

2-24-1999

Bruce Nelson, Oral History Interview, 1999

Laurence Smith
Eastern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.emich.edu/oral_histories

Recommended Citation

Smith, Laurence, "Bruce Nelson, Oral History Interview, 1999" (1999). *Oral Histories*. 6.
http://commons.emich.edu/oral_histories/6

This oral history is brought to you for free by the Sound Recordings at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
HISTORY

U

INTERVIEW
WITH
DR. BRUCE NELSON

LNS: Dr. Bruce Nelson, former Vice President for Academic Affairs at..

BN: Well the title was really Vice President for Instruction. I started as Dean of Instruction and then when the University became a University, I had the title of Vice President.

LNS: But it was always Vice President of Instruction.

BN: That's right. I kind of always insisted on that, although there were some suggestions that the change be made to Academic Affairs but since our primary attention was focused on Instruction, I felt that that was the more appropriate title.

LNS: You came to Eastern, in what year was it, do you remember?

BN: 1954.

LNS: 1954.

BN: I was at Lincoln School at that time and I was Superintendent of the school and also was Professor of Education and Director of Laboratory Schools. I had three hats.

LNS: So know, when you say Laboratory Schools, did that include Roosevelt School at Eastern or?

BN: Actually, no I don't think the title included that. Len Menzie was the Principal there and I was, we were rather co-equals as far as the lab schools were concerned.

LNS: And you were a lot younger in those days. How old were you in '54?

BN: Well in '54, I would've been thirty-nine.

LNS: You were married at that time. You had a family in the area?

BN: Yes, I had just been married in '50. My first wife had passed away in '49 and so at that time we came down to the University of Michigan and I completed my Doctorate there and then went from there to Battle Creek where I was consultant for the Secondary Schools under Virgil Rogers, who at time was President of the American Association of School Administrators. That's the reason I went over there. And then he left at the end of one year and so did I. I went to Lorain, Ohio and from Lorain, Ohio where I was Assistant Superintendent of Schools, I came up to Lincoln.

LNS: You had children?

BN: Yes, I had one daughter Jill by my first wife and we have four, Fran and I have four children.

LNS: Any of them go to Eastern?

BN: Yes, two of them went. And my daughter Jill was in the Special Education Program and John started out at Eastern in the early seventies and then left but came back in the late seventies and was graduated from Eastern.

LNS: And your other two, where did they go to school?

BN: Well, Nancy our youngest daughter went first to Arizona State and then to Bowling Green and finished up at the University of Wisconsin. And Scott was out at Arizona State for his entire for three degrees.

LNS: Why did they pick Arizona State?

BN: Well, he'd been injured in a toboggan accident when he was seven years old. And he was at that time had a head injury, which he was unconscious for over a month. And he came out of it with his complete facilities as far as his thinking ability and so on was concerned. But his motor system was affected so that he was classified as a quadriplegic. But he was able to get around a bit and able to use his arms and his legs somewhat. And so it was better for him to be out in a warmer climate where he didn't have to battle the ice and the snow and so on. He went out to Arizona State.

LNS: What's he doing now?

BN: He's a School Psychologist. He's has his Ph.D. in Psychology and he's also passed the Boards out there and he does consultant work but his primary position is as a school psychologist in the Mesa Public School System.

LNS: So I'm surprised you're here instead of Arizona.

BN: Well, we like the climate.

LNS: I notice in the phone book you are listed as living in Florida.

BN: Can't be. It must be somebody else.

LNS: I don't mean our phone book, I mean the Campus Emeritus phone book.

BN: I don't know.

LNS: Did you ever have a Florida home there?

BN: No. Never been in Florida. Well, we've been there but.

LNS: Maybe I'm looking at the wrong Nelson or something.

LNS: Could be. I'll check that out.

BN: I think there's a Herbert Nelson that's also a retiree. But he may have passed away now. I just don't remember.

LNS: So you came and Eastern was, Elliott was relatively new. He came in what '48?

BN: Yes, he was Superintendent of Public Instruction. And one of the last Republicans that was in office at the State level when there was an upsurge of Democrats there. And of course Eastern at that time was under the State Board of Education. He'd been a very effective Superintendent of Public Instruction. I'd had some knowledge of that because I was Principal of a High School up in Negaunee and there was a teacher during the time that he was Superintendent. So I had really only met him on a couple of occasions. I'd had one other contact with him when I'd discovered in, well he and I did our Doctoral dissertations on the same topic.

LNS: Oh really?

BN: There'd been a dissertation done back in the mid-teens on Teacher Supply and Demand and then there'd been another one later on and then in the early 20's and then Elliott came along in the early 30's and he followed along on it and then there was another one on it in the early 40's. And I came along in the 50's and in the course of the research for this dissertation I found that there was a dissertation written by a person out at the University of Colorado that was a complete plagiarism. And one of the chapters and the way I discovered it was that one of the chapters was a verbatim chapter from Gene's dissertation.

LNS: Really?

