily.

WM: Not the state's, no.

JB: One of the theories that arose from the radical students twenty years ago when the campus erupted was that the reason the campus hadn't been sited over in the Hansen Dam area was because there was desire to put it in a white enclave and I thought—

WM: Oh, baloney. But I told the press that, too. I've already heard that there. (both talking at once) Reporters, well, reporters came to my office while I was here in 1969, '70, they brought that up. I said, "Well, that's a lot of hogwash. That had nothing to do with it." The fact is that this is in a flood plain over there. It's also closer to the earthquake fault in that area. They simply discounted how those two things alone, there was no relationship to that, to anything of that being in Pacoima or anything like that.

JB: Del Oviatt. We've talked of him briefly. Del and Howard McDonald divided the faculty that was in LA State. As I recall it figures there were about two hundred faculty in LA State at the time, that people began to choose which way they were coming in—

WM: That's right.

JB: About half of them—

WM: Not like I had my choice.

JB: About half of them wanted to come here and forty originally were chosen to come here. How did that happen? How did Del and Howard divide the faculty?

WM: Well, I don't think, uh, Howard McDonald was very, uh—he felt that if a person wanted to go to that campus, they should make application to do so and so there would be no animosity, you know, he would not preclude them from doing so. I was the senior, uh, person, obviously (laughs), from the standpoint of tenure and everything else at Cal State LA. And I had bought a house out here and I'd bought a lot and built a home out in Tarzana, and not necessarily with the view of coming out here, but that was before we had acquired a site. I just wanted to get out in the country. I love the country, is what I'm saying—(??)

JB: (laughs) It's funny how these kinds of things—

WM: Well, we had children, we had three children, and we wanted a place where they could play out in the yard and have our dog run loose and everything else, so the only place you

could go would be out here in the west San Fernando Valley. In fact, we looked at places even further out than that. But there was something about the site that was selected on east LA that I did not like. Personally, I felt that that was a bad choice. Number one, it was only ninety-some odd acres, it was clear there was gonna be twenty to thirty thousand students in that place, the land around it was all occupied by houses and everything—that would be difficult. It was the most gigantic cut-and-fill operation you could imagine. They put in a fill that was over one hundred feet in depth, plowing down mountains and putting it in to level that plan out and that's one of the causes of their problem with the rather serious damage that was done by the earthquake to those buildings. They were sitting on filled land, although it was compacted heavily. I've got pictures of the compaction process and everything else, because that was partially—Ace Lambert and I were the two people that were in charge of the development of the physical plant, and I took half of it and he took half of it, and we worked out the programs for those buildings with faculty consultation. But the problem was that this site was obviously a problem site.

[00:30:02]

JB: Uh-huh.

WM: And I could see, down the road, all kinds of problems. And when the, it looked like this site, these sites that I'd been assigned to go out and look for, that one of them was selected and I could see some real possibilities of having a campus with some elbow room, and buildings that you could stand back and look at without having them jammed in together and a lot of things of that sort. I said, "Well, I think, well," Howard said—uh, I liked working with him very much. He was very, very good to me. He even let me have my reins to do anything I thought was best. And, uh, from planning to budgetary to setting up auxiliary corporations and all that sort of thing. So we had an awfully good rapport, and always did have, right up until the time he died.

JB: Let's stop there and flip our tape. Start again.