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John S. White

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: John S. White
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Registrar at the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy (and Texas Western College), 1948-1954.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; how he came to UTEP in 1948; recollections of administrators, professors, and buildings.

Length of interview: 45 minutes Length of transcript: 17 pages

JOHN S. WHITE
by Rebecca Craver
November 22, 1983

C: Okay, this is John White, Registrar. I believe you told me you had the job...

W: From June of 1948 until September of 1954. /PAUSE/ I am a native West Texan. My parents, who were teachers, came to West Texas in 1898 from Kentucky. I was born on the Pecos River, at Grandfalls, in Ward County. I hold a B.A. from the University of Texas, an M.A. from Stanford, taught school, and was in public school administration in West Texas oil fields. Spent three years in the Ozarks raising sheep. We moved to New York City and shipped a thousand quarts of vegetables and fruit Vida had canned. We lived there till the fruit was gone, a little over three years--a couple of it in Manhattan, then bought a home over in Queens. While there, I first worked as a detective, and then I attended Columbia University. I worked for Fred Crofts, F. S. Crofts College Textbook Publishing Co. I got out their catalogue and did a little of their publicity work. And finally, then, for about two years, I worked on Wall Street with Moody's Investors Service. So, I was just ready for UTEP, then the College of Mines and Metallurgy.

Came here in June of 1948. I had a little bit of knowledge of it, because, back in 1918, I had two brothers who were in the Army at Fort Bliss. And during that time they let them enroll at what was then the School of Mines here. That was during the terrible flu epidemic here in El Paso. The only word we could get: they didn't have enough boxes in El Paso to bury the dead.

I had two or three days before the first duties here at the college, and I spent those (the evenings) studying a college annual.

I memorized the names and faces of every member of the faculty. There were less than a hundred of them. I got some surprises when I saw people with big faces that were little people and vice versa.

(Chuckles) I remember when I was introduced to Prof. Moses--quite a character and a wonderful Shakespearean scholar and so forth.

When I looked him in the face and shook his hand, I said, "Leon Denny Moses?" He was surprised. (Chuckles)

President Wiggins hired me. He was followed by Eugene Thomas, Interim President for a year, then by Dr. Elkins. I remember the first faculty meeting with Dr. Elkins there. He had a sense of humor and he was able to say things without antagonizing people. But he said to them, he said, "I have a Ph.D." (I believe he said from Harvard.) He was also a Rhodes scholar. "I'm glad to have it for at least one reason, and that is that anybody that just because they have a Ph.D. think that they can just live on it, why, I can stuff it down their throats." Not word for word, but close to that meaning.

[One of] the buildings here at the time I came [was] Old Main. As well as classrooms, Old Main had, in the basement on the east end, a bookstore--various other things from candy on were sold there. It was run by Dr. Nelson, "Speedy" Nelson he was called. His services were many, including arranging rentals of graduating caps and gowns, robes for faculty, etc. The Registrar's offices were in the Administration-Library. Also, it held the office of the President, the Business office and the Library (upstairs). We had a wonderful librarian, Baxter Polk--quite a character and a very fine actor, too, incidentally. Old Bell Hall was our girls' dormitory.

Adjacent to it was the college cafeteria--in the basement were offices of Dr. Jeness, retired Navy officer, the health officer for the college. Others of the old buildings included Burges and Kelly Halls--used back in 1918. Also, in the engineering area, were Seamon and the Engineering building. Others were Worrell Hall, Benedict and Hudspeth; Miners Hall for athletes; Kidd Field, which as I recall, seated somewhere from around ten to twelve thousand by putting bleachers in the end zones.

New buildings during my time here included the science building, called the Chemistry building then. The Student Union building was directly across the street from it. I don't know what that building's called now. An important new building for us was Magoffin Auditorium. Another was the Student Union building. It served as bookstore and for meals, light refreshments and so on. It was run by Jimmy Kitts. Jimmy Kitts was very well known in athletic circles. He coached at Athens, Texas and put out a national championship team. He later coached at colleges and universities, including, I believe, West Virginia Tech.

When I came, enrollment had dropped well below 2,000 and a substantial part of those were made up of veterans of World War II. I would guess 20 to 30 percent of them were veterans. And on the subject of veterans: there was a good bit of talk about them loafing around and taking money from the government, but actually they were very few. Most of them were better motivated than the students just out of the high schools, made an average of better grades, were a very fine, stabilizing element in the school.

C: I've heard that from several people.