BN: So then we discovered that other chapters came from Iowa, from Pennsylvania and other places. So anyway, I wrote to him at that time and told him about it and that was in the early 50's. But then he had come in '48 and in the State Department of Public Instruction he had a reputation for bringing in young people who had ideas in the field of education, he had Bob Coopman, he had Earl Mosher, he had a number

of other people there. And so when he came to Eastern, he brought Earl Mosher over and Earl, I don't recall exactly what his title was but Earl was the one that I had had some little contact with him. And he when the position opened at Lincoln, why Earl was the one that enticed me to come up here. I wasn't really wanting to leave Ohio. I had only been there one year. And was really quite happy there and the prospect of coming back to Michigan and looking at the question of where my retirement was funded and all made sense to come back to Michigan. So we came up in the Summer of '54. And I was out at Lincoln Consolidated for just about Eighteen months. And as I said earlier why I don't know what was happening on the campus very much. I was too engrossed in getting, going we had a building program out at Lincoln and all so I was too much involved in that and so then I think Burt Isabelle decided to step down because he had a plan or organization in the college that was not accepted by the President. And so he felt that he would prefer to return to teaching and that's what he did.

LNS: He was a historian?

BN: Yes, right. Very fine person, excellent person.

LNS: His book unfortunately, he didn't have a chance personally to finish it, but there's a lot of gaps.

BN: Very unfortunate that he passed as quickly and as early as he did.

LNS: How old was he when he passed away?

BN: I'm not sure.

LNS: Not too old, though. Sixties?

BN: He may have been in his sixties. I'm not really certain.

LNS: Another person who did a lot of writing or at least wrote recollections of the Presidency was Edgar _____.

BN: Oh did he? I didn't know that.

LNS: Political Science, Faculty member. He was in his eighties someone asked him, some of them are rather entertaining. They are three pages long. He always starts out saying that his memory is not as good as he'd hoped it would, but he certainly could recollect a lot of that. The Munson Era, are you familiar at all with that? Even by reputation?

BN: Well I didn't know very much about it. However, I took my first degree up at Northern Michigan University and Munson was President there at the time. So I knew somewhat of his style of leadership and he was a strong individual, taciturn kind of person. Very much interested in the students and what they were doing. And I well recall being called in up at Northern on maybe you don't want to hear this.

LNS: No, No I want to hear.

BN: When I had just was in the last month or so of my Freshman Year and was called into the President's office and when I arrived, why he was busily engaged in writing something at his desk and didn't look up. I kind of coughed and tried to make some little noise to attract his attention and finally he finished whatever it was that he was doing and he looked up and he said, Nelson, have you ever thought of taking French? And I said, No, Mr. President I have had four years of Latin in High School and that's enough languages for me. And so, I had said I'm not interested in taking French. He said well, we'd like you to take French next fall. I said I don't want to take French and so when I said that he got up and walked over to the window and stood and he looked out toward Lake Superior and he had his hands behind his back and he was twiddling his thumbs and he was really disturbed at this kind of an answer. He said, Nelson, would you like to attend Northern next fall? And I said, oh, yes. I can't afford to go any place else. And he said, sign up for French. So I did. I took a year of French.

LNS: What was his motivation other than building enrollment?

BN: I think that was it. I don't think there was anything else. I don't know. Maybe he had some kind of feeling that maybe eventually when I got to working on a Doctorate that I may need a second language, then it came in handy then. So but that was the kind of interest he took in individual students up there. And another experience with him. And when I was a Senior the Head of the Biology Department there decided to bring some of the students down to the University of Michigan to get us acquainted down here with people and I think encourage us to go on. I was in no position to do that. But I came along and so we spent the day at the U of M and then we came over to say hello to the President over here. And of course, we'd traveled five hundred and some miles to get here and we thought this was really an occasion for us. And we stepped into his office and he had really nothing to say to us. He was he was a man of few words. And our professor tried to keep the conversation going but it didn't really work out very well and we weren't there very long.

LNS: Didn't bother him either did it, he didn't care that you were uncomfortable?

BN: Another little incident that is kind of interesting is that when the Industrial Arts Department was moving out of Boone Hall they were moving some desks that I guess that hadn't been moved in years. Behind one of them they found a requisition made out during the months and years and it was made out for a two-cent stamp. So I guess that tells a little bit about.

LNS: There's apparently no decision big or small that didn't deserve his attention.

BN: I would say that was probably true.

LNS: He was he left I guess he always hired, you try to solve the persons shortcomings that you replacing and Elliott was more attuned to conversation and more Democratic.

BN: Oh yes. Elliott would've been a politician he had been up in the Lansing scene for many years. He was well known throughout the State he had, he had traveled from one end of this state to the other. He knew a lot of people, he was, Elliott was, and since he was about the last Republican in State Office why he had a lot of influence in the Republican Party and so he was that kind of a person. He came in with a feeling of introducing more of a voice of the faculty and the operation of the university. It had been excluded from any kind of participation apparently during Munson's years and so he started out a very democratic fashion and then some of the faculty members apparently in those early years you'd have to check with someone that was really on the scene. But from what I understood at the time, they had taken over and so what was substituted was not really more of a democratic involvement of the faculty. But a few strong individuals who were then deserted somewhat by I don't know if that's the proper word or not, who lost the goodwill of the certain faculty members so there was kind of a turnaround. It was about at that time that I came in.

LNS: A couple years earlier before you came in, I think in '52, there was a, it came to a head a little bit because there was a decision over appointing Department Heads and I guess that Elliott decided that governance had its prerogatives but Presidential leadership had its and there seemed to be some sensitivity.

BN: I don't know what they exact cause it was. But there was something in the air.

LNS: He asserted his leadership and that seemed to reset the course.

BN: Yes, I think that that was probably the case.

LNS: As you make an assessment of the early Elliott years, what kind of person was he? How would you describe him?

