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# An Interview with Dr. Tom Wright

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas



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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project.

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February 14, 2005  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Claytee D. White

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## Preface

Dr. Tom Wright was born and grew up in Illinois. His father finished his PhD in Chicago and then taught at Illinois College in Jacksonville. His mother suffered from arthritis and was told to seek a warmer climate, so John Wright packed up his family and moved to Las Vegas. Tom was 14, ready for high school, and his two brothers were elementary school age.

Tom attended Las Vegas High School, which was close to the Crestwood community where the family had purchased their first home. He remembers that UNLV had no buildings when his dad first started teaching there. Instead, he conducted class in high school classrooms and church Sunday school rooms.

Dr. Wright started off at a community college as a Geology Major, but a class with Bud Poland convinced him that history was his passion. He transferred to Pomona to continue his bachelor's degree. He spent his junior year in Peru on a study-abroad program, and that experience made him a Latin Americanist. The information he gathered in Peru was included in his PhD dissertation.

Tom went to Berkeley to work on his master's and completed it in one year. He eventually finished his doctorate there in 1971. He worked every summer between semesters, including jobs at Safeway, Walt Casey's Serve-A-Soft water company, construction on the foundation of John F. Miller School, and jack-hammering a runway at Nellis Air Force Base.

His memories of early Las Vegas include buffets with the family at El Rancho Vegas, the Dunes, Stardust, and Showboat hotels. Even though he had grown up in a green and well-watered climate, he grew to love the desert and one of his favorite recreations is camping out with friends.

Tom came to work at UNLV around 1971, and worked with his father until John retired in 1976. Jay Zorn was president of the university when Tom first got there, but returned to teaching as a U.S. historian the next year. By this time there was funding for the Latin Americanist position for which Tom was hired.

Dr. Wright taught 3 or 4 classes when first hired, including History 100, History of Mexico, and Revolution and Reaction in Contemporary Latin America. In 1991 he went to Cuba, a trip arranged by the Center for Cuban Studies. He gathered enough material and inspiration to write a book, his third, called Latin American Era of the Cuban Revolution.

Tom was tenured in his fifth year at UNLV. He was associate professor until 1983, and became acting dean of the College of Arts and Letters in 1983. In 1988 he attended a seminar in Nicaragua, which fired his intention to return to research and teaching, and he stepped down as dean in order to do just that.



**It's the 14th of February of 2005. And I'm here in the History Department at UNLV with Dr. Tom Wright. Dr. Wright, how are you today?**

I'm fine. Thanks, Claytee. How about you?

**Wonderful.**

Good.

**Dr. Wright, I want to talk you, first -- just to give you some time to think about some things -- I'm going to start with your early life. Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Illinois. I was born in a small town called Albany famous for albino schools. I was kind of an academic migrant around. My dad went to Chicago to finish his Ph.D. And then he went to teach in Jacksonville, Illinois, at Illinois College, which actually is the oldest school in the state, a small liberal arts school. And I grew up there in Illinois till age 14.

Then basically, because my mother had very bad arthritis, really bad, a warm, dry climate was prescribed for her as the only remedy. My dad scoured around for several years. He even took us one summer to Tucson so we could do a little test run to see if Mom might improve there. Then after I can't tell you how many years of looking, this opened up before there was even a building at the Southern Regional Division of the University of Nevada. I was 14 and my dad was 46, and we packed up the family and moved out.

**Okay. Can you give me your parents' names?**

John S. Wright and Lucille Wilson Wright.

**Okay. Any brothers and sisters?**

I have two brothers. John S. Wright, Jr., lives in Pocatello, Idaho. He's just retired from the UP [Union Pacific] Railroad. And my other brother is Roy Wright. He lives in Coquille, Oregon, near Coos Bay. He's a lawyer, but he doesn't practice. He's in the Department of Probation and Parole for Coos County. There are a lot of dope dealers up there, you know. It keeps him busy.

**Okay. Tell me about how you decided to follow in your father's footsteps.**

Well, initially, I decided not to. And I must tell you my dad did not encourage me to be a historian. He thought that maybe a person might want to make some money. He didn't want me to be a businessman. I mean, he wouldn't have opposed it, but he did not directly encourage me to become a historian.



So I started at community college as geology major. And I stayed geology major for my first year and a half. I had several problems, though. I didn't really like the ancillary courses -- the math, the chemistry. I had yet to take physics, but I knew I wouldn't like it very much and wouldn't do well.

And then in the 80s -- this is the early days of computers. I started, remember, in 1959. I got into a little bit of trouble in the geology department because I did something wrong on this ancient computer -- new at that time -- and I kind of jammed it. And I thought it was best to switch majors.

I had had Western Civilization from a wonderful teacher my first semester at Pomona. And I really liked it, but I kind of ignored the tug. Then I took the History of the French Revolution from Bud Poland. And I knew really that this is what I really should do. So from that point on, I was a history major, although I took my junior year in Peru at Lima on Indiana University's study-abroad program. So I didn't get to work much toward the major. But, obviously, that's what made me a Latin Americanist. I got back to my zone and finished up the major my senior year.

**Now, Pomona, why Pomona?**

Well, it's, you know, a really good small liberal arts school. It's in the region. It's far enough away so that my folks were rid of me and I was away from them. And, yet, it was easy enough to get back and forth. In those days, the train ran, so I didn't have a car at Pomona, unlike today's college kids. I borrowed my folks' car for part of my senior year. But I just would ride the train down there, and it worked out great.

