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Interview No. 43

Joseph Smiley

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Smiley
INTERVIEWER: Dale L. Walker
PROJECT: History of UTEP
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 27, 1970
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

President of UTEP, 1958-1960, 1969-1972.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

State of the University since resuming the presidency in 1969; doctoral programs, relationship with the University of Texas system, teaching versus research, ethnic studies, political activism among students.

50 minutes, 21 pages

(This is an interview with Dr. Joseph R. Smiley, conducted in the President's office on April 27, 1970, by Dale L. Walker for Nova Magazine.)

W: Dr. Smiley, you've been back at this University now for almost a year. Can you talk about the University's priorities and what you see as the order of business, so to speak?

S: Yes. It's taken me easily this long, Dale, to begin to rediscover what changes have taken place: where we are, what the emphasis has been and is likely to be, and what the realities of our situation are. There have of course been many, many changes in the intervening years. I'm very pleased to find the University where it is, progressing I think along very solid and reasonable lines in a realistic fashion. We have added, as you know, in recent years, with the appropriate approvals, a number of master's level degrees in a number of areas; this is certainly as it should be, given the fact that we obviously have the resources, the faculty strength, the need and so forth. It's also inevitable, I think, that in the next several years there will be substantial pressures upon us to move in some areas toward the Ph. D. degree or a doctoral degree of one kind or another; perhaps a doctoral degree in a more or less professional area that will not be the Ph. D. To cite an example out of the air, it may be a Doctor of Science degree or a Doctor of Engineering degree, or some such degree as that.

W: If I can interrupt you just a moment, do we have any reason to feel slighted at all that the University of Arlington was recently granted a doctor's program, I believe, in psychology?

S: The Regents approved this, it will now go to the coordinating board.

No, I don't think so. They have already received the appropriate approvals for a doctor's degree in some areas of engineering, for example. I think these things evolve depending on one's current strength. As we all know, particularly at the doctoral level, some departments are more nearly ready than others because of past history, because of recruiting practices and because of emphasis on one or another segment of our mission as a University.

W: Now, you're a proponent of our emphasis on Inter-American or Latin American studies.

S: This is right, because it exemplifies, perhaps better than any other example I can think of, my conviction that we must propose for the doctor's degree things that will take advantage of special or unique strengths that we have. Obviously, our very location itself is a natural, in my judgement, for a broad area that would take advantage of our border adjacent to México, adjacent to a large border city. When you say Latin America, I am thinking of such areas as Linguistics, Language and Literature, obviously; History, Sociology; some areas of the fine arts, clearly; Psychology, Political Science. All these can have an emphasis or focus upon our relations with México because of our location.

W: Are you convinced that the Board of Regents and others in Austin are aware of this destiny, for lack of a better word, of ours?

S: Some do. Chancellor Ransom and I, for example have talked. We talked when I was here before about ways in which this institution could develop unique programs. We were not talking about doctoral programs

at that point, obviously, but unique programs based on the strength and resources that we have in this area of interrelationship, primarily with México, but therefore with all Latin America.

W: Do you see any special funding that will come along any time soon to begin some of those programs that we haven't started already in our Inter-American program?

S: Well, as far as a new program is concerned, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, this is a problem that has not been solved for any institution because the legislature appropriates on coordinating Board recommendations for past performance. Although there are times, and I believe this has been true at Arlington, when as a special item of appropriation, not related to the former, it's possible to get a special appropriation to begin a new program. This, I think, would obviously have to be our approach when we get to the point of having gained approval of the Regents and coordinating board for x, y, or z doctoral level. But, I don't want to let my remarks so far be given undue emphasis as far as our graduate programs are concerned. They are upon us; they're with us. It's inevitable that within the next several years such proposals will go forward.

W: Yes, and it's also true that when someone asks about the progress of the University, the question that immediately occurs to them is, "How far along are you toward getting a doctor's degree?"