BN: He was a person I think who appointed individuals and then was very supportive of those persons and what they were attempting to do. We did have somewhat of a problem in the appointment of the Department Head for the History Department, which at that time was, included all of the social sciences and kind of an umbrella. And after Syfargestrom retired, we were interested in getting a person in who would show leadership there and who would provide kind of a stimulus for the area. When it came down to the final, we had a committee on the faculty; they reviewed the various candidates. We had quite a number that we were concerned with. Two that were at the surface were Don Drummond and a man by the name of Warner at one of the Wisconsin colleges that had been on the staff over there for a number of years. So we invited both of them to the campus. I was particularly impressed by Don Drummond, and the faculty felt that Warner would be a better person. So there was a split here between here's this new administrator, relatively new person and the faculty was opposed. So we had one member meeting I attended with the faculty members and what I agreed to was that I would go over to Wisconsin and visit the people over there and see what try to introduce that as a kind judgment too, a factor so I did. What I found was that Warner was a person who would really not rock the boat at all had never developed any particular kind or shown an initiative over there as far as the faculty was concerned. And had not exercised leadership and had been in that role for many years. So I came back convinced that Don was the person who we should appoint. And so attended a meeting but I tried to be objective, as objective as I could about him because I knew all sides of the thing. There was a certain feeling of loyalty on the part of the colleagues over there at Wisconsin and was a well thought of person and all. But I felt that really for the needs of the department right now, we really should have a person show more strength in this leadership role. So I remember it was, I think it was Wiggins Wallace said well, finally when it came that we were at odds completely, he said well, will the president support you in this decision? And I said, I don't know. And I said why don't you go to the telephone and call him and ask him if he will, and so he went to the phone and I didn't know what Elliott would say. I had reviewed this all with him in advice President supports the Vice President, or the Dean so they voted to go along with Don.

LNS: He came from U of M?

BN: He was at the U of M. but he was at one of the colleges in the New York State System at the time.

LNS: Oswego System.

LNS: So that was his first introduction, the lady in purple came with him, I guess. A lot of years ago. Now what was it, Elliott obviously was a foil in terms of the way Munson's personality was. Munson was taciturn, Elliott more gregarious.

LNS: And his wife too was very much interested in what was happening. Munson was single. That role of the President's wife hadn't been played out on the campus for some time. And Wilma came in and she was a gracious person, the faculty wives group thrived under her leadership, and so that was another strength of union throughout the institution.

LNS: Now Munson lived downtown in the Huron Hotel.

BN: That's what I understand.

LNS: Today's era there would've been a lot of other questions would be raised.

BN: I don't know about any allusions to that.

LNS: But he lived down there. I guess the President's House I guess was knocked down after the McKenny's left and they were building a new one. He moved into four hundred, he lived where the current Presidents live. Elliott, is that correct?

BN: Yes, he did.

LNS: And that was a brand new home when he moved in.

BN: Could've been it was here when I came.

LNS: He was the first occupant.

BN: I see.

LNS: Did he have staff meetings? How did he run his business?

BN: Well yes, we had of course we were a much smaller institution at that time. We had about 2,500 students I think when I came in. We had the President's Council which met once a week and on other occasions when we needed to get together to come to some decision then we had the Faculty Council which was a growing organization, very, very active in participating. And I was selected by the faculty as a representative of the administration to meet with them. And I met with them.

LNS: So you sat on the faculty council?

BN: Yes, I didn't vote on it but they invited, I was a regular attender.

LNS: Did the President, he didn't Chair at all? Did he Chair the Faculty Council?

BN: No, not while I was there. The chairman was always elected.

LNS: So he went to the faculty council meetings though, the President?

BN: Well rarely.

LNS: I came across a couple where he gave reports. And I was.

BN: Well yes, he could've. Yes, there'd be a lot of interchange.

LNS: Who was on the President's Council?

BN: Well Ben Clager was the Financial Officer.

LNS: He was the Controller?

BN: Right. And Bill Lawrence was the Dean of Student Affairs.

LNS: He was there when you came?

BN: No, I don't know whether we came the same year or whether I think he came a year or two afterwards. I'm not sure about that. And the other person was Jim Green.

LNS: So he was Director of Development or something. Campus Planning.

BN: He was almost in the role of President's Assistant. But he didn't have that title. He was..

LNS: Eventually he did. Because I know at some point the Board when they asked Elliott to step down, they eliminated that position and I think it was at that point he was either Dean or VP plus Assistant to the President.

BN: Well Jim was a real spark plug then, coming up with a lot of ideas. Very fertile mind. And of course he was very much involved in the contact of the legislature, and, see at that time we did not have our own Board and that made quite a difference. The attention that was given us by the State Board of Education was minimal. I remember going into several meetings with President Elliott and we would go early in the morning and sometimes if we were fortunate, we would get in to see the Board Members at 6 in the

evening or after 6 and we would be told we had 20 minutes. And that was really no way really to run a university.

LNS: Sort of a demeaning process?

BN: Well, in a sense it was of course, it opened up the opportunity for a lot of action on the campus that one might not have had under the...

LNS: But Elliott shared the council of presidents too, by virtue, did he still chair in those days, was he still Council of Presidents of the four teachers colleges?

BN: I was don't know very much about that. I know more about the Council of Presidents after it developed with all of the State support at the college. But I don't know what went on in those early years.

