

10-30-1989

Interview no. 781

Gary Massingill

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Interview with Gary Massingill by Dr. Charles Martin, 1989, "Interview no. 781," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Gary Massingill
INTERVIEWER: Charles Martin
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 30, 1989
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO: 781
TRANSCRIPT NO: 781
TRANSCRIBER: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born and raised in Snyder, Texas, attended Howard County Junior College in Big Spring, graduated West Texas State BS in 1969, Air Force 1969-72; MS from West Texas State in 1975; entered UTEP 1976 and graduated in May, 1979, the first PHD graduate in the history of the university. PHD was in Geological Sciences.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Tells of his educational career and speaks of the influence of professors at UTEP, particularly W. H. McNulty, then head of UTEP's geological sciences department. Graduated PhD in May, 1979, the first PhD recipient at UTEP.

Length of Interview: 38 minutes Length of Transcript 18 pages

Gary Massingill
October 30, 1989
Professor Charles H. Martin
UTEP Diamond Jubilee

This is an interview with Dr. Gary Massingill, by Charles H. Martin by telephone on October 30, 1989 from El Paso, Texas to Reno, Nevada.

C: All right. I thought we would start off simply by just reviewing where you were born and where you grew up and what kind of educational interest you had up until the time you graduated from high school.

G: Allright I was born in Snyder, Texas, that's in ????? County. It's about halfway between Abilene and Lubbock.

C: Okay.

G: I'm one of three children. My sister's five years older than I am. [Cut off by machine.]

C: Let me adjust my machine. Okay go ahead.

G: [laughs] Okay. My father at the time I was born--through a lot of my life--was a farmer. In our family there wasn't a whole lot of people that had an educational background . . . *beyond high school.*

C: Yeah.

G: My father had an eighth grade education. So there wasn't a great push on anyone's part in my family to put me into college at all [chuckles].

C: Okay, I see.

G: So I started more or less from a . . . "well we'll try in couple of years of college and see how it works," that type of thing. I went to Howard County Junior College, Big Spring. That's about fifty miles south of Snyder.

C: Okay.

G: I spent two years there, and left there . . . I graduated from high

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school in 1964.

C: From which high school?

G: Oh, Snyder High School.

C: Okay.

G: That was in 1964. I had fairly good grades and really did fairly well in high school without a lot of trouble; didn't have great study habits [chuckles]. When I got to college . . .

C: It probably didn't make you unique.

G: Neither do I. I think that's probably true. When I got to college I didn't do so well [laughs]. I partied a bit, which didn't make my father any more impressed with the idea that I should continue to go to school. I never really thought about what I wanted to be, too much. I guess I always liked being outside, and I always enjoyed . . . rocks in the sense that they ask a lot of questions to me, and I tried to answer those questions.

C: Yes.

G: It seemed that that was one of the things that might be a field for me. So I just said, well I want to be a geologist.

C: Okay.

G: No great amount of thinking, too. It was just one of those things. Strangely enough, from that day forward, have never deferred from that path.

C: Okay, was this at Howard or subsequently when you began to make this decision?

G: Well, they asked for a major at Howard County, and I went ahead and gave them my major as Geology. There was a professor by the name of Thackery. I think he had masters degree. I don't believe he [had] any higher

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education than that. He had worked for Texaco, in Midland, most of his life. He was really . . . not a super geologist, but he really kind of developed a desire on my part to continue in that trend.

C: I see.

G: Oh, anyway the grades weren't all that good, except for geology and a few other things. I literally had to fight my father almost to continue school, in fact . . .

C: That's interesting.

G: Yeah. When I went on beyond there I went to West Texas State. That would have been two and a half years after that, so '64, '65, about 1966, midyear; I went up to West Texas State.

C: Which is in?

G: That's in Canyon, Texas. That's about fifteen miles south of Amarillo.

C: So that was about, how much further away from Snyder?

G: Yeah, it's about an eighty mile drive from Snyder.

C: Did you live on campus or try to commute . . .

G: Oh, I'm sorry it's more than eighty. It's more like a 160.

C: Oh, okay so you . . .

G: No, I went ahead and moved up there; stayed in the dorms some and then stayed off campus some. Still didn't do real great with my grades. There was this . . . I . . . I had a desire to go to college, but that was not the only thing on my mind [laughs]; working towards a bachelors degree. I graduated with my bachelor degree with not a great grade point [average] in 1969.

C: Okay.

