



ATTENTION: © Copyright Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes without the written permission of Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. All materials cited must be attributed to Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections.



This interview was conducted with James O'Brien on July 27, 2005 at his home in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewer is Tamara Belts. Patricia O'Brien is also present during the latter portion of the interview.

TB: Today is Wednesday, July 27th, 2005 and I am here with Dr. James O'Brien, former faculty member, retired from Western and we are going to do an oral history. He did just sign the Informed Consent Agreement. So my first question is always: how did you happen to come to Western?

JO: There was a job in 1941 open when I finished my master's degree at University of Washington. I was living in Seattle. With this job I could teach and earn enough to continue my work. I had a master's degree from the University of Washington. I taught here during the school years, and each summer went back and took classes and did work on my thesis.

TB: Who hired you?

JO: Dr. Hicks, head of the English department.

TB: What was the hiring process like at that time?

JO: There was an interview with the English department. I also met with Dr. Hicks, the chair and then with Dr. Haggard, the president. I was to teach freshman composition. In the summers I could go back to Seattle where my mother lived and continue work on the PhD.

In 1953 I took a leave of absence from Western and went to Dublin to write a dissertation on Irish authors; Dublin was a very economical place to live. So we went to Dublin. It was a fascinating period to have been in Ireland when horse traffic was still an important factor.

TB: What was the atmosphere like in your department when you first came?

JO: It was a very small department with four professors. There was also three or four instructors to teach freshman composition.

TB: Do you have any other comments about your colleagues? What they were like? Cederstrom to me is only a name, what kind of person was he? Or Kangley? Hicks actually was here when I came (I've been here a long time).

JO: You would have known Lucy Kangley?

TB: She was already, I'm sure, retired, and I majored in history. Everybody knew Hicks because of his walking around reading a book.

JO: Reading a book on the street. One of the comments that somebody made was, "*You know, I've watched him very carefully and I've never seen him turn a page.*" That was part of the folklore.

TB: But were there any traits or anything that stands out about Cederstrom, Kangley or Van Aver?

JO: Oh, yes. They were strong personalities. They got along well in managing business, but the direction of their personalities were varied and strong. I was a junior member; Annis Hovde was also a junior member. But they invited comment on things, especially about the students and class work. It was a lively, pleasant place. Things got done.

The whole faculty attended a monthly meeting. Because I was in the English department Dr. Haggard said, "*Ah, we have a man for secretary.*" So I was secretary to the faculty. Part of writing the minutes was to take them, write them out, and then go to Dr. Haggard's office. We'd go over the minutes to see if my summary accorded with his. He didn't change very much. I had that job for three years.

TB: What are your memories of Dr. Haggard?

JO: I liked him. In those days it wasn't just Dr. Haggard; it was Dr. Haggard and his family, just like it was with Sam Carver. Sam Carver's son was a newspaper man. You knew the children, especially those going to the Campus School, and you were interested in them. A different atmosphere prevailed as we got larger.

The single women and men would have lunch in Edens Hall in a small room. Here you found out what was important. They kept up with everyday affairs. Another thing that united the faculty was a smoking room, right across from my office. Faculty would come from other parts of the building. I didn't smoke but often I went in there. If somebody was putting on a play or one of the coaches wanted to take faculty to a game, they could find faculty to help.

TB: Where was your office? Where was the smoking room?

JO: That was in the corner of Old Main pointing to the Campus School. Not everybody came to the smoking room. But those who came often were up to date. If you wanted to know about the plays or athletic events, you could find out about public things. We also had monthly faculty meetings. That was more to hear what the president was promoting or trying to make faculty aware of relations to the state and the budget.

TB: It sounds like the single people, who were mostly female, but also you, had a hot lunch, then that must have been served in Edens Hall?

JO: Yes, in the basement.

TB: Then were did the married people eat?

JO: A few would come when it was convenient. Some even skipped lunch. They all attended faculty meetings. You wanted to know what was going on or what changes were coming from the legislature or the community.

