

Edmund Peckham, Track 4

Tape 2, side B

JB: We're back on tape.

EP: Okay. But I was using that as a background to, uh, to get back to the 1970s when things weren't quite that way. Remember back again we are talking about the Vietnam and slightly post-Vietnam days, where there was a lot of either hostility or suspicion of the administration. Whether the administration happened to be in the White House or in, uh, Northridge. We had, uh, several student leaders, who were not at all inclined to work with the school at all. I don't need to go into the details of that, but this was a time we even had a suit brought against the university by the Associated Students. We'd had a budget passed by the preceding student administration that the successor refused to accept, and the AS just became absolutely impotent. I mean, the student government just stopped functioning. Student fees were essential to a lot of the programs that were incorporated in the Associated Student budget, and so the court ruled that the university could spend the monies in this year's administration for the same purposes of the preceding one, but that we would have to justify in writing every single expenditure, and so our vice president for administration and I, because it took two signatures, had to write, I don't know how often, our names on every single item spent out of the present AS budget which the present AS administration refused to authorize to be spent. And when the court case, uh, finally, uh, was determined, the AS government lost, and the monies that had been properly expended and properly authorized by the preceding government, even though the rule is that one government cannot bind the acts of the next, still if there are legitimate reasons such as contracts that have been reached, or grants and aids that have been promised, things of this nature, that should be honored. So anyway, we had some tilts in the early 1970s with two administrations particularly, those are the only two really that created major difficulties between us. I think you are talking about the time, there were two attempts made to, uh, recall an AS president. The first one failed, this is by a, uh, an AS president that, uh, really was trying to deride the old traditions and, uh, sponsored for the homecoming, uh, king campaign, a pig. You may remember this.

JB: I do.

(00:03:17)

EP: This was the AS president that did this and a lot of national publicity came. Not always very favorable. This was a man who also dynamited something that we really wanted very badly on the campus, which was a large donation which we would have been able to get I'm sure, uh, from Bob Hope, by trying to make the students and the faculty feel that Bob Hope was so tarnished by his willingness to go overseas and to be with the troops during the Vietnam era, that we should have nothing whatsoever to do with Bob Hope.

And he created such an atmosphere on the campus that Bob Hope and Mrs. Hope decided that they would terminate any idea of, uh, donation to our campus. At one stage we were going to have an honorary degree for Bob Hope, he's received dozens, and as such it was not going to be anything really out of line, but, uh, this student leader, uh, was influential enough so that did not come to pass. But it was not he that was recalled, it was one of the ones, uh, the year after this, uh, president, and it was a bitter election. We've had a number of elections that were truly bitter. Uh, in the early days when I came, we did not have slates allowed, and just as soon as we started to have slates, it led to a huge divisiveness in the campaign. So, there would be one group that would advocating one thing, and the other advocating something quite different. Uh, and anyway the elections have been marred often times by things that probably, uh, well, of course, by the standards of India, and some other states our elections have been, uh, simon-pure, but still, uh, votes been persuaded, and people have been standing too close to the polls, and sometimes the poll workers have not always been honorable. We tried at one stage to have all the poll workers, faculty wise, uh, we were promising them a certain amount of money, if they'd be willing to do it, and they were willing to do it, but it was hard for them to man or woman all the polls at all the places and all the hours that we wanted. So, we've had difficulties with student elections in the past and to a degree still are having difficulties, because there are always stories that the charge of this(?), but this particular election was a very bitter one, and the election was won by one of the slates but the, uh, the charge was made that the reason it came about was the slate that won, uh, controlled the election committee, and as such was able to, uh, set rules and set standards that operated in its interest, rather than the interest of equity for the student election and, uh, even though this, uh, this man was elected and was, uh, seen to be elected and was inaugurated—indeed, his vice-presidential candidate was one of my own personal advisees, who is still a very good friend of mine, who's now married and teaching in valley areas—still, the issue came up that this election was rigged, and so when the fall came, instead of having the summer get rid of the pressure, it just seemed to accentuate the pressure, and thus came the recall election and the slate lost. But it didn't lose because of dishonesty, or like some of the other schools inside our system by, uh, using AS monies for a hospital in North Vietnam or sending, uh, munitions to North Vietnam, as one of our sister schools did. Uh, it was avoidable. And, incidentally this person, and I'm sure that you are aware of this, is now a very honored person inside our state, and just been given a state appointed office. (pause)