S: Perfectly natural question. But in the meanwhile we must by all means continue to fulfill the role to the best of our ability, which I think we have very ably fulfilled up to now; and this is having, then, a

predominantly undergraduate, excellent, teaching institution. The master's degree is one step beyond, but is not to be done and has not been done at the expense of undergraduate teaching. The doctoral level is the final step in the hierarchy academically, so to speak; but I very much hope that there will be no lessening of emphasis on our undergraduate and master's degree obligations as we move into the doctor's level. In other words, we will not make further moves at the expense of the excellent programs that we now have.

W: Would you see any advantage in making progress toward this eventuality if we were not a member of the University of Texas system? I'm reminded of the statement made by Judge McCall recently here who advised his group of Baylor exes, I believe, that we might be better off if we were not a member of the University of Texas system. Do you think there would be any advantages in that?

S: On the contrary, I think it is to our advantage as we move toward these proposals to be an integral part of the University of Texas system. There's no question about it. For example, on the basis of colleague to colleague or department to department, before we propose formally a Ph. D. or a doctoral level program, it's a perfectly natural thing for X department, for example, to have the understanding, endorsement, approval of its counterpart in Austin. I say that simply because the graduate school at Austin is old and well established. The first doctor's degrees were probably given at Austin, I would assume, probably in the first decade after the turn of the century. The University at Austin has long been a member of the AAU (Association of American

Universities), the most prestigious group of graduate institutions in the country. And it is not without significance to have the appropriate approval and endorsement from an old, well established Ph. D. department in Austin when we go for it with a proposal of our own. So that's one way in which our belonging and always having belonged to the system is of definite advantage to us in this matter we are discussing.

- W: In our press conference recently, one student who attended touched on this matter of our membership in the Texas system. It was his viewpoint that the figures show that we were kind of a stepchild, at best, of what used to be called the main University. Do you think we have that kind of relationship?
- S: Not at all. The emphasis is entirely in the other direction. Every contact that I have with the system administration and with the regents shows very clearly and very pleasingly to me, a consistent, steady system concern on the part of all these people--regents, system administration and so forth.
- W: Do you think that the change in our name is evidence of that?
- S: Absolutely, absolutely. I must admit that when I was here before, although our official title was Texas Western College of the University of Texas, we were not in some ways, certainly, as clearly, positively identified as an integral branch and part of the university system as we now are with the name that we have. This is clearly and unmistakably the University of Texas at El Paso.
- W: Dr. Smiley, this is a little bit off the track, but ties in with what

we've been talking about. Last February, a newspaper story claimed that the Texas Board of Regents has determined to place emphasis on excellence of classroom teaching and, to quote from the article, "Faculty members who short-change their students and keep their department heads happy with spurious granthunting and useless cut and paste articles are in for a shock." Is there a decline in this "publish or perish" doctrine, and how do you view this writer's interpretations of the Regent's actions?

S: I think that the Regents have been in this action and the statement of theirs in February certainly confirms, that they are deeply concerned about the quality of teaching. This was no idle gesture of lip service, but rather a genuine, earnest concern which clearly is permeating the entire system. For example, shortly after this Regents' meeting in February, there was a meeting held near Austin by a number of the administrative officials, faculty, students and so on, to devote a whole weekend to the discussion of effectiveness in teaching and how it could be achieved and improved. On the heels of that, about two weeks ago here in El Paso, we had a similar meeting which lasted all Sunday evening and started again early Monday morning and lasted until noon. It involved our deans, several members of the faculty from each of the schools, and a number of students (both undergraduates and graduates), as well as our administrative officers. Four people from Austin came out to participate, including Dr. John J. McKetta, Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. The system administration

people, like me, were highly pleased with the results of our discussion, because there was honest, deep concern and many constructive criticisms and suggestions on how we can make our teaching here more effective. I think what we're seeing, Dale, is a very welcome and happy shift in emphasis from concentration and first priority, in some cases even sole priority, on research and publications, which Mr. John Gardner characterized as the flight from teaching. We're clearly going in the other direction, now, in the University of Texas system and I am delighted that we are.

W: Is the implication clear then that at some point in the immediate past, there has been a noticeable emphasis on research to the detriment of good teaching?

