John W. Porter Oral History Interview, 1999 May 7

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EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
HISTORY

INTERVIEW
WITH
DR. JOHN W. PORTER
Seventeenth President
LNS: May 7th, it's a beautiful Friday morning, the sun is out. It's warm really beautiful Spring Day and this is tape 2.

LNS: When we talked before, we never got into who you were how did you get to where. You may not even want to talk about that. But tell me a little bit about your background, where were you born? What was your childhood like?

JWP: I was born in Ft. Wayne, Indiana on August the 13th, probably on a Friday, August 13, 1931. And I had a very, very successful and beneficial elementary experience, had wonderful teachers, remember many of my teachers, the principal had many special assignments I remember way back in the 1930, late thirties, early forties during the war. We put the first bell in the elementary school but some student had to be the responsible student for going out to ring the bell. It was like a doorbell. And my job was to ring the doorbell for the whole school so that the classes could pass. To me, I was in the Fourth grade or Fifth grade.

LNS: So that was you first school administrator job?

JWP: That was my first school administrator job. They put this bell in, it was on a piece of plywood and my job was to go out and ring the bell. I never will forget that. And now I can't, I say to myself now that you've brought it up. Why in the world out of all those thousand kids in Justin Study Elementary School was I selected to ring the bell, which was a responsible position? Cause you had to ring the bell ten minutes before each hour. But anyway, I played in the band. I played the trombone.

LNS: Really?

JWP: And I was athletic. And then I had to go to a different Junior High School. I had to catch a bus, had to ride a bus.

LNS: This is still in Ft. Wayne?

JWP: This is still in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. And I was a very good athlete in Junior High School.

LNS: In what sports?

JWP: Well in Junior High School all we had was basketball and track. And High School, I was by the end of my four years, designated as the outstanding athlete in the whole city, city of several hundred thousand people at the time.

LNS: All-American type? Or All-City?
JWP: And we had some great players. One of them was a fellow named Johnny Bright who was a Halfback and I was a Quarterback. He became the NCAA leading scorer. He was a kid that became historically famous cause he was hit in the jaw and had his jaw broken in a racial incident cause he was at Drake University when he was in school.

LNS: He was African-American?

JWP: Yeah.

JWP: Great teams and I was a National Honor Society Student, I got all A's and B's. I don't think I ever had a C. I never missed a day of school from Kindergarten through First Grade.

LNS: Now Kindergarten to, not First Grade?

JWP: I mean Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade. Never missed a day. Never missed a day.

LNS: Family, parents? What did your parents do?

JWP: Well during the war my mother worked making bombs at a place. You know back in those days the _____ Pistons were from Ft. Wayne, Indiana. I don't know if you realize that or not. So Ft. Wayne had one of the real big professional basketball teams and during the war a number of factories made bullets and my mother worked in a factory. My dad had a restaurant and things were much different and obviously, I was going to school during the Forties. Graduated in '49. But I had, I was very fortunate. All I can say is I was very fortunate.

LNS: Brothers or sisters? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

JWP: Yeah, I had a couple of brothers a sister who had passed away. A brother who had passed away during that period of time too. And my last brother passed away in 1960. So it's been a long time. Both of my parents passed away a long time ago. My dad in '54, my mother six months before my last brother passed away. So I've had some troubles in the family. But anyway, just leaving just getting right up to here. I had great experiences in High School, tremendous support from great teachers. I had good academic record.

LNS: Did you work prior to high school?

JWP: Yeah, I worked at the Steel Mill. Joslyn Steel Mill.
LNS: How do you spell Josyln?

JWP: J-O-S-Y-L-N.

JWP: And I had a tremendous experience at Albion College was a great institution.

LNS: So you applied to college from high school?

LNS: How did you pick Albion?

JWP: To show you how it worked... Well it was the closest school to Ft. Wayne. Back in those days, there was still a lot of racial discrimination around, you know, 1949. We were still a segregated, very segregate society. In fact, I'll jump ahead and say you know I held the scoring record at Albion for twenty-five years.

LNS: Oh really?

