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Interview no. 62

William F. Webb

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: William F. Webb
INTERVIEWER: David Salazar
PROJECT: History of the University
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Spanish professor at UTEP.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Early days of the University and changes it has undergone.

Length of interview: 30 minutes Length of transcript: 16 pages

William F. Webb
by David Salazar
January 5, 1973

S: I notice everybody calls you Dr. Webb, and even I have been calling you Dr. Webb.

W: Well, that's just a courtesy title and it does not matter to me. They can call me anything. They can call me "you" if they wanted to, it wouldn't matter as far as that goes, just so they said "you" with a proper sound of respect in their voice.

I first saw El Paso in 1933 when I was teaching in San Angelo High School and we came out here to play a bi-district football game. But I was only here one day and I never even got out here to the campus. All I saw was the downtown area where they had a parade then the football game at El Paso High Stadium, so I didn't get much impression of El Paso on that trip. And I didn't see it again until 1945. Just at the end of World War II the chairman of the department of Modern Languages, whom I had known previously, telephoned me where I was living in San Antonio about the 1st of August and wanted to know that now that the war was over [if] I'd signed on with anybody. And I said no, and he said, "Well, come out here." So I caught an airplane the next day and came out. He had just arrived on the campus. He had come here from Texas Tech. And when he came in as chairman of the department the President met him and said, "You're a man short." So he went home and called me. I had known him well for a number of years. So I've been here ever since.

We got here a little while before most of the men got out of the service, so we only had I think 1100 students here on the campus that first semester, and in the city there must not

have been over 100,000 people. But then at the beginning of the second semester the flood hit us. From about a thousand students the first semester it jumped to about 2,000 in one semester, and that's a pretty good percentage jump. We started to have one class in a section that would correspond about to 4102 now, hoping that there might be enough to make it. Well, 80 students signed up for it, so we had to do some stirring around and get some placement tests ready and all of that. Then there's been a steady growth ever since. Ups and downs--it hasn't been of course the same amount every year. And of course I'm glad to say that the pay has improved a little bit as time went on until we got to the stage we are now.

But the main thing I notice besides the University is the way the city has grown. As I said, they had probably about 100,000 people when I came here. And I'd been here a few months and some relatives came here to visit me and they stayed in what they call the Farnsworth Motel out here on Montana. That was the last one out, and that's just about where Loretto Shopping Center is now. And that was the last one out that way. Where Chelmont and Bassett Center are now was nothing but desert, and out here in the Northeast where they had the Mountain Park and all that area out in there where I used to go out is out of the city limits then. [I'd] go out and my boys were young, I'd teach them how to drive the car. Wouldn't be any traffic out there, get all those back roads. So I've seen a lot of change here. And of course Juarez has grown in some ways even more rapid than El Paso has.

Oh, naturally I wasn't a stranger to this kind of a climate, I'd lived in San Angelo for about 10 years. And while there's not as much western as this, at least it's on the way. And they have the western atmosphere in some ways more there than they do here, because here they began to get the big city atmosphere. And San Angelo being smaller is still kind of a cowtown even though it has about 50,000 people now.

So I've seen about 12 or 14 presidents come and go here at the University since I've been here, counting acting presidents, interim presidents and all of that. Someone asked me one day, "How do you think you'll get along with a new president?" I said, "Well, I've served under about a dozen already and I got along pretty well with all of them. I'm not particularly worried."

But I think that taking it by and large, I've never lived anyplace I've enjoyed living as much as I have El Paso.

S: I was looking through some of the old catalogs and they don't have too many Spanish surnamed students. They had a larger number than I thought.

W: Yeah, they've always had a large number.

S: This has increased quite a lot?