G: It was about midyear. There was one other incentive that would kept one in school back in those days, and that was Vietnam. To be honest with

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you, even though that was on my mind, that was not the only reason I wanted to stay in school. There was just this kind of thing in the back of my mind that, I really wanted to do more than be a farmer or whatever else you might do--back in my home town without an education. I graduated in '69. I knew that I was in terms of the draft, so I went ahead and I applied to go into the Air Force, officers training.

C: Okay.

G: [1] Took their test and apparently did fairly well on it because they never gave me any trouble. After I had graduated, I had moved to Abilene, Texas. Had been accepted by the Air Force, but I still had to take a physical and everything. I knew that I was not going to be there for very long. There were no geologic jobs at that time, easily attained. I had applied for a couple of jobs, but nobody wanted to deal with me because of the draft status . . .

C: Sure.

G: . . . more than anything. I took a job as a draftsman with an engineering firm. It was Tipit and Gee Engineering in Abilene and they're still there.

C: Ah.

G: I don't know exactly at the same location, but they're still . . .

C: How long were you there before the military decided they were ready for you?

G: Six months. I graduated in May. I guess a little more than six months. In December I went into officer training school . . .

C: Okay.

G: . . . in Lackland Air Force Base, in San Antonio.

C: Sure, I know that place.

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G: Interesting story about the -- taking my Air Force physical though. The draft came hot after me right after that, so if I had failed my Air Force physical--they made me take my draft physical the following week, just on the possibility that may be the Air Force didn't want me . . . [chuckles]

C: Oh!

G: . . . they were gonna get me anyway. Even when I was in Lackland, they got rid of the draft, and they went to the lottery system . . .

C: Okay.

G: . . . I went in December. I think that happened on January. What happened was that my number came up 43, but they offered us the opportunity to get out if we wanted to, but with a number like 43 I figured they'd get me anyway.

C: Sure. It's a low number.

G: I elected to stay in.

C: How long were you in and then how did you think about going back to school when you got out?

G: I spent three and a half years in the Air Force. My last year, well, the first two or so years I was in Austin at Bergstrom Air Force Base.

C: Right.

G: My last year I was in Korea. I was a vehicle maintenance officer in Texas and in Korea. I got out at the rank of captain. I should have been in for four years, but since my remote tour of one year over in Korea was up, they offered me the ability for what they called an early out.

C: Ah, okay.

G: I had more or less, again even when I was in the service I kept working towards this end of trying to become a more educated geologist. I kept trying to find out if there was any way that I could do anything,

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photography or anything in the Air Force, and applied to several of their educational programs. Didn't have much success. When I got out I decided, I wanted to go back to school for two reasons. One is I had the G.I. Bill, and I felt that was a good opportunity. The second reason was my grades as an undergraduate really were bad [chuckles]. [1] Decided that I would try to improve upon them, and that's the reason why I elected to go right back to the same school . . .

C: Oh, okay.

G: . . . that I went to before. I went back to West Texas State. This would have been in '72. I spent three years--graduated in 1975 with my bachelor, with my masters degree in Geology --a master in Science and had a four point.

C: Oh, okay.

G: I did a little better [laughs].

C: Right.

G: I really feel like that in terms of rounding me out, in terms of a geologist, those years I spent there at West Texas State were good. There masters program had just more or less started up. They had some new professors in. They were very motivated. It was a small enough school that they really gave their students extra attention. They had a new science building, and everything just seemed to be clicking. It was just a very enjoyable time for me there.

C: How did you begin to think about UTEP and working on a Ph.D or working on a Ph.D at UTEP?

G: That in itself is an interesting story too. I'll kind of go through a couple of side stories to get there. One is that I worked a couple of summers--things were changing in terms of a geologist getting a job about

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those times. When I got out, I remember back in 1969, you couldn't hardly buy a job as a geologist.

C: Right.

G: When I went back to school in 1972, things were beginning to look better in terms of geologists. The energy problem had arisen. I got a job that Summer, it would have been . . . yeah, that would have been right, it would have been 1974, that summer I worked for Exxon.

C: Umm, hmm.

G: That was in Kings Ranch area, Kingsville.

C: Sure, I know that area. I went there to A&I. Interesting.

G: Really had a good opportunity there, worked for some real fine people. They liked what I was doing. It was just one of those enjoyable type situations. I really developed a good relationship with Exxon and the people in Exxon. In 1975, that would have been the year I graduated, Exxon was really pushing me hard to go work for me, just more or less offered me anything. [They] Said, "Hey, we want you, you're a good man. You don't need a doctrate degree." But I was telling them that I wanted one. The reason I was telling them that I wanted one was because Frank Daughterty, who was a professor at West Texas State, was a real good . . . besides being my mentor at that level, he was also a real good friend of mine. Frank knew [W.N.] McNulty.