There was a very good relationship between the university and places like the police department. The dean of men had some influence. He kept students out of trouble. If a student got drunk at a party, they tried to keep him out of jail. It protected the students and it gave them a place in Bellingham that they don't have now.

TB: Was that Dean MacDonald?

JO: Yes. That was his first year here too.

TB: 1946?

JO: Yes. He was a basketball coach.

One of the committees to get on was the athletic committee because you got five dollars if you took tickets at a basketball or football game. The faculty smoking room and the lunch room were good places to make contact, a frequent need in a faculty of sixty members.

TB: How did all of this change over time?

JO: Change was very gradual, of course. WWU grew into an institution with many large departments. With each new building, a lot of work had to be done, by the administration and the departments. We branched out and took in more property.

TB: Do you have any thoughts about when Jarrett came how that changed things?

JO: Oh, yes. That was one of the biggest changes. He was a Great Books man. The departments were to be strengthened and enlarged and we became a university.

I think the Auditorium-Music Building was finished in 1950. I have fond memories of that because tennis courts used to be where the music building is now. I played tennis with students and faculty. One time one of the faculty members had a visitor, a young woman who wanted to play tennis. He called me. So I went out to play tennis with her in the afternoon. The city traffic used to go right by the courts. The street turned at the gymnasium and went out into Happy Valley. Well, somebody was driving along who knew me and saw me playing tennis and he called the president and said, "I saw one of your faculty members playing tennis in the mid-afternoon." The local man did not approve of faculty playing tennis during the working day.

Many faculty were involved in the community. The college had football practice close to the gym. Often one of the judges would come up to watch. I happened to have his daughter in class so I often talked to him. You would meet town's people informally because they were interested in the college. There were many ties with the community.

TB: Did Dr. Haggard tell you not to play tennis in the afternoon?

JO: No, no. He didn't, but gossip got around. That's where the smoking room came in. Not all the men smoked, but if one wanted to find out about things one could try the faculty smoking room. Having most of the college in one building had great advantages.

TB: Yes, I can see that. Anything more about Dr. Jarrett? The changes that he made?

JO: I think he was here four or five years. He had a very good effect at a critical time, when we were enlarging and people could look ahead. Faculty wanted to have a strong liberal arts program. I think that a lot of impetus and strength came from his presidency.

TB: Did you participate in that humanities program?

JO: Oh, yes.

TB: Do you have any thoughts about that?

JO: Yes, the program was excellent. But it demanded cooperation from several departments. As we grew departments developed their own majors. Jarrett's presidency came at a good time when we were still a unified college. Later departmental majors and departments became dominant forces in the university.

For example, in drama, Vic Hoppe was a very good director. He had many good students and he'd train them. The student newspaper involved students, faculty and the community. I was surprised when one of the judges would come to the athletic field to observe football practice. He came up to the campus to watch football practice and would talk to faculty and students.

TB: Do you mind saying what his name was?

JO: Judge Olson.

TB: What about the curriculum changes over time?

JO: Oh, yes. The curriculum committee was a center for debate and discussions. It authorized the expansion of departments. The enrollment kept growing and growing and soon we became quite a different place from one with 1200 students. When we had 1200, students had to go to programs on Tuesday and Friday morning. There would be a lecture or a concert at ten o'clock in the morning. Students came to the auditorium in Old Main. The big change came with the building of the Auditorium-Music Building in 1950-51.

TB: Was that also kind of a bonding experience for the faculty and students to be together for that assembly time?

JO: Yes. Not all faculty would go. You would discuss the lecture with the students. The student body officers had good relations with the faculty. Whoever was student body president was very important to each of us.

TB: Do you have any thoughts about what the students were like when you first came and how that might have changed over time?

JO: Oh, yes. The students were largely local. As we grew, the requirements, the student grade point average, went up, so the average student probably was a better student. The size of the institution and the relationships changed, too. There were advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes you knew the students too well as certain students had a reputation -- like Dick Wahl who was a good actor. The student body officers were important to the faculty.

TB: Did the faculty have students come to their homes?