**So where did you do your graduate work?**

I went to Berkeley. I went right from Pomona to Berkeley and got my master's done in one year, then slowed down, and finished the doctorate in 1971.

**Okay. Now, your father was already here.**

He was.

**Okay. What did he think about this campus at the time? He had worked in other places. What did he tell you about this fledging school?**

Well, the first year, there was no building. So he taught in high school classrooms, church



Sunday school rooms. So when things began to come together out here on this really remote campus -- this was a mile south of town -- I think he was quite proud of it. He never complained about what was lacking. He was a very positive man, very much an optimist. In fact, he was a member of the Optimist Club. That was his service club. And he basically looked at the good side of things, what was being created here. I know at times it was frustrating to him because it was slower than he would have wanted.

He went to Reno every now and then on these old airplanes to lobby with the system people. I don't think he lobbied the legislature. He might have a couple times. But he went up to speak with people who ran the system, pleading for more resources down here and, of course, grants. They did come together.

And I know he was very proud of what I think is the fifth building on campus, what's now Wright Hall, the social science building in those days. He had a big hand in designing it and kind of watching it come together.

**That's great. So what is it like to work in the building named for your father?**

Well, I think it's a great honor. To me, I never dismiss that idea. I don't think about it all the time, of course. But I'm very proud of it. I know it's something that could not happen today at a time when you need donors for every building. And I'm just very grateful that they kept the name when they did this much-more-than-remodel. I mean, this building is 90 percent new, and yet I think they called it a remodeling. So I'm very happy they kept the name. That's a great honor, I must say.

**Yes, it is.**

For him and for the family. In fact, there's going to be a re-dedication sometime this spring. My two brothers will come from out of town and maybe some other family, as well.

**Oh, that's great. That's a good celebration.**

**Who did your father work with? Did you ever hear him talk about any of his colleagues?**

Well, I know I heard him talk about them. But I met most of them in the early days by the fact that we were so small. I'm sure for his first couple of years, there couldn't have been more than a dozen, maybe up to 20 after two years. So they'd have dinners together. They'd play



bridge. They did all sorts of social things together as you would imagine that academic types, the only ones for hundreds of miles around, would do.

**What were some of the other departments?**

Well, things started out compressed. So what today would be history, political science, anthropology, psychology, sociology, at a minimum -- and I would say social work came out of there, criminal justice did too, and communications -- started out as the division of social sciences. And my dad was the head of that. Now, he never fancied administration. He had to do that to get the job, and as soon as he could, he gave that up. As soon as the place grew big enough for there to be a dean, he never applied for that or wanted that job. He just wanted to teach and do his research.

So, yeah, they just compressed everything in big, broad units. And then they had the humanities, English, philosophy and so forth, and the sciences. I can't give you an exact breakdown. I think an old catalog would do that, of course. But that was the way it started.

And he had to teach not only history but also political science, and he had to teach every field of history that was taught and who knows what political science other than the introductory course. But people just did that. You had to do that to be here.

**So what was his first title?**

I think he was director of the division of social science -- again, this would have to be confirmed by really the earliest catalog or whatever they had from those days -- and professor of history. See, it was in that role that he made his trips to Reno and dealt with the public and so forth, just trying to build up support for bricks and mortar and scholarship money and all the things you need, really, to get a campus off the ground.

**Did he ever talk about Dickerson**

Yes, he did.

**Tell me about that.**

I wish I could tell you more than I can, Claytee. I think he was a highly respected individual. And he died, unfortunately, early. That's about as far as I go. I don't think they were real close personal friends. I don't remember his socializing with Dickerson, at least as much as with some other people.



**Tell me about some of those other people that you remember.**

Well, probably in the long run, dad's closest friend here was Hank Hendricks. He was a professor of education, secondary I believe. And he's still alive, I think. His health couldn't be very good. But we'd have to check to see whether he's alive. I've lost touch with him, unfortunately. And there's an auditorium named for him in the Carlson Education Building. Carlson was one of the first administrators brought in after -- I guess he oversaw the whole thing, not just the division of social sciences, which dad did.

You've put me on the spot now. Hank Hendricks, I know they played a little golf together. They played bridge together. Had dinners, you know, the couples, my mom and his wife. And, in fact, his wife was one of my mom's very best friends. So it ran both ways.

**Now, did this climate help your mom's arthritis?**

It did tremendously. It was the best thing that could have happened for her arthritis. It went into remission right away. Later it came back, but it was never as bad as it had been before. She was virtually crippled before. I mean, she really had a hard time using her hands and walking and so forth. And she never went back to that again. She was always very mobile and didn't have any trouble. I think she had some aches and pains, but she wasn't handicapped by the arthritis after they moved out here.

**Tell me about your mother's life as a wife of a faculty member and in a place that was --**

Okay. Well, Mom was by training a home-ec [Home Economics] and typing teacher, kind of a traditional thing for women to do in those days. She taught high school back in Illinois. I remember she had a hard life, I must say, because there were three of us boys. For years Mom taught in another town called Winchester, about twenty miles away from Jacksonville. She'd get up and make everybody breakfast and make lunches to take. You know, people in those days took bag lunches. And then she'd drive 20 miles, teach, come back, probably pick up the house and make dinner. I mean, that was hard.

**Especially living in a house with four men.**

Yes. There's no question about it. I feel bad about that.

