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Interview no. 615

W.H Timmons

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: W.H. Timmons

INTERVIEWER: Vicki L. Ruiz

PROJECT: History of U.T. El Paso

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 19, 1983

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Professor Emeritus of History, U.T. El Paso

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How he came to U.T. El Paso in 1949; University personalities, social life, ethnic makeup, teaching and research at U.T. El Paso.

Length of Interview: 45 minutes Length of Transcript: 14 pages

W. H. TIMMONS

Interviewed by Vicki L. Ruiz
October 19, 1983

R: Now tell me when did you first arrive at UTEP?

T: Oh, Vicki, I came in 1949. This is after I completed my degree, a Ph.D. degree in Latin American history at the University of Texas, wrapping up a doctorate on a G.I. Bill after World War II. I had a history professor in college, and I was, of course, like so many other kids, the impressionable undecided type, but the professor turned me on. So it was history from that point on, with a B.A. from Park College and M.A. from the University of Chicago where I had gotten interested in Latin American history but decided to work up a background in European history and then at the same time look over the Latin American program at Chicago. Well, I got the M.A. in European history at Chicago, but the Latin American program wasn't everything that I wanted. So I switched to the University of Texas with that fine library and good faculty and started the doctorate there, just before Pearl Harbor. Well, of course, my doctorate was interrupted by World War II but then I went back on the agenda of the Ph.D. in 1949.

R: What branch of service did you serve in?

T: I served in the U.S. Navy--in the Pacific for the most part. Jobs were hard to get then in history, as they are now. And this thing was about the only opening that I came across. But it was Dr. Waller, the chairman of the department here, who got in contact with me and went ahead and hired me. My wife and I decided...we'll try this school for a year. It wasn't very well known. It had just become Texas Western College after having been the College of Mines for a number of years. We'll try this for a year and in the meantime look around for something decent. But the place took hold. There were a lot of things about the department that I liked. Dr. Waller was just the epitome of a gentleman and a scholar. The History Department was a fairly strong department at that time, compared with some of the other departments. I

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had majored in Latin America history, and I saw a possibility [that's right] for teaching Latin American history and Mexican history right here on this border. I didn't move into the Latin American field, or even Mexico, for quite a while because back in those days it was the department of History, Government and Sociology. So for quite a while I taught, besides the American survey, a survey course in European history, government courses, but eventually I worked into U.S. diplomatic history and then in Mexico and South America, et cetera. But we liked El Paso and we liked the college and I like to think that it would've been nice, obviously, to have a big quality library, big quality faculty-- Harvard, California, Stanford, whatever--but I decided that there would be a satisfaction in contributing to a school of this size, that obviously was gonna grow. I just felt that there would be a satisfaction there in doing my little thing for a school that was on the go, that was obviously developing. Well, Texas Western was a small little school at that time, 2,000 students, a glorified high school. There was a small but congenial faculty, but the sororities ran the school. They won all of the school elections, they were the cheerleaders, they did homecoming, they did it all. And everybody went home at noon. The chairman of the History Department and the president of the school played golf two or three afternoons a week, and there wouldn't be an automobile anywhere on campus after twelve o'clock. It was kind of a country club. I consider myself a member of what I call the middle generation of faculty. That was because as the school came more and more over into the academic, the Liberal Arts, away from the engineering and mining, a number of Ph.D.'s were hired in the late '30's to head up the departments. And some very, very able, dependable people were hired, and I'll never forget them: Tony Berkman, Puckett (he was Dean of the Arts

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and Sciences for a while), Gene Thomas in Engineering, Sonnichsen in English. People of that type were hired, and you obviously could see that they were trying to build a foundation there of academic quality. Now I came in some years later. I came in the late '40's along with Joe Leach, Francis Fugate, Eidbo, ... those names come to mind. They were trying to hire Ph.D.'s, and they very definitely were trying to improve academic quality. Well then, that's right, the next generation or the generation of the '60's and '70's is where you got a tremendous influx, that's right, of faculty. So I'm that middle generation that can see both back and forward.