S: This has happened in many Universities. Certainly I should say (although this is a generality, I think it nonetheless is basically true) that the trend you describe has been going on particularly in the larger, complex universities for a number of years--the idea that the higher a member of the faculty got in academic rank, the farther he would move away from teaching (or especially from teaching lower divisions or undergraduate students); that he would do what teaching he did only to graduate students with a relatively light assignment to give him plenty of time for his research. Now, what I'm saying does not, in my opinion, take away from the importance of the research in any way. But so many remarks were made from experience and observation at this teaching effectiveness seminar that we had, to the effect (which all of us who had been in the game a long time understand)

that teaching and reasearch are not opposites; they go together.

W: Would you see any change in the time honored definition of a university, which is certainly not very clear, but the one that says that the university is a community of scholars. Does it seem to you that this shift shows now that a university is more a community of teachers?

S: Yes, I think basically, Dale, that it has always had that meaning traditionally, but with the emphasis on research and publications the word scholar or scholarship kind of got that nuance attached to it. I don't think the basic aim of the university has changed at all, and let me emphasize that I said basic; and that is, primarily to teach what man has already learned and in the second instance, to add to the fund of man's accumulated knowledge. These have always been the primary dual roles of a university. What has happened, particularly since World War II until the last several years, has been an overemphasis on the addition to man's fund of knowledge; at many times, at the expense of the other obligation, which is to pass on effectively and meaningfully what man has already learned.

W: In our occasional misunderstandings with the public or the press or whatever, about our role, there does seem to be a communications gap somewhere in the business. In other words, we always seem to be explaining what we are, because the public for some reason is usually on the heels of some disruption or something. We seem to feel they don't understand what we are. Is there any simple way--or could you repeat what you just said--some simple way of defining the university and its purpose?

S: Well, I think that the two roles that I have described, of passing along to each student generation as best we can what man has already learned, plus the addition by universities to the store of knowledge, I think these have always been the traditional role--sometimes understood, sometimes not, particularly in recent years because of the over-emphasis upon the research and publication.

W: Do you think that massive student involvement not only in the university affairs but also in national affairs has caused some of the misunderstanding in recent time, at least over the functions of the university?

S: I think so. I think what has happened is that so many members of the general public, because of their own experience or their children's experience, understand quite readily the aims of undergraduate education and the aims of professional education. Everybody knows about medicine and nursing and pharmacy and the law and so forth. But the public tends, I think, to weaken its understanding when we get into the doctoral level and the emphasis which must be there at the Ph. D. level on research--some kind of creative contribution, as one's doctoral dissertation. This is what gets misunderstood. Another thing that causes, has caused, and I guess always will cause some confusion or lack of understanding about these matters is the essential difference between a college and a university.

W: I don't think that's been clearly defined.

S: Well, the college...let's take the typically small, private, endowed Liberal Arts College. It's sole function is the teaching function.

Let's assume that the college we're talking about has no graduate work of any kind, that it's sole purpose and all its resources are devoted to teaching, which is the typical role, you see, of the undergraduate college.

W: Now, this is more typically the role of the junior college.

S: No. The junior college, traditionally and I think properly, emphasizes the vocational and technical aspects of training as well as the first two years of college. But take any small Liberal Arts College with which you are familiar that has no graduate work. There are no resources for research. There are traditionally no special rewards for the faculty man who does research. His assignment and therefore the basis on which he is judged is teaching; the effectiveness of his teaching. We here at El Paso are ahead of the game, so to speak, in that over all the years our primary emphasis up to now has been entirely upon teaching. Sure, many members of our faculty have done research, have published books and articles; but these were more or less incidental to their primary function which has been teaching. Now, as we said just a moment ago, as we begin to move in the direction of doctoral level work, then our role is expanding. So we have not only the obligation to effective teaching, but we are adding that dimension at the doctoral level, which is the contribution to man's fund of knowledge.

W: In our 55 years we have little knowledge, really, of the overriding research role as other institutions will have; and that this opinion of the Board of Regents' toward emphasis on teaching, while it affects us and concerns us, is not the crucial matter here. Have we

ever, at this institution, de-emphasized classroom teaching in favor of research? The only research facility we have is Schellinger Laboratory.