**Okay.**



I tried to make it up to her in her later years.

**Okay, good.**

And then when we moved here, she couldn't get a job doing what she was trained for except for a brief time at Gorman High School. After all, there were only three high schools in town. Gorman; of course Las Vegas, being the oldest; and Rancho opened in '55 [1955], the year before we got here. So she took on a kindergarten, went to the opposite end of the spectrum of public education and taught for nearly 20 years in John F. Miller School, which is at Eastern and St. Louis, very near our house, which was good. And she was very dedicated to that, liked it, even wrote a little curriculum book, lessons for kindergarten.

**So now, where did you live when you first moved here?**

We lived at 2014 Peyton Drive. That's in the district of Crestwood. That was two blocks south of Charleston and just west of Eastern. It was one of the newer areas at the time. They were building south of there, but housing stopped at San Francisco Street, which is today Sahara, apart from isolated homesteads that had been built out in the Paradise Valley.

**What was Las Vegas like for someone who was 14?**

Well, it was a change, no doubt. I remember on the way out, you know, it was kind of a nice trip, a cross-country trip. You got to see a lot of sights, the Rockies and all that. But I remember the last leg, for a boy from Illinois where everything's green and you have to cut back weeds to a transition where you have to nurture any plant in the desert, initially it was shocking. And I remember in the desert around Tucson where we had been for one summer, it was much more lush than the desert is here. The last leg of the trip, coming into town from Mesquite, you know, that was a long grade on a two-lane road. When we got here, it was just absolutely barren, I thought in those days. These days, I think very differently about the desert because I love it. I just thought my dad had gone crazy.

But we pulled into town and saw the small park where the Doolittle Recreation Center is now, which was a true oasis. It had green, big trees. I felt a little bit better. Driving around town, you had some greenery and trees. But it was an easy adjustment.

When I went to high school, I was able to walk up to Las Vegas High. I developed a good friend right across the street who also moved into that neighborhood within a week of when we



did. His name is Jade Woodruff. He's still in town. And I made some other friends in high school and had a pretty good time, really.

**Okay. Did your brothers have the same kind of experience?**

Well, they came in much younger because my brothers are, I think, six and seven years younger than I am. So they were in grammar school. Yeah, I think they adjusted pretty well. One of them, John, was a little bit of a -- well, they were both a little trouble, I suppose, compared to me. But they got along fine.

**What kind of activities did you participate in? Did you come during the summer?**

Yes, I arrived in the summer. So I got to experience that great heat.

In school, I joined a couple of clubs. I took French, so I joined the French Club. I played JV basketball. I wasn't any good, so I didn't even try out for the varsity. I knew I wouldn't make it.

**But you were tall enough?**

Well, yeah. But, you know, too awkward, too slow, all that stuff. What else did I do? Oh, I think I was in the Honor Society, stuff like that. I tried not to be a nerd. I was a modified nerd.

But what I did like to do was go out in the desert a lot. My dad had been in North Africa in the war. So I think he had had a little prior experience in the desert. After our first year here, we went back for the family visit. Both sets of grandparents were back in Illinois still. We bought, because they were much cheaper back there, a World War II jeep and drove it out, burning a quart of oil every 20 miles. So he had to get the engine fixed. But he liked going out in the desert, prospecting, looking around. And he took me out. So I got to love it, too.

That's my biggest thing today. A lot of people don't know that. Maybe it's not the biggest thing in my life -- of course not -- but my biggest form of recreation, probably, is getting out, whether it's a day trip, a two-hour trip, riding or hiking -- I have a four-wheel drive myself -- or camping for up to a week at a time.

**Oh, really.**

Most camping trips anymore aren't a week long. But it's a couple nights here, one night there, three nights there.

**So do you actually rough it when you go camping, or do you have the motor home**



**with the television and...**

Good question, Claytee. No. I sleep right on the ground with the rattlesnakes. Except I confess, one night recently somebody brought along a cot that wasn't used. I used it. And for Christmas this year, I got a cot. So I guess I'm getting soft. But, no, we cook everything out. We never camp in campgrounds. You have to be too civilized in there.

**Oh, my goodness.**

We take existing campsites. You know, there are a lot of them out there. And we never destroy the desert. Never drive off the trails. But we do find some pretty small trails and some beautiful country to explore. And, you know, we do the normal things that the guys do around the campfire, which I can't disclose, of course.

**Now, do you usually do this with a group of guys, or do you have --**

Yeah.

**-- wives? Okay.**

No. Dina does not camp. It's a group of guys. I have two separate groups, actually. They don't mingle too well. But Jerry Simmons and I go with both different groups. Yeah.

**Good. Okay. That's interesting.**

**Now, tell me about the car trips. How long did it take from Illinois to Las Vegas?**

I'm guessing three full days. It might have been three and a partial day. I don't remember exactly. But they were long. And actually, after the first year, I might have done maybe just one more. But I think one set of grandparents died. And my second grandfather died. And my grandmother came out to live with my uncle in Southern California. But she'd come up here fairly often. In fact, my mom and dad would meet my uncle in Barstow and trade her.

**That's great. Now, did you work as a young man before college?**

I always had a job. It's something that's a bit unusual by today's standards. I did some work in Jacksonville, too, paper routes and mowing yards. Out here I didn't mow yards. I had done that since the age of eight.