C: Umm, hmm.

G: . . . of University of Texas at El Paso. I had thought about going on, but when I found out, and I'm not a large school person. One of the better schools that had been in geology is the University of Texas at Austin, but I never really had a great desire to go there. I liked the small school, the smaller school.

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C: Okay.

G: I saw the University of Texas El Paso as being sort of, 'hey it's a new program.' I think it's a good place to kind of get through . . . more personalized attention that I wanted . . .

C: Sure.

G: . . . rather than just being one of hundreds in the Liberal Arts, that type thing. When I found out that Frank knew McAnulty, and highly recommended it, I said, "I think I'll give this try." I still had plenty of G.I. Bill left. That was more than anything that prompted me to go and do that. I got a job that summer in 1975 between the time that I went from West Texas State to El Paso, with U.S. Steel. Their headquarters were at the time out of Salt Lake City. They were doing a helicopter recon sediment-base metal type exploration program in northern California. I came out here and was lucky enough to kind of, underneath the direction of one of the guys out of Salt Lake, I was more or less in charge of the program out here. I really felt good about all of that. I liked hard rock. Do you understand the difference between hard rock, soft rock geology?

C: No.

G: Okay. Soft rock geology is principally what most people would consider oil and gas.

C: Okay.

G: Coal might be included in that and sometimes even Uranium. I was always wanting to go more hard rock, but for some reason I kept getting pulled back to soft rock direction because more than anything, just being from Texas. It's more of an oil and gas . . .

C: Right.

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G: . . . area than minerals. The University of Texas [at El Paso] on the other hand was a noted minning school. When I got out there, especially working under McAnulty, who was more or less the old man of the university at that time. He wasn't the director, but he carried a lot of clout.

C: I see.

G: As a matter of fact I think you asked me a question about who was instrumental in perhaps getting that program going, and I think McAnulty's name would be right at the front of that list. He had been at the school a long time and really deserves a lot of credit.

C: How long a plan a of study did you envision when you launched on your Ph.D?

G: Ahh, that's a good question. In fact we ran into kind of a problem with that. I sort of allotted myself a three year program. And when I got here, for some reason everyone else allotted [chuckles] more like a four or five year program . . .

C: Okay.

G: . . . most professors, so I pushed real hard, to say, "well, gee, let's motivate, let's get this thing done." They, on the other hand, would say, "What's your hurry?" [laughs]

C: Right.

G: We did have sort of a constant battle . . . not really a battle, but at least we would exchange sort of differences of opinion on that subject every once and a while.

C: How many courses are we talking about, for a Doctoral Program was for someone already with a masters?

G: Oh, man, let's see. It seems like to me -- I really don't remember

precisely, but I think it was like thirty hour minimum course work, that doesn't include six hours of thesis, I don't think, so it would be like thirty-six hours.

C: Umm, hmm.

G: I got more than that. I don't remember precisely, but it must have been over forty hours, I think at the University of Texas El Paso -- to complete that. A couple of things that we ran into is that they required a language. I had really gotten a strong beginning in computer science when I was in West Texas State. Well, I came here, and I was trying to convince them that I should have computer science as my foreign language, or a language.

C: A language, right.

G: They really wouldn't relent on that. That was just one of our many . . . these are things that I think now that they would allow you, at least some of my later conversations as a computer science minor.

C: But you were sort of the guinea pig?

G: Yeah, I think there was a lot of things that happened to us. There were five doctoral students while I was here, while I was there. Two of us were, or three of us were fairly . . . well, let's say, four of us were fairly advanced along the lines of . . . and it seemed like that they changed the rules on us a little bit, every once in a while. [chuckles] We'd be going along and say, "Well, this is what we require," then they'd have some kind of meeting and decide, "Well, gee, may be we need to require this instead, or change this requirement ever so slightly." All in all, I feel like, through all the adversity that it's really been a, actually a gain for me in some ways because . . . I'm a fairly strong geologist and have gone through some fairly tough times in terms of--

Uranium died while I was working with Uranium . . .

C: Right.

G: . . . made a lateral shift over at oil and gas. Oil and gas died, [laughs] so now I've made the third lateral shift, and I'm now working in minerals. I think just the fact that I had the doctorate is not all that kept me, that allowed me to do that. I've got a really strong background, and a lot of that background is because of all the tough requirements that they laid on us while we were there.

C: So they gave you an ability to be flexible or have a little broader training than you might have with, which helped you out win in . . .