W: I watched it through records, interviewing them in the office, and so on. In this connection, many different kinds of courses were offered throughout the nation at the different military institutions. One job I had when I came was to go over the materials that veterans had taken and with the help of a very large book containing course descriptions and credit recommendations, award college credit to veterans. We were very, very sparing about it. Many of them probably should have had more than they got, but you're always afraid of over-doing such things.

We handled registration, records and all admissions. The title didn't go with it, but I was Director of Admissions. We needed students, as our enrollment was falling. Jud Williams and I made trips. (He was Dean of Student Life.) He and I made numbers of trips, week-long at a time, through West Texas. We visited high schools, talked to their seniors, gave various kinds of tests.

Now, this incident you may not be able to use, but I won't forget that one time we were caught for the weekend down at Del Rio, Texas. Judson Williams was something of a joker, always has been, and probably still is. We had a very good friend at the College, Dr. Floyd E. Farquahr (head of the Education Department--had come here with Wiggins from Mississippi where he was head of department there). He was a very intense man of vivid personality--an interesting man to be around. Jud telephoned him that we were going to be in Del Rio for two days, to catch a plane Friday afternoon, come down and we'd play golf for our two off days, and he came.

We were out at this little tiny airport, eight or ten miles from

Del Rio. Jud said, "I've got an idea. I'll leave a note for him that Dr. Wiggins sent for me to come to Tech at Lubbock, and you have a brother who has a ranch up here about 50 miles, and you went over to [your] brother's--and, we've reserved a room for him in a hotel here in Del Rio for two days." Well, the note was left with the attendant at this lonely airport. And we hid. Farquahr came, breathing the fresh air, delighted to be here. He looked for us, a little surprised, came on in, looked more, and inquired around a little bit. The attendant said, "Here's a note for you." He read it. I don't think he was capable of swearing, but with great feeling, he said, "If I had known this, I would have stayed in El Paso." (Laughs) Then, he said to the attendant, "How does one get into town from here?" There was a lady across the room who volunteered, "Well, I'm in a truck but you're welcome to go with me." Floyd said, "That'd be mighty good of you." (Laughs) Well, we burst out of the restroom at about that point, and Floyd, being a forgiving person, and so glad to see us, he forgot all that had been done to him.

We got good results from our testing program. I remember an incident over in Marfa. We'd given a lengthy test. I noticed one student who worked only a little while, then quit. I went over to him and asked, "Is there a problem? Is there anything I can do to help?" He said, "I finished." This student had it practically perfect--but didn't go to college!

Another thing we worked on quite a bit, extension courses. They already were doing a little bit in the way of teacher's courses in the afternoon, but we did a great deal more, got the various

departments to offer courses. We offered courses on campus and at Ft. Bliss. A man by the name of Forrest Hewitt--he's gone now--was largely instrumental in our enrolling several hundred people in these afternoon and night classes. We all had to work on it, but he was the mainspring. The last registration that I prepared, September of 1954, the enrollment, as I recall, was about 3500.

An important job we had was preparing a list of the graduates. We had no computers. It was all hand work, and we were working under deadlines. Of the faculty, almost 100 percent, co-operated with us beautifully. We had almost no cases where they didn't come through with grades in time for the list we certified to as meeting requirements for graduation. Incidentally, the first graduation that I attended was in a Masonic building downtown, as we had no auditorium.

I remember 1951. We brought the diplomas to the auditorium. I read the names. The President awarded the degrees. We were in Magoffin Auditorium in 1951 and (for us) we had a lot of graduates, two or three hundred or so. Seemed like a lot to us, as we were doing them one at a time. I think some of the people were practically asleep by the time we got to the Ws. So I came to one Vida Lucille White (my wife). I read the name and handed it to Dr. Elkins. He said to me, "You award it." So when Vida came up I awarded it and kissed her, and woke up the audience. (Chuckles)

C: Oh, that's a wonderful story.

W: The registration when I came here was, whoever came first got to register. This resulted in all-night lines--waiting to register. It snaked across the campus. Most of the registration was being done in what we called then the "Chemistry Building." It's one of the

oldest buildings. It's down just below the one where geography now is taught, a very old building on your way up to Old Main--on your left.

C: I think they call that Quinn now.

W: I believe they named it for Howard Quinn. He's the one with the alligator story you heard about. Well, you've got the story on that.

I realized that this registration system needed changing. We began conducting all registration in the Administration-Library building--actual registration in the library itself, the entire upstairs. It still was quite a problem. Bob Schumaker recently reminded me of something I didn't know or had forgotten. He said that he had criticized the registration procedure and I had overheard him. I promptly had asked him if he would help with the next one--personally, physically keep the lines moving along. And he did that job for over 30 years. (Chuckles) Bob Schumaker, a wonderful man!

