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C. L. Sonnichsen

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: C. L. Sonnichsen
INTERVIEWER: _____
PROJECT: Speech
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 1970
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

(UTEP Professor, 1931-1973, and author of numerous books on the American West)

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Speech entitled "The Folklore of Scholarship--Some Sacred Cows of the Academic World", given for the University Forum Program.

8 pages

Dr. Charles L. Sonnichsen
H. Y. Benedict Professor in English
1970

The Folklore of Scholarship

Some Sacred Cows of the Academic World

Good afternoon. My name is Leonard Bales. On behalf of the University Forum's Committee, I welcome you to another program of the fall semester Forum Series.

Today, we are privileged to have with us Dr. Charles L. Sonnichsen, H. Y. Benedict Professor in English. Dr. Sonnichsen received his doctorate from Harvard University. At the time Dr. Sonnichsen completed his studies at Harvard, he was a specialist in English Literature of the 17th and 18th centuries. After arriving at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), Dr. Sonnichsen gradually acquired an interest in Southwest literature and has become a well-known scholar on the American West. Because of Dr. Sonnichsen's personal efforts, Southwestern literature has become a respectable field of study. Our speaker is a busy person; he is a man of many accomplishments. While Chairman of the English Department at UTEP from 1933 to 1960, Dr. Sonnichsen steadily improved the department's academic quality. Similarly, as Dean of the Graduate Division, from 1960 to 1967, he upgraded the academic standards for graduate study. Dr. Sonnichsen has received many honors. He is listed in various biographical books, such as Who's Who in America, and Who's Who in the South and Southwest. He has held offices and memberships in various organizations. But despite the man's honest time, Dr. Sonnichsen has done a lot of research and writing. He has written twelve books and various articles. His books have appeared

several times on lists of best volumes about the West. Since Dr. Sonnichsen prefers to study local sources for information about the West, he considers himself a grass-roots historian. His latest book, El Paso--Four Centuries at the Pass of the North, is an example of Dr. Sonnichsen's method of study. Dr. Sonnichsen's topic is "The Folklore of Scholarship--Some Sacred Cows of the Academic World." We can learn and profit from Dr. Sonnichsen's experience. It is with the greatest pleasure that I now introduce to all of you our most distinguished speaker, Dr. Charles L. Sonnichsen.

Thank you very much, Leonard. It could have been worse. As I think you all have sensed, we're having a little change of pace today. The subtitle of my speech was introduced, more or less, at Leonard Bales' request, because he thought unless we had something controversial up here he wasn't going to get anybody to come in. I think he doesn't feel that an occasion of this kind is a success unless there are a few black eyes and bloody noses. So I would like to warn you that these sacred cows are not very sacred and not very bona fide. After all these years at this institution, I do have some idea about scholars and scholarship. I've seen a lot of them and a lot of it, and I would like to comment a little; and if there's time I'd like to see whether you agree with me or whether you'd like to add a few sacred cows of your own. Mr. Hal Harding on the fourth row, I know, is writing down some notes about some of his sacred cows.

I ought to say, I think, that I am not anti-scholar; some of my best friends are scholars. I do not think I would want my daughter to marry one, and I know that I would not want to be cast ashore on a desert island with a scholar. But I've seen so many changes in the definitions and requirements and so on that I think I'd like to comment on them a little bit first. When

I was your age, a scholar was a man who read books and taught children; he sometimes edited a textbook or two; he loved the classics; he liked words; he didn't like to be a salesman and that's probably why he was a scholar. A lot of us here don't like to be salesmen, and that's why we're here. He wore old-fashioned clothes, and people thought he was a little nuts, but they loved him. He was known as a gentleman, and a scholar emphasizes on being a gentleman. I've known a few of them. I remember old Dean Griggs who was a figurehead around Harvard for a long time. He always looked as if he just came in from the hay fields. I remember there was one story about him that he was trimming his trees one day. He got out in his orchard and trimmed his trees. He looked so natural there that the woman next door said, "My good man, when you get through trimming those trees will you come and trim mine?"--and he did. I used to know Professor Waring at the University of Texas. He was a gentleman and a scholar. He was the one who went to a recital by Carl Sandburg--he and his wife--and midway through the performance, Carl Sandburg got started on "The Ballad of Sam Hall." You know, "My name is Sam Hall, Sam Hall, Sam Hall, ..." and it goes on to where he says "... and I hate you one and all, Goddamn your eyes." Dr. Waring and Mrs. Waring got up and left the auditorium. He was a gentleman and a scholar.

I used to know a little bit of Dr. Calloway who was at the University of Texas many years ago. He was the world's authority on the Anglo-Saxon infinitives. Mr. J. Frank Dobey didn't approve of him at all. When Dr. Calloway died, somebody said to J. Frank Dobey, "Mr. Dobey, today is Dr. Calloway's funeral, are you going to attend?" Mr. Dobey said, "No, but I approve." So there is your gentleman and scholar.