LNS: The irony is the Elliott was Secretary to the Board of Education so he certainly knew all of those people. They may have been for a while.

BN: Well they change in it from year to year

LNS: When you came and Lawrence and you and Ben Clager, he was, Clager was an interesting person I read a couple of places where he was described as a sort of very tight with college funds and everything.

BN: Yes, I think he felt that his role was to control all of the expenditures and to question appropriations and that sort and to be able to show that we lived within the budget. And during those years, I don't know exactly but I can't remember exactly having seen the balance sheets at the end of the year but I'm sure that we lived within the appropriate amounts.

LNS: Read some place that he signed everything and if he wasn't there if he took a week off everything waited till he came back. Or he only reviewed requisitions one day a week or something. Does that ring true to you at all?

BN: I don't know. He would come up to the office to ask me about well what's this requisition about and he was very conscientious in his responsibilities.

LNS: Was he a bottleneck?

BN: Some people felt that maybe he was. But I don't think so. I think his questions were generally legitimate. I think it would have been helpful if we had known a little bit more about just exactly what how we were coming during the year. What developed, what I soon discovered, we would have a budget in the instructional area and we would budget for

salaries for people for the entire year. Well then because of one thing or another, people would leave or become ill or whatever and we would employ substitutes and we'd come up with a healthy balance each year.

LNS: We still do. Some things never change. In the lapsed funding.

LNS: What were some of the characteristics of the early years of the Elliott administration. What kind of issues were you confronted with?

LNS: Salaries were going up, enrollments were going up, I assume.

BN: But not fast enough and the budget was a big problem. The enrollments were leaping ahead that meant first of all that we had to have additional faculty. We in faculty members were in short supply, particularly in well-qualified persons and of course, being close to Ann Arbor, the tendency was to look to Ann Arbor in graduate students to come in on a part-time basis and teach a class or two. So that was a constant problem and that was pervasive on the campus because we allowed the departments to make the initial steps in finding candidates and come up with their recommendations. Another issue in the instructional area was how we could modify the curriculum to the various curricula in the various departments so that we could give the students an education, a college education that would be balanced and would somehow reflect some of the things that were happening all through society at this time and still doing it within a hundred and twenty-four hours. And of course, there was we were having some growing pains here also because of being primarily a teacher education institution, we had been focusing on that and the departments all felt as if they had of had to have a voice in curricula that would reflect their department in whatever kind of balanced approach we would have. Before I came into the office, they had developed the General Education Program and this General Education Program called for certain departments to unite together and teach a comprehensive course, an introductory course, in their composite fields. And it was not going very well, the faculty was not accepting it very well. So one of my first jobs was to try to salvage this program and to keep it going. And so we worked with the faculty council and we worked with faculty members who favored that approach but it was quite a struggle to have that kind of thing happen. I don't know about other issues.

LNS: We had the Vietnam War, the Korean War. That was around '54 when it started to get more people coming back again.

BN: Well we had a whole building problem of providing enough sites for teaching and that was a difficult one of course, because the buildings always came along two years later and then by that time the enrollment had increased. One of the ways in which we could compensate for the

lack of building facilities and for the number of classrooms was by changing the schedule somewhat and having more 8:00 in the morning classes, classes during the noon hour and classes in the late afternoon.

LNS: They were pretty crowded classes?

BN: Yes, I would say that they were.

LNS: Somewhere I read that there were 60 people in the classes and that they were really stretched and no grad assistants in those days, teachers did all their own grading. They didn't have any support?

BN: Oh yes and they were teaching and everyone was expected to teach 15 hours and some were teaching much more than that.

LNS: I read that Elliott got them to reduce the load, is that correct? The load was 15 and he got it reduced to 12?

BN: That's right, we reduced it to 12, eventually. That was the standard. Margaret Sill in the Geography Department who had taught for many years there complained. She came into my office one day and asked whether we'd lost faith in her teaching ability because she'd been teaching with her off-campus had been teaching something like twenty - twenty-one hours, so now she was only having to teach about fourteen and that was a reduction of about a third of her load. And she thought that we had lost confidence in her ability.

LNS: She liked teaching a big load?

BN: She did. She was a great gal.

LNS: Seems to me that one of the other things they did was they enabled teachers to teach for extra compensation, continuing Ed., which used to be part of the compensation. Is that correct?

BN: Yes, that was that and, well there was a little bit of controversy about that because some felt that if a person took on two additional classes in the evenings and had to travel some distances on that would take away from their effectiveness in preparation for their own classes on campus. I know I felt as a Department Head when I was out at the Lincoln School System that that was particularly true of some of our staff members out there.

LNS: And you as I recall from reading all the materials, you were pretty instrumental in getting the load reduced to 12 hours?

BN: I was.

LNS: Since you and Elliott now I understand both wrote dissertations on the same topic and you had his confidence and he supported you.

BN: Yes, he was very supportive of all of his people.

LNS: Salaries weren't too good though anyway. Then I think in the 50's there was tremendous inflation. Very spiraling inflation, any raises people got were eaten up by the cost of living quickly. What happened?

BN: There was a lot of mud around the campus too because of the construction that was going on.

LNS: What buildings were being built then?

BN: Well, the Library what's now, I suppose the old Library. That came in about 57 and then Pray-Harrod was under construction and then we had the Towers and so on over on, Residence.

LNS: Elliott's or Sponberg's?

BN: I'm not sure which that was. It could've been a little bit later.