JO: Oh, yes; Cederstrom (I boarded at Cederstrom's). He would have students in frequently, after a basketball game for example. There were many faculty-student relationships.

TB: What was that like living with Dr. Cederstrom? Was that fine?

JO: Oh, yes, we had a great time. I was gone often on weekends; I was still working on my degree, so every second or third weekend I'd be gone. My mother was living in Seattle. I would go down; I had to get books from the university. It was a busy time, but a good time.

TB: How long did you live with him?

JO: Two years.

TB: O.K. Well, that's pretty cool. Do you have any other thoughts about how Western changed over time and becoming a university? How did the emphasis change from teaching the students to doing more research? Did that bother you or was that good?

JO: It didn't bother me so much because I was working on my degree. But I think that did make a basic change when faculty had to publish -- to get promoted. I don't know how that affected the summer school

teaching, because one could do research if you didn't teach in the summer. In the English department we taught every other summer. There's never enough time to do research. But I think it improved the university greatly to have the faculty publishing.

End of Tape One, Side One

TB: When did that really start?

JO: Oh, it was there, but subdued. But probably after Jarrett left, as the departments grew and new faculty were coming in with PhDs or about to have PhDs. Publishing became a critical point in respect to getting tenure and promotion. I think one had seven years before he or she got tenure.

TB: What about service? Service is always an ingredient of faculty tenure and promotion too.

JO: Committee work was important but had to be accompanied by publication of articles or books.

I had been at the University of Washington where a friend started a magazine, a creative writing magazine. So, in the first year here I helped start a creative writing magazine here. What was the name of it?

TB: The Writer (1947-1962).

JO: As a graduate student at the University of Washington, we would eat with the faculty members at lunch-brown bag. There was one woman there named June Burn who once lived in Bellingham. She started a student magazine there so I thought, "*Well, why can't we do one?*" Cederstrom taught creative writing and he was willing to have his students submit stories.

TB: Do you have any thoughts on what are the most significant changes that you saw over your career?

JO: Oh, in Western? I think the emphasis on faculty publication would be one; another would be tenure and promotion regulations.

There was a couple of faculty that thought we should form a men's cycling club. We'd go up to Abbotsford and Vancouver Island. (There was also a poker club.) We had trips up to Abbotsford, and mostly in the county. When the organizing fellow left the group broke up, it wasn't critical to the life of the university to have a bicycle group. In the small faculty, things formed like that; when you had only sixty faculty, you only a few to draw on for certain things.

TB: Do you think it was a more important part of your whole social life then?

JO: Oh, yes. The faculty lunchroom had twenty people or so. You could also get things done in walking from Old Main to the gymnasium; you'd run into people. When Western became larger you didn't have time and you didn't see faculty as easily.

TB: So you did see a lot of changes to the physical campus over time?

JO: Oh, yes. Every new building was a large event for the Western and the community.

TB: So what did you think of the Sixties and all the student protests; any memories of that?

JO: Oh, yes. Students protested on the freeway. It was a troubled period.

TB: What are your favorite memories of Western?

JO: Oh, I think a lot of the classes and working on the literary magazine in the early years and when I taught summer school. We had a good program for trips to the islands and walks in the mountains. One of the best groups I belonged to was the math department hiking group. The chair, Joe Hashisaki was good at

organizing outings. Not all the math department took part in this, but for as many as five or six years, in the break, or between winter and spring, we would go to the ocean and walk for three or four days, camping each night. Then about 1970 or 1971 the State of Washington cut back on appropriations and many departments had to eliminate faculty. The math department got into such a heated conflict of those who were going, who was to be cut, that the walking group broke up. This isn't for publication, but that's the sort of activity that went on at that time.

I'm sure there are a lot of other stories of groups, like the faculty men's poker club -- I don't know at what point that disbanded. The faculty smoking room in the corner of Old Main continued for many years.

The official things of course, the president ran. He could get things done. When I first came in 1946, the faculty had a monthly meeting. In the first meeting I was appointed secretary, because I was in the English department.

TB: What are your worst memories of Western (If you're willing to share that)?