JWP: Yeah in basketball. But during the time that I played basketball at Albion and we'd go into Ohio to play at Wooster or some of those schools down there. We had to stay as blacks in a different place than where the white students played and in fact, when we went to the State Championships in 1946 in Indianapolis, black players had to stay in a black Hotel in Indianapolis. So that's the experience that I have.

LNS: School didn't take a stand on it in those days, did they?

JWP: No they didn't take a stand on it, you just put the blacks over in the black neighborhood and the whites wherever they usually stayed. There wasn't, people weren't taking a stand. But I had great experience. Albion was a great place, great people. When I finished Albion, I felt I could compete at any level.

LNS: What did you study at Albion?

JWP: I majored in Political Science. Minored in History and English. You used to have a Major and two Minors in the old days. And got a teaching certificate. I wanted to be a architect, but that was a dead end. So I had to end up...

LNS: What do you mean by a dead end?
JWP: There's just no way to become an architect. It probably would've been something. But to be an architect back in those days you had to have some resources. See you had to know somebody or have somebody. But anyway, I came to Lansing.

LNS: Before you leave Albion. You were involved in athletics. Any other things at Albion?

JWP: No primarily in athletics and I worked full time.

LNS: What did you do?

JWP: I worked at the Steel Mill.

LNS: Still worked in the Steel Mill?
JWP: Called Mallible Iron, Albion Mallible Iron. And also I worked for four solid years at The Albion Recorder, this was the local newspaper and I turned the lantern-type machines on. Back in those days they had lead that printed the newspapers and my job was to get up at 4:30 in the morning and turn the lantern-type machines on so they could warm up to melt the lead so that they could print the newspaper. Tremendous experiences. But I came to Lansing.

LNS: Now you're graduated from college?

JWP: Yeah. Great experience. Came to Lansing. Couldn't find a job. I'm just going through this.

LNS: Lansing, meaning MSU? You mean to college or you just to the city?

JWP: Came to the city of Lansing and got a job with Michigan Bell Yellow Pages and during the daytime and a job as a Janitor for the school system.

LNS: This is with your Bachelor's Degree.

JWP: In 1949, Lansing had not had a single black teacher. And Lansing, the only black teachers were in Detroit. This is hard to believe but it's true and Lansing was trying to deal with this issue. They hired, they adopted a policy that they would hire two black teachers a year, starting in 1949, but that the appointments had to come to the Board. And the Superintendent was fellow named Dwight Rich, great man and the Deputy Superintendent was a fellow named Forest Averil who was a very good friend of mine. And he was the former Superintendent in Forest Hills, outside of Grand Rapids which was the East Lansing / Bloomfield Hills kind of a school district. And I'm telling this story and I'm gonna finish up right quick here. I'm working for Michigan Bell on the Yellow Pages and cleaning the Mt. Hope Elementary School and it's 1949, December holidays between the twenty-fifth and January the third and during the, I had worked cleaning the schools all Fall and cleaning the schools all Summer.

LNS: You were only eighteen at this point?

JWP: Twenty-one.

LNS: Twenty-one, so you were born in '31.

JWP: Yeah. This was fifty-three.

LNS: Oh '53. You said 1949.
JWP: No, no. '53. I started Albion in '49. I'm sorry, it was 1953. And I did say '49 so that was a mistake. And I was in all of the schools and it's kind of interesting because forty-five years later they still do the same thing and that is you clean the schools and you wax the schools during the vacation periods. So I was waxing the schools and Forest Averil tapped on the window and I was running the buffer. I was buffing the floor of the school. And he says, we've just had a teacher at West Junior High School resign and the Board has just adopted a policy today that we could hire another teacher and I'd like to know if you'd like to begin teaching in January? In the old days, we had semesters, this was before your time. Where you had a first semester, and actually you moved to the second semester and if you didn't pass the first semester you didn't move.

LNS: It wasn't before my time but go ahead.

