Charles McCann interview

Charles McCann
(Transcription of Tape 1 of 1, Side 1)

KB  [February] 27, 2006. I’m Karen Blair on the Evergreen College campus to interview Charles McCann. [Tape recorder turned off]

CM  … paths have crossed. I read that your doctorate is from SUNYB.

KB  That’s right.

CM  Well, I taught at Canisius [College] for six years.

KB  Really? When was that?

CM  From 1956 to 1962. God bless Canisius. They were the only people who were willing to pay a living wage to a guy with four children.

KB  So were you a beginning professor at that point?

CM  Yeah.

KB  Had you been born and raised in the Buffalo area?

CM  Oh, no. Barbara and I were raised in Bristol, Connecticut. And the Navy sent me to Yale. After Yale, I went to NYU to the Retail School.

And after six years in the retailing business, I figured this is not for me. So I went back to Yale to graduate school, and then [inaudible].

KB  So you got your bachelor’s, master’s and Ph.D. at Yale?

CM  Yeah.

KB  OK. And so Canisius College was your first job?

CM  Uh-huh.

KB  So you taught English there for several years. OK. Did you develop a fondness for Buffalo? I certainly did! [laughing]

CM  I … [pause] … we didn’t hate Buffalo.

KB  OK, that’s diplomatic! [laughter] Well, when you had the chance to move on, I guess you took it, huh? So what was your career path after that?

CM  Central Washington.

KB  Oh, OK. So did you come as a professor of English then?
CM Yes.

KB And why there?

CM And then Chair …well … Keith Reinhart and Jim Brooks offered me a job, and so I … especially going out to see it. It’s quite a difference. The Kittitas Valley is quite different from Buffalo. [laughter]

KB What year did you come?

CM 1962, summer of 1963.

KB So that was when a huge wave of hiring was taking place. Lots of new folks.

CM Oh, yeah, from then on until several years after I left.

KB So you were there until 1968, right?

CM Right. Six years.

KB You taught in the English Department and then became Chairman. How quickly?

CM I don’t know. Two months, I think. It couldn’t have been more than a year. Maybe a year. I forgot now.

KB Was that your choice, or was there a vacancy that needed quick attention?

CM Yes, I suppose. It was Keith Reinhart who was Chairman. He became Division Chairman, and that’s when he asked me if I would take over English.

And then, Assistant to the President; and then Dean of Faculty, which was in those days an Academic Vice President.

KB Which you held how long?

CM Two or three years.

KB I see. Well, I’d be eager to hear about your impressions of Ellensburg and the college and your colleagues.

CM You’re going to have to … well, first of all, both Barbara and I have a tremendously warm feeling for the whole experience in Ellensburg. But you’re going to have to tell me some of these vague notions that people are giving you, so that I can refute them or … [laughter].

KB Well, one of my goals is simply to collect impressions of the town and the University in its growing years. And if you can identify people who made an important impact on the campus, I’d like to know.

But the rumors I’ve collected about you are from people who felt that you were helping the University to move toward embracing the liberal arts, and shed its commitment to education preparation solely.
CM  I think that’s accurate.

KB  And how did you come to feel that that should be a priority?  How did Ellensburg look when you got there?  Was it a teacher’s college solely?

CM  Not solely.  But … [pause] … I mean, not solely.

KB  But you had not actually had any connection with a teacher’s college before?  Not in your own background, not in your teaching life?

CM  No.

KB  And how is it that you sensed this could happen at Central?

CM  I wasn’t the only one, you see.

KB  Well, who were your allies?

CM  Well … Jim Brooks.  And … plenty of people in English … History … Sciences.  Practically just everything except Education, except I had friends there, too.

KB  Is it the new people who were hired who wanted to go in that direction?

CM  No, there were people there who had been there, I don’t know for how long.  Marty Kaatz, for example.  Walt Berg.

KB  And Brooks, was it difficult for him to tread on the turf of the School of Education, and push the school, with you and others, in a new direction?  Was there resistance to it?

CM  Some.  [pause]  But I didn’t try to do it in such a way to say “This is it!”  [slams his hand on the table]  You know.  You do things with the budget, and you do things with hiring.  It’s a gradual process.  It’s not something that happened overnight.

KB  I see.

CM  So I’m sure that probably it had started several years before I got there, since there were people who were rather eager to get on with it.