But I think my first job was at Johnny's Supermarket, which wasn't a supermarket. It was an old grocery store right around the corner. I bagged at Safeway. What did I do? I moved refrigerators and freezers. For quite a while, I was with a soft water company. I'd go around and -



- actually, I didn't have a route. I worked in the plant filling the big metal containers with the appropriate chemicals and stuff.

**Now, was that a company owned by Mr. Casey?**

Yes, it was. How did you know that?

**I interviewed him the other day.**

You did?

**I did.**

I worked for Walt Casey. Serve-A-Soft, it was called. Oh, connections here. This could be dangerous, Claytee. And I met a good friend of mine, John Cobain, who worked there. We stayed in touch over the years, not as much recently as we used to. So I worked pretty hard, really. And through college, I always worked every summer.

**You would come home to work?**

I did after my freshman and sophomore years. And after my junior year, I did. After my senior year, I stayed down in Southern California. I got a job at the GE Ironworks, meaning steam irons.

I worked construction one summer. They used to have student labor union cards. And I remember I wasn't any good, you know. I wasn't tough enough. And also a veteran laborer knows how to look like he's doing something where he isn't doing too much. And I didn't learn that technique either. I remember working on the foundations of the school where my mom would teach shortly, John F. Miller School. Man, that was caliche. And two days, I was out of there. You know, they didn't need my service anymore.

**Explain what caliche is.**

Caliche is this stuff we have under the soil here. It's gypsum, really. And it's hard -- I mean, it makes it hard. And it can pop up anywhere in the Valley. It's digging through minerals. And you had to be really tough and also have some techniques, I think, to do that. So I found I was on a lot of different jobs. Some I got canned; others I moved on. That is, during that one summer in construction.

The hottest, I remember, is running a jackhammer on a runway at Nellis Air Force Base. Now, that was hot.



**Oh, yes. Oh, it had to be.**

Yes, it was. So, yeah, I always kept busy. Made enough money to help with educational costs. And I worked at Pomona in the dining commons.

**I always thought you were from a wealthy family.**

You did?

**Yes. I don't know why I thought that.**

Yeah. Well, no, we weren't wealthy. We were fine, you know, a middle class family who didn't lack for anything. We also didn't have anything that we didn't -- well, a few luxuries, but nothing serious. We lived in a compact house for five people. Dad resisted always getting any very fancy car. Yeah.

**You were here at the same time that the Strip was beginning to really blossom. Your parents were academics. What was that like? What were those two worlds like?**

Well, they didn't intersect very much. Neither my mom nor dad had any interest whatever in gambling. Neither was really a fan of popular culture. So I can't remember any show they ever saw. Now, they probably did see something. What we did, though, was go out to the brunches on Sunday occasionally, maybe once a month, maybe once every couple of months. They were cheap in those days and abundant. And that meant Mom didn't have to cook Sunday dinner, which was a good thing because she worked hard. She traditionally made a big sit-down Sunday after-church dinner. So that was a good thing. We all enjoyed that.

**Where did you go?**

We went to El Rancho Vegas before it burned. In fact, we went to dinner there a few times, actually. They had a buffet, again. You know, feeding three hungry kids, buffets were good. I think we went to the Sahara, probably the Dunes and the Stardust, you know, places that were there at the time. Maybe the Tropicana.

For me as a kid, though, it was great only for the occasion of like a prom because they weren't real careful in checking IDs in those days. And for three bucks, I remember you could go to the Sands, take your date for the prom, three bucks apiece, and you got two drinks. You could see the Rat Pack, "the" Rat Pack, for three bucks, and you got two drinks. And I remember I didn't drink alcohol in those days except beer. I mean, I'm making a big confession here. I wasn't



21; I drank beer. That's unusual, I know. Well, I could get away with it. But out there, I'd have a Singapore Sling because it was a nice-looking tall drink, but it didn't taste like alcohol.

**That's right.**

You know Singapore Slings?

**Of course. So now, were you driving?**

At 16, I drove, yeah. But I didn't have my own car. I just had to borrow one. But my dad let me use the jeep a lot for around town, as well as going out in the desert.

**So what was it like to see the Rat Pack? How do you remember that?**

I don't remember that much detail and that wasn't because of the Singapore Slings. My family overall wasn't too much into popular culture. We were the last people on the block to get a television set, for example. In fact, the only reason we had one, I think, is because it came with the house. They bought a fully furnished house in Las Vegas. In fact, I think they got it from Jack Entratter, who was a big producer on the Strip. By that time, he had already moved on, but for a little while, this was kind of the -- it never was the elite area. But it was a new area that was fairly nice.

**Now, was this near the Huntridge?**

Yeah, it's just below Huntridge, down the hill, to the east of Huntridge. So Huntridge was the first -- what do we call those things -- mass?

**Housing development.**

Developments, yeah. And Crestwood was maybe the second, although there was one called Hyde Park in the west that maybe was built a little bit before Crestwood. I'm just guessing this, but this is what I think.

**How did the community, your middle class community, academic, how did you look at those people running those casinos? Did it play any part in your life at all?**

Well, as a teenager, I wasn't terribly cognizant of what all that meant. It was just kind of what it was when we got here. I didn't see a real rapid change during the time I was here then. Maybe something new opened. But it wasn't like a total renovation of the Strip such as we've seen more recently.

Right across the Strip was Jake Kosloff. And he's a medium-sized name at least in



gaming. In those days, he worked with some of the -- should we call them the boys who came out, you know, from the East to run the gaming. And I knew all his kids. There were about four kids. They'd come out from Philadelphia.