JWP: I'm making you feel good. So you don't have semesters anymore. But you really had to do the work, I like the semester idea. Anyway, it was the second semester and the schools all had to reorganize for the second semester and at the time I was making $3,100 as a Janitor. I says, Yes, Dr. Averil, I'd be delighted, that's what I'm interested in doing. So I started working in the Lansing Schools in 1954, January of 1954 and my salary was $2,900. I had to take a $200 cut in pay from my job as Janitor and that was before there was negotiations. So I had an individual contract that I had to sign, cause there was none of this union stuff. The union stuff didn't start until 1966. So that was, I can look back on it now and I worked with the, I was involved in a lot of social stuff, NAACP, Education Committee and did a lot of work and stuff. Had a family worked for the State of Michigan and once I got the job at $2,900, I worked for the State.

LNS: This is after you've been teaching for a while?
JWP: I worked for the State evenings. And I taught and then in 1957, Lynn Barland, who was the State Superintendent for Public Instruction, now the reason I'm going through this hurriedly, you asked me for this and I'm not giving you all the gory details, I'm just giving you the highlights that pop through my mind. You got to put this in the context of what's transpiring for your record, and I don't want to take a lot of time cause we've already taken some time. But, you got to keep in mind that the most significant event of the second half of the Twentieth Century, in my opinion, besides World War II was the US Supreme Court decision of 1954. Now keep in mind that I am right at the 1953 - 1954 Brown vs. Topeka Kansas and being a history buff and a political buff and Thurgood Marshall being quite prominent in 1954, you can see where I am coming from. So I'm sure that that probably had something to do with the Lansing School Board wanting to start bringing in black teachers. And in 1957 the State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Michigan, Lynn Barland, who was a very good friend of mine, wanted to hire a black. Wanted to hire the first black professional in the department of education. I know this sounds kind of weird. So, I was the one that was selected by the NAACP to be the one to sit at the door. You know, it's like the kids in Little Rock, I was the one that had to walk to the door. Like James Meredith did out at Oxford Mississippi.

LNS: Yeah, but here they wanted you. There they didn't.

JWP: So I was, that's how I got started there.

LNS: And when did you go to school? You went to MSU to get your Ph.D.

JWP: What I decided I was one of those individuals given these experiences, I'm hurrying through and I still feel this as you well know from our ten years of working together is that I believe you have to be prepared when the door opens. One of the problems that I have today as I talk to many people as the door opens before they can prepare and I can ah-ha it doesn't work that way. I was the first black I think in Ft. Wayne that ever had a Ph.D. I mean, what the hell do you want a Ph.D. for? So, my position has always been. See I got a Ph.D. in '62. That was seven years before I became the State Superintendent. There was no reason for me to get a Ph.D. I'm just some education consultant in the Department of Education. But I was fortunate cause I set up the State's first Guaranteed Loan Program. I set the State's scholarship program in the '60's. And I was in charge of Higher Education and then in '69 was the State Superintendent and was the architect of the Michigan Education Assistance, or architect in the 60's of the Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority and was appointed by Lyndon Johnson to several Commissions and then with the architect of the Michigan Education Assessment Program which is still, probably think it
just started a few years ago in the '70's along with a lot of other stuff in the '70's. Was on a lot of Commissions and Boards, Chairman of the Chief State's ____ of the United States, Chairman of the College Board and on and on for ten years. And to make a long story short and to get this thing over with, cause I feel kind of awkward talking about this.

LNS: Why?

JWP: Well...

LNS: It's interesting.

JWP: It is interesting. It is, it is, it is. I should write a history of it.

LNS: Well, we're recording it now.

JWP: My experience has been and I told Governor Milliken this who I admire greatly as one the great Governors that if a person stays in a job successfully for ten years that is usually about as long as the system can tolerate them successfully. And that if because the experiences as State Superintendent you last about four years, University President usually lasts about four years and so if you can do things for a ten year period, it's time to have someone else do it. Now keep in mind, this was before we imposed the Two Terms on the Presidents that gets back to the point that the nation doesn't think that a President ought to stay but eight years and that was the Franklin Delanore Roosevelt spin-off. So I tried to practice that. I was appointed the first Black State Superintendent of the United States.

LNS: What year was that?