W: Yes, I think it's increased mainly because people from South El Paso that formerly were unable to go to school when they got out of high school, through government grants and other aids and also through improvement in family income, there are more of them able to attend now than used to be, which I think is a very healthy thing. Because right after the war and I came here, there were so many people living in South El Paso that just barely could

survive and they didn't have any money to pay to send the kids to school. And the number of scholarships and things were extremely limited then. They've increased a lot since then and we've seen the affect of it. And then I think I have to admit that when I first came here, students from Spanish-speaking families down in the schools in those areas, the kids would come to school, to start school, unable to talk English at all. Course there's still some that do, but it used to be a very large number. And I attribute [that to] the television as much as anything else, and so [when] they come to school they can all talk some English now. I haven't seen one--this is when I visited schools--I haven't seen one in a long time that couldn't talk a little English.

S: That's true, even just a little.

W: And maybe a television or maybe just general level of education. I believe the general level of education from the bottom to the top. Well, the top may not have gone up any, but I think the bottom part has come up a good deal. And to me that's pretty encouraging. A lot of people talk about it, but I think everybody's entitled to at least a moderate education.

S: Now you were talking to us one day in class about the Spanish Honorary Society.

W: Yes, we have an honorary society here that's national. It was formed at the University of California, oh, some 40 years ago. It's called Sigma Delta Pi, those are the Greek letters it stands for. And over the country there must be 150 colleges and universities that have chapters, so it's nationwide. You have to have about 2.8 average in everything and about a 3.0

average in all Spanish courses, and then you have to be enrolled in advanced courses. You can't just get in when you get out of 3201. It's not a social organization at all. And many people never come to a meeting except the one they get initiated, but that's all right, they have the right to wear the button. And some people wonder why I bother with it, but many times when you apply for a job with any company, they'll have a place to put any scholastic honors you may have received. And so if you had that there and someone else applied that had approximately equal qualifications and didn't have it, then you might get the job. So, it's worthwhile.

S: Now, you're talking about the past presidents. Did you come in contact with any of the past presidents closely at all?

W: Oh, I've known them all pretty well. When I came here, Dr. Wiggins was president and he later went up to Texas Tech, and then he finally left Texas Tech and became president of a bank up there, and he has since retired from that. Then after an acting president for a while, they brought in a man named Elkins, who is now president of the University of Maryland. He was in some ways the most brilliant man we ever had. He was a Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Texas, president of the student body, a Ph.D. from Oxford in England-- he was a Rhodes scholar--and he was captain of the basketball team and all-conference quarterback in football. He was quite a man. And then he was followed by another acting president

or two, and then they brought in a man named Holcomb from Texas Tech. He'd been a dean at Texas Tech. He only stayed here a couple of years and he got a better paying job with the gas company.

Then they had another intervening president or two, and Dr. Smiley came here for the first time. Then he left to become president of the main university in Austin, and from there he went to the University of Colorado. And Colorado got to having an awful lot of trouble. They were what you might say just overrun for two or three years with what we call hippies, and that was rather amusing. Somebody on the west coast, some kind of a person they considered a prophet prophesied there was going to be a terrible destruction of earthquakes all over the world and the only safe place would be either in Tibet or in the mountains of Colorado. So they couldn't go to Tibet and they just all swarmed in there. And so then when he had a chance to come back here, though, he'd just come back and stay until he got ready to quit being administrator, which, as you know, happened this fall. He decided that he had enough. And he started out a professor and decided he'd go back to being a professor. They they brought in Dr. Templeton, whom I've just met. I don't know him as well as the rest of them yet. But all the rest of them, I've known 'em.

S: So, which one made the biggest impression on you?

W: Well, I'd probably have to say Dr. Elkins, because I know him better and I'd known him before he ever came here.

S: Well, you're from the University of Texas at Austin, aren't you?

W: Yeah. And then when I was in San Angelo I was one of these kind of a hybrids. They had a high school, and right across the street was the junior college, and the junior college was part of the school system. And I was one of several that were hybrids, we'd teach back and forth between the two. Then they brought Dr. Elkins there as president of that junior college just before the war started, so I didn't have much association with him then before the war came on. So I've seen a lot of 'em. I know just before Dr. Elkins went to Maryland, I met him one day and he said, "I didn't especially want to go to Maryland right now, but," he said, "they offered me \$10,000 dollars a year more than I was getting here. That's a pretty good raise to turn down."