LNS: Who were some of the names of others that were, Lou Profit came in he replaced Ben Clager, or he came in as his assistant and eventually replaced him. Who are other names that you recall from that Era? You mentioned Sill, she was, she's the one for whom, she was in what department?

BN: Geography.

LNS: Was she related to Sill for whom the...?

BN: No. I don't think so.

BN: I don't think so. She might be but I don't think so. Well, let's see, in the Art Department we had Gus _____. And in the Music we had Hayden Morgan. When I first came in George Willoughby was in charge of the Industrial Arts Department, Bob Pate in the Mathematics Department, Susan _____ was in Home Economics. Sy _____ was History.

LNS: Was Bingo Brown there at that point?

BN: Bingo was in the..he was...

LNS: Dean of Men?

BN: Dean of Men and

LNS: Susan Hill was the Dean of Women?

BN: Susan Hill was there in that office.

LNS: What kind of person was she?

BN: She was an Eastern lady and very friendly, very competent very calm about things. A person you really...

LNS: Good dean of Women.

BN: Pardon?

LNS: Good Dean of Women.

BN: Excellent Dean of Women,

LNS: Bingo's fame seems to come from he's the one for whom the legends exist. What was his magic?

BN: I think it was just friendliness and a good handshake and a pat on the back and a good memory for people and positive in his outlook. You always felt that you could relax with Bingo and that was it. He had been here for a long time, well acquainted with, particularly in the athletic program and all. And his public speaking I think was an asset.

LNS: Men of Ypsilanti.

BN: Right.

LNS: I heard a tape of him once.

BN: Did you?

LNS: We were sitting one of the older fellows in the room thought that Bingo was in and it was really a tape and it was embarrassing but. Now in 1954 just to refresh your memory. That's when the conflict occurred with the faculty and it was over who would make a decision I guess in the nature of the, what the nature of the Department Heads would be. I don't know if there was a particular Department Head and that's when I wrote that the faculty learned that shared governance was advisory it was the President

who had the authority and responsibility and Elliott was willing to act to protect it. Is that a fair statement?

BN: I guess probably it is. I think, I don't know. I was in effect was a Department Head as Head of Lincoln but my involvement with the rest of campus that occurred during that period was rather minimal. I think that it may have been there was a department head who was also in charge of the faculty council or something like that and maybe that's where the conflict came up I don't know though.

LNS: Now one of the things that I read also was Jim Green gave this interview there was a whole retrospective in the Detroit Free Press I think that's where it was and Green and Elliott were very upset about that there was not enough resources to acquire the modern teaching technologies of the day. As Dean of Instruction, that must've been something that you were also concerned about.

BN: What year was that?

LNS: It must've been about in the early sixties. There was a lot of concern over that they had an atomic sub-critical reactor or something and they didn't even have a computer for the institution yet. Does that sort of ring a bell with you at all?

BN: I don't remember that piece appearing but I think it was generally true, we had to place some emphasis on the acquisition of faculty members and after we finished that it seemed as if we never had money for instructional supplies. It just a very small amount for the Library and for the Audio-Visual Program and that time. And of course even that.

BN: And during the Sponberg years at one point I found at the end of the school year some time in June that we had approximately \$800 left in our budget in the Office of the Vice President. So at that time Comshare was just getting started over in Ann Arbor and they had advertised that they were ready to help institutions and businesses develop computer programs. So I called the President over there and asked him if he would be interested in coming over and looking at our registration process and we'd like to I think we had a machine what a 16/20 machine and something like that. It was one of the very primitive punch card things. Oh yes, they thought that this would be a good way to get started maybe with other educational institutions and they came over and spent a good part of the summer, we got into the early part of August and I said well, we've got to make a decision, we can't wait longer. Are you ready to go ahead with the registration? I remember it being down at the computer office there till the wee hours of the morning, and they finally came up with an answer that they couldn't do it. They'd spent much more time on that,

hours wise than we were able to pay and they submitted a bill later for \$2,800 and that was kind of a surprise to President Sponberg there that bill.

LNS: Nothings changed. It's still the same problem. Only it's in the millions now. You mentioned you came in '54, I don't know why my records show '55.

BN: Well I came to Lincoln, so I became a member of the staff you see in '54.

LNS: But you became Dean of Instruction in '55?

BN: In '56.

LNS: In '56.

BN: Right, in January of '56.

LNS: Oh ok. And that's when and Jim Green, he was the Librarian, he was Librarian at that time and he became the Director of College Planning and Development. Does that sound right? Did he come from the Library?

BN: He was from the Library. I don't know. He was not the Director of the Library.

LNS: No, no. He was a Librarian.

BN: He was a Librarian.

LNS: But he became the Director of College Planning and Development.

BN: That's right.

LNS: Ok. And then Bill Lawrence then moved from the faculty ranks to become Dean of Student Affairs.

BN: No, he came directly here into Student Affairs. I think. I don't know. He was not on the faculty before that.

LNS: Ok. I thought he was in the Psychology Department. Is that a possibility?

BN: The what?

LNS: Psychology?

BN: Well, he was a Psychologist. But we didn't have a Department of Psychology.

LNS: Now, did Bingo Brown and Susan Hill report to him as Dean of Student Affairs?

BN: Yes.

LNS: Ok. So you were here just right before we became, we went from Michigan State Normal College to Eastern Michigan..

BN: Eastern Michigan College.

LNS: Do you remember those days? Was there much hoopla over the change in names?