JWP: 1969. That was before Coleman Young, before the President of Michigan State, before the Secretary of State, Dick Austin. It was a really historic moment and Ebony Magazine wrote it all up and all this kind of stuff. And we had a great, great ten years in the State and did a lot of things. And then I was caught in this very strange dilemma and the strange dilemma was that I was forty-seven and had already served my ten years having been the youngest State Superintendent and the first black State Superintendent and needing another challenge, frankly. And at that time, EMU was going through the process of appointing a President. I had frankly, the year before, been asked by Jim Miller, the President of Western Michigan University, if I could come down there and be his Senior Executive and...well, I'll take this back. In 1969 before I became the State Superintendent, Jim Miller, in 1969 asked me if I'd come down there to be a Vice President because I had served as the Associate Superintendent for Higher Education and I said no. That's when in October of '69 the
Board asked me if I would serve as the State Superintendent. But to make a long story short, in '79 I had to, '78 actually, I had to make a decision. I was in Japan, at the time and someone said to me that EMU was (a legislator or somebody) said EMU's in crisis and we're gonna close EMU and they can't appoint a president, the board is. I don't know whether it's true or no, the Board is deadlocked and the Governor's upset, there's a crisis on campus and you know, we shouldn't have an institution four miles from a great institution in the first place. And frankly, we're going to probably turn it into a prison. And the fellow who was head of Jackson Prison had visited the campus to see how it could be retrofitted to be a prison. I mean that's an unbelievable story. And I said, well, there's only four jobs I'm interested in. I'm interested in a job, and I had feelers for all four of them. I have to have a job, this is a strange story, I have to have a job at one of the four teacher training institutions. It's got to be a job at Eastern, Northern, Central or Western and frankly, as long as it's at the level of an executive, I'm not particularly interested. So I had talked to a number of the Presidents during this period of time for possible number two positions or something and then somebody suggested that I submit an application to Eastern. And I proceeded to submit it to the wrong person.

LNS: You sent it to Tim Dyer?

JWP: Yes.

LNS: Who wanted to be President. He had the whole Board lined up then.

JWP: I know, I know. But he did the right thing. He didn't, he gave it to Dick Robb I think. But, hindsight, that was very interesting. So that's the whole story and then from there you know the record.

LNS: Let's go back over this. Married?

JWP: Yes.

LNS: When did you get married?

JWP: '53.

LNS: And you had two children from this marriage?

JWP: Four.

LNS: This is your first marriage?

JWP: First marriage.
LNS: Are you're in touch with your children from that marriage?

JWP: Sure.

LNS: Are they around in this community?

JWP: No, Lansing. All of them are in Lansing.

LNS: What do they do?

JWP: Oh various things. They're all in their fifties you know, forties and fifties.

LNS: You were a young guy when you got married. How old were you?

JWP: Twenty.

LNS: That was young. Right out of college.

JWP: No, before college. Junior.

LNS: Person you met at Albion.

JWP: Deceased.

LNS: I know I met a couple of your other children at University Events.

JWP: Yeah they come down all the time.

LNS: But then you remarried, Melissa

JWP: In '60.

LNS: Donna and Steve.

JWP: And they still live in Ypsilanti.

LNS: Yeah, I see them around a lot.

JWP: Donna's having her second child.

LNS: Isn't that great?

JWP: In June. And I go over with David John every weekend and play Grandpa.

LNS: How old is he now?
JWP: Two.

LNS: Starting to move around.

LNS: Do you have grandchildren from your other four children.

JWP: I had a grandchild call me on the phone yesterday. She's just graduating from High School June 6th in Lansing.

LNS: So how many grandchildren all together?

JWP: Eight or nine.

LNS: That's great. And what about, when you look back at your school. You mentioned this elementary school teacher that had an influence. Any other mentors that you had when you were going to school?

JWP: Oh yes, I mean..

LNS: Any of them that really stand out in your mind? Formative people.

