

CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

Luther Baker

Lowther: Today we are interviewing Luther Baker. Larry Lowther is the interviewer and Ham Howard is running the equipment. Luther before we get into your career at Central, would you tell us a little bit about your early life, your family background, where you were brought up and your education, where you went to school, and any career that you had before Central?

Baker: Part of my career, as a matter of fact, a very educational part of it was foot loose and fancy free running around the country as a teenager. For about ten years I was on the road. I dropped out of school after the ninth grade because I thought I had learned all there was to know that was of importance there and besides, I needed to do things and go places and learn that way. So I pretty well traveled around the western part of the United States. Held some sort of a job in every state west of the Mississippi during that period of time. Checked in with my dad every once in a while because while he never fussed with me about it because he probably realized it wouldn't do any good, he was always ready for me to come back and interested in what my escapades were involving at that particular time. My mother had died when I was six years old. My father married again shortly - a couple years after that but she and I didn't make it to put it bluntly. So he and I had established a pretty nice relationship that involved - that permitted me to do those kinds of things. I finally went back to school when I was 24 and went to college at Whitworth in Spokane because I wanted to join the Methodist Church. I had grown up in the Pentecostal Church and had as a matter of fact been licensed to preach in that organization but many things prevented my feeling comfortable in that organization so having known some people who were Methodist I decided to go that route. They, as a matter of fact, gave me a student church in Spokane to help my income during the four years that I was there. Following that I went to Boston University School of Theology for three years at which time I served there also at a small Methodist Church about 40 miles from Boston. On my graduation from there I spent 11 years then in the Oregon Conference of the Methodist Church. Portland for five years and in Salem for six years. I wanted to go back to school to get some additional training in counseling because a great deal of my ministerial work had involved me in marital and family counseling. So I went to Oregon State University, inquired of such a program. I talked with Lester Kirkendall who was the head honcho of the family life program there at that time. He talked me initially into just going all the way for a Phd program. I consequently resigned my pulpit at Salem and took a year off and went to Oregon State and finished up my doctorate at that point. Everything except the dissertation. During that time while I was there, Louise Tobin who was then the Chairman of the department of economics here attended a conference - a home ec kind of regional conference at the University which I was giving an address. After she heard me she talked with me a little bit about my future, came back and talked with Wes Crum here and the upshot of that was they invited me to come for an interview and the upshot of that was that I came for the interview and stayed and have been here ever since.

Lowther: Did you have the Phd at the time you came here?

Baker: No, I had finished all of the course work and was working on the dissertation here.

Lowther: Did you subsequently finish that and get the degree?

Baker: It was a couple years later - '66. I came in '64 and in '66 I completed the dissertation and all that other work.

Lowther: What was your assignment when you came here in '64?

Baker: I was an Assistant Professor of family life within the Department of Home Economics.

Lowther: Okay and then some time later you became the chairman of the department?

Baker: In '68 I became chair of the department, yes.

Lowther: Were you the first male chair of that department?

Baker: One of the first and only male chairs of such departments anywhere in the country. As a matter of fact, I became somewhat involved in the National Association during my tenure as chairman. I never came across very many other male chairmen. There were a few and we'd commiserate with each other whenever we'd come to conferences but not many, no. And I was the first person - the first male in the department around here.

Lowther: Can you tell us a little bit about the assignment that you had when you first arrived?

Baker: Well, essentially, of course, teaching courses in child development and family life. They were - oh I think I finally developed about probably half a dozen different courses that I was teaching at the time. Also at that time there had been some interest being expressed in a master's program in family life. There had been some previous talk apparently interdepartmentally but nothing had come of that. So I then finally then put together an interdepartmental committee which I was chairman that haunched a master's of education degree in family life.

Lowther: What was - now there was a name change in the department, wasn't there? What was the department known as when you first arrived?

Baker: It was the department of home economics.

Lowther: Home economics.

Baker: It was Helen Michaelson's department. She put the thing together and built it and was, you know for a long time - you know the history of Helen Michaelson. Great lady.

Lowther: Did - was she still active when you arrived?

Baker: Yes, as a matter of fact, she retired in 1970.

Lowther: Do you have any remembrances of her and - would you care to share with us?

