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Interview no. 692

Wayne E. Fuller

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Wayne E. Fuller
INTERVIEWER: Vicki L. Ruiz
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 6, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 692
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 692

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

History professor, 1955-present; past recipient of Amoco teaching award.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How he came to UTEP; changes in the student body since 1955; changes the faculty and administration had; President Joseph M. Ray and how he helped the university; thoughts on the future of the university.

Length of interview: 25 minutes Length of transcript: 11 pages

WAYNE FULLER
by Vicki Ruiz
March 6, 1984

R: When did you come to UTEP?

F: The fall of 1955.

R: And why did you decide to come to this university?

F: Well, two reasons. I was looking for a job, basically. I was up in Wisconsin as a director of the Historical Society, and I didn't want to do that. And I had a friend who knew that there was an opening here and I applied, because one thing, I had been in El Paso during the war. For two years I was at Beaumont Hospital as a patient. My leg was draining and I needed to have medical care and I knew I could get it at Beaumont. And so that's one of the basic reasons I came. And when I got here, they operated the summer after I came, they operated on my leg. And it didn't do much and it continued to drain. It had osteomyelitis in it.

R: Were you injured?

F: It was a result of being wounded in World War II. And so the next summer they did an extensive operation, and went in and took out a lot of the bone and a lot of other stuff that was in there. And it healed, and it's been healed ever since. And I'm lucky because normally they never tell you you're cured with that, because the only treatment they have is to go and scrape the bone.

So by that time I was pretty well launched here, and I just stayed.

R: Do you see any differences in students from when you first started?

F: Yes, I do. I think there's been a deterioration. Maybe that's just because I'm getting older, you know, and I'm less willing to put up

with what I put up with formerly. But I think there has been a deterioration, particularly in the basic skills. I think this is true.

R: Do you think students are less serious today, or more serious, or equally serious?

F: I don't know. In history I think they're maybe about the same. I'm not really sure about that because you see so many people out there in your class not taking notes, sleeping. And one thing when I first came, I didn't have big classes, so that everybody, you know, you could keep an eye on them pretty well. The big classes suggest that there are a lot of people who just go to school maybe because their way's been paid or because they don't know what else to do. But I don't know if I'd had big classes back there whether or not... I probably would have found a similar thing. Of course going to college in another day was I think much more meaningful because it required some sacrifice on your part. Nobody paid your way; there wasn't the idea that you must have the college education. You usually wanted it pretty badly or you wouldn't be there. That isn't to say that all students were great students, it's just that the atmosphere was different.

R: Were you involved with any student groups?

R: No, not really. Well, I was one of the founders of the United Campus Christian Fellowship, I think that's what they call it now. We had something similar to that, we had a similar _____, but I don't think it's quite the same. But yeah, I was involved in that group.

R: Do you see any change in terms of faculty and administration?

F: Oh, yes. There's a big change there, and all for the better. When I first came, in the History Department there was one man named Robert Miller who didn't yet have his Ph.D. and he was working furiously on it from Northwestern University. And he was publishing and working hard to publish. And when he got his degree he went off to North Carolina University and he's been there ever since. But he was really the only one in the department that was really working on research. That wasn't considered necessary. And in fact, in our department there wasn't this idea that you bring in a person with a specialty. Just bring in anybody who had a degree and who could teach anything--that was kind of the idea. It wasn't really until about 1961, I think, when Dr. Shover came. He is the first one we deliberately hired for a Civil War specialty, for a specialty. By that time, however, Dr. Timmons and I were both working on our manuscripts, our Ph.D. dissertations, to get them published, and I guess both of us had published by that time a few things. And the difference nowadays, of course, with everybody, [is], if you're not doing it there's something wrong.

And so that has been a big change, and that's a change all the way across the university. I've sat on a lot of committees where I've seen [a good deal] of the faculty, and I'm impressed by the faculty that we have. That's one of the best kept secrets in El Paso, and some of the outstanding men we have on this campus and that have national and international reputations. They're never known in El Paso, strangely enough.

R: Do you see a difference in the ethnic makeup of the campus?

F: Oh, yes. We have lots of Mexican Americans that we've been _____. I've never gone back and looked at my roll books, but I expect in a class of 35 or 40 probably not more than 10 or 15 percent would have been people of Mexican descent. I'm not sure about that, but there's been a great increase.

R: Has there been any change that you've seen in administration?

F: Yes. And for the most part, well, my own view of this, that when I first came we had a man named Holcomb and that was the first year that the university was integrated. It was Texas Western College and I remember the first year we had blacks. Holcomb wasn't here really long enough to do much one way or another to direct the university. When he left I believe Dr. Smiley came. And he was very knowledgeable about what a university was all about, but he wasn't here long enough either to do much good.