G: Exactly. Well, . . .

C: Industry shifted.

G: When I elected to go, at one time I decided to into one particular discipline or another in geology, but in general I made the choice, about the first year I was there in the Doctoral Program, that I was just gonna be general. Just give me a good broad general education in geology, and I'll live with that. It worked out real fine for me. I've not been disappointed in that at all.

C: What were the backgrounds of the other graduate students working on Doctoral Programs? Were they citizens as opposed to foreign students, or from the southwest as opposed to all over?

G: I don't remember all of them. Let's see there was K.C. Evans. He was working very specifically in Uranium, particularly caldern type environments. Ah, his name was on the tip of my tongue just a minute ago. There was a Michael Shayphest, and he was a palentologist. He was doing some stratigraphy work.

C: Is there mostly Americans as opposed to . . .

G: Oh, yeah there were no foreign students at that time that working on doctoral program. There were only five of us, and I can't remember the other two's names, right on top of my head.

C: Were there any high points or low points in your career here before we get up to your being close to finishing?

G: Low points would . . . McAnulty was an awfully good professor, but he was a little bit old school.

C: Umm, hmm.

G: At that time I had decided that I wanted to move toward Uranium. Phil Goodell was there, and Phil had instigated some pretty nice programs in terms of doing some Uranium work in Mexico on the caldern type systems. I felt that was something new and innovative, and I would like to [be]come involved with it. I managed to eek myself out job one summer, working for Exxon Minerals in Uranium.

C: Ahh!

G: When I went in to tell McAnulty about it, he was not as thrilled as I was; in fact he was quite disappointed because he thought that I should work on my dissertation instead. So I had to call after really making an effort to get the job, I had to call the guy back and say, "Look I can't take it." And I feel like, that in some respect that hurt me in my relationships with Exxon, after they'd gone through all the trouble to make the special interview and offer me a job. And that bothered me a little bit. I managed to get funding for my dissertation through the New Mexico Bureau of Mines and Mineral Resources in Socorro. And as a matter of fact, the University decided that since I was getting my funding there and actually doing a lot of my work there, they sort of co-assigned me an off-campus advisor, and that was Chuck Chapin at the New Mexico Bureau.

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And so McAnulty and Chapin both reviewed my dissertation, and that got to be a pretty interesting situation too, because they both had different styles of writing. And before it was over with, my changes had long since been corrected and made, but theirs were--they were changing each others changes. And I finally went to McAnulty and said, "Look somethings got to give here." So he relented, and this was pre-word processor days, and luckily there was a girl there at the Bureau that they'd just assigned to me to have her do the typing. So she basically typed the thing--a number of times--just over and straight through it. It was like three hundred pages long.

C: What (in laymen terms), what was your dissertation about?

G: Oh, there's an area that's about fifty miles north of Magdalena, New Mexico. And Magdalena is about thirty, forty miles west of Socorro. And Socorro, I guess you know, is right in the middle of the state. This area was an area that is structurally is very interesting in terms of sort of global type tectonics. There is a fissure that runs right through the center of New Mexico, that the Rio Grande occupies that they call the Rio Grande Rift. It's a position where the plate, the Continental Plate, is sort of being ripped apart, and it's spreading. It's going eastward on the eastside and westward on the westside of the River. So this area that I was working with was on the edge of that, and there's also on the southeastern margin of what belongs to the Colorado Plateau, which is, if you took the Four Corner area of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, that would be pretty much centered on the Colorado Plateau. And the Colorado Plateau is just a broad uplift that hasn't been disturbed all that much. Well, it intersected with the river and rift, just about the place of my thesis area. And there was just

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good mapping that needed to be done in there. It had some uranium potential, had some coal potential, had some oil and gas potential. So I just addressed all of those particular problems, did a fairly detailed geologic map and structural interpretation of the earth.

C: And when did you then finish up your program and take your exam and hand it in?

G: Well, I guess, let me see if I can remember these dates exactly or nearby. I left the University and actually took a job with the New Mexico Bureau of Mines and Mineral Resources in '78, I think. And I worked for them for a little over a year, and what I did was basically finish my thesis but continue the mapping that I had started and worked westward with it. So at the same time that I was working for them and doing some other mapping I was also finishing my thesis. The good part about that was the courses that I was getting paid for, for basically doing the same thing. We had worked out some really interesting stratigraphy, I was working a paleontologist there at the New Mexico Bureau, and his name was Steve Hood. Steve and I had done some kind of forward type work in the Cretaceous stratigraphy of that part of the world, and that's the reason that my mapping was pretty good, because we could just carry that on further, and it was really an advantage for them.