S: This is right. You and I can think of people in the humanities for example, who have continued over the years to do their research, to publish their books, and continue their emphasis on first rate teaching. So you are absolutely correct that the emphasis on this effectiveness of teaching and excellence in teaching by the Board affects immediately and much more directly the University at Austin, which, as we said a moment ago, has offered the Ph. D. for two generations, at least.

W: What role do you think students, the more aware students, have had in this shift in emphasis? Have their demands on changes in the educational process contributed to this shift?

S: I definitely think so, especially in my experience. Within the last six or eight years students have become increasingly concerned about the quality of teaching. I have no doubt at all that the expression of these concerns, their requests, the pressures upon faculty groups and others to re-examine the quality of teaching, re-examine pre-requisites in course content and degree requirements and so forth, without any question have had a tremendous impact on the change, the flexible situation that we are in now. No question about it.

W: To keep on this subject of the student's role in determining policies and involving themselves in the administration and in the functions of the faculty and other things (committees, in particular, are what I'm thinking about), what is your prognosis for the future for the

student's role in university life? Is it going to widen as it has obviously in the last two or three years?

S: I think this depends on the institution and the situation. You're correct that it has been widening and it is going to continue, to a certain extent, to widen. I think that it is entirely appropriate for students to be involved in faculty committees with faculty groups and so on, in areas where the student is very clearly and deeply involved himself: The quality of the student's life on campus, for example, to make a broad arena there. On the other hand, I do not think that the faculty can abdicate its responsibility. This does not mean that it shouldn't listen to student opinion, student request, student suggestion; on the contrary, it should. But I do not believe, in the final analysis, that the faculty can abdicate its responsibility for the curriculum, for requirements for pre-requisites and the like. The simplest way I know to put this is simply that I have never heard of a college or university that was not founded on one simple premise, and that is that some know more than others.

W: Tied in with that are two things that become a concern of ours over a period of months of course, but more immediately last fall: the creation of Black and Mexican American Studies. Both came as a result, I presume, of student involvement in these areas and interest in these areas; and in some respects, if not demands, at least intelligent presentations and so forth to the proper deans. Have we made any progress in these studies?

S: I think we have and I'm very, very pleased by the reasonable and

constructive way in which these changes and additions and new study programs were adopted, because there's no question that they were instigated primarily because of student interest; and quite properly the appropriate academic groups involved, heavily, student committees, student participation in the preparation and the evolution of these programs. I think it's been an ideal way. So far as I'm aware, there have not been a series of demands, of confrontations, of threats to do this, that or the other. On the contrary, these students have banded themselves in committees, worked with the deans and with the faculty very constructively, made excellent suggestions, presentations and so forth, and have earned agreement all the way along. That's the reason why the programs are in existence now. I don't doubt that these will change. It's a dynamic thing, it's a new area. Both Mexican American and Black studies are relatively new areas and I don't doubt that after experience suggests a change here, or a different emphasis there, or an addition there, that these things will logically and normally come about.

W: That leads into a question about the politics of confrontation. Do you have any idea on how we have been able to, so far, avoid that seeming eventuality that has happened to a lot of other institutions that are very similar to ours in size and scope? These things have happened, seemingly, despite the best efforts of their administration and faculty. Do you have any idea about how we have been able to solve these problems and get with the students in manners other than that?

- S: Well, my own approach has been--and I've observed happily that, as far as I can tell, this is the approach throughout the university here--to keep one's doors open, one's ears open, to student concerns, student suggestions, student requests, discontent, criticism and so forth. I have found that when you listen carefully to students, you understand what it is they are proposing. I believe it's not an exaggeration to say that our student groups who have made various proposals have clearly understood that they are being listened to, that they are not shunted aside, that they are not told, "Nobody's going to listen to whatever it is you want to propose." The latter, I am sure, in many instances around the country, has stimulated the kind of conclusion on the part of the students that, "Nobody listens to us, therefore we have to take some action or make some threats in order to get our points across." All our people in the faculty, in the administration, in the student personnel and so forth, clearly deal with students openly, listen to students constantly; and I think that this is the best answer I can give as to why we have been fortunate enough to avoid the kinds of ugly situations on other campuses. I think it's equally important to emphasize that our students have behaved themselves reasonably and maturely, and so the responsibility for having got this far without the kind of confrontation we're talking about, is equally theirs with those in the faculty and the administration who have been listening and dealing with their suggestions.
- W: Dr. Smiley, this may be an unfair question to ask; it has several parts to it. It has been asked many, many times of other university presidents. It has been stated that the principal problems having an impact on college campuses and their students boil down to five major issues. I wonder

if you would mind giving us an observation on each of these as to how it bears upon the university, on all its students, on the administration, on the university system, etc. The first and most important at this point is the war in VietNam. Could you somehow tie that in with the university and with the students?