Baker: One of the things that I always remember very quickly about her is that she told me about how she and her sister when she was 19 years old traveled across the United States on a motorcycle just the two of them. She was that kind of a lady. As a matter of fact, the students called her Machine Gun Mike. That was because of her style of lecturing. She knew her subject and she dispensed the information very quickly and accurately and forcefully. I took one class from her, as a matter of fact, in nutrition before she retired and it was a delightful class and I have to say that I learned some things some of which I have forgotten probably by now about nutrition. Shortly after I became department chairman, as a matter of fact about that time, there was a sort of a ferment nationally in the home economics movement concerning title. There was a considerable pressure from some sources nationally to get away from what was perceived to be the negative stereotypes of home economics and many thought the way to do that would be to change the name. A variety of names. Most of them centered around family life with more or less variety of nomenclature including Consumer Studies were the ones that were being under discussion, So we discussed that, of course, in the department and at length after considerable discussion the department wanted to change the name to family and consumer studies. We made the presentation, it went through the mill here and was approved up to the point of being then heard by the board of trustees. There was one particular member of the trustees whose wife had gone to Central and was in home economics and held a dear spot in her heart for home economics and unfortunately they perceived that move to be an elimination of home economics and apparently under the circumstances were not convinced otherwise. The result of that was

that instead of just making a name change the trustees approved a change to home economics dash family and consumer studies which of course is redundancy to start with, a little awkward and so for years we just were called family and consumer studies.

Lowther: Were you advocating just simply being called the department of family studies?

Baker: Yes, that is what the department wanted to do.

Lowther: Was there opposition within the department to –

Baker: Some reservations. There wasn't any real strong opposition but there were a couple people who had of course had been in the business for many years and they had the similar emotional attachment to the title. Interestingly, not only departmentally here, locally, that move never really succeeded. It is now still called home economics - family and consumer studies but most people now are referring to it as home economics and as a matter of fact, before I finally retired I just called it the department of home economics because - and nationally the same thing occurred. The change just never really took place and it's now just sort of resigned itself to continue with the traditional title.

Lowther: Do you remember when that name change was made?

Baker: Well it would have been about in 1970, approximately. I don't remember exactly but about 1970.

Lowther: Okay, all right, do you - let's see would you tell us a little bit about your style of - teaching style and philosophy of teaching in your classes?

Baker: I hadn't really thought about that Larry as a matter of carefully defined style or philosophy. I think I probably have to confess that first of all my preaching had been a teaching style of preaching. I wasn't - I was more - people said I should be a teacher instead of a preacher. I think my style of teaching was - had a little bit of the preaching in it. So I guess I did go - lean heavily on lecture. I felt that I had some information that needed to be presented but at the same time I made considerable attempts successfully, I think, to involve students in discussion and giving them projects to perform and that kind of thing. I felt and feel that student involvement is very important to the learning process but at the same time the only reason they are in class with a teacher is that hopefully the teacher knows more and needs to present some of that information to them.

Lowther: Do you remember what your work load was in terms of credits?

Baker: Twelve credits.

Lowther: Twelve credits, okay.

Baker: No question about it. Except that that was flexible so sometimes I taught 15 credits. Occasionally 10 but it was supposed to average out 36 credits a year until I became chairman. Later on, as a department chairman, depending on the person's other kinds of involvements and the subject matter at hand I didn't always insist on a full 36 credits a year.

Lowther: Was there a separate family studies major within the department?

Baker: Oh yes.

Lowther: Did you initiate that?

Baker: Yes I initiated it an arts and sciences degree program which had one of the options being a major in family life.

Lowther: Okay and –

Baker: And for a long time, that was a very strong program.

Lowther: And you said then that a master's degree was built on that.

Baker: And for a while that was very strong. At one point we had 19 graduate students in residence at one point. It was a very good program. I might add - commented that at first that program was interdepartmental and I chaired the committee that did that but it was only a couple years before the other departments indicated that they didn't feel comfortable with participating in it because in their perception it was becoming a home economics program which undoubtedly in fact it was. So we simply absorbed that and then a few years later we changed the MEd to an M.A. New title.

Lowther: So you had quite a bit of experience working with other departments? Did you encounter any particular problems?