S: So, when you first came here was in 1945?

W: 1945, right at the end of World War II.

S: What kind of effect would you say World War II had on this university, if any?

W: Well, like in so many schools, all I can say about during World War II is the enrollment went way down because most of the men were in uniform, and about the [only men that] were here, so the oldtimers told me, were the 4-Fs and people like that. But then when the G.I.s got out and started coming to school, I would say the effect there was very good. I know for four or five semesters in a row the G.I. group had the highest scholastic average on the campus. See, they'd grown up and they knew their time was limited, they had to get out and make a living. So they weren't

wasting any time. They didn't care anything about social affairs, they were here to get their education and get out. Most of them, by that time, had families to support.

I remember I picked up one boy over on the other side of town on the way to school one morning, and we were inquisitive about all of them, they were new. And I said, "Well, when you were here before the war, what kind of grades you make?" He said, "Oh, I made Ds and Fs." I said, "Now?" He said, "As and Bs." I said, "What's the difference?" Said, "Well, before the war I was spending Dad's money and I was trying to make the right fraternity and have a good time." I say, "How's it now?" He said, "Hell, I got to make a living now." (Chuckles) "I've got a wife and baby to support." So things had changed. And they were more mature and they knew what they wanted. And you didn't have any trouble with them cutting class 'cause they knew what they wanted. If they got in the class some instructor that had the habit of being absent a lot, they'd complain about him. They knew they had to have it. They had to get out and make a living.

I [would] estimate that half of the lawyers in El Paso that are under 50 I've had in class up here one time or another, and a large number of the doctors, 'cause so many of them were G.I. students right after the war. Really, I enjoyed having them. They were an intelligent group and a serious group.

S: Can you remember any in particular that you did teach?

W: Oh, a lot of them. Probably, one of the outstanding [ones] right now would be Judge Bob Schulte of the district judges

down here. He was one of our early G.I. students and one of the best. And there are several that are teaching here on the campus that I had then, like Dr. Tappan in our department. When he first came back, he lacked a little bit of finishing his degree, and Professor Eamon in the English Department. And [there are] quite a number of them on the campus that were in that stage where G.I. students were just finishing up. So I think the G.I. Bill, in spite of some of the abuses that some people gave--you know, people will abuse anything--I think it's one of the finest things the nation ever did. Most of the leaders in El Paso today were G.I. students either here or somewhere else right after the war, and some of them never would have gotten an education without it.

S: If it hadn't been for that, yes. I can imagine.

W: I remember one graduation while Dr. Elkins was president. See, in so many cases the boy, man, would go to school and his wife would get a job. And before Dr. Elkins started handing out diplomas, he said, "First let me offer a tribute to the wives of many of these graduates, without whom they wouldn't have made it."

S: It's so true.

W: It is so true. And another I think of is John Phelan, one of the officials of KTSM, although I'd known him before the war when he was a newspaper writer over in San Angelo. So there have been quite a lot of them.

S: So then I would imagine you've seen quite a few of the faculty come and go also.

W: Oh, I'll say. I guess when I came here the first year there must not have been over 40 or 50 faculty members, and look how many there are now. And there have been a lot retirements, a lot of people leave for various reasons. But I guess in 27 years, that's how long I've been here, you expect to see changes. And beginning this May the 31st, they'll see me change.

S: Oh, you're leaving the 31st?

W: I'm retiring on May the 31st. I've had 27 years here, and altogether in this state 43 years of it, and I think that's enough.

S: That's a long time.

W: And I want to quit while I'm not in a wheelchair while I can enjoy it.

S: Yes, right, absolutely.

