Today is February 15, 2006. This interview is being done as part of the CWU Living History Project, and today Dr. Ken Gamon, retired professor in the Math Department is being interviewed by Bob Jones.

Ken, to begin with let’s start with the high points of your personal history before coming to CWU – where you were born, and what you consider your home town to be – that kind of thing.

KG: I grew up in Spokane, Washington, and spent some time in Alaska, and six years in graduate school in Oregon. I was in graduate school in Oregon when I applied here.

BJ: To Central?

KG: To Central. Yes. Nothing very exciting.

BJ: Do you still have family in Spokane?

KG: Yes.

BJ: Well how did you happen to come to Central? What brought you here?

KG: Uh, at the time I was looking for a job. There was an opening at Central, and Eastern, a couple in Oregon. Central made the best offer.

BJ: Did you have a degree from Eastern?

KG: Yes.

BJ: And from there you went to?

KG: Oregon State.

BJ: Well what were your first impressions of both the campus and the town when you came?

KG: We came in March during spring break to apply, or to be interviewed, and it was bright, sunny, warm, no wind. We had a picnic out behind Bouillon at the time. I thought, “Boy, this would be a great climate to live our lives in.” I think that probably had more impression on us than anything. It was a nice small town.

BJ: What year was that?

KG: Nineteen sixty-five.

BJ: And you got your doctorate in that year?
KG: No, I had finished my thesis after I came here, so I spent weekends commuting between Ellensburg and – actually, Huckleberry Hill on the Oregon coast where my major professor spent most of his time outside the classroom. So –

BJ: Was that a drag, traveling back and forth?

KG: It definitely was.

BJ: How long did it take?

KG: About five hours each way.

BJ: No, I mean the –

KG: Oh.

BJ: The writing of the dissertation?

KG: About three years.

BJ: Mmm. So it was somewhat long and draw out, then.

KG: Yes.

BJ: Mm-hmm. Well at the time you came, Ellensburg was really a little cow town.

KG: Right. Interestingly, when we first came there was quite a bit more industry in Ellensburg than there is today, but it was still a small town.

BJ: What did you – what kind of industry did you find?

KG: Well there was quite a bit of logging. Boise Cascade had a big operation here. Busby had a pretty good sized manufacturing operation.

BJ: And Shockey’s was here.

KG: Shockey’s was big at that time.

BJ: Well tell us about your first rank, and also your teaching assignments if you would.

KG: Well my first rank was Assistant Professor, and my teaching assignment was not that different than it was when I retired. Kind of across the board – some upper division, some lower division.

BJ: Did you have any special interest in any particular area of Mathematics, or?

KG: Well most of my work was in applied analysis – differential equations and special functions. I stayed pretty much there the whole time I was here. I developed an interest in Geometry during the time I was here, but –

BJ: Did you find yourself teaching in these areas of your specialization?

BJ: Most of the teaching you did in those areas was at the graduate level, wasn’t it?

KG: Quite a bit. One of the beauties of the time-frame from shortly after I came until maybe 10 years before I retired was that we had a true Master’s program in Science and Math, and so the upper division classes had a variety of both graduate and undergraduate students in them. It meant for a better mix, and it was easier to get a quorum in an upper division class at that time. About 10 years before I retired they decided that the graduate program was too expensive, and in effect, when they cut off the graduate program they really cut out a meaningful undergraduate program. It became a service department, pretty much.

BJ: So the Master’s in Math was essentially deleted from the –

KG: Yes, yes.

BJ: So where along the way were you promoted to Associate and Full Professor?

KG: Quite frankly, I don’t remember the times.

BJ: I guess I’m interested in how long it took to get to –

KG: Fairly – fairly lengthy period of time.

BJ: That was common at that time.

KG: Yeah.

BJ: How about some of the influential or unforgettable people that you experienced during your tenure?

KG: Um, actually I had a lot of respect for Jimmy Applegate, which was really not in my area, but I found him to be more encouraging to outside activities that I felt were important to the program. Bob Brown was obviously an important person within the structure. Can’t really think of too many that I –

BJ: Bob Dean was the Chairman of the Department for several years.

KG: Right. Yeah.

BJ: Well when you talk about outside activities that were supported by Jimmy Applegate, what are you speaking of?

KG: Well, at various points along the way I was pushing for going beyond the boundaries of the institution and looking at things like the Putnam Exam, the Co-Math Exam, which is an applied Math exam – both of these are national competitions, actually, among mathematicians. The team I put together in both cases kind of surprised the outside environment with how well they did, and within the institution Jimmy Applegate was the one who would always be first to congratulate us on what we did.

BJ: Was this an ongoing thing?