S: Yes. To go back a little bit, I think the first manifestations of serious student concern with social values, with human values, probably came about the time or shortly before Selma, Alabama and other such highlights--the genuine concern about social justice on the part of the students. This concern, as the war in VietNam began to take lives, take large numbers of commitments of troops and so on, this obviously escalated the student concern about it. The point I'm trying to make is that I have no question that the war in VietNam has stimulated an enormous amount of student concern, interest, expression, dissent, and all the rest. The point is that the reason this has happened on college and university campuses is clearly that that's where so many of our thoughtful, intelligent, thinking young people are. I think their dissent, in other words, has basically been, and still is today, with social concerns to a much larger extent than individual or local or parochial campus concerns at a given point in time.

W: We are past, I presume now, the point of no return. Students will be no longer concerned with parking problems and the Homecoming Parade and things of that nature that used to seem to occupy the students.

S: Yes. Of course, many of them are still bothersome, they are distressing to some extent; but much, much less important I think, in the thinking

and the discussion of students in these larger issues.

W: A second issue is the one that's really current now. Probably, the national interest in it can almost be marked at January 1, 1970.

That is the overriding interest of pollution and environmental well-being.

S: I think this too is an excellent example of a sharply increasing concern of intelligent, thoughtful students precisely for the quality of life. We mentioned social injustice; we mentioned their concern over our involvement in VietNam, which is so many miles away and which has so many complex ramifications. Now, again, a quality of our national life which comes home on every campus is precisely the question of ecology and pollution, which definitely is a national concern. Here again, I don't think that the concern of the students about pollution is directed at this campus only, or some other campus; but it's definitely on the broader scale as a national issue of the quality of human life.

W: Now the third is one of the most distressing in many ways because there seem to be so few answers and so many questions, and that is racism.

S: This, too, as I said a while ago, I believe really made itself manifest with the concerns four, five, or six years ago with social justice, with racism, with Selma, as I used as an example. This is continuing very strongly.

W: Do you see any lessening at all, incidentally, in that issue?

S: Not at all. None whatsoever.

W: Going back for a moment, do you see any lessening in the issue of

VietNam with some of the developments that have taken place?

S: I think that's much more likely to occur, to be a lessening emphasis, precisely because of the changes that are likely to take place in VietNam: The troop withdrawal, for example; the de-escalation; the de-emphasis, the decreasing loss of our American life in VietNam. But the racial issue is not declining and will not, for many, many years to come.

W: Do you think that there's any reason for racism to be any more an issue on this campus than any other campus? Are we placed in any kind of peculiar situation here that there's any reason why it should be a more burning issue than elsewhere?

S: No. I think on the contrary in some ways it might be less of an issue, because this institution from its beginning, because of its location, development, evolvment, and character, has always been characterized, certainly, by a genuine aire of tolerance, of lack of prejudice. Therefore I think, we're better off than many, many institutions, because of the large number of Mexican Americans that have always been students here (and hopefully will always be). There is no prejudice, there is no evidence of any kind that people of different backgrounds--economic, ethnic or otherwise--are not welcome here. So, I see this as something that is a distinct advantage to us, because of our background, because of our history.

W: Now the fourth issue is more amorphous in a way. We all know what the word "violence" means and it's compacted into that one word. How do you view that as President of this University as an issue for the University and

its students?

S: Well, I think, of course, that violence is intolerable in general anyway. But it's particularly out of place, inappropriate, on a college or university campus, of all places. The university exists to examine sanely and soberly and intellectually any problem whatsoever. It pre-supposes a kind of basic, understood, agreed upon tolerance for any point of view. Violence simply does not fit in this picture. Any kind of use of force to enforce one's opinion or point of view is completely out of place in a university context. It has no place whatsoever.

