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Interview no. 718

Wilson H. Elkins

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Wilson H. Elkins
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 10, 1985
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 718
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 718

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

President of Texas Western College, 1949-1954.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollections of his years as president of the College.

Length of interview: 25 minutes Length of transcript: 14 pages

Wilson H. Elkins
May 10, 1985
By Sarah E. John
History of the University Project

E: Let me tell you something as a preliminary statement, that I'm not going to know very much, or recall a lot of what took place. I can tell you what my memories are. But I don't think you want me to use my imagination of what they ought to be. (Chuckles)

J: No, I do want basically your impressions and things that stand out in your mind and so forth from your presidency here. Well, before we get to your years here at...well, Texas Western College it was then.

E: Well, no it was not. When I came, that's the thing that stands out most in my mind, that it was not Texas Western College. And the development that took most of my attention the first year was changing the name. And if I had had as much experience as I have now, I probably would never have done it. Because I was young enough to be a little insensitive as well as just willing to be courageous or foolish to go ahead, as did some of the others that were here at the time, after I had been here for three or four months, that the name ought to be changed, that they had outlived the College of Mines and Metallurgy and that mining had declined a considerable extent at the time, and that it was developing into another kind of institution, and that it ought to have a change of name as well as a change of program, and that perhaps the change of name would aid in program change. We

didn't start out to name it Texas Western College. Hopefully it would be called Texas Western University, or better, what you have now. But we ran into difficulty with the name change immediately and we ended up the same year with Texas Western College of the University of Texas, which didn't satisfy me but was better than, I thought, nothing. And we all realized that we had to go through an evolutionary process, so that's the way my tenure at the university here began.

J: Where had you been before? Can you give us just a little background about where you had gone to school and so forth and then what brought you to El Paso?

E: Well, I was brought up in San Antonio. I wasn't born there. I was born in a small ranch town, near Kerrville. And I went to high school in San Antonio and then I went to the University of Texas. And then I went to Schreiner Institute, which was a two-year college, off and on there. I was playing football, went there on a football scholarship, and broke a leg and left there and went to the University of Texas the next year and broke my leg again and came back to Schreiner, and spent the year and then went to the University of Texas at Austin again and stayed there for four years. As I had been to Schreiner for some courses, so at the end of 1932 I took a Bachelor's and a Master's degree together.

And then I went to a little town in West Texas called Cisco where I coached football and taught American history, since I had double majored in history and government. And during the

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year I applied, as I had been thinking about applying, for a Rhodes Scholarship. And I was given a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University. I spent three years at Oxford and took two degrees there, a Bachelor of Letters and a Doctor of Philosophy, and then I came back to the University of Texas. I never intended to get into education at that point, but that was in the depths of the depression. We were in a depression, a real depression, the likes of which people don't realize now who didn't live through it. There were very few jobs available. And I came through Washington looking for a job and people told me I couldn't get a job in four years or five years. Well, while I wasn't married and didn't have any obligations except myself, I couldn't starve to death, and so I finally ended up getting a job as an instructor at [the] University of Texas. And I was there for only two years. Then I went to San Angelo, Texas to a junior college as president. And they were attempting to build a new junior college, and I spent ten years there as president. I had no experience as president, knew absolutely nothing about it. I guess that's the reason I survived. (Laughter) But we built a new campus entirely during that period, and now it's a senior college. That was from '39 to '49, and then in '49 I came here to the College of Mines and Metallurgy as president and stayed here until the fall of '54, which wasn't a long time.

J: How did you initially find out about the position here at the College of Mines or School of Mines? Do you recall?

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E: I had some connections with people in the University and with people on the Board of Regents of the University. I was not in the university system but I was in a junior college and I had kept up connections. I believe that Dr. Wiggins was here at that time, and I think it was he, that I followed. Anyway, when the job came open and he was going to Texas Tech, I was approached by the Regents. At that time I was interested in moving anywhere, rather than staying in one place, and moving into a senior institution. And this looked like a good opportunity and they offered me the job, so I took it. It was because of my connections with the University of Texas and having maintained them. I really don't recall just how I did, but I know that I knew the chairman of the board and I knew some others, I knew other people in the university. The position was open and I was looking around, so I ended up with the job.

J: Had you ever been to El Paso before, passed through or visited before that time?

E: Yes, I had been in El Paso before, but for no length of time, no great length of time.

J: You mentioned just a few minutes ago that the first thing you tackled when you came here was this name change.