W: Oh, I'm going to maintain my connection with the campus. As you know, we have a credit union here which I'm president of, and I expect to continue to work with it. If nothing else, two things, it'll give me something to do, and besides, I own a good many shares in it and I want to see that they're taken care of right.

S: Right, so Dr. McNeely tells me. I don't think I've told you, but I'm working for Dr. McNeely.

W: Yeah, I know Dr. McNeely.

S: He was very happy that I was going to interview you.

W: Yeah, I met him when he first came here. Also, I met his wife. She was a very nice person.

S: Yes, I've met her, too. Now, one of the faculty members who left recently was Dr. Porter.

- W: Yes, Dr. Porter was a good friend of mine. He came here earlier than I did, but I knew him quite well while he was here, and I still see him occasionally. Dr. Porter is a highly cultured, educated gentleman, and he was a marvelous lecturer. You ever have a class with him?
- S: No, I'm afraid not. I never did have.
- W: Well, he was a marvelous lecturer. He didn't lecture from notes, and when the bell rang to start the class he'd step in the door lecturing. When the bell rang at the end of the class he'd say his last sentence and step out the door.
- S: Well, I saw him at a Westerner's meeting, it's sort of a historical group, and I was talking to him and he spoke to me about you and that he was also a member of that Spanish Honorary Society.
- W: Yes. There were several others we made honorary members-- well, like Dr. Timmons is one. There are quite a number of them like that have interest in Spanish or Spanish American affairs that we've made honorary members. But I'm the only one in the department, other than some of the younger ones, that didn't have to be made an honorary member or initiated after I got here. I was a member at the University of Texas. When they first started, I was a charter member of the charter there when it was just getting organized all over the country. So I think it's a good thing, the honor society. We have other honor societies on the campus, but Sigma Delta Pi is the oldest national honor society on the campus. There are several others now, and any of them are worthwhile.

- S: I'm sure you might have seen another trend here in the University, as far as the fraternities and the sororities.
- W: Well, I'd say while the fraternities and sororities are still here, I don't believe they have as much...well, you don't notice them as much as they used to, partly because the campus has gotten so large and so the percentage of people that belong to those is not as large as it used to be.
- S: Do you feel it's that, because even the University at Austin is fairly large. How is the situation over there?
- W: Well, their fraternities are pretty powerful there. I never was a fraternity man. When I was going to school, I didn't have enough money to be. Oh, I did have a number of bids, but because I had an uncle who was a professor there, and anybody that was related to a faculty member was usually bid by one of the fraternities. But I knew I didn't have the money to go _____ . I didn't have all the helps they have now. I had to make it or else.
- S: Even now I am a member of a club here, not a fraternity, and it's hard getting members coming in. It's just the general mood of the students here.
- W: Well, it's always been that to some degree. Since the majority of our students are from El Paso, they have too many of their own interests to give all of their time to campus affairs. Down at Austin most of the students are from out of town and so they are more highly interested in campus affairs than they are here, which is one of those natural things. Then right now I think people are less interested in strictly the social side than they used to be. Even some we consider far-outs, they're interested

in the far out stuff more than they are the social affairs. And we have an awful lot of people here, yet they haven't got time to fool with it. It's all right, it's a good thing if you can afford it, and they do have some benefits. But a person that has to work hard for everything he's got, whether it's worth what he puts in, I don't know.

S: Now, did you know Dr. Sonnichsen pretty well?

W: Yes, I got to know Dr. Sonnichsen pretty well. [I] used to have an office on the same floor with him over in Old Main. He was one of first people I met when I came to the campus. And I thought a lot of Dr. Sonnichsen, and I still do, in fact. I thought he was one of the real assets the campus had. And personally I think they should never have let him retire. Even [if] he hadn't taught a class, they should have kept him on just for the prestige.

S: We have taped Dr. Sonnichsen.

W: Oh, good.

S: And he is pretty interesting. You know that he's in Arizona right now.