We (Registrar's Office) also assembled and proofread class schedules submitted through the departments. Where there were problems of hours or need for changes, we worked with that. And the catalogue, we took care of our part of the catalogue. I soon discovered that the regulations in the catalogue for admissions were not being followed. I talked to President Elkins about it. With his approval, I re-wrote the entire admissions section. Afterwards, I presented it to the faculty, who, after full discussion adopted it in full. It appeared in the next catalogue. I forget the year--about '49 or '50. I remember a comment Dr. Elkins made afterward. He had a backhanded way of complimenting. He said, "White, if I didn't know better, I wouldn't believe you wrote that."

C: I've heard him called Bull Elkins.

W: Well, Bull Elkins was a very determined man, but it was misunderstood before he got here what the "Bull" [was] for. One professor said to me, "Bull Elkins? What do we need with a Bull Elkins?" But this man would see that the job was done. That was the "Bull", determination. He's quite a man. I've played golf with him, and played tennis-- and with Bob Schumaker, Mr. Pierce, and W. H. Ball. W. H. Ball was synonymous with tennis around here in the old days. He coached and we won the Border Conference. He had two sons, at least one of whom was outstanding nationally. I think one won a national championship. W. H. Ball taught Chemistry, and his lovely wife, Myrtle Ball, whom you may know, taught Speech. She is still going strong at 90 plus.

I mentioned that Bull Elkins was an able man, a scholar, endowed with horse sense and people "savvy." He wasn't exactly timid, but was turned that way. He was quarterback on the University of Texas football [team], and there, I feel sure, is where he got the name of "Bull" Elkins. Once, we were on our way for a round of golf. As we went down the other side of Scenic Drive, and shortly before we got to the bottom, my brakes went out. Dr. Elkins had the presence of mind before I could make a move to reach across my lap and pull the emergency brake. He was quite a man.

Name change, I've forgotten the date. Around 1950, approximately.

C: Around '49 or '50.

W: Around that. There was a little opposition in the engineering circles, but I think they were all real happy with it after it was all done. This had started off as the College of Mines and Metallurgy

and probably there was feeling. But, actually, they have grown larger and better. The institution increasingly meets the needs of our metropolitan area. And we have quite a lot of foreign registration here, especially from Mexico, as well as other parts of Texas, New Mexico and other states.

To give you an idea of the size of the school in my day: the switchboard for the institution was in one corner, one tiny corner, of the Registrar's office, and Mrs. Cunningham ran it. Sororities and fraternities kept things humming--with the "rush" period, parties, etc. Tri-Delts, Zetas, and the others.

C: Well, the Zeta house was right there across from where the library is now.

W: I think Jim Peak is using it now, isn't he? Well, I believe that's it. And then along early in the year, why, there was a ceremony and a lot to do among the freshman or having the freshman paint an M on the mountain. And then at some point in there, annually they had the Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae Race.

C: Was that in the spring?

W: I don't know. But once a year they had it.

C: Well, tell me about it.

W: Should be the spring. I think they had a good many of them and I don't really know how it was run. I saw them dressed up. And then in, for example, that annual there, it shows [them]. I really don't know a lot about it except they had a lot of fun with it.

C: Well, what would they do? Where?

W: Oh, they'd chase the girls, and then they'd catch one. (Chuckles) Whether they had a lot of Daisy Maes or what. But at any rate, well,

you'll see there in that particular annual, that's '51. They had a lot of fun at it. There were a lot of things going on. People are people whether it's now or 200 years ago, I guess, or maybe in a cave.

We had some very good football teams in those days. We beat a lot of awfully good schools, and then we had years when we didn't do so well. We beat Arizona, Arizona State at times, probably more often they beat us. They came over here one time and beat us, 96 to 6. Once, New Mexico A & M came over here and we beat them that way. I think part of it was to allow one of our players to set a national record--but, gee whiz, how could we do this to a neighbor!

Dean Puckett was a loveable (crabby at times) person who required things to be done right. He was a great asset to the school--actually was head of the school at one time for a short period. And I remember one time he spoke of older students (teachers) who were cranky and insulting to administrators--especially one person who was lame. Dean Puckett said, "I'm not going to let anybody come in here and beat me over the head with a crutch." Mrs. Fisher was long-time director of dormitories. Two very great minds that were here were Dr. Roth and his successor, Dr. C. C. Crawford, chairmen of Philosophy and Psychology, great people. Urbici Soler was a character, an artist. He told me about the Cristo Rey here. On questioning him, I learned that he had helped with the Christ of the Andes project.