R: What do you think has been the quality, the difference, how students have changed over the years both socially, intellectually?

T: Well, I'm not so sure whether they've changed a great deal. I think we have a better institution now academically than the one that I came to. To be sure, the student body was smaller, the faculty and the classes were smaller, and there was a closer relationship with students, very definitely a much closer relationship then. But academically, intellectually, I think students are about the same and have been just pretty much the same all along. I went back after my retirement and taught a freshman course, and I didn't think that they'd improved that much. Maybe, by virtue of T.V., I think they're perhaps somewhat better informed generally about the world, about the world they live in, but I can't see any great amount of differences from their academic performance now as opposed to twenty, thirty years ago.

R: What about socially?

T: I think that by virtue that the school was smaller and the role played by the sororities, there was a much more active social life back in the old

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days then there is now. The students were proud of what they had, of their student body, and they played an active role in institutional affairs.

I can remember chaperoning the dances; you knew all the students and they knew you. And somehow they'd manage to find funds to bring in big name bands.

R: Oh, like who did they bring in?

T: Oh, it was marvelous! Well Tony Berkman was a kind of a Dean of Men or Dean of Students back in those days, and he was a disciplinarian from way back. He was at all the dances, all the social functions, and there were plenty of them. Well, if he was there at the dances and usually he was, your job as chaperone, well, you had it made! You could go dance, because he did all the work. (Laughter) He'd take down names, he'd round up all the drunks.

R: Did they separate you if you were dancing too close? I mean what were the different codes? Could you have public displays of affection or was that frowned upon?

T: Oh, sure there'd be some, but the late '40's and even the early '50's you still have plenty left over from that great jazz age of the late '30's and '40's the big name bands, and, that's right, the beautiful ballads. So, yeah, socially the students were very active. They must've spent a lot more time on social activities than they did on the books! And oh boy, those sororities watched their gals! Boy! I can remember the gal in charge of Zeta Tau Alpha, that's right, when I flunked one of her gals. Boy, she was on me like... But it was good though, because they did teach girls the social graces, and they did watch over their studies too.

R: What was the ethnic makeup of Texas Western at that time.

T: It was almost entirely Anglo, and that's a major change that's taken place. As I say, the sorority didn't involve any Hispanics back in those days.

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When one would try to get in, even with wonderful qualifications from families of long, of distinguished standing,...no way, no way.

R: So even if they were wealthy and from Sunset Heights?

T: Possible. But I can remember Hispanics being turned down in the 50's. They came from fine families that had been here in El Paso for a long time. So we've come quite a distance on that. And now the school is what, about 45% Hispanic isn't it? Hispanic student body? And that's in my mind, as it should be. El Paso is 60% Hispanic, and we're here on the border, and we're here to serve the whole, the entire, international community.

R: Did anyone ever have a schoolgirl crush on you and how did you handle it?

T: Oh, well, probably, in some cases, maybe. I wasn't even aware of it. I like to think that there were times and certain..., where if I'd given some encouragement things would've developed. I was pretty careful about it.

R: You were pretty careful.

T: That's right. We were told to keep things here on official, professional basis. (Laughter)

R: And Laura was with you...

T: Yeah, right!

R: What are some of your more memorable events?

T: Here's one. Now girl, I want you to go Oh-h-h-h and Ah-h-h-h!!

R: O-O-O-O-Oh.

T: Oh-h-h-h...that's right! Well, this is obviously one that comes to mind... the 1963 annual Flowsheet. It was dedicated [to me.]

R: You don't look different.

T: Oh, well, thank you. [I] don't look any older then? (Laughter)

R: No.