So I knew there was something going on there. And I probably guessed there were some questions that shouldn't be asked. But the Strip wasn't really part of my life. It was there just for the two things that I mentioned. I might have gone to see another show or two with friends.

The only thing I did do a lot was to go to the Showboat, which is very nearby. After I'd be out with my male friends, we'd go there for bowling and have breakfast, 49-cent breakfast starting at 11:00 p.m. We'd get there and have that bacon and eggs and toast, hash browns for 49 cents and bowl a few lines. That was kind of fun.

But apart from that, I don't remember the Strip meaning much to me. I've always just felt it was kind of the local industry, the local automobile plant, grain mill, port, whatever it might be in other cities. And I've never gone -- or even today -- much beyond that. I think I know a little more about it now. But I'm really not very much at all into popular culture, so it's rare I go to a show.

It turns out I go to the Strip pretty often now because my wife, Dina, as a state senator gets invited to a lot of these charity dinners. Companies buy a table. They fill them. So she gets these invitations. I have a tux and three sets of cuff links. I go out there, you know, half a dozen times a year, at least. Occasionally, I will throw a quarter in a slot machine, but that's about all I do out there. And I know there are plenty of things to do that would be interesting or fun, but somehow it doesn't attract me.

**Yeah. I usually go when I have company in town.**

Yes. That's the other thing.

**Once you finished Berkeley, how did you go about getting employment?**

Well, I came out at a time just when the job market shifted.

**(End side 1, tape 1.)**

I came out from Berkeley just when the job market shifted from being a seller's market to being a buyer's market. And I know this firsthand -- I think it was 1970 -- because I went to the American Historical Association meeting in San Francisco. I met my dad there, as a matter of



fact, and we roomed together. At that time, people were looking for freshly minted doctorates. And I hadn't finished yet. But two or three people kind of talked to me. I wasn't even on the market. One person kept hounding me. He was from someplace like Eastern Illinois or some state school in Illinois. Not the top tier, by any means. And I had to keep telling him, no, I wasn't interested in the job.

Two years later, I was interested. I had finished. I needed a job. It was almost impossible to get anybody to talk to me. And another disadvantage, frankly, this is not P.C. [politically correct] to talk about it. Well, anyway, this is the time when we had affirmative action. And in my field of Latin American History, you know, people wanted to hire, understandably, people of Hispanic or Latino background. And I'd apply for jobs. And in those days, you could tell it the way it is. I'd get these letters back saying, "Well, dear Mr. Wright, you have a nice-looking resume, but we're trying to hire a Chicano." So it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy.

**So you got to see the other side of this?**

I did. I did, indeed.

But UNLV had an opening for a Latin Americanist. And it was delicate because with my dad on the faculty, it might have appeared that there was something going on here. But my dad -- and anybody who knew him well would confirm this -- was the straightest arrow in the world, so straight-arrow that he'd make me mad sometimes. He always wanted to play by the rules. I knew all of the history faculty because sometimes I'd be home at a time when there would be a department dinner or something. And I think they had an interest in me. I think I had good credentials coming from Berkeley. My dad played no role at all in the process. And he wouldn't. I mean, he just wouldn't do that. So I don't know who my competition was. But I did get the job. And that was very nice to be with him here for four years.

**Wow.**

Four or five, until he retired in 1976. There was a little awkwardness at first. But we got over that and enjoyed each other's company. If any eyebrows were raised about my hiring, I think they were lowered again fairly quickly.

**Good.**

But I don't think anybody ever made an issue of it.



**When did we begin to breakaway and to have our first president here in Las Vegas?**

I can't tell you. Warring will tell us. I know there was a president here for whom the student union is named, Moyer, Donald Moyer. I think he was gone by the time I got here. I know he was. But I believe he was the first full-fledged president. I'm not sure of that, though, Claytee.

**We'll check.**

It wasn't until 1968 that we got parity with Reno officially. We became UNLV as opposed to Nevada Southern University, which is our second name. We might have had a president when we were Nevada Southern University. Probably did. That might have been Moyer. I don't know. I don't remember the order.

But Jay Zorn was president when I was here, and he was a historian. And the very next year after I was hired -- actually, I was hired on a one-year acting basis until they got the permanent funding for the Latin Americanist line. He came back in the department the next year. And it was kind of a crisis because with him returning to history, that kind of gobbled up that line, that faculty line. So they scrambled around because they did want to have a Latin Americanist, and Jay was a U.S. historian. So it worked out in the end.

But I wasn't sure what was going to happen. So I went and interviewed with the State Department just as a fallback position. And I sent out a couple of other applications, as well. I wanted this to happen, and it did.

**Now, what were you applying for at the State Department?**

Well, just a regular State Department Foreign Service officer. And I passed the interview. I went to San Francisco. I guess the exam was held here. I went to San Francisco for the interview and apparently did well. They wanted to begin processing me to go to the training, and I asked them, no, not to do that because I wanted to wait. I didn't want to do that and waste their money and my time --

**Right.**

-- if this job was going to come through. But they did it anyway. I remember I was gone part of the summer after I knew that I had this job, and I didn't know that they had started anything. In fact, I had told them not to do it. Then I came home, and the neighbors had told me



that the FBI had been snooping around about me. But that's not the job I wanted. I wanted this academic job and it came through.