BN: No.

LNS: No, I didn't think. One of the interesting things is there was some discussion about different names. Some wanted it to be Michigan State College because Michigan State had changed its name, but that didn't go, but they. Do you feel that locking it into Eastern Michigan College helped seal the regional?

BN: Regional, yes. Well, I suppose it did. I don't remember anything about where that changed, I suppose it was in the old State Board of Education. And I'm not certain how much they prevailed on that idea.

LNS: Well the fact that the other teacher's colleges had already become colleges and they had already changed their names, I think.

BN: Northern and Central and Western.

LNS: Sputnik period. Remember that? The Big Race, more Science in the curriculum?

BN: Well there was a real effort at that time to improve in the public schools the courses in Science and so on. I headed up a committee for the State on that in the late fifties and we tried to encourage the exploration of the whole field and qualification into the curricula of the public schools. Of course, there was activity on campus too. Well, we needed to put more money into that field get better equipment. That sort of thing.

LNS: When did your titles change to VP's? Do you remember when that was?

BN: I think it was at the time we took on the University status.

LNS: Oh, ok. So that would've been 1959.

BN: Probably. I don't know where you could check that record anymore but it was probably around.

LNS: I'll just go with that. But when you switched, I noticed that the records show that you did have a computer when you came. Was there a computer?

BN: No.

LNS: That was just punch cards then? When did we get our first IBM computer or something? That was in the late sixties then or...was that before Sponberg came?

BN: No, that was before Sponberg. Well,

LNS: Does '62 sound right?

BN: I don't know whether they call these original machines computers, I don't think they did. You know, they were the punch card operation and those were in the, that happened. Well, when I was working on my dissertation over at the U of M I used punch cards at that time and that was back in the early fifties then we came over here, why it was, we had this one machine, I think it must've been in the late fifties.

LNS: It was before sixty-two do you think? These are dates that I have some confusion with.

BN: Well, I'm not exactly certain either. Larry, we, I know that our first registration was over in the old gymnasium which has been torn down near the Water Tower.

LNS: Burned down.

BN: That and I'm trying to think what kind of cards we had at that time.

LNS: Sort cards. Those were the early computers but it wasn't keypunch and everything. Let me move away from that. The later years of Elliott which were sort of tumultuous he there's some confusion, the Board eventually asked for his resignation, he refused it. They fired him and prior to that it was the thing that happened where a group of anonymous people originally head up this Commission or to investigate problems confronting the campus. Do you recall that at all? Am I refreshing your memory? Or opening up unpleasant doors?

BN: Well it was a time of crisis I think.

LNS: What was the crisis over?

BN: Do you remember who was the Superintendent of Public Instruction at that time?

LNS: No.

BN: Head of the State Board? Secretary of State Board? I can't remember his name either. I've been trying to think of it. I think it was partly political because he was interested, he knew that Gene was approaching retirement. The Democrats had taken over the, I think they had three of the four votes on the State Board and the only person left I believe, I want you to be sure to check this, if you wanted to use it, but I believe that Steve Nisbit was the only Republican left on the Board. And so it was pretty certain that what the Board was going to do would be determined by the Democrats. Well here was Gene who had been a strong Republican when he was in the State Government and I guess they felt that well he was getting to the point where he should really retire and this other person who was the Superintendent of Public Instruction had great aspirations to be here and so he was interested in seeing the Gene was moved out as soon as possible. That was one aspect of it. Another aspect had to do with the athletic problem. Well there's been something written here recently about this because of Fred's, Fred Trosco's death and all. And Fred was a neighbor of ours, lived right across the street here.

LNS: Really? He was the football coach, right?

BN: Yeah football coach. And had in the early years his coaching he had been very successful and had good seasons, but in the later years, that whole athletic phase of the activity and change and other schools were able to offer football scholarships and attract the better athletes and so Eastern was pretty much left and we didn't have those scholarships and I think the position that as far as Elliott was concerned his position was that the needs of all students ought to be treated equally and he wasn't about to sacrifice dollars or place them over in advancing the athletic program when he would have to take it away from the other fields. I don't really ever remember any proposals that we ever had or anything where we ever acted directly on it some of the newspaper publicity recently or even back at that time seemed to indicate that the administration as an administration, including me and Bill and Lou, that we were opposed to football although we weren't all. This riled up the alumni and so they began to and they had formed some sort of organization.

LNS: Yes, called Organization for Eastern Michigan University Action.

BN: Was that it? And I think there were certain people in the Southeast here that were Alumni and so on that were very active in this and up at Flint and all and they sided in then with the people from Lansing any other persons that were disconcerted with what was happening at Eastern. So they formed quite a movement there and got a lot of publicity.

LNS: They had some secret meetings, they wouldn't reveal who were. Had to be a very painful time to be President.

BN: Well it was, it was. It was very difficult, but I would have to say that Gene retained his composure through it all. I mean he was not a person to get excited. He had his own political basis in the State, he was very well respected and so he just decided to ride it out, he wasn't about to resign and of course, what was happening then was the George Romney was coming forward at that point with his grass roots campaign to be Governor and I think Elliott with his political savvy saw that George had a very appealing program there, so he decided that he would ride it out and the Constitutional Convention came into play here and Steve Nisbit was the Chairman of that Constitutional Convention and one of the things that they did was to as you know, to change the Constitution so that we have our own Board and took the power away from the State Board and practically the first action of the new Board was to rescind the action.