And, Dr. Waller, History and chairman of graduate studies, good golfer, wanted to shoot his age at age 80. He went out and shot the first nine holes in 36. Everybody agreed that he could make it, so

he didn't have to play the last 9 holes. Cart Hertzog came soon after me. His specialty was printing, one of the greatest in the nation. We've been very fortunate to have had Carl Hertzog. Carl, as I recall, didn't have a degree and there was a feeling that he should have a degree. So, they thought perhaps they might give him examinations and qualify him, eventually, for a degree. Carl, thinking about typing and print, asked (just as Einstein did) "Who is going to examine me?" (Laughter)

/PAUSE/

Prof. Tom Barnes in his field, so well versed, so busy in so many things he never did go on and take a doctorate, but what he did was, perhaps, equal to maybe two or three doctorates. He was one of the Oakridge people, a tremendous mind and teacher and character. He was one of the finest Christian persons I've ever known. Thormodsgaard contributed greatly (came nearly at the same time I did). Thormodsgaard was head of the Music Department.

Wade Hartrick is one of the finest that I've known. He was an extremely hard worker, was head of the Department of Business Administration. He probably knows more people in town than anyone-- business people. Wade Hartrick has contributed to UTEP. Also, a fine Christian character. Bill Timmons we've talked about. He's the most, isn't he? Can take that piano apart, can't he? Gene Porter was one of the finest minds that's been in this school. Dr. Porter was a History professor, excellent lecturer, scholar. Dr. Farquahr--I've mentioned his vivid personality, his contributions. Neil Foster in Education, modest, he contributed a great deal to cooperating, getting things done. Sonnichsen, no need to talk about Sonnichsen, what he's

done and able to do, and with his sense of humor. Bill Strain: on the side, at night, I took a couple of courses in Geology under him. He was a solid, wonderful teacher. So was Floyd Decker, chairman of Civil Engineering, conscientious, a Christian gentleman, effective. And do you still have Military Science in the school?

C: Yes, I believe so.

W: Col. Crowell, who retired as Gen Crowell, was one of the greatest, and the other one was Colonel _____ . Haldeen Braddy, brilliant, productive and so on, and the same can be said for John Sharp in Languages. Clarice Jones, tremendously fine, good woman, in Speech. Edgar Ruff, chairman of Modern Languages--scholar, dedicated, untiring.

C: Let's talk about your job a little bit. What percentage of the students were local during those years, would you say? You talked about recruiting around the state.

W: I still think that probably 75 percent of them were, would be my guess at it.

C: Did the administration want more from...

W: The area?

C: Yeah.

W: Yes. Yes, that was the reason we were going out. But I think more we just wanted students, good students, because we didn't drop any of the requirements as you might have guessed by what I worked with on this thing, the admissions. Now, on those 21 years of age or older, I was given leeway to admit by individual approval. But in every case, I interviewed and had every one of them write something similar to a letter. That immediately eliminated those that were...just couldn't

get the job done in grammar and in English.

Some of them, for example Steve Barres had been in the navy, submarines down in Australia, was trapped by a beautiful girl there, married. He applied for admission here. He was a Brooklyn boy. He did not finish high school. He was, probably, between 25 and 30 years old when he applied. He did a good job in writing and so forth. I saw in him desire, motivation. After enrolling, he went to work! I remember he invited Vida and me to their home for dinner, and on one of the doors he had posted his grades, all of his grades. He went on and took his Bachelor's Degree here. He went to Purdue University, took both his Master's and his Doctorate, came back here and taught with Dr. Hartrick in Business Administration. He left here and went to Utah and _____ to a good job, then to San Diego, became head of the department. Unfortunately, he had a heart attack and died. There's an example, a good example, of one of your military students.

I had a letter some while back from Chester McLaughlin, who has a very responsible position with the government. He's doing very well indeed. And it isn't that I knew him well personally, but he came and applied like that. He wrote me years later to tell me how much he appreciated being admitted by individual approval.

C: How wonderful. Well, what were the other requirements for admission besides this letter? Did they have to take a test like an SAT test?

W: No. For those over 21, it was by interview and a short written assignment. Now, we did not have a great many people enter that way. I think I was so sparing that I may have been criticized a little by it. But those to me that had a good chance, I approved for admission.