**Because at the time, what, you were speaking two languages, French and Spanish?**

My French was never very good. I call it a "touristic" French. It's a little better than that.

Well, my Spanish, of course -- when I went to Lima for that year, it was a sink-or-swim situation. I lived with a Peruvian family and had a Peruvian girlfriend. But all the classes were in Spanish. So it's not like a lot of our study-abroad programs today where you test and see how much you can take in the language of the country where you are. This is all in Spanish. So I hadn't had much. But I bobbed to the surface after about a month and a half, after one night dreaming in Spanish. I woke up and thought, by golly, something is different here. I'm dreaming in Spanish.

**Oh, that's fantastic.**

Yeah, didn't have to translate the dream into English. See, I spoke Spanish. That's my main language.

**So what was your dissertation?**

My dissertation was called "Landowners and Reform in Chile: The (Spanish), National Agricultural Society," which is an elite study. These were the large landowners in Chile. At that time it was the slight vogue of looking at the other side of the Revolution. You must keep in mind the Cuban Revolution was in 1959. When I was in Lima as a student on Indiana's program, it was a wonderful time, 1961 and '62, because as Bob Dylan says in one of his songs, "Revolution was in the air." And it really was. Everything was talk of revolution.

**How did your family feel about you being there?**

I think my dad thought it was a good thing. Well, you know, they might have had a secret worry or two. But it was a great education. I mean, I've got to say. Students, of course, in Latin America are always out front. I got to talk to people about the Cuban Revolution, about the revolution that some of them would like to see in their country. Others were opposed to it, of course. And you had infinite varieties of revolutionary blueprints that they had talked about.

And it was an education I couldn't have possibly gotten here, where, of course, our whole system is stacked against revolution. But looking at it from the other point, it just made it seem



logical that there should be revolution. And it almost seemed at certain points inevitable for that not to have been. But that was a great education.

So later on, the vogue by (indiscernible) Cuban owners, the Revolution is 1959 with a huge wave of revolutionary activity in most countries up until 1965 or so. And then it continued. But Che Guevara is killed in Bolivia in 1967. That puts a damper on the whole thing.

By the time I got ready to do a dissertation, which was in about 1968 when I started, I guess, '67 -- '67, there was a new vogue, which was that rather than being a revolutionary society, Latin America was actually a conservative society. That's why these attempts at revolution had been failing. So we looked instead of at the forces of revolution, to the left -- the peasants, the poor, the students -- a few people began looking at the pillars of conservatism and stability that prevented revolution from happening.

So that's why I chose this topic, the study of the landowners, the Large Landowners Association, because agrarian reform was the biggest single political issue out of the 60s. They were struggling to hang onto their land and their influence in national politics.

**Did you do any interviewing?**

I did quite a bit, yep. I interviewed some landowners and some employees of the Landowners Association. I did traveling in the countryside and looked at the results of agrarian reform. I remember so clearly. I was lucky in a way. When I got to Santiago, we looked for housing. The thing I found was just a little grand mother-in-law apartment that had been attached to what was really quite a mansion in the elite part of town. And the senora there, the lady who owned the house and the next door house, was a good friend of a family that were former presidents, two (Spanish) had been presidents. And they were about as blue-blooded as you could get in Chile.

I got to know the island, and they would take me to their hacienda, which had been expropriated. They kept what they called the "cosco." The owners got to keep the building, the house, and a small amount of land around it. So I got insights into the old aristocratic ways because the house servants, of course, still were of the type that bowed every time they saw you and were, oh, excellent service and all that stuff.

You went outside to where the land and the outbuildings had been turned over to the



peasants and there was a very interesting division. The older people could not break the habit of kind of bowing. They knew I was a guest of the former landowner in this very aristocratic family. And they would come up and bow and take their hats off. They didn't bow down to the ground.

**Right. I understand.**

They would bend over and take their hats off. But the younger ones, oh, they were very proud, understandably, of their new situation. And they would just kind of stick their chest out. They would say hello, but we were on a par. We were equals as a result of what had just happened there. It was a very dynamic time, very dynamic.

**Wow. And to have witnessed it.**

Yeah.

**And then to write about it. That's good.**

I started its organization back in its founding in 1869 and brought it up for the dissertation to 1938. It eventually became a book, and I brought it up to the early 70s. So...

**Okay, great. So back to Las Vegas. You get a job here. So what is it like?**

Well, it was --

**How many classes? How many students?**

We had about four classes at the time. It changed to three before long, I think within a couple of years. What I had to do was teach primarily U.S. History because there was no groundwork laid for a Latin Americanist to come in and teach even three classes and that. Bob Davenport, one of my colleagues, had had Latin America for his minor field, for his second field. He had taught Latin American Survey, so that was already on the books. So what I did, as rapidly as I could, was try to build a clientele and develop new classes, classes I thought would sell, so I could get out of teaching U.S. Survey. And that took maybe -- I don't know. I can't remember exactly. Maybe three to four years. Maybe only two.

But the other thing I did was the big service class, which we still have, History 100, whatever it's called, Historical Issues of Contemporary Perspective. And in that, I remember I taught with Paul Burns and sometimes Sue Fawn Chung and sometimes Andy Fry. We conjured up this course. It covered the U.S. Constitution.