Baker: One of the problems, of course, is sort of typical turf thing and it's - I think it's very sincere. For example, one department had hired a person who came at the same year that I did whose assignment was teaching courses on the family. When I was being given by the dean some what was perceived to be extra authority and responsibility with that subject the others didn't like that and I think I can understand why. So over the years there was always a little tension, probably both ways and we tried I think somewhat successfully to resolve most of it and keep it mediated so each department could do what it felt best and needed to be done that way.

Lowther: What other departments were involved?

Baker: Sociology and psych primarily. Psychology a little reluctantly because of administrators and assistants involved in it.

Lowther: Was education also involved? Was there a teaching major?

Baker: Not in depth. We had another interdepartmental that worked real well, Con Potter in education and Joe Rich in psych and I got together and I think it was along about 1969, I think we established the Washington Center for Early Childhood Education which utilized the Hebel School as its major resource and when we got Michaelson Hall built we had the child lab there also. For two years that worked very well and the three of us, I think, had a good time and a good relationship. There were some other kinds of problems. Probably centering - coming mostly from Olympia that prevented the full development of that program and eventually then we felt it best all around to let that become a program in early childhood education within the department of education.

Lowther: What was the purpose of the Washington Center for Early Childhood Education?

Baker: It was to be both teaching and research. Teaching learning association our intention and for some little while somewhat I think successfully. They - we had children both preschool and - well all preschool because we couldn't get into the public school system but there were preschool children who were in classes for them with teachers teaching children what would be helpful for them at their developmental stages. It also then provided an opportunity a laboratory setting for advanced students, particularly graduate students, in various subjects such as child development and or family studies to have a laboratory setting for the study of children and pedagogical techniques. I think it had great potential for that to - but it just never really got off the ground well.

Lowther: Did it have separate funding? Did you get grants?

Baker: We got some grants. We started, of course, with each department putting that arid then when we were able to get Dale Otto who was the first real director of the thing, he was very instrumental in getting some good grants - some good funding. As I say, we're all quite disappointed that for state political and fund - fiscal problems, it simply wasn't able to continue.

Lowther: Was that in the 1970's that that was established?

Baker: Yes, yes, the early 70's.

Lowther: Is it still in existence, do you know?

Baker: The Washington Center is not in existence, no.

Lowther: About how long did it last?

Baker: It - I put some notes down and I can't remember. Dale Otto could remember, I wrote that down here. Dale would remember dates on that specifically but I think it only continued for three to four years before it - we had to fold that enterprise and let it become a departmental program.

Lowther: Do you feel it accomplished anything while it was in existence?

Baker: Yes, I think so. I don't know - there's no way of knowing to what extent the early childhood development program might have done - succeeded if it hadn't been for that. At least it certainly pushed that but I think that during the time that it had there were some people who went through it who got some good training and were able to take that somewhere else and hopefully are doing something with it now.

Lowther: Was it managed by you three chairs?

Baker: Yes.

Lowther: Okay, were there problems of collaboration there?

Baker: No.

Lowther: Okay. Do you have any comments on any of the personalities that you encountered within your department or in your collaborative work with other departments? Outstanding people, humorous events?

Baker: One of the things that I thought would be a pleasant change when I left the ministry and went into higher education was that I would be able to get away from the petty human foibles characteristic of ministers. I discovered that's the characteristic of people. Not any professional classification at all. So I didn't get away from anything, my response to that is that yes, there are some - there is a wide variety of personalities, some of whom you get along well with and others with whom you can't get along very well with and I think that's just the characteristic of people trying to work together.

Lowther: Do any stand out in your mind as outstanding educators?

Baker: Oh yes, there were - when it comes to that it gets hard. There are a lot of people's names. I thought that my - all of my colleagues in the chairman's meetings for example - as a matter of fact, I think that nearly a hundred percent of the chairs of the school of professional studies got along very well. We didn't -

we never really had any serious - no personality problems. The problems we had were fiscal, administrative, but not personal. They were really a great, great bunch of people.

Lowther: Okay, while you were chair, how long were the chair of the department? Until you retired?

Baker: Yes, I was chair two four year terms at first - eight years. Then I resigned from that except that I was acting chair during - off and on during the next two years when we were struggling with it and then again I became chair again for the next eight years until I retired. So I did 16 plus years as the chair.

Lowther: What year did you retire?

Baker: '87 and I took a phased for three years.

Lowther: Okay, you've mentioned the Washington Center for Early Childhood Education. What other issues do you remember from your tenure as chair? Were there any that particularly stand out or was it mostly just routine administration?