LNS: Didn't they aggravate the situation at North Central, came and investigated, Elliott told the State Board, bring get North Central to bring a team moved up accreditation visit a year and Detroit News of Free Press came out with this huge editorial that the State Board wouldn't release the findings of the North Central Committee? Does any of that ring a bell with you at this point?

BN: Well that's a long time ago. And I don't remember the details of it. But I do remember that it was a very difficult time because the Board, I'd been through that Leadership Program over at the North Central and had served on a couple of accrediting teams and I think that our, I had some feeling that the accrediting team was overwhelmed by some of the problems that we'd been facing all along.

LNS: Those were just overload of....

BN: Right, our budget really wasn't where we and all and what happened was when they came on campus, then they interviewed individual faculty members, they tapped into just a big flow of discontent and so that, they became very much concerned about that.

LNS: Ambitions were met, the President was asked to resign as I mentioned, he said no, so they gave him a year and told him he'd be gone. And that was when the new Board came in anyway and so they first thing they did was rescind the recommendation or the resignation.

BN: I don't remember about whether if they asked him to resign or whether they just said, he ought to

LNS: They gave him a chance. He said he wasn't resigning. He was close to retirement anyway.

BN: I don't think they actually fired him.

LNS: Well they did. They passed a resolution terminating his role.

BN: Oh, they did?

LNS: The Board, the State Board. Because the first thing the new Board did was come in and rescind it at the first meeting, they rescinded that and appointed him for another year. Not for only altruistic reasons but also because of the fact that they said it would take a while to select a First Class President. Do you think that it was the athletics that his response to athletics and having the university resign the interstate intercollegiate athletic league and then be not without any competitors and do you think that was the real force behind most of the organizing effort, or is that a wrong conclusion?

BN: I don't know. You'd have to ask the people that were involved in that. I don't know. The way it appeared to us was that there was a lot of emphasis of that and but in my own thinking it seems to me that it was greatly influenced by the political situation.

LNS: So the two together. One was fuse, the other was powder.

BN: Probably.

LNS: One of the names that has come up is Bob Curry. He was the Alumni Director or something.

BN: Don Curry.

LNS: Don Curry I meant to say. Was he a major player in any of this at all? Or, do you have any recollection?

BN: I don't know whether Don was still here. Was he on the campus?

LNS: Yeah, he worked for Elliott in his early years he was

BN: Well he had and he had been very influential person on the campus and a very fine fellow.

LNS: Still very attuned to Eastern.

BN: Yes. He is. But I don't think he was here. He was off-campus I think maybe. He was Superintendent over in Royal Oak.

LNS: By that time.

BN: I don't know whether he was there by that time. But because I think he had some other role after he left here. But then mentioning...

BN: Now another...

BN: I don't know. Don, I think Don may have been a little bit unhappy with Gene. I'm not sure about that because he may not have been appointed to some role that he wanted to have. I think he and Burt Isabelle were pretty close and all. But I wasn't really aware that Don was playing a big part in that.

LNS: Ray Loeschner. Does that name, is that how it's pronounced?

BN: Yeah.

LNS: Does that name emerge?

BN: Well that came much later because Ray wasn't here under Elliott.

LNS: He came during the Sponberg Era?

BN: Right.

LNS: Ok. We'll come back to him. Then Elliott handled that last year pretty well it appears. He was pretty much a gentleman. Must've been embarrassing in the community to have all of this out in the press that the Board had fired him and a new Board re-appointed him.

BN: Well, it didn't make a lot of difference as far as our functioning is concerned. We still had our meetings. There were some individuals that were under fire more than others, I think that Jim Green was a lot of pressure placed on Jim. Jim was well he was a shaker and a mover and liked to see things get done. Some people thought, well he was quite dictorially, they didn't think that he should have the role that he was having

in influencing Gene. But I would have to say that as a partner and on the team that he was really a responsible and was doing everything that was and was in favor of developing the Student Affairs and the Instructional area and so on. And a very active person in it. But his personality did grate and so he was under a lot of pressure at that point.

LNS: Do you think he went back to the Library when he was?

BN: I don't remember whether it was the Library or whether he, it seems to me he went into the History Department.

LNS: That's what I thought but

BN: I think he didn't go back to the Library. I'm quite certain of that. I think it was the History Department.

LNS: Ok. Now Elliott's last years. You were friends with him. Did you stay in touch with him?

BN: Yes, we would go down to, he had a place down at Adrian and we would go down on a Sunday afternoon visit with him and with Wilma and he had a daughter that was living there in Adrian at the time and of course, his other daughter is over in Ann Arbor.

LNS: Is she still alive?

BN: Oh yeah, if you haven't talked with her you ought to talk with Ellen.

LNS: Ellen.

BN: Oh, yeah. She could probably fill you in about how he reacted in all of these.

LNS: What's her maiden? Is she married?

BN: Her husband was an Anesthesiologist at the University of Michigan Hospital and passed away about maybe a year and year and a half ago. And she lives over in Ann Arbor. Her name is Weatherbee, Ellen Weatherbee and she's very active in the Matthai Botanical Gardens. And she teaches classes out there.

LNS: Oh good, I'll meet her there.

BN: You'll be surprised to see Ellen, talk with her she's a real individualist.

LNS: Well he died of a stroke or something?

BN: I think that's possible the problem. He had a game leg for her a long time and developed after he had left office or something. But I don't remember exactly what he died from.