It's always been kind of a trick. Don't let the regency hear this. But actually, I liked it



because we gave people outside perspectives of the U.S. Constitution. If you just take it from the U.S. history viewpoint or political science, it's "the" Constitution, you know, unassailable or a sacred document. Well, constitutions are pieces of paper. The area where I teach, hey, you can have a new constitution every month for a while in some cases.

But we would teach History 100, focus on the U.S. Constitution. And then I would look at Fidel Castro's regime and look at another form of constitution, other forms of human rights. I mean, our Bill of Rights is a statement of human rights in the western tradition. And Cuba's Constitution and its policies are statements of human rights in the socialist tradition. You know, individual liberties are down the tubes. But you have economic, social, and cultural rights that they lived up to. So that was always a lot of fun. We had big classes, huge classes. We'd have a number of TAs.

So between History 100, History of Mexico and a course which I still teach, Revolution and Reaction in Contemporary Latin America, which I also really love, that kind of worked me out of the U.S. Survey fairly soon, which was good. I always loved those classes.

**Now, tell me, did you ever go to Cuba after Castro?**

I went to Cuba in 1991. I've only been once, actually. But I went with a -- I went legally. There's an organization called the Center for Cuban Studies -- it's in New York -- that arranges trips that meet the State Department's very narrow criteria, if you have a professional interest as the State Department defines it. And they keep narrowing it down. It's harder to go now than it was then. So they had, once a year or so, a trip for Latin Americanists, people who teach and research Latin America in any discipline.

So I went with that. It turned out to be a great trip because the Pan American Games were just about to happen. They were going to happen just a couple weeks after we left. And with visitors coming from most of the hemisphere and country, except the U.S. of course -- you had to attach yourself to the Cuban tourist service; no way around that -- but all their guides were busy. So the first day or day and a half, they just sent us around to places we could find on our own in Havana.

We went on strike, this group of about 15 people. I was kind of the ringleader, I confess. And so we just sat down on the porch of the organization and made up a list of demands of where



we wanted to go. And we got to do all of it, which was not a tourist itinerary at all. It was great. We got to go up to see where Fidel's last camp in the Sierra Maestra was. We went with the Communist Party people. We went with people in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. We saw Salvadorans who had been wounded in the civil war there on the left side, of course, who were brought to Cuba for rehabilitation because the Cuban medical service was so good. The only request that they didn't meet was we wanted to meet with some dissidents. And that was just going a little too far.

**Did you meet Fidel?**

No, unfortunately, I did not get to meet Fidel. But one of the books I did actually grew out of the revolution and reaction through a Latin America course. It was my third book. It's called "Latin American Era of the Cuban Revolution." So this fit in very well with that. Actually, that book is a bit critical of Fidel in certain ways. So maybe it was just as well I didn't meet him. I mean, I'm an admirer of his. But I just question the story of the guerrilla war being the method of insurrection that succeeded. They leave out everybody else. Fidel and Che Guevara together. Leave them out. Anyway...

**Oh, yeah. I just think that would be an exciting place to visit.**

Yeah, it is.

**So if I were going to do a history of UNLV, an oral history, from those early years, who do you think I should interview?**

Well, two people occurred to me right away who are here in town still. One, for sure, is Tom Beatty. He is a lawyer. He'll be in the Yellow Pages. And he, a very smart guy, was one of a handful of people that took my dad's classes. But, of course, they were here. And they would argue that UNLV was the place to be at that time because classes were so small and the faculty was so caring. I mean, sure, the facilities were virtually nil. But the nurturing and the close contact...and they, of course, having a great camaraderie among themselves as early students made up for that.

And Phyllis Darling is another one. I haven't seen her for a number of years, but I think she's still around.

**Did you get to know people in the hard sciences?**



I got to know a biologist -- I can't think of his first name -- Bradley. Malcolm Graham, he was a pretty good friend of dad's. He was in math. Herb Royals is in engineering, not exactly hard science, but they were all combined at that time. He's definitely still around. I saw him recently at the president's reception.

The story with Bradley -- we went out camping in the Virgin Mountains, Bradley and my dad and Jade Woodruff -- the kid I told you lived right across the street from me -- and myself. And we went up probably overnight, maybe two nights. On the way back, on the highway there was a coyote that had been run over. And Bradley just went crazy. He thought this was a great opportunity. So we had to stop. He scraped up the remains of this coyote, put him in a bag, and, of course, took him to his lab. I don't know what he did once he got there. But that was a great thing for him.

**Yes. So thank you for those names.**

In fact, if I think of more, Claytee, and come up with them, I'll give them to you. And these people will probably know other people. I think Tom Beatty would be a key resource from a student viewpoint. And Phyllis Darling would, too, if she is still around. But I think she is.

**What were the positions that you held as an early professional here on the UNLV campus?**

Well, I started out, of course, as an assistant professor. And I got promoted after four years, I think. In those days, the requirements were not nearly what they are these days. They've evolved, of course, as we've become a research university. But I think I had published a couple articles in the central journals in my field, really, of Latin American history and done a few other things. And that was considered okay for a promotion.

I think I got tenured in my fifth year. And I remember pre-tenure paranoia a bit. I remember so clearly sitting in my office in Wright Hall. And the dean's office was right across the breezeway. After the department had made its promotion and tenure recommendations -- I think it was in my fourth year; anyway, the year I got put forward for both -- I spent pretty much all day sitting in my office. I'd go down and look in my mailbox now and then because I had heard the dean was supposed to make his recommendations that day. And that was a long day. And I got one and not the other. But that's a good sign. So tenure came on.