C: What about the requirements for the people under 21?

- W: Under 21, they had to be graduates of a high school, with certain required courses: (as I recall) three years of English, at least two years of math, two years of science, social studies, etc. I think about 12 out of 16 units requirements. We stayed with the line there very close--didn't make exceptions. There was never any breakdown in admission standards. If the applicant's high school was accredited, and the applicant had credit in the subjects we required for admission, the applicant was approved for admission. We took them whether they were from El Paso High School, Bowie, or wherever. Of course, we knew that some of them might have failed tests (or not have done so very well), but once that motivation gets going, they go on to be some of your best pupils. Motivation is so much--so much.
- C: Let's talk some more about some of those problems during registration. You said that students were lined up all over campus. How many people did you have to hire temporarily to help you during registration?
- W: Faculty helped.
- C: Did they?
- W: Faculty did the registration. They were at the various booths, and then they had their departments, they had them stationed up in the library, you know, to take care of the advising and so on there. But the actual registration was handled by...I was simply in charge of it, and Bob Schumaker was out there seeing that it worked. And the faculty did all these jobs.
- C: How many days for registration?
- W: It was either, let's see, there were two or three for regular registration periods. We had late registration for a few days.

C: Did your office also supervise where the classes were held, the assigning?

W: No, we did not. No, no, we were furnished that, the schedules of the different departments, which were largely used. The only changes we made were to avoid conflicts and to provide ample sections to allow reasonable student schedules. But in the main, they knew from past experience how to do this, so to quite an extent we were proofreading, except for those few things that might be needed, such as another section, etc.--but not a great deal of that. Then, we sent the schedule to Carl Hertzog and he printed it (in the Cotton Memorial Building). He also printed the catalogues. I remember one year the catalog was rather outstanding. They used the texture of adobe on it.

C: I'll have to look that up.

W: I've forgotten the year. I think I had the catalogue. I wanted to get it and give it to them when they were asking me these things, but we still have 90 boxes we have not unpacked. I think we're going to give them to people for Christmas presents, and surprise them. (Chuckles)

I remember one night getting ready for registration, and I remember a long counter in the Registrar's office. When you go into the old part of the Administration-Library building, our offices were to the immediate right and to the end of the building. Consisted of three offices--one larger, the outer one, [with] this long counter. That night I had the counter loaded full of applications. I was trying to organize them. I was glad when my office force returned from vacations.

Dean Puckett came to me one time--I was sort of fresh out of Arkansas. We bought a place back in Arkansas, lived there another year. And they economized in those days. We were still not completely recovered from the Depression, which I lived through. But I remember he said to me, "Come in here a minute." He said, "Do you realize that we have the same number of people working as we had two years ago--when our enrollment was much smaller?" Dean Puckett wanted me to know that we ought to have more help, and he was right, of course.

C: Did you have scholarships or anything to dangle in front of the good students?

W: Some, but not a great many.

C: Did you actively recruit in the high schools here in town?

W: No. I didn't. It could be that others did. But I think, in the main, it was felt that we were going to get the biggest part of local students anyway because people didn't have a lot of money to go away to school. And those would could get scholarships or families with the money, so they could go to Austin or other places, there was a certain percent of them who would go. But, we got a lot of the good ones here because a lot of the good ones were poor, too.

C: People have told me that back in the early fifties the faculty and staff were a very close knit group.

W: Right.

C: And there were a lot of gatherings, social gatherings. Do you remember going to some of them?

W: Well, we had rather frequent receptions or get-togethers in Cotton Memorial Building--served punch and cake, sat around and visited.

And we were very close. We were a small group. I counted in this [annual from] 1951, and I counted 84 teachers, faculty. There [were] perhaps eight or 10 in administration. There could be some duplication there, department heads and so on. At any rate, we're talking about around a hundred people. And probably in '48, yes, in '48 we had some less than that. So with close to a hundred people, why, everyone knows everybody else on the faculty. I knew the faculty very well by the second day because I had memorized their names and faces backward, forward. Anytime I'd see that face, I knew the name. It was helpful -- like learning your ABC's or the multiplication tables: you can use it from the on, regardless of the argument against such things.

C: Well, I'm curious, Mr. White, why did you leave the University?

W: I don't know. I certainly wasn't fired. Dr. Elkins urged me to stay on, he was going on to Tech. Must be some gypsy or nomad in me. On checking, I find that every few years I change. We have moved 23 times in our lives. That probably explains it--something in the genes. And not money.

C: I think on that note we'll stop.