W: The final issue is in many ways one of the most sensitive and least understood, perhaps; and that is (the matter of again being compacted into one word) the issue of "drugs." Could you give us some statement about that? I think our values in society--I don't think anybody would argue with this--are changing in many ways very rapidly. I think the attitude of society in general toward drug use is changing also, and perhaps an example would be a change in social value, social attitudes toward the consumption of alcohol a generation or so ago, for example. I think there are parallels here that are evident. I think young people these days--college students and others--being curious and being alert, being inquisitive, are more likely to experiment with drugs than probably has been true of earlier generations; certainly any college generation that I have known. I think what we must have (and we're doing our best to achieve this) is a much factual, hard information as possible to be made available to our students and others

on the dangers of drug abuse as well as drug use--matters of addiction, psychological addiction, psychological dependence, upon whatever form of drugs; habits that can be formed and so on. These are things that I think we must do and are doing to the best of our ability to let students be informed. I think students in many ways are more mature when they come to us as Freshmen now than was true in many past generations. Young people today, properly, want to be treated as young adults when they come to college. I say education, hard facts about the danger, the pitfalls, the possible addictions, and so on, are the answer.

W: Dr. Smiley, one final question, now. It's often been observed that when you left Texas Western College in 1960 (and even, in fact, before then in your career in Illinois), that you, in your administrative career in Illinois and as President of the University of Texas at Austin and at Colorado, that you have indeed just about seen it all; nothing that you could observe coming back to this institution would surprise you. Have there been any surprises and is that a truthful observation? Or are there new things that you're seeing from day to day even in a relatively small school such as this?

S: Well, I'm seeing some things that are indeed different, Dale, from situations at Colorado and in many ways different from Austin, too, that please me very much; and that is a kind of cohesiveness in the student body, certainly a cohesiveness in the faculty as to our role, our standards, what we're all about. These are things that may or may not be typical simply because of size, but they certainly

are consistent and true of this institution. I find the pleasant associations in the faculty, the dedication of the vast majority of our students to what they're really here for, what the faculty are really here for, or what we're all here for, to be a very rewarding and pleasing experience.

W: Is the going somewhat less hectic for your office?

S: Yes, in many ways it is, because to some extent of these things I have mentioned--a kind of esprit here, a kind of institutional loyalty that is to me very evident as it was when I was here before--as contrasted with a very large, complex institution, where many times the faculty member's loyalty, for example, is more directed towards his discipline than it is toward his institution itself. When you have, as we had at Colorado, such a substantial proportion of non-resident students, you cannot expect the same loyalty to one's state university as you can from students who are resident of the state. They tend to have less of a stake in it. They are birds of passage, so to speak. They're there for whatever reasons; but the question of personal involvement or feeling of loyalty is likely not to be so strong, if it exists at all.

W: In El Paso, the make makeup or the geographic location and so forth of this institution lends itself to more of that "home interest" in the institution and the kind of loyalty, although we do have kind of an international flavor.

S: We do. But, I think what the institution has stood for and still stands for, what characterizes it in terms of institutional integrity,

in loyalty and purpose and so on, I think this spreads. I think the students who come here from out-of-state or from abroad quickly catch on to the spirit, and so it permeates the entire reaches of the student body and the faculty.

W: I said a little while ago that that was the last question, but actually I have one more. It's a personal question, but I've asked it before and I know you won't mind me asking again. You have a long career as an administrator and interspersed your career as teacher for a long time. I think you mentioned that you taught 30 or 35 years. Do you look forward to returning to teaching or has the administration part of your university career--do you think that's going to be the high spot of it?

S: No, I look forward very much to returning to teaching when I am finished with this assignment. I deliberately chose teaching as a career, prepared myself for it, thoroughly enjoy it, and I've never gotten away from the continuing interest and concern that I have with teaching; so it's not something that I have outgrown or cast aside in any fashion. The fates have decreed that I would do other things meanwhile, but that's still my first love and my primary concern.

W: Thank you very much, Dr. Smiley.