Then I was associate professor until 1983 or '4. I became dean of what was at that time the College of Arts and Letters, acting dean, in 1983. That, I must say, was an accidental adventure. I had been department chair. In those days, we still rotated in history. Nobody ever held more than the prescribed three years unless there was some unusual circumstance. And very few people repeated. We have Gene Moehring coming back for a second term. Andy Fry, I think, has done it more than once. But that's only when circumstances call for somebody to go back into the chair.

Anyway, I had been department chair, but I was out of it. I think I had already stepped down, yeah, after my three years. There was an opening for an acting deanship because John Unrue became acting provost. I had never thought about administration, to tell you the truth, not a single thought. The point is that he asked me if I might be interested. I took that just as a rhetorical question. I didn't even answer. So a few days later, he called me up and asked me if I had been thinking about it. I said, "Well, I hadn't been because I didn't know that you were serious."

But actually, by most accounts, I think there was a senior person with much more seniority than I had who was a long-term department chair. I won't name any names. But Unrue consulted everybody, all the chairs. And I guess my name rose to the top. So I, with some trepidation, decided I'd be this acting dean. And that lasted two years. Yeah, nearly two years. Actually, I liked it.

**Did you teach, as well?**

I taught. I tried to teach a course a semester, then a course a year. But I tell you, I didn't like that. The reason being that when you're in the faculty ranks, you can set aside course preparation time. You always want to refresh yourself, bring in something new. And when you're dean, you're on call. Even though I would set aside on my calendar in the dean's office two to three hours before a class for preparation, I couldn't hold that time because if something came up, if there was an emergency or something from the president or the provost, that preparation time had to be sacrificed. So I didn't always feel as well prepared as I wanted to be.

So I decided after a few years that they aren't very compatible, administration and teaching. If there were just one course, your favorite course, that you repeat every now and then, it might be different. But I tried to teach kind of variety to keep the Latin American field growing.



But pretty soon they got a person to replace me, which was good. And I liked it enough to apply for the regular deanship. Some people say permanent deanship. There's no such thing. A regular appointment, I got that. And so that lasted four more years.

But see, in those days, I think there was much more flexibility. The place was more malleable. You could do things. You could innovate since the place was young and growing. I thought the most important thing about being dean was nurturing, helping departments to nurture faculty, helping to get resources, and having our eye on other institutions that should be our model. If not a precise model, institutions we should strive to emulate as far as possible. I always looked to UCLA. You know, it came along much later than Berkeley. And, of course, it had the advantage of being born of a silver spoon. But it actually transitioned from a teachers' college or something to UCLA. So that's what I tried to do above all.

But paths fork after about five or six years, and you have to make a decision. What are you going to do for the rest of your career? And it turned out I knew what I wanted to do, anyway. I wanted to go back to faculty ranks.

But in the summer of 1988, after five years of doing this, the Latin American Studies Association -- that's our international interdisciplinary organization -- held a seminar in Nicaragua for Latin Americanists who didn't know much about Nicaragua. And that was most of us because most people didn't study Central America until the Sandinistas took over. And then you had the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala.

And I loved this thing. That was the most marvelous experience. It was like being back in graduate school with a vengeance. You talked this. You interviewed people. You sat around and drank beer or rum after your long, long days were over until you went to sleep, talking about nothing but Nicaragua and what all this meant. On top of that, I had Robert J. Alexander as my roommate, who is an encyclopedic author of all sorts of things on Latin America.

After that, I mean, I couldn't wait to get back to the research and the teaching I really couldn't do in the dean's office. That's when I decided to do the book I just mentioned, "Latin America, and Era, the Cuban Revolution." And that was it. It was only two weeks, but it was worth a year of intense rejuvenation for me. It was great.

**That's interesting.**



Yeah. So that made the decision. I mean, there was no longer a decision to be made. It was made, of course, when I announced it. Yeah, that worked out wonderfully.

**And they had someone step in?**

Yeah. They named Paul Burns as acting dean. Then they did a search and got Dr. Mallock, I think was his name.

Right after I stepped down, they began dismantling the College of Arts and Letters, for a good reason. They spun off the College of Fine Arts. When I was a dean, we had 15 departments. And we had not only had the social sciences and humanities but also the fine arts and the applied social sciences -- criminal justice and social work as well as communication studies.

And let me mention Andy Fry was in the dean's office, too, as an associate dean for about two years, I think, maybe three. I should know that. He was a great help in there -- I mean, he wasn't help, he was a colleague in there. We worked together, I thought, really well, helping to build.

This was what it was. We were helping to build, helping UNLV to get over the hump toward becoming a research institution. Having gotten by on much lower standards myself, I was in the forefront of raising those standards because that's the only way you can progress.

**That's true.**

You find people better than you are and make them produce more without being inhumane about it. And you try to be humane to the older folks who had been operating under the older standards. Trying to light a little fire where you can. And where you can't, just do the best you can.

**So what do you think are some of the major changes that you've seen, especially that you saw from your beginning to about 1990?**

From 1972 to 1990. Well, during that time the growth was quite phenomenal, of course. Even when I got here, I didn't know everybody on campus like my dad did, but I knew a lot of people. And by 1990, I didn't. Unless you were maybe on the faculty senate or had some position working for the president or something that put you in contact with other folks, you know, your horizons in terms of personality began to get more limited because there were so many around. I saw more bureaucratization.



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