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T: Oh, that was quite an honor and I deeply appreciated it. Another one that comes to mind--in 1977 I won the AMOCO teaching award. That recognition is wonderful, and I was proud of that one. Another thing, a highlight that comes to my mind was that we had one of the first Peace Corps projects anywhere in the country in 1961. You remember how John F. Kennedy turned professors and students on. But we had one of the first projects here that summer of '61, and it was a project to train surveyors and engineers who were gonna go to Tanganyika and build roads. So we had about 40 of the Peace Corpsmen, men in the Peace Corps. And, of course, the geologists here at our school were heavily involved. A fellow named Clyde Kelsey was the head of the Psychology Department for a number of years. Clyde Kelsey was director of the whole project and I was Associate Director. But they were a fun bunch, I mean sharp. And they were so dedicated, and they wanted so much to do a job for the country. There was a spirit that I don't think I've ever seen before or since. It's a little bit difficult to explain, that's right,--of the dedication on the part of these people who wanted to do a job. Well, to get to the point, at the end of the project, President Joseph Ray and Kelsey were invited to the White House for a reception, and all the Peace Corps members were invited too, the whole bunch. Well Kelsey couldn't go!

R: O-o-o-oh. (Laughter)

T: La-di-da. No, he had to oversee a project he had going in Columbia, in South America. So President Joe Ray and I went to the White House, that's right,...went to the reception. And this is the hand that shook the hand of J.F.K.

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R: Oh, what did you think of the whole reception? What did you think of him? Was he as charismatic in person as he was on T.V.?

T: Yes, right. I remember he came out of his office, of course, with his entourage, and we had a little get-together in the Rose Garden at the White House. And he made a little speech. He used some of the same language that he used in his inaugural. And then the reception was held at Sally Bowles' house. She was the daughter of Chester Bowles, who was quite a Kennedy supporter, as was Sally. So we had a wonderful time. That was obviously a highlight. I'm gonna mention one more that I'll never forget. I taught that course on México for a number of years, but more and more, obviously, we began to get students from Juarez. I wound up teaching the History of México to the students from Juarez. And it made an impression on them. Here was a "maldito gringo" teaching these Mexican students about the history of their country. It made an impression upon me, and I just tried that much harder. I tried to get the story through to them. They were wonderful to work with. But obviously their knowledge just didn't amount to very much of anything. Well, they'd heard of Miguel Hidalgo and Benito Juárez but that's about the extent of it. So I hope they learned a lot.

R: What sort of campus tradition do you remember? Campus lore? Legends?

T: Ok, anecdotes, stories, alright I'm glad you asked that. One thing that comes to mind is that when I came to this campus there was a formidable faculty body known as the Curriculum and Standards Committee. And it just made everybody tremble! (Laughter) And it was chaired by Dean Puckett, and Dean Puckett is "a one and only." Well, after I'd been here a while, I noticed that a student could stay in good standing if he made six hours of C, and that's it. He could make three F's, and if he made the two C's,

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That's right, he's still in good standing. Well that bothered me a little, and so here we go, I'm gonna be a crusader! So I begin to write a few letters, and to make a long story short, I wound up in front of the Curriculum and Standards Committee. This is the Deans; this is some of the more formidable department heads; and I made my pitch. I had to justify my position. It wasn't easy. They didn't make me feel very comfortable, just to put it briefly. They don't put you at your ease. So we went round and round there for quite a while, and the result of the whole thing: yes, I forced them to change the scholastic requirements from "two C's and three F's" to "two C's, one D and two F's." (Laughter) The battle was won! Well, along pretty much the same line, this is Puckett once again, who was Dean of Arts and Sciences. Puckett's middle name was the Catalogue--right to the letter, always right to the letter. So I was teaching an advanced course and I had this very fine student, straight A in college so far, but I think the requirements for an advanced course back in those days was junior standing plus six hours of History and six hours of other social science, I believe. Ok. This particular student, and she was a little older than most and very, very conscientious and hard working--the student had the requirements except she was short of junior standing. I wasn't gonna let that stand in the way because she could do the work. I wanted her in the course. Ok, this comes up before Puckett, and I explained my position: I was absolutely certain that she was just the top, an excellent student, just top notch, and I had no doubt in my mind that she would have no problems in handling the course. Puckett finally looks up, looks at me straight in the eye, and he says, "I agree with everything you say but the answer is no." (Laughter) So those are the things obviously that you don't ever forget. And everybody must've had a similar experience. I'm sure they did because that was Puckett, and he was doing his job, and he was administering the

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Catalogue right to the letter. And you sure had respect for him. We can spend just a few minutes here and I'll talk about when I was chairman.