JB: Its odd how these things turned out--

EP: It is, because I personally never lost my friendship for either side of this political battle. Uh, and when we now have, one of the traditions that I have created, John, at homecoming time, is the tradition of sort of return to the fold, in which we send out invitations to all the AS leaders from the beginning of our school, and these include some people who are now faculty now, uh, the chance to come and get together before the homecoming game for a dinner and some festivities and fellowship at my home, and we have each

year an increasing number of these AS leaders, and it's a tremendous sense of pleasure for me to see the past coming back to the present, and to revive my feelings about the history of this school.

JB: You have seen it in generations of student leadership, year after year after year.

EP: Uh-huh. And I have had the chance to work with them individually too, which very few people have.

JB: It always astonishes me how quickly collegiate generations turn over.

EP: Each year.

JB: We have a few minutes left, I don't want to over stay my time, but, uh, in the time that we do have remaining, perhaps we can talk just a bit about commencement. Uh, we alluded earlier to the honors convocation, and to speak personally, the honors convocation is a bit as I recall commencements once were. Uh, commencements not just on our campus, but elsewhere, have become something different over the intervening years. Uh, (pause) and I wonder what has happened, when it began, when the kind of, oh, I suppose the word uproariousness might be appropriate here, that we see common in commencement today, originated, in your perception anyway, whether you think perhaps this year's format will address the problems we've had with commencement.

EP: Mm-hm.

JB: When did it begin, what are the problems, will this year help settle them, do you think?

(00:10:04)

EP: Well, you've opened up, uh, another huge area, and I'm glad that we have some minutes to, uh, explore this, and I hope that we will get back to these student leaders, John, because I know that you are interested in the student tradition and transition from, as you say, generation to generation, because, and I would like to tell you a little bit about some of these individuals, and how I see they exemplifying the changes on our campus. But commencement, this is, uh, this is a real bane to me. When I first became Dean of Students, I found that I inherited the responsibility as chairing two committees. One was a commencement committee, which was a very large committee, uh, very unwieldy, and, uh, not a pleasant chore at all. And another was just about as bad, which was a commencement speakers committee, and somehow the art was to try to plan for a commencement, and to plan for a speaker whom we can afford, and whom the students would like, which was another big issue. These early commencements, and we had a tradition at this time, which we are breaking from the first time in 1991, which is the tradition—we have so few traditions on our campus—this is the only time that the entire school is united in celebrating a certain point. I've tried to create the honors

convocation in a way comparable to this. Uh, but these commencements that we've had, uh, each one was a different one. Now, in the early days when, uh, we were having the difficulties with, uh, overseas people, Vietnam for example, uh, there was a big issue as to who should be the speaker, uh, where the microphone should be, because we were afraid that activists would come and take over the microphones and disrupt the program. We hid the speakers for several years behind plants and flowers. I know these things sound silly. We used to have, uh, student speakers, until it reached the point this was, uh, president of the senior class because we had class presidents in those days, until one year when the senior class president, who was the first elected senior class president that we had who was a Black woman, whose sister was a student of mine, at University of the Pacific at Raymond, incidentally, a student I came to know very well here, uh, just blasted the school as well as the country for its foreign policy, just to in four letter terms (slight laugh) and that was the last year that we had a student speaker. But, uh, over the years the commencements became a little more peaceful, but still united, and for a number of years, very happily, I made the coup of giving the commencement responsibility over to the academic area, and this was done by David Benson and Jim Maness of our administrative staff for a number of years. Dorena Knepper in the president's office handled commencement for one or two years, until, eventually, unhappily, the responsibility came back to me, I think about four or five years ago, and, by then, the school was considerably bigger. We were only 14,700 when I came. We are now well over twice that. The commencement exercises are now seen as something to be looked for, instead of, uh, dragging students there. Students now flock to commencements with their families and friends, and so we've had a problem about trying to find a proper venue for commencement. We had a number of places on the campus which we have tried, as you know. The Oviatt library lawn, and this year, uh, using the University Club. We've tried the area north of the gym. We've tried the area of the, uh, north campus stadium. We had the tremendous year, which was I think one of the highlights for our school, but still filled with a lot of rancor, when we held the commencement off campus in the Hollywood Bowl, which was a beautiful ceremony once people got there. We created the largest traffic jam, the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] says, in the history of the city.