KG: It was for – well the Putnam Exam, we were involved in that for about 15 years. That kind of ended when the graduate program and that ended, but the Co-Math Exam started much later than that, and it didn’t continue as long in the department. I think that there is maybe some interest coming back in that now.
BJ: What happened to the Math faculty at the time they disbanded the Master’s program?

KG: Not much of anything. It didn’t change.

BJ: Nobody had to leave, or?

KG: Nobody had to leave. There was some attrition – in fact, early on in my career – what is it, 14 in the Math Department, and it had actually shrunk between the time I came – or not when I came, but within a few years of when I came, and when I retired.

BJ: How many people were on the faculty when you came – or in the Department when you came?

KG: About seven, I believe, and within the next four years or five years that grew to fourteen, so we had a real growth spurt at that point.

BJ: Would you care to comment on the political problems that you encountered while you were doing your thing?

KG: Uh, they were definitely varied. Actually it was – I found it interesting that – when I came, Jim Brooks was President, and he was, I think, a pretty good President. But before he retired as President there was growing concerns that he had been President long enough and it’s time for a change, and that kind of thing. After he retired that position and went back into the Department, and got a new President, it wasn’t long before people thought he was the best thing since sliced bread, and with each change in President it really didn’t see that philosophy change. Jim was not only a good President, but he was a good supporter of Central. From the first day I got here ‘til today, there is no one that’s more supportive of Central, and when he went back in the Department he went back in with gusto, and students loved his classes, and he was – he was definitely an asset to the institution.

BJ: You were involved with the Faculty Senate for some time, too.

KG: Yeah, yeah. I was on the Senate Executive Committee over two periods of time – a total of twelve years, I believe, and I was Senate Chair during that time – one of those years. And during the time I was Senate Chair I got interested in essentially the extension of the Senate to other institutions, and was very active in the Council of Faculty Representatives – also chaired that, at one point.

BJ: Did you accomplish anything earthshaking during that period of time?

KG: No, unfortunately not. It – Mary Marcy was the Administrative person addressing the legislature during the time I was Chair of the Council of Faculty Representatives, and we would commute back and forth to Olympia on occasions, and she asked my opinion on what she might do to further the standing of Central in – you know, in the budgetary increases that we might get, and I told her she could be the best government person in the world and she wouldn’t get two percent more, and if she was the worst she wouldn’t get two percent less. So there isn’t a heck of a lot that any individual at any institution’s going to do that’s really earthshaking – earth shattering in that case.

There were a number of things that the legislature required us to do during that time that were anti-academic, as I see it, and those changes – I don’t know if someone would have been able to change their mind on it or not, but it – when they got into accountability, and having the legislature looking over our shoulder all of the time, it wasn’t in a good way. The things they looked at were things they could measure, like how many students graduate – what percentage of students graduate. That started at Central. Well obviously, if you want to have a higher graduation rate all you have to do is lower your standards. The good students will graduate regardless, and there is a reason why some of the poorer
students don’t make it through. And – anyway. So when I came to working with the legislature I found that rather frustrating.

BJ: I think most people did. What was the time frame involved?

KG: I was Senate Chair in ’87, and from ’87 through about ’95 I was on the Council of Faculty Representatives. At the time I was Chair we had a group that was an advisory group to the Hec Board for the Master Plan, and I was on that prior to Council of Faculty Representatives, and that was interesting.

BJ: I can imagine. What’s your feeling about the town/gown situation.

KG: I think it’s a myth. I don’t really see it as a significant problem area. In fact, I don’t see it as a problem area at all. We never were treated any differently than any other residents so far as downtown is concerned.

BJ: Could you comment about the changes on campus during your tenure – that is, organizational, departmental, programs, buildings, and so on. Other than Walnut Street being torn up all the time.

KG: Well organizationally I always argued against trying to create more administrative positions that carry the rank of Vice President or whatever. When I first came here there was a President, and there were Deans, and the number – the total number would have been you can count them on both hands. And that rose significantly, and I don’t think there’s anything positive came out of that increase. I remember when Don Garrity was here, it was a time when I was Senate Chair, and he wanted me to endorse changing some of the Deans to Vice Presidents, and I said, “I don’t see any need for that.” His argument being, “Well, sister institutions had them being labeled as Vice Presidents, and so we should, too.” And I said, “Well, quite frankly I don’t think the faculty at the other institutions are in favor of that, but I’ll poll them for you if you’d like,” because I was on the Council of Faculty Representatives and it was an easy thing to poll. And to a person it was, “We think you’ve got a better situation. If it were up to the faculty we would eliminate those positions.” I reported that back to Garrity and he wasn’t happy, but he let me alone and waited ’til the next Senate Chair came in, and then made the changes. So I didn’t gain much other than a year from that.