R: OK.

T: From problems, departmental problems, that developed after Waller retired and I won't bother about going into all of that... But several of us could see these problems developing, and that's right, we just didn't like the way things were going. When Joe Ray had taken over the presidency in 1961, in time a number of us in the department went straight to the top and pointed out, "Look, there are problems over there and something's got to be done." The result was there was a change in administration, and I was named chairman. And I knew exactly what the problems were, as did a number of my colleagues. So we went to work.

R: Do you care to divulge the nature of these problems or do you want me to turn off the tape?

T: Most of it was a matter of hiring decisions without any consultation whatsoever. But that was the gist, that was the core of the problem--doing an awful lot of things, that's right, independently, without even an attempt to consult with even any of the senior professors. So I became chairman in '62 of the Department of History, Government and Sociology, and right away, they took two-thirds of it away. (Laughter) And nobody was happier about that than I was. No, Government was set up as Political Science on its own; Sociology the same thing, I welcomed the thing because obviously I could focus on History, and we had some hiring to do. First, let me say this: Joe Ray and I got along pretty well. He was a little difficult to figure out at times. He was a diamond in a rough, but he knew this school, and he knew how to go about making it a better school. Joe Ray did more for this place than anybody else I can think of--that I served with or under. And he was around long enough to get a few things done. He was around for the better

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part of about eight years. (And before that time they'd be turning over just like ministers at University Presbyterian Church before Gordon came.)

(Laughter) Joe Ray had a lot of neat ideas, I called them gimmicks, little tricks that he had learned along the line. The first thing he did was that he took my wife and me to San Marcos, down in central Texas, where he was going to participate in a little conference down there. But the reason for taking me primarily was for me,....and I later found this out...., was for me to let him know the situation within the department. He wanted to be supplied with information in details on the people that I thought had to go. So it was a clever device I didn't realize it at first, but I began to see it was an opportunity and I started talking away. There was no system of tenure whatsoever, so obviously we didn't have the problems that you would have now if you decided that somebody had to go. Now the tenure system did come in shortly after that time, but we were able to clean house pretty well, /that's right/, and get this thing straightened out with qualified professors. (We had some, we had put on some that were not that qualified.) A second thing that comes to mind is that Joe Ray had a little system of bringing in professional visitors, to look a department over and make recommendations as to good points and bad points. So we brought in a professional, a historian from the University of Nebraska that both Joe Ray and I knew, and he came in and he did a good job and he made his recommendations. But the whole point, what Joe Ray wanted the chairman to do--in time this came to me, is that in off moments you get with the visitor and tell 'em. "Hey, we need this and we've got to get rid of him." And then when a visitor draws up his report, it becomes official and I'm just a neutral party, of course. La-di-da! So I thought that was a clever, very, very clever way of handling the department. And a number of departments would bring in visitors, and of

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course I'm sure all the chairmen played exactly that role, of letting the visitor know what was going on.

[PAUSE]

And he just singled out special departments and the History Department. We had more Ph.D.'s than most of the others. So Joe Ray would single out the better departments, and he had set up a policy of bringing in a "Superprof." Presumably we'll say a man with distinguished publication record, about to retire or perhaps already retired, but still active. Bring in a name, in other words, a distinguished name in the field, and set him up with a six-hour course load, that's right, and as Joe Ray said, "Bring him in and let him walk among you." (Laughter) I thought that was a descriptive phrase! So we snatched on to Robert Riegel who had a very distinguished career. We brought him in about '65. Riegel had just retired from Dartmouth, was still vigorous, and still active, and still publishing. He was just a wonderful fellow. Bob Riegel was the nucleus that this department needed and he knew how to give a good party, as well as teach a good course, and I think we had more togetherness in the History Department when Bob Riegel was here. He was just one of those things you could attach to. We had more togetherness than we had before or that we've had in a long time. So that was simply another little policy. And those were great days. Well then, after about three years, I simply decided, "Well, we've cleaned up most of the problems, and somebody else can do this thing, I've got other things to do." So from that time it's been a rotational arrangement, which I think is [good], and the department has enough senior professors. I think it's worked reasonably well, and that is that one guy doesn't get bogged down with the paper for the rest of his life. So we set that up.