JB: Is that true?

EP: Yeah. Oh, we did. We had two whole freeways absolutely blocked. Two freeways. Uh—

JB: Our traffic—

EP: Our traffic, yes, people trying to get to our commencement, and they just didn't believe us when we said leave your car at home and take our shuttles, which we'd planned. This was, uh, three years ago.

(00:15:03)

JB: We had adequate shuttles to handle them? (EP agrees) I recall.

EP: We did! We had a system which we feel would have handled the problem (both talking at the same time) but at the same time would end. I must say that I never had a warmer feeling—

UW: Excuse me, Dean Peckham, I hate to interrupt you, but you need to be at Century City at 6:15.

EP: At what time? At 6:15?

UW: Yes.

EP: Thanks, Grace(??).

JB: I can pause this at any point that you like and—

EP: Yeah, let me just finish up this story about the commencements, though. Uh, the thrill of being on the stage of the Hollywood Bowl, and seeing out in front of me, an absolutely filled crowd. It was, uh, it was a very indescribable moment, and it was a very successful commencement for the people who were there, but clearly that was not adequate, nor was our experience last year, where we had seats for twenty thousand, including a lot of bleachers, and we wound up with twenty-seven thousand people, milling around, making it almost impossible for the program to take place. So, we had a survey last a, uh, summer of all the students who had been eligible for graduation whether they attended or not, and I wanted to show the president because it was the president's wish that we have a unified program, that no longer can it be done, that the students and the faculty were now largely in the feeling that we had to do something different. And so the president was willing to accept the results of the survey. I must say I think that was a very noble attitude in his part because he was very, very strongly in favor of, uh, a unified commencement. And so, we had a broad-based commencement committee this year, which decided whether or not we have two ceremonies, four ceremonies, eight ceremonies. We decided eventually one per school. Where they will be, when they will be, one day, two days, over the commence—over the Memorial weekend or whenever it will be, trying to not antagonize religious groups by having them on a Saturday or a Sunday, and so we wound up with this very strange system with three next Friday, three the Tuesday after that and final two, the biggest schools on Wednesday. I hope it's going to work, uh, we gave a lot of time and planning to this. We delegated a lot to each of these schools, but we have a central format, a central script, central processional, the president, and he is going to give out, uh, well he is going to shake the hands of all the graduates in all the schools. Uh, I'm going to be at all eight (slight laugh) it's going to be fun. I know there is going to be glitches in all of the eight, but at same time I think this is a good move. We are now a big university, and I think that there is no reason we can contain this single ceremony any longer. But we'll see how the students and faculty like

it. One last thing is, and I know we have to quit now, but the publicity this year, instead of being largely negative the way it has in the past—articles in the Sundial applauding us for the change and larger numbers of, uh, faculty in robes at the honors convocation, which means they took advantage of the fact they can have the same cost robe for the honors convocation and utilize it for commencement. I think we will have many more faculty than ever before. I think when we total up these eight schools, we will have more than twenty-seven thousand. I'm quite sure we will. We've got receptions and luncheons, and there is a whole polyglot arrangement of social activities combining these eight events, but we'll know in a week how successful it is.

JB: Perhaps after that, we can get together and, uh, (unintelligible).

EP: Yeah, let's do that John.

JB: For now, let's go off tape.

[END OF TRACK 4]