BJ: Well that’s an accomplishment.

KG: Yeah.

BJ: Was Ed Harrington here when you came?

KG: Yes, and I would list Ed among the people that I thought were outstanding administrators that we’ve had.

BJ: Under Garrity’s plan, where did the Provost, or the Vice President fit in? I’ve forgotten.

KG: I’m not sure what you mean. We had it – in fact, we had a Vice President for Academic Affairs who then became Provost and Academic Vice President during that time, and I don’t think that there was any difference in how he fit in then as to how he fits in today. But that particular position requires someone who is not just a politician, but is truly an academic professional, and that’s been a bit of a problem over the years. The President can be a politician. In fact, the President could – at one point we were going to make a – one of the candidates was a military person that would be a good PR person, and not that I was in favor of that, but at least you could see how a President could function in that role. But the Provost needs to be someone that has academic credentials and is respected by faculty as a potential faculty member.

BJ: Do you recall any particularly proud moments for the University?
KG: [Very long pause.] Not really. We had a great basketball team under Dean Nicholson. I guess I would list him as a person I highly respected, also – not because he had a great basketball team, but because he had a great basketball team and also was highly respected as a professor of Physical Education.

BJ: He also had a lot of respect for the students.

KG: Yeah. He was highly thought of as a professor – not as a coach, but as a professor.

BJ: What was your perception of the students’ capabilities when you first came, and when you left – I mean, at the time you left.

KG: I felt that our students from the time I came until the time we had a good, strong Master’s program, which was between five and seven years – I thought the students improved dramatically, up to a point where our students would rank with any of them. I felt at the time I retired, that’s probably one of the things that made me see retirement as a positive thing was I felt that the quality of our students – at least in Mathematics – had dropped considerably.

BJ: I guess I keep coming back to the deletion of the Master’s program. What was the rationale? Or was there any?

KG: Well the rationale was that we spend a lot of time for a very few students. My rationale was that we didn’t really spend hardly any time. The Master’s students and the senior students made a good mix for the upper division and beginning graduate courses, and we should have those courses any way. However, after he deleted the Master’s program those upper division courses, instead of being offered on an annual basis, were offered every couple of years, or every three years, and if you weren’t in sequence as an undergraduate you had a hard time getting the upper division courses you wanted because you’re not going to spend two or three years as a senior.

BJ: Is there any thrust toward [inaudible] the Master’s program again?

KG: I don’t know. I think at the time I retired it was still on the books. It just didn’t fund it, and didn’t have any students in the program. But – you know – my argument was that if you want to attract good students in Mathematics you’ve got to have a strong program, and the Master’s program helped strengthen that, and without that a student would look at our curriculum and – you know – they said, “You should be out recruiting students.” How do you recruit students to a program that is lacking? I couldn’t in good faith go out and recruit students to a program where they might be able to catch this senior class if they got in the right sequence, or that senior class if they’re in a different sequence. But to be able to pick and choose, they couldn’t do it.

BJ: It would also be difficult for them to enter a Master’s program at a better institution.

KG: Right. Right.

BJ: Do you feel that Central provides ample cultural enrichment for students?

KG: Yeah. Actually, that’s one of the beauties of having an institution like Central in a town like Ellensburg. Cultural enrichment doesn’t mean math debates. You know, I mean, the things that you’re looking at with cultural enrichment are the Music program, which is very good, the Arts program, which is, I think, certainly good. Obviously the sports program helps with that. I think that students coming here have plenty of opportunity for cultural enrichment.

BJ: Has that changed over the years?
KG: I think that was pretty much true from the beginning, but I think if anything it’s stronger now than it was then. Obviously the new Music building and Music facilities help that.

BJ: Tell us about any job changes you had during your career.

KG: I came with the idea of teaching, and that’s all I really wanted to do. And – other than outside activities like CFR, or Senate, there weren’t really any job changes.

BJ: Would you have, or been allowed the time for research had you been so inclined?

KG: Um, at times. Actually, for doing much research that comes early in your career, and early in my career it was pretty much a full teaching load and not much chance for research. And the other aspect of that is when it – when the opportunity arose may not have been the time you were interested in pursuing something. You don’t turn research on and off very well – at least not in Mathematics.

BJ: Did you feel that there was much emphasis placed on the Publish or Perish idea?

KG: Periodically. But not – not to any great extent. It was kind of interesting during the time I was serving on CFR and working on Master Plan, the Hec Board’s idea was that the regional institutions shouldn’t be doing research unless it was directly related to what they were teaching. And so they clearly weren’t interested in funding that, and they almost, at one point, had it to the point where you were kind of being watched, and if you were doing something research-wise that wasn’t part of the classes you were teaching, then that wouldn’t be something that they would approve funding for.