R: What was your most disappointing experience?

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T: Oh, I've never had too many disappointments. I can remember back in the 50's though, when money was so tight, and if you got two hundred dollars increase! Boy! But those were awfully hard days, and there were a lot of people my age, getting two hundred dollars a year raise, and families are coming along, and the oldest one is gonna be hittin' college... So these were things of rather deep concern. But Joe Ray did a good job, that's right, in improving salaries--quite a good job. Let's see, what other disappointments? (Pause) I can't recall anything, or any great setbacks. Ok, I've had a few publications that have been turned down. That comes to mind, but I can't think of anything major. This institution has been very good to me. Now I'm gonna spend just a few minutes and tell you what I think is my major contribution to this institution.

R: OK.

T: I've served on a number of committees and I always thought I made a somewhat significant contribution as a member of the Building and Planning Committee. It was always made up of the deans and very, very dedicated, qualified people like Oscar McMahan, who chaired the thing. But we were responsible for all the structures, for maintaining the architectural style for whatever building was needed. Whatever the building needs were at any given time, was our responsibility. But my major contribution was the microfilm program in the library. We had a committee of community people called Mission '73 to look over the institution to make recommendations. And quite naturally as almost any president and many committees have said, "Take advantage of your geographical location." And every president said, "Yes this is the basic", but never has very much been done. I believe that more is being done now than any time in the past, from what I can tell. But at any rate, I was impressed by the language in Mission '73. They put out a little booklet. "Do those

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things to exploit your geographical location, your situation here on the border." I took this to heart. So I went to Joe Ray and I told him that I would put up a thousand dollars, if he would come up with four thousand dollars--put four thousand dollars with my one--to get a program started in which we would start microfilming some of the basic printed documentary collections at UT Austin, in that marvelous Latin American library that Nettie Lee Benson has down there in Austin. We had focused first on printed materials, particularly the source materials. That's right, he bought it. He went along with it, my proposal. And we went to work. And after two years, that's right, we had five thousand dollars' worth of microfilm of printed source materials from the Latin American collection in Austin. Well, I said to Joe Ray, "I just consider this Phase One. Let's move it forward. I'll put up another thousand, and you put up whatever you can to go along with my one, and we'll start moving into archival materials, manuscripts. And since this region right to the south of us obviously is a part of our history, we'll start work in Chihuahua." And we already had the records of the ayuntamiento of Ciudad Juarez. That had already been done. That was the beginning. We picked up right there; and we bought the Parral; we did one in Janos; we did a major job in Chihuahua City, 700 reels. We did the Periodico Oficial of Chihuahua, Chihuahua's leading newspaper. And we did that pretty well, working with Francisco Almaraz, Chihuahua's distinguished historian. Everything we microfilmed, we left a copy in Mexico--everything, everything--Mexico always got a copy of everything we did. Then we started working in Durango, and that's still going on. So as it turned out, for my two thousand dollars, I guess I must've gotten ten, fifteen thousand dollars worth of [microfilmed materials]. I'm somewhat disappointed it hasn't been worked locally as I think it should've been. But it has brought

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in a lot of scholars. [Scholars] around the country know about it, and it's brought them here to El Paso. So I have to say I consider that to be my major contribution. This school has been very good to me. The decision to retire in 1978 is one that I shall never regret, simply because it's a brand new life for me. I'm doing things that I had to put off through the years. You're born again.