JO: The time they had to reduce the faculty because of a limited state appropriation. I'm not sure the year that was. We had to eliminate a faculty. The bad effects of that reduction in faculty continued for years. There must have been some [other] things. Well, if anybody got in trouble with the police, that was always bad (students). I don't think faculty, well, there was one faculty episode. But you don't want to deal with that. I guess some things were bad, when somebody didn't get promoted that you thought should be. But I'm sure that happens every place. Mostly there was expansion, new things, and more people coming, new departments. I am trying to think of any accidents. It was always bad when the coaches would lose games because they were our friends. They were doing the best with the material they had, but other schools, Central and Eastern, often had better teams than we did. The worst event was the state legislature about 1966 with the loss of appropriations; some faculty had to be eliminated.

JO: RIF, reduction in force, that was really painful for all faculty. I think those who left got good jobs, but it wasn't in their plans to leave.

I think another one of the things was if the state didn't appropriate enough money for new faculty that was often a source of difficulty. It meant the size of the classes would have to be large and faculty would not be hired and some would be dismissed.

PO: Well, when you were ranking chairman you ran into a lot of buzz saws of problems that made you decide you'd rather spend the rest of your career teaching.

JO: Yes, but you're getting into personalities and how they agree or groups, clusters of agreement and disagreement. That's very hard.

TB: Well, did you feel that you were treated well as a faculty member?

JO: Oh, yes. In general, yes. The salaries kept going up. And the school kept growing. That meant you didn't have to teach so much freshman composition. To be here in the expanding era was good.

TB: So who were the most influential campus leaders among the faculty? Are there some you can identify?

PO: Would you say Woodring would be one?

JO: Yes. Woodring and I guess Arntzen in social studies. Keith Murray was very good in history. Well, you know the music people were. They were always important to me, and the drama, Vic Hoppe and the other people who came after him -- like Lortz. You could tell in the first couple of plays, here was somebody who is very good.

TB: And you're talking about the current Theatre Arts faculty person?

JO: Yes. I could tell from the first play, that, "*I'm going to everything he does.*" And I did, practically. There are others who are very good. The band director used to be a public figure.

TB: Don Walter?

JO: Yes.

PO: Bill Cole was band director later. He'd come up from the University of Washington. That's when marching bands were the great thing. He did a lot with that.

TB: And then Phil Ager.

JO: Yes.

PO: Well, when I came one of the powerhouses happen to be Ruth Weythman who was behind the scenes. English and PE were not necessarily compatible, so he wasn't as sold on Ruth Weythman as I was.

End of Tape One, Side Two

TB: Well, is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to comment on?

JO: Oh, yes, I think a continuing problem that was hard to keep up with was liberal education. When Jarrett came there was a hope that there would be a general studies program, that that would be part of a liberal education. I think the university is caught by the specialization. When we had 1200 students we almost had to have a liberal education. Being one of 1200 is a lot different from being one of 12,000. Among the faculty it was a matter of discussion of who was going to be student body president. We knew the candidates well. The collegiate experience changes when you get larger. You can't blame students for not being more involved. They've got enough to do on their own. But there were real advantages, I think, as far as liberal education for a small institution.

TB: So what have you been doing since you retired?

JO: Oh, I was working on Irish writers, my main interest. We've traveled quite a bit.

TB: Any other thoughts or comments?

JO: Oh, I suppose, one thing is changes; they go on when you're in there. They're necessary because we moved from 1200 to 12,000 students. But it did make for quite a different life -- especially in university governance. Student life is quite different when you have 1200 than when you have 12,000. And the institutions are probably better in many ways. They can organize each discipline better. If you have a department with only six people you're going to do certain things but if you have 20, you can organize better programs.

TB: Well, thank you very much.

JO: Well, I don't know if I've been very enlightening on many things.

TB: I didn't know about the smoking room before and I didn't know about the women having lunch in Eden's Hall. I think there are a couple other things, but those were two things I really had not heard before.

JO: Well, thank you. It's made me think about a lot of things.