We have the new breed now. They scare me a little. They're young and they're aggressive and they're so different from what I remember that I feel a little uneasy with them. If you want me to make a definition for you I can give you the short definition, that is: A scholar is a professor who can get a grant. I have a longer definition which I made up myself: A scholar is a specialist who publishes articles that nobody wants to read about, teaches subjects that nobody is curious about, and wants to teach his speciality (no more than six hours a week) to four graduate students for \$20,000 for nine months with funds for research and travel. This may be the definition of a Benedict professor, I'm not quite sure. Well, there are other definitions. I don't have too much time for definitions, but have you heard that a scholar is a person who knows more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing. I like better one that I heard that says a scholar is a man who takes one unimportant fact from one inaccessible place and puts it in another. That fits some of my friends.

Well, contrary to what you may be thinking, these people are human. They share our joys and sorrows; they get up in the morning and eat breakfast just like other people; they go home at night and are glad to get off from work just like you and me; and they are people who are run by their folklore just the same as you and I are. So I have to define folklore now, and then we can get on with what we're doing. The dictionary definition of folklore is that it is traditional customs, beliefs, tales, or sayings, especially those of a superstitious or legendary nature (that's where the professors come in) preserved unreflectively among a people. The important word is unreflectively. Anything you do because you

do it or anything you think because you think it--that's your folklore. In other words, all of us have a lot of things going on in our lives that we don't consider; we just go ahead and do them. Isn't that right? The people who talk about these things are full of illustrations and if I had time I could go on for a couple of hours doing these things.

We like to talk about the buttons on our sleeves. You know everybody's got buttons on his sleeve; if he has a sleeve, it has buttons on it. You go down to a tailor and tell him, "These sleeves don't do me any good, I mean, these buttons don't do me any good. Let's not have them on my next suit," and do you suppose he would leave those buttons off? He'd rather die than leave those buttons off. Of course, it's the old story about how they were put on there by Frederic the Great, you know, because he didn't want his bodyguards to wipe their noses on their sleeves, which must be folklore because how could you ever get your nose around to where that button is? I think they were put there because once gentlemen rolled their sleeves back to show their lace cuffs, then they could button them there. But this kind of thing takes hold on us, and it's preserved unreflectively if anything is at all.

Take our terms of insult. Why, in Texas, do we have to fight a man who says that we are related to a member of the canine family of the female gender? I don't know why. I've got two little dogs at home who are S.O.B.'s, or D.O.B.'s. They're both female, and we love them dearly. In México, if someone calls you a goat you have to stab him. In France if you call a man a pig, he jumps up and down and waves his hands at you.

This is all folklore. It's all something that we agree on, but there is no particular reason for it. Even things, like for instance, which are

so important in our discussions now like obscenities. Why is it that one word for you know what is bad and another word is all right? Well, it's folklore. That's all there is to it. And yet, did you ever know of anything in your life that people would lose their tempers over quite as quick as these matters which are not open to reason at all? No. The very things that are inaccessible to your reason, that are given to you, they're handed to you, they're in your subconscious, they don't have a thing to do with what you choose, they are done to you. Those are the things that you just can't stand. That's what the generation gap is all about. You have your folklore, your parents have their folklore--you can't budge them, they can't budge you. You walk out of the house and don't come back until you get hungry. Sad situation. But the point is, all of this sort of thing you can't do anything about. This is really what I want to talk to you about. I'll get at it in a roundabout way, but I'll get back to it pretty soon. Don't forget that the social scientists are dealing with it all the time. They don't call it folklore--that would be too simple for them; they have to have their special language, which they do. It makes them seem more impressive, and they get their salaries raised better that way. But when they talk about group standards, unconscious controls (am I hurting anybody's feelings?) and traditional patterns of conduct, they're not talking about anything in the world but good old folklore. So bringing this down to scholars now and to scholarship, what presumptions do scholars make that they believe just because they believe them? Well, these things change all the time. The patterns are varying always, but there is always something that these people accept without thinking about it and they would rather fight than switch their folklore. I think

that's where this "rather fight than switch" phrase came from, probably talking about folklore in the first place.

When I began teaching, we had a kind of passive agreement that teachers did not talk about religion, sex, or politics. As I say, things change. In this forum, I've noticed that you are practically obsessed with politics, and I've wondered earnestly why you leave out the other two. Somehow it was much more interesting, at least to me. But this is folklore and you respond, you register, but you don't think about this; it's just the way you are. When I was doing these things--a little bit older than you are--we thought we ought to put on a coat, we thought we ought to stand up in front of our classes, and that we ought to try to give them some information. We dressed up, stood up, spoke up, and shut up--at least some of us shut up. I see professors now who have a cup of coffee in their hands and are heading for the classroom. As soon as they get in there, they take off their shoes, sit on the table, and then they start scattering cigarette butts on the floor. I've been going into one classroom where the cigarette butts are so thick that if this were in the days of the Forty-niners, the men could lie behind a barricade of cigarette butts and stand off the Indians. You positively could. Well, the point is, we know in our minds that these things don't matter--like the length of a man's hair, the length of a girl's skirt, or whether you have sideburns or not--in the eyes of history. But really, do they count in ~~the~~ the eyes of the people who are responding to their own folklore? How about that? You probably feel that the more cigarette butts on the floor of a classroom, the better. Do you? I can't help it, I just don't like to wade.

There are three areas which among scholar's folklore has replaced reason. This is the speech now. The first one is in the area of responsibility and I think you would agree that there is no such thing as complete freedom. Don't you think all freedom is relative?