

1-24-1970

Interview no. 45

Eugene M. Thomas
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Interview with Eugene M. Thomas by S.H. Newman, 1970, "Interview no. 45," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Eugene M. Thomas

INTERVIEWER: S. H. Newman

PROJECT: History of UTEP

DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 24, 1970

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.:

TRANSCRIPT NO.: 45

TRANSCRIBER:

DATE TRANSCRIBED:

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Dean at UTEP.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

History of campus buildings, including design and construction.

Transcript; 9 pages.

Dean Eugene M. Thomas
January 24, 1970
Interview by Bud Newman

N: I came up here to see you, Dean Thomas, because this gentleman has been writing to Baxter /Polk/ repeatedly. His name is Lloyd C. Englebreck. What I would like to know is why it is believed that Henry Trost did not design any of the campus buildings, and also who are the Gibson and Robinson people mentioned in the Fugate book and also in the El Paso Times article of February 13, 1938?

T: Well, there are some of the original blueprints down at Holly's* place with Trost and Trost on them, the original blueprints of the buildings that were first put up.

N: So that's the man I want to see.

T: Well, he has them. They, of course, got awfully dog-eared. Cap Kidd had tracings made of them. There were some of the original blueprints that the buildings were built from that I turned over to Holly.

N: Can you tell me right off-hand which buildings were the original buildings?

T: The original buildings were the main building, Old Main; the second story part of the present Geology Building, which was Chemistry and Metallurgy; the power house, which was a two-story structure that is now integrated

*Hollingshead, Director of the UTEP Physical Plant.

into the Engineering Building, the western portion of it; and the so-called Education Building now, which was the dormitory. Those were the four original buildings.

N: That's right across the street from Kelly Hall and up the street a bit?

T: Kelly was probably built about two years later, because Kelly was existing when I came here in 1922. It was not in the original group of buildings. You had the present Education Building, which was the dormitory; the Old Main Building, which was existing very much as it is now, with the exception of the fact that later we excavated the basement, which was unexcavated at the time. The only thing that was in the basement in the original building was a men's toilet on the left-hand side as you went into the building; the bookstore, that was just the first part of that office, that office that is existing there now. That was on the end and you entered from the outside. That was an instrument room. That was there at the time. The only rooms downstairs were a men's toilet on the left-hand side, the bookstore (which consisted of only the first office on the right-hand side), then a room used as an instrument room. You'd go in the doors right there by the stairway and all you could do was get in there, and around there was a janitor's closet under the stairs. The rest of it, the rock was up as high as your head. You could get in underneath by stooping down in most parts of it. In the early '30s, Cap went in there and blasted out that basement and made all the room that is there now. The dormitory, the Main building, the two-story part of the present Geology Building and

the power house (which is a two-story job now integrated into the Engineering Building, the west end of it), those were the original four buildings. Then down where Seamon Hall is now was a sheet metal mill building with some milling equipment in it and a little old-time blacksmith shop sitting right about in front of what is now Seamon Hall. But the original four permanent buildings were those I was telling you about.

N: I have the Fugate book here.

T: These /pictures/ are from the Flowsheet. This is Keno Hall as it was known in those days. Here is the power house and this is the Chemistry Building. This /picture/ is taken from up above. This is the Old Main Building.

N: What year did the Administration Building (where the Library stands now) come along?

T: 1938. It was the first building that was built after Seamon Hall. Seamon Hall came along in 1927 and there was no other building until the Library-Administration came along in 1938. In the meantime, however, by the WPA and stuff of that sort, the three-story addition to the south and the upper part of the Geology Building, which is the big classroom there, was put on to Seamon Hall. It was in WPA times.

Holliday Hall was built and I believe the old part of the Engineering Building. I don't remember the exact dates of those. Percy McGee designed

the Library-Administration Building and Thormand designed Holliday Hall. The additions to the buildings -- including the addition to Seamon Hall, the Chemistry Building, and the Engineering Building, which was built onto the power house -- were designed by Cap Kidd and were built on a combination of WPA and state money. The original buildings are all wall-bearing structures. The fact of the matter is, even the newer buildings which Percy McGee designed are wall-bearing structures.

There came a time when the Engineering Building and the addition to Seamon Hall designed there at the college by Cap Kidd were not wall-bearing structures. What we mean by that is that these older buildings have no concrete whatever in the walls themselves. There are no columns in the walls. They went down the middle of the building with a series of columns and then the beams across these columns to support the various floors were buried in the walls. The walls are made of rock. That's why, of course, in the older buildings you get this immense thickness, particularly in the Old Main Building, which is a three-story structure and rather large. In order to get this batter, your inner wall is straight and then the batter comes up here. If you finish it out, of course, you have to finish it out with about eighteen inches of wall at the top. So when you come down 30 or 35 feet on that batter, with the inner wall being vertical and the sloping wall out here, that's why you get that immense thickness of wall in the older buildings. You notice in the Engineering Building, for instance, and the newer buildings which are columns and beams, concrete, the walls are just filled in and covered over. Now on the Engineering Building, for instance, the inner wall down

in the basement is here, we'll say. You start this batter. Well then, on the second floor the wall is moved in a little bit and the batter continues on up and so on. But you see, you could take out every wall in the new part of the Engineering Building and the roof would still stand. The older buildings, no. They are completely wall-bearing structures.