LNS: He died in '72 or something like that?

BN: Could've been.

LNS: Did you go to the funeral?

BN: I don't remember whether we did. Fran and I have been to so many funerals.

LNS: I understand. Then Sponberg comes.

BN: Yes.

LNS: You're still Vice President for Instruction under Sponberg?

BN: Yes I am.

LNS: You're a Vice President right through until Brickley comes. Is that correct?

BN: Right.

LNS: And the Sponberg era begins with great promise. It's a difficult time across the country for every campus, Eastern's no exception. Any thoughts about the Sponberg era?

BN: There were a lot of hopes there at that time because we had a new Board, we had our own Board. And that was a whole new development and that kind of quickened the action with regard to preparation of budget proposals and proposals for changes in curricula and so there was a lot of expectation when Harold came in and I think things went along quite well.

LNS: Lou Profit played a very dominant role?

BN: Lou followed Ben and he was quite instrumental.

LNS: Now who was Ray Loeschner in all of this? It's hard to find any references to him. I came across a cartoon or something in the newspaper everybody's got a parking spot and his is bigger, he's got the biggest car and it's sort of an analogy that he was getting an increasing role in the administration or something or he's got what was sort of an empire builder or something like this.

BN: Well in a sense, Ray took the place of Jim Green. See because I suppose that a President feels that he has to have someone that he can really turn to and be dependent upon that he knows that his Business Manager is going to be concerned with the business affairs and he's going to develop an interest in that and people in student affairs, they're going to be all for their area and the instructional and the faculty and so on and he needs somebody he can turn to and see that certain things that are associated with his office are accomplished and people in these other areas feel that that person is interfering with their role and so on. And he, I don't know where Harold had met Ray, but I think it was back at Washburn College, I think perhaps it had been there. So he was brought in and I don't recall now what the title was whether it was Administrative Assistant or something of that sort.

LNS: But he became a Vice President eventually?

BN: I don't...

LNS: The records are very unclear.

BN: I don't know. I'm not sure about that. And he became a member of the President's Council. And so he was very much involved he was an equal vote with everybody else in the Council. At one point, when I was going to be away, the suggestion was that Ray meet in our area with and Harold made the suggestion and I have to say that I was a little bit uneasy about what was happening there then to have Ray come in because it had been our policy that whenever I was off-campus I would always recommend that one of the Deans fill in and I felt that that was a good thing for us to do because in that role and I began to realize what some of the problems were in the various other areas. But then Harold said, well he needs that kind of training, he needs to understand your area better than he does. So it worked out that way but we did have a person, who was, I think it was Earl Ross was the person who had in the interim.

LNS: Wasn't he working in the College of Business then?

BN: Yeah. So that what and I think maybe Ray's goals were somewhat higher here than Eastern and then he went on to be the President of Olivette college, he was where Ohio Northern I think it was and then he went up to the Mott Foundation. I'm not sure certain whether he's retired now or what he's doing, I presume. I think he lives over in the Grand Rapids area. Well, so it didn't affect, his involvement didn't affect us greatly in the instructional area.

LNS: The sequence in events was take over by black students in Pierce Hall at that point. Do you remember that?

BN: I sure do. I remember exactly. You want me to recount that?

LNS: That preceded the Vietnam takeovers or did that come at the same time or?

BN: I don't know the sequence. I was supposed to attend, I had a meeting scheduled that morning and I was in another one of the buildings and so I went down about 7:30 and my secretary or one of the secretary's was already there, Jan Millard and she and here when I arrived, here the security people all around the building and I didn't know quite what was up. Went in and I was standing outside, they wouldn't let anybody in and the doors were locked, I guess from the inside, they had chains around the doors on the inside. And Jan comes to the window there it was facing Forest Street there opens up the window and says, Dr. Nelson, here are your materials for the meeting this morning. And handed them to me out the window. Well I wasn't going to any meeting with all this excitement going on. And so I remember how we got in and closed the place down and then the Sheriff came over and brought his dogs. And I know Bill Lawrence got so mad at the Sheriff, Harvey, Sheriff Harvey. What a guy.

LNS: Sort of a demagogue?

BN: I guess you could say that.

LNS: Did Bill Lawrence resign over there? I know he left around that time.

BN: No it was some time after that.

LNS: Let me ask, this has been a long sitting already, but I'd like to know if you're going to be around next week that we could come back and talk a little bit more about the Sponberg era.

BN: I think so.

LNS: I'd love to do that. I'd like to talk about the comings and goings of people. I'd like to talk a little bit about the impact that you remember about the John Norman Collins situation on the campus, the impact of the black student takeover, impact of the war, the arrival of Tim Dyer and George Strip on the Board, the dynamic duo and the transition and some of the other characters that existed. Do you feel up to that?

BN: Do you mind turning the machine off?

LNS: I want something on the record. And I'll turn the machine off for today cause we're right at the edge of the tape. I'd like to come back and talk.

1964-1965
1966-1967
1968-1969
1970-1971
1972-1973
1974-1975
1976-1977
1978-1979
1980-1981
1982-1983
1984-1985
1986-1987
1988-1989
1990-1991
1992-1993
1994-1995
1996-1997
1998-1999
2000-2001
2002-2003
2004-2005
2006-2007
2008-2009
2010-2011
2012-2013
2014-2015
2016-2017
2018-2019
2020-2021
2022-2023
2024-2025