C: So when did you wrap up then your dissertation and hand it in and receive the degree?

G: I took a job shortly after the Bureau. I went ahead and I took a job with U.S. Steel and moved to Corpus Christi. I think I had finished basically the defense and most everything there was to do with the dissertation before I left the Bureau, and that would have been . . .

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let's see I graduated, I went through the ceremonies, it was May '79, I think. I think I took the job in Corpus Christi just about January of that year, so I must of have finished and defended that mid-year, but did not . . . or the degree and everything was not conferred until the following semester. I may not have that exactly right, but it seems like thats the way it worked.

C: Okay, let me stop for just a second.

[End of Side One].

[Beginning of Side Two]

C: Did your parents come to your graduation, or relatives or anything?

G: Yeah. I had told you earlier about my dad, not being real supportive of me going on to school, and he continued with that same tact even when I came back and was going to get my Masters Degree. It was like, "Well do you really think you need this? Is this really necessary?" Well, he really took that approach when I graduated with my Master's Degree and started on for my Doctorate, it was like, "Well, gee, do you really think you want this. Is it necessary?" And of course Exxon was giving me a hard time at the same time. It was like, "Hey you don't need it, come work for us, and you'll just get all this money and all this stuff. It's going to be great." Well, I figured, well I've got to get it. It's something I need to do. Well, when I graduated, he and my mother came. My wife was living, of course in El Paso, she was there, and I think that was all that was at the graduation ceremonies. But he changed totally. To him it was like, before the degree, and even up until the point that it was conferred, it was like, "Do you really . . ." it was like he didn't really understand it. But all of a sudden when he got back home, he was talking about his son the doctor. From that point on, he's never,

never even suggested that I did the wrong thing. So I think that he was quite proud, and that's one of the things we try to do of course, is please our parents. And my mother, she's been very supportive through all of it, that's a different story.

C: Well did you realize until you got up to your commencement, quite what your place was in the school's institutional history?

G: Not exactly. I mean, I would have all for and willing to skip it. I never have been a very ceremonious person in terms of the way that I approach things. It's just something that maybe, maybe I'd do, maybe I wouldn't. I even missed my high school prom, just thinking well, why should I go, I mean it may not be that important. But they more or less put it to me, "I think you ought to be there." So I decided that I'll be there.

C: What did it feel like it to be the first Ph. D from the entire University in any field?

G: The feeling was fantastic. It really was. That was one case to where I'm awfully glad they talked me into going, because that is a milestone in my life that I would have not missed. The ceremonies were great. There was a couple of interesting things that happened there. One is, since I was the only doctoral graduate, they didn't know what to do with me. And the guy asked me, well, would you like to proceed down with us or would you like to just sit out there? I couldn't figure out in my own mind at that time what the difference would be in terms of the impact or whatever. So I said, "Well gee you know, I'll just go sit out there." Well, the thing was that I went down and I sit out there. But I was the only person in the auditorium for a number of minutes, before anybody came down. So I didn't really proceed with everyone, which I think was a mistake on my

part. But when it all happened and all came down, it was just amazing-- the feeling that I had.

C: Any other special moments that you remember about being a student here?

G: Oh, there were there were lots of things that happened there. School was just great, really, in most cases. It was growing. They changed directors a couple of times while I was there. Just good people all around. Sometimes it didn't seem like it at the time, giving me extra hard times doing one thing or the other. There were all the personalities of professors. Luckily, in terms of some of the problems, I think they may have been diverted a bit by McAnulty, and I have to give him some credit on that, because he did carry a bit of clout around the campus. He, many times, I'm sure that they didn't always know what they really wanted everyone to do. They were still trying to figure it out in their own mind, and I think he was able to smooth some of the problems over. We ended up taking a . . . oh, it seems like it was about a half-day written examination on anything and everything that they wanted to ask for. Or wait a minute, I think it was a whole day on the written exam. And then they ended up with a half-day oral examination on anything and everything they wanted to ask us. And that was on top of an oral defense of your thesis and the presentation. So we had some fairly demanding things, because I don't think, even though they may have some of these other exams in some of the other schools, those I think ended up being quite strenuous, because in modern times all that they'll ask you is on your particular field and in this one, they, the field of geology quite diverse. They could ask you anything they wanted to about it. But somehow we managed to struggle through it. There were only two of us that were really taking both tests at that time, and that was myself and

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K.C. Evans.

C: Well, listen, I'd like to thank for

[End of Interview].