E: I didn't come here with the intention of changing the name. I came here and started looking at [the] picture here. It was a small institution, of course, but it was a senior institution and it had a good record [in] mining engineering, particularly, and some other engineering programs. But that

was fading out to a considerable extent and it was beginning to become, or at least if it was going to become anything, it was going to develop into a more comprehensive arts and science institution with engineering along with it, and other things. So it seemed to me and to others, some others, that we ought to try for two things. We ought to have another name that would not limit us as much, and that would perhaps enhance the growth of the institution; and better still, we ought to have a more integrated connection with the University of Texas. The University's Board of Regents was the governing body for this institution, but the institution was really not a part of the University of Texas System. And that was one of the things that we were looking at, realizing that all of this might not come at the same time but that we were just looking ahead. And so we got started with the change of name, and before the end of the year the name was changed.

J: Was the faculty the people that wanted the change, or the community?

E: Part of them, yeah. And some of them didn't, especially those in mining engineering.

J: But do you think the big push then was from the community itself that wanted this?

E: No, I don't think so. The community was interested in the growth of the institution. But when you say the community, it's hard for me to remember at present just who was involved. I know a few, of course, that were, but most of

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them are not around now. And so we pressed on with it. It wasn't the greatest thing that ever happened in the world to the Board of Regents. (Chuckles) But anyway we succeeded in getting a change, and I thought that was a good thing.

J: Well, at least it formalized this relationship with the University of Texas.

E: And so as I say in the [Commencement speech tomorrow night], I think probably the main contribution that I made here during the short period was being a symbol of change and developing further the expansion of the institution, and getting it started off on a larger and more comprehensive direction.

J: Besides this, are there any particular events or problems or successes that you recall during your five years here as president? Anything that would stand out in your mind that you recall from your years as president here.

E: Well, it's hard to recall any special event. We were very much concerned about the improvement of the faculty and we spent a lot of time on that. They had some good faculty members but we didn't have, as most institutions like this at that time, adequate salaries. We didn't have the attraction that we needed and we were very much interested in getting that changed. And we made progress in that direction. We didn't just jump out there and have some big event with Einstein coming or something like that (chuckles), but we just started making progress, so as to improve the quality of the institution and give it a good base, for...the main thing

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was to provide a good base. I'm not trying to say that there weren't some good faculty members here. There were. People sometimes think that you're berating the faculty that you have because you're trying to improve the whole thing. But it's not true at all. If you're going to have an institution that's good, you've got to have a first-class faculty. Otherwise, you can't do anything because they do all of the teaching. You can help guide it and direct it and the like, but the administration's job primarily is to enable the students to learn better and the faculty to teach better. And then the faculty of course does what research it can do. But I don't know of any special event that took place in regard to that.

J: Do you recall any specific things that you did to try to attract people?

E: Well, the main thing we were doing was trying to get money for positions, and we were trying to get money from the Legislature, as we got our appropriation directly, although we were under the University of Texas. So I spent a good deal of time in Austin since the Board of Regents met there frequently, but I also was involved there, raising money. We were not in a position during that length of time to go out and raise a billion dollars, and didn't. Most institutions in 1949 and '50 were growing some, but that was not the period of the greatest growth in institutions. It was a period of some growth but not like the '60s or the late '50s. The ten year period from '55 to '65 was the big growth period

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and then it began to slow down a little bit, and some of them continued to grow until '70 or [so]. But I don't recall specific things that we did. We were doing things with special programs. Does the name Carl Hertzog mean anything to you?

J: Oh, yes.

E: Well, I was responsible for bringing him here and trying to set up a press. And I felt that developed well. Not in a great way, but he was a great guy and really, really fine in his field. That's just one example, and it's difficult for me to recall specific developments. I can't even remember the faculty people who were here, much less what happened. (Laughs) Because when I left here I was going another way, on another road.

J: Sure, that's true, that's true. Are there any administrators that you worked with, were there vice presidents as such in the years you were here?

E: We didn't have any vice presidents when I came here. There wasn't anybody except the president and then the deans and the department heads.

J: Are there any you remember in particular?

E: We had some staff people in administration. We began to bring in a few more. But the institution was just, just barely growing.

J: Do you recall any of the deans, for example, that you worked with?

E: I guess I'd recall them if I heard their names. Now I'm

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trying to think of the dean of engineering who was so opposed to the name change, and I think he's dead, but I can't think of it. And who was dean of the Arts and Sciences. Right now I just don't recall exactly. I remember Dr. Leech quite well. He came here at that time and later, he was to take a step up and got into administration. And there was a man here that I worked with as the financial director. I don't know whatever happened to him. His name was Smith, and I know he left here. And I'm trying to think of the names of some of the other deans but I can't remember.

J: Do you recall the relationship between, for example, the College and the people in the community or the business community during those years? Was the city pretty supportive?