And then came Dr. Ray, and he was the one I think who has done the most good for the university. He's the one who knew what a university--had been at Maryland University--knew what a university was. He emphasized research and he began the Alumni Program. He knew he had to get funds, outside funding, for the Excellence Funds. It was under him that they moved toward excellence and talked a lot about it, which of course was a little unusual, you know, because people weren't talking much about excellence and he was. And though we certainly weren't excellent, he gave us an aspiration to move in that direction. So I credit him with doing an awful lot for the university. He was good for us. We changed

the name to university, we didn't change the university much.

But the direction was all in the right direction. He set up these professorships, the Benedict professorships, and asked us to go out and bring in notable people to get on the stats. And we brought in _____, who had a good reputation, had been at Dartmouth for years. And that was a good thing, too. In a way, it added a little bit to the university, quite a bit.

He also set up research professorships. In those days, if you could prove that you had a program that you were working on, a publication you were working on, you could apply for a research professorship. And for the whole year you could have just a half a load, half teaching load, which is a marvelous thing for us. I wrote The American Mail partly under that grant for the dispensation of teaching, really is what it was. And a funny thing, when The American Mail came out and it was published, I took it up to him and gave him the book and I said, "I couldn't have done this as soon as I did if it hadn't been for that research professorship." He said, "You know, I had to give dozens of those to get one book." And of course that was true because people got the research professorships and didn't publish, but you can't always tell how your research will come out, can't always guarantee publication. But it was worth it. I think he never regretted it. I think he always thought, well, it was worth the _____. And I would like to see us go back to that system.

And when we were last evaluated for the Southern Association, I was in charge of that section on faculty. And I went to Dr. Beasley

during this period, and I said, "You know, what we really need are sabbaticals. We can't get sabbaticals. We need some provision for half-time teaching on occasion. When you've got a scholar that you know is going to publish or is deep in his research, then you ought to be able to get this half-time teaching load." My understanding from him was that, yes, he would do that, but I don't think that he could sell it to Dr. Templeton and we never got it.

When Dr. Templeton came, that was a different story. He undid about everything that Joe Ray had done. He wasn't interested in publications. Of course he followed Dr. Smiley's secretary, and he found the university in what he thought were terrible financial straits--and maybe it was, I don't know. And he straightened that out, but he didn't understand the faculty, he didn't understand research, and wasn't in sympathy with us. He could understand some practical things. Like if you were doing research on salt water in the Rio Grande or something, he might be able to understand that, but he couldn't understand what we do as historians, and he didn't like history.

I was chairman of the department when he came, and one of the first things that happened was, he gave a speech downtown on history, and said, "Students don't like history. They have learned all about the Plymouth Rock by the time they get to the university, and when they come to the University they have to learn all about it again." And, well, this just infuriated me, and so I spent the weekend drafting a letter to him. So, when Monday came I called the department

together and said, "I'm going to read you this letter I'm going to send to Dr. Templeton. I'm telling you ahead of time because I don't want you to be blamed for this, but I think you ought to know." So I read the letter and they said, "Well, send it to the Regents and we'll all sign it." And so I did, I sent it to the Regents.

That was on Monday, and I got here early Wednesday morning and I'd usually come about 7:30. And the telephone rang before 8:00 and President Templeton wanted to see me. So I went over and he said, "I understand you're unhappy about the speech I gave." And I said, "Well, yes, I was unhappy about it." And he said, "Well, I was misquoted." I told him what I thought about his view of history. I said, "I don't think you understand what we do," or something to that effect. He said, "Well, I was misquoted." I said, "Well, I had a feeling that what they quoted you as saying was your gut feeling." And we went kind of round and round, it was a very interesting conversation. But I never heard from any of the regents. He said to me, he said, "You know, this will do you more damage than it would me." And I said, "Well, that's probably true, but I felt I had to do it."

But I got along very well with him and never had any trouble. Always considered him a friend, I'm not sure that he was. But I never had any trouble with him at all. But the fact is he...and I would try to tell him, he was very difficult to talk to. He was always waiting until you got through to tell you what he was thinking, really, even when he'd ask your advice about something. And, oh, about two or three years after he'd been here, some of the faculty began getting their own state of the university messages, and they were pretty critical. And he got upset, and he called a bunch of the senior professors together. We met over there in his conference room, and he said, "You know, I raised all your salaries. I thought you'd be more content," something

to that effect. "What's the matter?" And I was sitting right next to him and he asked me to begin. I said, "Well, the first thing is, in the back of your mind you don't understand research. We want you to recognize even our potentials."