JWP: One of the great experiences that I had. I didn't live in the black community. Frankly, I lived in a Rumanian community. So I was brought up in a Romanian community, so I talked — and all that stuff about as well as I did English. And it was where the Steel Mill was Joslyn Steel Mill. So my best friend was a Rumanian girl named Elizabeth Chinkens, never will forget Elizabeth. And my dad, we had a lot of property. We owned almost a whole city block which, was kind of weird back in those days. But he started out this was before your time but he was in the moonshine business back in 1930's and in fact, John Dillinger had come to our house once. In 1931, I think. Really interesting stories. I was born in '31. So that was one of the stories...

LNS: Family legends.

JWP: Yeah, one of the family legends. And you get some moonshine and people won't know what that is. But I'm just saying this cause has those closets. And you know it was the Depression and we were on Welfare. I mean we had to go get...

LNS: In spite of owning the property.

JWP: Well, who could pay for the shit? You know, you had to go down the soup lines and you got the canned goods and they didn't have any labels on them and you had to put them in a burlap sack and I had to get eyeglasses and you had to sign up for all this stuff. I know what it was like
in the Depression. I went through the Depression. And we were supposedly well off. So I know how the rest of the people were. It was really a time, but besides Mrs. McCarthy and all the great teachers I had and I can just see them. All white teachers, all women except one geography guy was Beckman, in my middle school. The fellow in Geography was the only man I can remember. My Kindergarten Teacher, First Grade Teacher, Second Grade, I can't believe it. They took me to all the plays and stuff and I used to see puppet shows and all this kinds of stuff.

LNS: Did the other kids think you were teacher's pet?

JWP: Oh, I'm sure they did. But I was an athlete, remember? But the most significant occurrence as I look back and you know, I'm sixty-seven, so I'm going back sixty years. That's a long time. We had a Community Center for the black kids that was about five blocks from my house out here in this Rumanian neighborhood. And all of that was the only place we could go. And there were a couple of people at that community center (men) who worked with us. And see I was a Boy Scout, I became an Eagle Scout, I went through all these badges and did all this stuff and I did all those merit badges.

LNS: What Troop number?

JWP: Two Seventy-four or something. Troop two seventy-four or something. Incidentally, I was the Lt. Governor at Hoosier's Boy State in 1948, which is unbelievable, you know. So I would say that the Community Center was the most significant influence on me during my first eight years in school. Because it was you know right now, the President of the United States is pushing after school programs because the Latch Key kids as soon as school was out, I had to go two miles, I had to walk two miles to school cause I was out in the boonies. But as soon as we got home at four o'clock, we all went to the Community Center and we stayed at the Community Center until supper and played basketball and played checkers.

LNS: Is that where you learned how to play basketball?

JWP: Oh yeah. Obviously in the neighborhood they didn't have any facilities back in those days.

LNS: How about college? Any mentors in college?

JWP: Oh yeah, I had Sprentall. You've heard me talk about Sprentall. He was just like a father.
LNS: What was his first name? He's not still alive is he?

JWP: No he died, I was a pallbearer. Walt.

LNS: Walter.

JWP: He was Dorian's Uncle. I think Dorian's dad was his twin.

LNS: Yeah, well Dorian was a twin. You mean both of them were twins?

JWP: I think Dorian's dad, was Dorian a twin?

LNS: Yeah.

JWP: I think Dorian's dad was Walt Sprandall's twin brother.

LNS: Could be. That's interesting.

JWP: I don't know. I'm not sure. Anyway, Walt Sprandall was like a father to me.

LNS: Really? How'd you get to meet him?

JWP: Well I was going to tell you that and then you took me off on another little tangent.

LNS: OK.

JWP: My high school football coach and high school basketball coach and you need to get this name down, Herb Banet. Bought a 1949 beige Dodge, brand new Dodge. He took a day off from coaching and drove me to Albion College to tour the campus and went with me. Went with me. Can you believe that? I never will forget that. And I still, of course, it's funny, up until a few years ago, I corresponded with him for forty years. He drove me 68 miles from Ft. Wayne to Albion and spent the whole day with me so I could tour the campus to see if that was a place where I could go to school. He went to Goshen, Indiana and that's how I got to Albion.

LNS: So somebody took and interest in you?

JWP: Somebody took an interest in me. My high school coach.

LNS: And then you met Walt Sprandall there. Was Walt in athletics too or he was?