Baker: Most of them were routine. Certainly we went through a number of administrative changes at several levels among deans, classification of schools and colleges. You've probably heard that from others and you know that but it was essentially those kinds of problems that were the most difficult. And money.

Lowther: Any thing that's regarded as particularly noteworthy or outstanding in terms of the administrators under whom you served? Deans or presidents?

Baker: While you were just asking that question it popped in my head that I wanted to say something about Wes Crum, talking about people. Wes Crum took me under his wing somewhat, I think when I came here. He was certainly a wonderful personal help to me as well as an administrator. He was the Dean of Instruction when I came and I think his title changed to Dean of Faculty at one point. I'm not quite sure of all the nomenclature during that period of time either but Wes was also very concerned about family studies. He wanted that program to succeed so I think that he may have bent over backward sometimes to give me the support that would be helpful in order to make that accomplished but in addition to that just in general I felt that Wes Crum was an excellent administrator. He was very easy to talk with. He never made snap judgments. He always would listen to people and I think that when he made decisions he made them forthrightly and clearly but after a great deal of thought and listening to other people. I would say that until my last dean, he probably was - I felt the most effective one. At the same time that I became chair for the last go around in '76 Jimmy Applegate became Dean of Professional Studies and I have always felt that he was a very good administrator. He had a style somewhat similar to Wes's. He would listen. When he made decisions he would make them clearly which put them right out there but even after having made some decisions occasionally if you really were exercised about that decision and wanted to have another go around with him why he would listen and sometimes modify it. He was also a very good dean and a good personal friend.

Lowther: How about the presidents under whom you served?

Baker: Well, Jim Brooks was president when I came and so I like him personally again. I thought essentially that he was a good president so - and I was therefore somewhat disappointed when his tenure didn't continue. I guess I have never been excited about any of the successorship.

Lowther: Did you have any direct dealings with the board of trustees?

Baker: Yes.

Lowther: What's your impression of the relationship between the board and the University and the administration?

Baker: Administratively I think the board of trustees appointed by the governor is an effective way to operate an institution depending on who those appointees are and since they are in that kind of a position, what they do and their relationship with the University is going to depend a great deal on who they are and where they come from. Consequently over the years I have seen people come through who serve their time on the board of trustees some of whom who were very knowledgeable and very effective and others who sometimes I thought weren't quite sure what education is all about and this one in particular. So again like with any other organization you get quite a variety of people with - some who were effective and some who were not. But on the whole I felt that my relationship personally whenever I would attend meetings and I did that somewhat frequently even when I didn't have something on the agenda, I felt most of them were really trying to do their best and for the most part I felt they had done their homework and were really interested in the welfare of the University.

Lowther: Do any trustees in particular stand out in your mind?

Baker: Not come to mind right now. No, I can see some faces but I'm not putting names to them.

Lowther: Okay, so you felt that the trustees really had an impact upon the life of the University?

Baker: Yes indeed, yes. For good or ill they have an impact on the University.

Lowther: Okay, did you serve on any campus wide committees?

Baker: I was on the parking and something else committee for several years. That was the one that I served on the longest. Others were ad hoc. That was the only permanent one.

Lowther: What does the parking committee do?

Baker: Argue about where you are going to put the little money that you've got. Well, I guess I also served on the student - what do you call that? The student complaint committee? The faculty committee that reviews student complaints? Academic standards.

Lowther: Okay, academic standards.

Baker: That kind of overlapped because sometimes the complaints of the students would be concerned not only with academics but also with parking. Actually the parking committee was responsible for the location and maintenance of parking areas and the regulations governing their use for students and faculty. So we frequently had requests from faculty and from students that would come because of where they wanted something or what kind of use they wanted to make of it.

Lowther: The parking committee reported to whom? Was it directly to the president or the vice president.

Baker: The vice president.

Lowther: The vice president, okay. Do you remember any particular controversies on that committee?

Baker: No I think I was not on the committee when I think some more - some controversies involving location of buildings and that kind of thing that had the impact on parking lots came along so I wasn't involved in any of that.

Lowther: Okay, and the academic standards committee? Anything that you recall outstanding during your tenure there?