But he never, nothing came of it, but he never really understood that it was important for us to be writing and to be doing research and to be rewarded for that. I think he liked good teaching, he liked people to be good teachers insofar as the students would come to him and say, "Well, that's a good teacher you've got there." He understood that but he didn't understand research. And that's partly because, you know, he wasn't trained as a scholar. He got his degree in Education and he thought of this as kind of a teaching college, a university for teachers, which is a misnomer itself. The university is not a teachers' college. So, that was one problem with the administration.

But Dr. Monroe, it seems, understands what a university is. And I've been very pleased with particularly this idea of merit and forcing people to either measure up or not, and they suffer the consequences. It's what we've been needing for a long, long time. And, yeah, I'm pleased with the faculty. I think we're doing very well.

R: In the classroom, what was your most rewarding experience?

F: I think the thing, one of the most rewarding experiences I've had, was in the big class. On the last day of the class one of my students ran up to the podium and he had a flower. I guess he'd bought it from one of these flower people who are on the streets. And he presented it to me and said, "Here's a short professor who is seven feet tall in the podium," or something like that, and the class clapped. And, you know, I was very touched by that. That's, I think, a great experience.

You know, one of the problems that you find in teaching a big class is that you can't know all these students. I never knew that student's name. I knew he worked for one of the radio and television stations. And you never know, it's I guess one of the problems of teaching, you never know how you're affecting students, whether they think you're corny up there or whether they are touched by what you're saying or whether you've opened a door and let them see something a little differently than they'd ever seen before. But it's a rewarding experience when we think that we've gotten across to somebody.

R: What would you like to see in the future of the university?

F: Well, I'd like to see better students. And I don't know that we're going to have a lot of control over that, because we get what the schools turn out. And with their having been taught how to read and how to write by the time they get here, there's not a whole lot we can do, frankly. We have to assume that [if] we're going to teach at the university level, that they're university students. And my fail out is very bad. I would like to see that disappear. And I guess the last two fall semesters have been disastrous for me. I don't know whether they have been for you or not, but they have just been terrible. And I think, I'm blaming that on what happened in the late sixties and seventies in the school system, that they've just never been tested. My theory is that if you don't demand anything, you won't get anything. People take the line of least resistance. I would. And so you sort of have to push.

You know, our mistake is, we think, "Oh, these are mature students. They can come to class or not," and so forth. Well, they're

not mature. You have to treat them pretty much like you treat people in high school. You just have to say, "This is the class. This is what you must do. Do this and you get rewarded," in effect.

R: I've found that by requiring them to attend school, to say, "I'm going to dock you if you don't come to class if you don't have an excuse," that the grades are much better, because they're forced to come.

F: Oh, yeah. I think they will. You know, I think we made a great mistake because we grew up in a sort of a liberal tradition when we went to the university and you didn't have to go to class and so forth. And the idea is we were mature and so forth, and how mature you really were. But I do know that when I was an undergraduate, that there was a standing rule at the University of Colorado, if you missed three classes you got a zero(?). And I rarely missed. But I rarely missed because it was difficult during the Depression days; you didn't miss because you were there to go, you know, you had to go.

R: You were lucky to go.

F: You were lucky to go, yes, indeed, you were. And here it's... of course this may be partly because it's still a city university, it's only an extension of the high school, maybe, you know. I don't know, I've thought about that.

R: I think that so many students are very serious but they don't have the skills.

F: Well, I think that's true, too. And that, you know, is something that's sort of out of our hands. We just cannot, we can't teach the reading, the writing, particularly in a history course. I've got a student in my advanced course, and I xeroxed her last essay exam.

And it's just [terrible]. The woman can't write and doesn't have any idea about how to construct a sentence, doesn't know when periods should come, doesn't know when she's got a complete sentence. It's just really tragic. And here this is an advanced student.

On the other hand, Vicki, we have some awfully good students. I had a student in this small freshman course that got a hundred on the last essay exam that I gave, and I always have good students. There's a little Mexican American girl that sits in the front row of this class, and I was talking to her this morning. And I said, "Are you the student that did so well on this test?" And she laughed, grinned, and said, "Yes." I said, "What did you get?" "I got a 97." Well, you know, that's top in the class, aside from that hundred. And I said, "Well, are you a History major?" She said, no, she's an Accounting major. I said, "Where did you go to high school?" Well, she went to Coronado. Now, I don't know what that means, [if] she was getting a better education than she was in some other high school. But I know she's bright.