JWP: He was the basketball coach.
LNS: Oh, he was the basketball coach?

JWP: See, Walt Sprandall was the basketball coach.

LNS: So that's how you got to meet him.

JWP: Yeah, I went up there to play basketball.

LNS: And he just took also an interest in you.

JWP: No I was pretty good.

LNS: So he mentored you. He mentored you off the court too.

LNS: Any others that you can think of?

JWP: Oh yeah. My History professors, you know, Henry, Henderson and Hall and my Philosophy professors. I had great teachers in Elementary School. Great teachers in, we called them Junior High Schools, great teachers in High School, fabulous teachers in college. I mean it was just unbelievable.

LNS: You were probably a pretty good student that's why you had good teachers. A lot of students who don't like their teachers don't put much into the class, I guess.

JWP: I don't remember any teacher I didn't like. That's one reason why I went into education. I just had great teachers. Never ever in my life had a black teacher.

LNS: Really?

JWP: From the day I started Kindergarten to the day I got a Ph.D., I never had a black teacher. I never had a foreign teacher.

LNS: That says something about America, doesn't it?

JWP: Well, you couldn't do that today. It does say something about America.

LNS: What question didn't I ask you that I should've asked you about growing up?

LNS: Is there any question that I missed?
JWP: Well the only other question that came to mind and this came up yesterday when I was at a meeting in East Lansing at the University Club. A member of the East Lansing City Council, Sam ______ saying John, you know the last time we got together you were telling me about what happened at East Lansing back in 1965. He says, I went back in the archives and looked that up and I didn't believe you but you were absolutely right. What I had told him was and the reason that this becomes relevant is that there's a lot of friction in East Lansing right now where Michigan State University is between Town and Gown because of the riot. And I had indicated to him that that friction has always existed and that in 1965, in 1962, I was the first black person to ever buy a home in East Lansing. John Hanna was the President at Michigan State. I was the first black person to buy a home, to get a mortgage, get a mortgage for a home in East Lansing. This is hard to believe. And was a member of the East Lansing Human Relations Commission. And in 1959, we had an advisory vote on whether or not the city would support open housing. At that time, we didn't have civil rights we called it open housing. This was before your time, but back in Chicago and all the big cities, we called it open housing back in those days it wasn't what we have today, you know. And the vote failed. And this guy says to me, yesterday, he says, John, he says one of the guys who was opposed to the open occupancy housing is now a member of the City Council, he works with me and he says he was telling me that everything you said was true. He was absolutely opposed to it. Let's see, that was 1963, '99, that would've been thirty-three years ago. He says, I couldn't believe it. He says this guy is now a member of the City Council and this.

LNS: I assume he's changed his mind by now.

JWP: After the riot last month, I don't know whether if he has or not. Given the circumstances, that was the only thing that you missed. I just thought that that was so ironic and so historical. Here's 1999 and they're still fighting the Town and Gown, boy the friction up there is pretty.

LNS: I hear it's pretty tight.

JWP: And in fact, it was so bad that John Hanna, in 1965 said to the city, in 1960, he says, this is a true story, I was there. You don't know the city, but there was a big street, the most famous street in Michigan called Grand River. It runs all the way from Detroit to Muskegon, you know. It was called US-16. The University is on the south side of Grand River. Everything that the university owns is on the south side. And the City of East Lansing is all on the north side and John Hanna says, look, I'll run the south side of Grand River and you run the north side. I will not interfere with your business and you don't interfere with my business. And
LNS: He's a pretty powerful guy, wasn't he?

JWP: Yeah, but he didn't try. He started bringing in a lot of foreigners and he believed in agriculture and he started this kind of stuff. But the city and Hanna didn't push and this is why I was the first black. And he had hired one black faculty member but the guy had to rent or lease a house or something. There was all kind of goofy stuff. But the position was, I won't mess with your business and I don't mess with your business. And thirty-three years later, that has surfaced up again. It's almost déjà vu. I was there, you know.

LNS: Fascinating.

JWP: It's fascinating.

LNS: Thank you very much.

JWP: My pleasure.