N: The roof rests on the wall instead of on trusses?

T: That's right. Well, the roof might rest on concrete trusses or beams, but at the same time those beams are supported by the walls.

N: This is the 1923 Flowsheet.

T: The old power house, this portion is exactly the same. You can see this as you go down to Seamon Hall -- this window and this door and what-not here. The first part of the Engineering Building was built three stories out here to the east attached to this. Later we built another story over the top of the power house. Much later the "L" going to the south was attached to it.

N: This business of Tibetan design, you call it Bhutanese now, I think.

T: Bhutanese is the correct term. The Tibetan has very much the same thing, except for the fact that the roofs kink up on the four corners, making it more Chinese. It is from Bhutan. Back in the old days, we'd have visitors

come look at the college, and a number of them had been to Bhutan, and they remarked about the very close similarity. The original buildings, they've gotten away somewhat; well, of course, they have gotten away, period, with the bunch of crap they've put out there lately. But the idea [was that] they were built into the hillside, like the Old Main Building was. On the lower floor there was only one opening, a door for protective purposes. The Old Main Building as it was originally built only had the main opening, a window on one side and a window on the other, and then a door and a window on the east end.

N: Are these fireproof buildings?

T: They're as fireproof as you could get a fireproof structure.

N: I was wondering, with the absence of exits.

T: Now, the Old Main Building has a fire escape on the north side out of the third floor. The old dormitories had... Well, I guess there's one out of the north end of Keno Hall right now out of the third floor. There's one, unless it's been removed, on the north end of Kelly. That entrance way on the third floor of Kelly was built along in the early '30s when we were expanding and the Library had originally been in the Old Main Building. That entry way was put there and the whole third floor of Kelly was torn out, all the partitions and everything of that sort, and opened up completely for the Library. As you know now, you can't get

from the second floor to the third floor of Kelly from the inside, you have to go outside and around. This is one of the standard pictures. /Flowsheet, 1925. This is 1925 and this is Kelly Hall. Kelly was existing when I came to the college in 1922. This is Keno Hall. Now you can see the door and the window on the east end. This is the Old Main Building, nothing on the front here but the door; and, by God, I don't think we even had two windows, just the door.

N: This Keno Hall is the present Education Building?

T: That's right.

N: Didn't it have the name Burges somewhere along the line?

T: Yes, they changed it to Burges. Then when the new men's dormitory was built down there and Education moved over into Keno, then that's when the name changed again to the Education Building. But it was known as Burges Hall for a long time.

N: I don't think that we could get any more living evidence than that /which/ you have just given.

T: You go down and see Holly, and in his folios there ought to be some of the original blueprints with Trost and Trost on it. This deal in Francis' book about some other architect was complete news to me. What

maybe happened, we were under the Board of Regents at the University of Texas, always. It may be that even in those days that they had some sort of a consulting architectural firm, perhaps down at Austin or someplace else, and maybe that's how they got into the picture. I don't know.

N: The Gibson and Robinson people, those are the people down in Austin?

T: I don't know; I'm supposing. This is the Old Main Building as it was originally built in 1918. They did have the two windows here, but, you see, this is a blank wall here; so was the west end of the wall.

N: When you came out here, Dean Thomas, was it as a faculty member?

T: Oh, no; I went to school. I was there as a student from 1922 to 1926. I went back in the fall of 1930 on a one-year contract. This Fugate says that a second dormitory was started in the winter of 1920-21. That's Kelly Hall.

N: Now, where did you hold faculty meetings in those days?

T: When you had probably eight to ten faculty members, you didn't have much trouble. They were generally held in the Dean's office, which was in the Old Main Building. As you go up to the second floor, it's the first office to the left, where it was Dr. Knapp's office for many years. I

beg your pardon, that was the Registrar's Office. The Dean's Office was the office next to it. You can get quite a bit out of Fugate's book. I think it's pretty authentic.

N: I'm going to have to do a little research on Gibson and Robinson. I've never heard of them.

T: Fugate gives credit only to who produced the first sketches of the campus.

N: It does present a mystery how Trost and Trost got into it. Maybe the idea was taken over by Trost and Trost.

T: Apparently so. Or it may be that with the state of Texas in it, it may have been that Trost and Trost came along and gave them a lower bid on designing the buildings. If you could find an El Paso City Directory, you might check up on this Gibson and Robinson. But as far as I'm concerned, the first time I've ever heard of these people was when Fugate's book came out.

N: It's nice to have an engineer tell you things from his point of view.