Baker: Not outstanding. I enjoyed that because that was another place where I felt that I had a chance to listen to students and hear what they really had - what their concerns were and try to help them and the others on the committee work out some solution to whatever their problem was. I do recall twice when young men came in being led by their fathers whose intentions was to take the son's - be the son's advocate before this committee and in both cases eventually we could tell that the son didn't want that and he would have been better off without that. So, in one case I had a conversation afterward with the father for about an hour and I think he finally simmered down a little bit and was able to accept the decision as probably in his son's best interest.

Lowther: Now you dealt - on that committee you dealt mostly with student concerns and complaints about the grades they received in a class?

Baker: It was the academic - mainly the academic concerns, yes. On probation, wanted to come back, wanted to challenge some grade. Anything having to do with academics that students wanted to complain about.

Lowther: Did you get a lot of complaints - was it a busy committee?

Baker: Yes. Yeah. I would say that we had plenty - at least as much as we wanted to be involved in, yes.

Lowther: Do you recall anything quantitative not in terms of the number of complaints?

Baker: I recall that for one period of time that we had enough that we met weekly for probably a whole quarter I guess.

Lowther: Was that typical or was that an exception?

Baker: No, that was a little more than usual. Usually once a month.

Lowther: Okay, and those were the two committees then that on which you served

on. Did you ever serve in the senate?

Baker: No.

Lowther: Okay, all right. What was your impression over the years concerning the quality of students? Do you think that the quality went up as time went on or down or remained about the same?

Baker: When I first came and for quite a long while I was quite impressed with the quality - general quality of the students in so far as I had any way of making comparisons. I felt good about their dedication, their interests, and their challenge ability. I would say that mid '70's, mid to late '70's. There was a decline in motivation. I think it - what I perceive to be a decline in motivation preceded what I perceived to be a decline in ability. The latter did come. I think that during the 80's, early '80's especially, we witnessed a fairly significant decline in the ability of students to read and write. I found myself being an English teacher on more than one occasion. Toward the end, especially in the last three years which would have been the last three years of the '80's when I went into my phased teaching I felt there was again an upgrade, an improvement in academic ability and in motivation.

Lowther: Okay, the 1960's and early '70's, of course, the country as a whole was a time of turmoil and upset. Was there much reflection of that on campus?

Baker: Not a great deal. There was at one point a strong attempt made here to get a lot of black students and so for a while there was a Black Student Union, I'm not sure what they called that. Because one of the members of my staff in home economics was black. Well that's not the only reason - she was involved in it but she didn't really like to do that so she asked me to do a lot of some of the kinds of things she would have been doing and I had concern - positive concern about and toward black students so I didn't have to push very much to become somewhat active and involved in that particular movement. I think that it for a while, I believe that it had made some positive impact on the academic life of the University in curriculum in some ways and in some ways I'm not aware of. Eventually I felt that the black students became more militant than would be helpful to their cause and I think that the consequences of that eventually the whole thing petered out.

Lowther: Okay, let's see here, how did you - getting back to your department now, how would you evaluate the department's effectiveness in terms of internal structure, collegiality, the quality of the graduates, their success in life?

Baker: That's quite varied too. One of the problems with home economics is that it is a collection of discrete - almost discrete academics disciplines. There are basically five subject areas all under the one umbrella ranging all the way from nutrition to child development. Of course, obviously there is a great deal of overlap there. Nutrition has a great deal of part to play in child development for example. Clothing and textiles is a discipline that may be a little bit a field different from food science and nutrition. So it wasn't unusual that some of the professors in each of those subject areas were so concerned about and concentrated on their own particular subject. It was somewhat difficult for them to see and appreciate the needs of some of the other areas. Administratively, therefore, each was trying to fight for his or her own turf so to speak and sometimes a feeling of being slighted either through position assignments or funding caused some administrative headaches. But having said that, I guess I have to say that on a whole it was really quite congenial. I wouldn't have stayed in it as long as I did if I hadn't felt that things were running pretty smoothly and we were if not one big happy family at least a collection of colleagues.

Lowther: Do you have anything that you would particularly like to bring up or would like to mention concerning your career here?

Baker: No I think that when I spent a little time this morning just mulling over my own record and trying to remember a few things. I thought of some of the things we covered already. Nothing that we haven't.

Lowther: Okay, well thank you very much Luther. It has been a very pleasant interview.

Baker: I've enjoyed it. Thank you for the opportunity.