W: Yeah. Oh, I knew them all pretty well. I knew the Dean of Engineering, Dean Thomas; and the head of what was then the Mining School, his name was Graham. And the Dean of what's now Liberal Arts was a man named Puckett, he was a tough boy. I remember one time when we were having examinations late in January, just before examinations started he phoned me in the office one day and he said, "Has [so-and-so] been coming to class since Christmas holidays?" I said, "No, I haven't seen him." He said, "Wait a minute." And I heard him turn to the

boy and he said, "You told me you'd been going to class, didn't you?" And he came back and he said, "He's dropped." Said he caught him in a lie right there in his office, and I hadn't seen since the holidays, he hadn't been back. Course the good old gentleman is dead now.

S: We have some photographs of him at the university archives here.

W: Well, there's photographs on the second floor of the administration building, because he was an acting president at one time. Oh, there have been some good men on this campus that have come and gone since I've been here, and it irritates me beyond measure to hear people talk about, imply, that we have a second rate school, like you hear downtown. I don't agree with that. The things they complain about, other schools have the same as we do. And I will say this, with the mushrooming enrollment probably we've got more of the poor students than we used to have. But I'll take my good students, than means my A and B students, and I'll put them up against anybody's from any school. I think they're just as good as they ever were. But there are more of the bad ones. When you have so many that's inevitable.

And when some of these campus disturbances [were] going on, they [were] mainly put up by outsiders, you know. And several times they'd [be] going on, I'd have a full class attendance, nobody'd be out, and they'd be carrying on just outside the window. And the newspapers, of course, exaggerate. One time they had a little protest meeting [on] the other side of the Union by some of the black students, and I passed by just to see what was going on, and there may have been 50 students there and most of those were just curiosity seekers. I went on and got in my car and started

home and turned on the radio, and the radio said, "2,000 students rioting on the University campus." They weren't rioting at all. There weren't but 50 to start with. And when they see all the crowd, I know how students are and how I did when I was a student, come around and see what's happening, curiosity.

S: You know it is bad, because the newspaper does tend to give a...

W: They over...they exaggerate it.

S: And like you say, downtown people do think that the people are getting burned out here.

W: Yeah, they do.

S: That the buildings are being held at gunpoint or such.

W: And they say, "Oh, they're just a bunch of atheists on the campus." I would say three-fourths of the faculty are very active church members, at least three-fourths of them, maybe more than that. But you know, when you have this many, as many as we do, there are bound to be a few bad ones. Anytime you get a large group you have a few bad ones, just like you've heard me say in class one time, there was one rotten apple in the 12 Apostles.

S: Right. Even there.

W: Even there. And it isn't fair to judge the whole campus by a few...well, use the word nuts. It's not fair to judge the whole campus by a few like them. I certainly don't judge my classes by a few F students. But when a student tends to his business and passes his courses and works hard, that's not news. He goes out and gets in trouble, that's news. And I think that the majority of our students are pretty serious minded. I know these

27 years I've been here have been very happy years. I feel a little bit depressed at the idea of quitting, but it's one of those things that has to come sooner or later.

S: What do you plan to do afterwards besides being active with your credit union?

W: Well, there's a lot of things I want to do. My wife and I have so many things planned [I] don't know when I'll get them all done. See, my children are grown and on their own, my home is paid for, and there's no reason why we can't do a few things we want to. And there won't be any pressure. If we don't want to go today, we won't go. And if we want to go just overnight, say if I want to go to Austin and see a football game, I'll go. If I want to go to Mexico City and spend a month, I'll do it-- which I'll probably do before long.

S: Soak up some of that sun down there.

W: Oh, I love Mexico City. And I have relatives in Canada, we'll be visiting those. I don't have too much desire to go to Europe. I might sometime, I don't have too much desire to do that. I used to think I'd like to go to Ireland, but with all the things going on over there now, I think I'll wait a while. You might get shot if you go over there now.