R: Well, as I've always said, if you wanna share your articles, write them over to me and put my name on them for my merit evaluation. (Laughter)

T: Yeah, it's a wonderful life. You can travel. You can do things you want to do when you want to do them. You can get some writing done. You can help with the historical organizations here locally. This school's been very good to me. This city's been very good to me. And I'm glad to have been a part of it. Thank you very much.

R: Thank you.

[Time lapse.]

T: I remember, I think I must've been teaching a course in European History and we were on the background of World War I, and I was dealing with that diplomatic crisis, the July crisis of 1914. I was going along--oh, I was eloquent!--that's right, building tension, building tension, building tension all the time. And just then something broke the sound barrier, and the class just about gave a bark. (Laughter) I think I had said that an explosion could take place at any time, and then of course, yeah, we got this thing up in the sky! And so, I'm left speechless! The only thing I can say is, "Well back in my graduate school days a professor told me that you almost always have to have a sense of the dramatic," so here, this is it!

R: Oh, that's great, that's great.

Mr. and Mrs. Texas live in El Paso

Where do Mr. and Mrs. Texas live? Probably anywhere in the state they choose.

Happily, they chose El Paso 37 years ago. Laura and Wilbur H. "Bill" Timmons received the title — a joint honor — at the recent annual meeting in Austin of the Texas State Historical Association.

To celebrate the Sesquicentennial, members of the usually staid and scholarly 90-year-old association concluded their four-day get together with something unusual: a country-Western dance in the Austin Marriott Hotel, the "Happy Birthday, Texas" party.

The highlight of the dance was the surprise announcement that some couple there would receive the prestigious and unique titles, a first in the association's history.

There was a drum roll, outgoing association President Archie McDonald called out the El Pasoans' names, and the band struck up "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

A bouquet of 150 yellow silk roses was presented to the Timmons, and then they took a solo turn around the dance floor.

"It couldn't have been anyone but the Timmonses," McDonald said from his office in the history department at Stephen F. Austin State College in Nacogdoches, Texas.

"He's such a cheerful and happy person, and a loyal sup-



— Times photo by Rudy Gutierrez

Mr. and Mrs. Texas, Bill and Laura Timmons



good company

by Mary Margaret Davis

porter of the association. Of course, he and I have a running argument about which part of the state is the oldest, El Paso or Nacogdoches. Bill just can't ever get it right — that Nacogdoches is.

"Laura almost always comes with him to the association meetings, and they know everyone and are extremely well liked. It

Carl Hertzog, the late director of the press, used to do that, and so did Rex Strickland and John L. Waller, the late UTEP history professors, Bill said. "But they became unable to make such long trips, so we started doing it," he said. "And we loved it."

In his own city, Bill is known to thousands as "Mr. History." Five years ago, during the "4 Centuries '81" celebration, the retired University of Texas at El Paso history professor visited hundreds of elementary school classrooms in the city.

In simple language, he told the children about El Paso's 400 years of recorded history. His wife had made him a green suit and matching stovepipe hat, and he wore the costume when he visited schools or historic marker unveilings. And, if there were a piano handy, he would play some ragtime music for his audience.

Of necessity, college professors don't rank high among philanthropists. But Timmons used his own money to set up the Dr. W.H. Timmons Foundation of the El Paso Community Foundation to mark historic buildings in the area and to help fund the printing of a booklet, "The Historic Past of El Paso County."

He finished a paper recently: "El Paso — Where Texas History Begins," to be published in the June "Password," the quarterly journal of the El Paso Historical Society.

was a unanimous vote of all of us concerned with the association that we should make the whole state aware of the Timmonses' contributions to Texas.

"The titles carry with them the responsibility to live long and happy lives. They will hold the titles until the Texas Bicentennial — and Bill and Laura will probably be *there*, too!"

For years the Timmonses, their car loaded with publications from UTEP's Texas Western Press, drove to Austin or wherever the state association's meeting was, to "talk up El Paso" and sell books.