BJ: Very interesting. How about some of your personal contributions to the Department or the University as a whole? I guess you’ve talked about the CFR and the Senate, and so forth. Are there any others that come to your mind?

KG: In addition to such things as the Putnam Exam and the Co-Math Exam, I wrote, along with one of my colleagues, a proposal for a grant for female graduate students prior to the elimination of the graduate program, which was funded. Interestingly, they took the position away from the Math – the Science end of the Math program and gave it to the Teacher Ed part internally, which didn’t sit well with me. Other than that I can’t think of too much. I wrote another proposal years before, but it was a small, fairly insignificant grant.

BJ: So your first proposal wasn’t successful as far as the Math department was concerned?

KG: Uh, the first proposal was really for funding kind of an evening program, and I did that through Continuing Education. But it didn’t do a lot to in any way improve the program. And of course the second proposal – we eliminated the Master’s program before that really got off the ground much, so – we did have a couple graduate students funded in Math that could use that.

BJ: You say funded. Were they funded through scholarships?

KG: Yeah. It was a stipend, I think. I think it was about $10,000 a year, which is significant.

BJ: Oh. Pretty substantial.

KG: I might be wrong on the amount of that, but that’s what my recollection was.

BJ: The [inaudible] would also like to know how you feel about your time at CWU. Was it an enjoyable experience?
KG: It was interesting. I don’t regret it.

(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 2)

BJ: Give us a statement that wraps up your feelings about your time at CWU.

KG: I would say that I enjoyed my time for the most part. There were some times when I would get frustrated – mostly with the administration, but for the most part I enjoyed it.

BJ: Were you satisfied with what you were doing?

KG: Yes.

BJ: Um, when I was at Cheney I remember a Dr. Gammon there. Actually, he was our family physician. Now this was some relation?

KG: Yes, that was my Uncle. He was the doctor in Cheney for some 40 years. My mom and I helped them move into their place out there.

BJ: Oh really.

KG: Yeah.

BJ: He retired there in Cheney as well?

KG: Yeah. He passed away two years after my Dad did. He died in 2003.

BJ: Mm-hmm. For some reason I always remember him doing a pretty decent job for us.

KG: He was very well respected in the Cheney area.

BJ: Was that his only practice?

KG: He – well, when he graduated from medical school he went immediately into the service – that was during WWII. And when he came out, their first practice was there in Cheney. He went into practice with Pres Caldwell, who had been the only doctor in Cheney prior to that. This was in the – about ’46, ’47, and Pres was his brother in law. Actually it was the brother of a brother in law, but I think that’s still the word. So that’s why he went into practice there, and over that time he had a very successful practice.

BJ: Do you have any kids who graduated from Central, or went to Central?

KG: Yeah. We have four children. Three of them graduated from Central, and the fourth one graduated from Whitman. And the fourth one actually got a teaching certificate from Central after graduating from Whitman, so they’ve all had some experience here.

BJ: Are they still in the area?

KG: All of our kids are within 115 miles. Our one daughter is in Tri-Cities, another one’s in Renton, and the third one – the one that went to Whitman – is – teaches in the Tri-Cities but lives on the Columbia south of Vantage.
BJ: Did any of them follow your footsteps into graduate school?

KG: The daughter south of Vantage has her Doctorate in Mathematics. The one in the Tri-Cities was an Actuary, and the one in Renton teaches Math in junior high.

BJ: Oh really. So you must have had some influence.

KG: I guess so.

BJ: I know you have some outside interests. I remember your being in the cattle business at some time or another. Would you care to comment on that?

KG: We had a few head of cattle in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and I developed – in fact, that may be somewhat why I don’t sense a town/gown situation – because I had a lot of friends in the agricultural community, and when I got out of raising cattle I told them I was quitting because as long as I was in there I knew they were going to continue losing money, and I’d just as well get out and let them do better.

BJ: What other outside activities are you involved in?

KG: We had some rentals. We have gotten rid of those now. We had different land parcels which we’ve gotten rid of. I enjoy fishing and – I don’t hunt, but I enjoy camping, and fishing, and that kind of thing.

BJ: Well that was part of the thing that attracted you to the place to begin with.

KG: Yeah. In the early years one of our favorite activities was to get in a raft and float the Yakima, and fish along the way.

BJ: Was there anything we’ve left out?

KG: I can’t think of anything.

BJ: Well I think – um – I’ve pretty much exhausted what I have here, so let’s close the interview unless you have another question, or – of me, or whatever.

KG: I can’t think of –

BJ: All right.