E: Yes. One of the things that stood out here was how interested the city was in the institution, and that's not always true of a large institution, of a large institution like [the one] that I finally became connected with. But here it was very encouraging_. El Paso, in a sense, is somewhat isolated. In a sense. I don't mean that the people don't know about other places, but the location makes them much more interested in what they have, and it makes life very pleasant here, I thought, because people were interested and [I] got to know a lot of people. And if you wanted something you could go downtown and talk to the clubs and the like, and they would be interested in helping us. One of the things that we did, not because we felt that it was the

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primary factor in the development of the institution, but we got involved very much in raising money for athletics at that time because they were in need of some support and we had to have something better at the time or get out. I remember very distinctly raising money for a dormitory, to build a dormitory. And this was always a pleasant relationship, almost always, with the people in the city who were interested in helping to do anything that they could. But you did most of that right inside of El Paso or very close to it. And we were quite successful in getting things done.

I'm trying to think of some other special things but I don't recall anything right off hand. I know I was very, very busy running around, trying to promote the institution, trying to get money from Austin and meet with the Board of Regents. And having to be very busy with many things, I learned more about administration and about education. I had learned a great deal at the junior college level where I had to do everything, when I didn't have any administrative help to amount to anything. And then when I came here there was hardly any. It was just almost a one man operation, as far as administration, except the academic deans. I had people to help and so didn't have to do everything, I never have felt that you needed a million vice presidents and things like that even when I was head of an institution 10 times this large. But we did not have a lot of people. We had some very good people in proper places and here during my time. We were just beginning to develop the administrative

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structure.

J: When we were coming into the campus, you were saying that this Liberal Arts Building was built right about where your house was. Can you sort of describe the campus in the years when you were here?

E: Well, the library was right across from the museum. I guess it was there until rather recently. This building that we're in, of course, was not here. There was a student union about a third the size of the one that is here now. Most of these newer buildings now on campus were built since I was here. We added to the union building and there was one or two other buildings built. It's slow going to plan and build a new facility, but we were doing some building. On the way from this building, which is where our house was, right on up to the museum, there was nothing except for [a] sorority house. Do you remember that?

J: The building I believe is still there. Now it's used for offices, but the building is still there.

E: And Engineering was back over in that corner, two or three buildings. Business Administration was in one building over on the north side. All of the old buildings kept almost completely the style of architecture chosen at the beginning. The others have been added, for example, you have built a huge field house. The auditorium, I don't know whether we are using the same auditorium tonight for Commencement that was built during the time I was here.

J: The Magoffin building?

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E: [Yes.] And the field house, of course, is new. The stadium is new too. The old stadium was down at the foot of the hill. And of course there wasn't any Sun Bowl, or whatever it might have been called at that time. But there has been tremendous expansion, just as there has been in all of higher education. Higher education generally has more than tripled or quadrupled in population over that period of time since I was at Texas Western. But it was a nice looking campus at the time I was here. And one of the things that I remember best about it was how beautifully it was kept. And back over in there where the field house is now, the big one, they had a horse stable, and my kids used to go over there riding, one of them especially, all the time. And then the library, of course, I saw it when I was here a few months ago.

J: It's beautiful. It's wonderful to have it.

E: I didn't see the inside. I just drove by. And all these buildings right in through here all across in that direction toward the city have been built since that time. So the whole Arts program, the whole Science program have new facilities. One of the programs that we had in my times was in Fine Arts, and it was moving along pretty well. I think we improved it some. You don't improve anything very much in five years, but you can do something, if you make a move. The main thing is to try to move forward a little bit, and then let somebody else come in and take over. (Chuckles)

And then in 1954, early in '54, I was approached by some

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people in Maryland through a judge here in El Paso. His name was Thomason...

J: Very well known.

E: As to whether I would be interested in coming to Maryland. Well, they talked to the judge about me, and fortunately for me, he gave me a good recommendation and called and asked if I were interested. I told him I was interested in discussing anything. That was in March or February of the year, 1954. So I went up to Maryland on a couple of visits and ended up as president there. And the presidency when I got there was quite different than it was when I left, of course.

J: Well, you were there 25 years, so...

E: I was there 25 years approximately and had some good times and some years which are not so good. And that's the way progress goes, you take a few steps forward and you may take a step backward from time to time.

J: How would you assess or characterize, then, your administration? You've talked a little bit about it all through the interview, but is there anything when you think about your years here?

E: I think it was an administration of change and some progress toward making it a more comprehensive arts and science institution and moving toward a closer connection with the University. Whereas now you participate to some extent in the University's funds, at that time we did not. We had to get most of our funds directly from the Legislature, and all we

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could beg from the people. There has been a great changeover. The institution has developed and the present relationship has enabled it to develop into a much larger place, much more comprehensive. But every institution, almost every institution, goes through some change of that kind, not necessarily the same, but some.

J: Well, I don't have any more specific questions. If there's any other comment you'd like to make, please do.

E: No, I have no special comments to make.

J: Well, I appreciate you giving us your time this morning to talk a little bit about it.