KB  Well now, you came at a time when McConnell had only recently left.  Brooks was a new President.

CM  Yeah.

KB  Was there a feeling that it was time for a big shakeup or …?

CM  I didn’t sense any of that, no crisis.

KB  So you make it sound like it was a pretty easy evolution to move the schools.

CM  Yes, I think so.
KB  When you say you moved money, does that mean that more of the budget went into liberal arts courses or hires?

CM  Uh-huh. And you try to argue certain things in the curriculum, such as not having P.E. be a required subject.

KB  And was this a thrust in other schools in our state, our region, at the time? Did you have connection with your peers at other schools?

CM  It was happening, I'm sure. At least at Western, perhaps before it happened at Central. But no, I never – [inaudible] competitive. [chuckles]

KB  They're still vying for limited resources.

CM  Sure.

KB  But I gather that the State was unusually generous in the 1960s.

CM  Oh, yes. It was.

KB  Sounds like an aberration [laughing] before and after.

CM  It's been going steadily downhill.

KB  Why is that?

CM  Well, what do you think? I don't know. Just the whole world is going to hell in a hand basket! [laughter]

KB  Well, I do wonder if Washington State citizens and legislators are a little more reluctant to fund higher education than some other places.

CM  [Inaudible] What the base of all of this is the malaise that says “government is a bad thing,” and “we won't pay taxes.” It's hard to get over that.

And what are taxes for? Well, they're for everything – roads, prisons, old people’s care, children’s care. It goes on and on, but people just aren’t willing to pay for it. And so higher education has just gone *shoosh*.

KB  So if you've seen a steady decline since the 1960s, what had to give? What are the costs of that? What might have happened that is not happening?

CM  [Pause] That's a good question. [pause] There's very little or nothing on the margins. There's enough to meet students with, although even that is tight.

We can do something that approaches a private liberal arts college here. But it only approaches it. It doesn't come near.

But with the money we had when we began we could do it, just by the things we do. Just doing away with all kinds of layers of academic administration; watching the money in other places. So there was time for it.
Everything that in a good college happens – sabbaticals when they should occur, for example; extremely small classes when there were students who needed them, that kind of thing – that’s no longer the case.

Books, for example. In those days, in the early days of Evergreen, for example, and at Central, a big thing in order to be economical with education, was all the audio/visual stuff. Well, you know how important that really is.

Now, it’s computers. Nothing against students learning all about them, and dealing with them in Math and Science – or everything else, if they want to. They’re important, but they’re not a good substitute for a good library. And that’s going to be pshaw.

KB So when you say there isn’t a margin anymore, you mean the funds for supporting facilities and resources?

CM Yeah. And that’s why your campaign will be so necessary.

KB Our fundraising campaign at Central?

CM Yeah. And, of course, scholarships, with tuition going up and up all the time.

KB Well, what did you observe? What was happening at Central? In your classrooms, you were teaching Literature or Writing or … tell me about your experiences, as a teacher and Chairman and …

CM [Pause] It’s going to be a very personal thing. But after a while, the business of requirements really got to me. Once I began to understand the numbers, and really considering whether they were really all that necessary.

And I think that’s the case in almost every discipline. Maybe not Math, but almost …

KB Too many rules, you mean? Too many hurdles?

CM Yeah, too many curricular things. I did what I could for that. Some people don’t agree with that, but enough people agreed with it so we could start this place. [laughing]

KB And Evergreen has few of those requirements, I guess.

CM Almost none.

KB So your role in starting this institution is a reaction?

CM It is. Really, it’s not so much of a reaction, but … I guess that word’s fair, but …

After Yale, then after Canisius, and after that brief tour in New York City – which I depended a lot on internships for the connection with the real world – I just thought, Why can’t there be a combination of all of that, if only the administrators get out of the way?

Or, if only faculty doesn’t make it … all of us faculty tend to do the same thing? That’s how administrators get born. [chuckles]
KB Would it be fair to say then that even before you came to Ellensburg, you were evolving in a direction that was looser than the traditional academic setting?

CM Yes.

KB You said you tried to do what you could in Ellensburg to ameliorate some of that. What are you referring to?

CM The only things that come to mind really are … doing away with college-wide curricula requirements. Which it seemed to me were simply – maybe not simply, but very importantly a way for a department to be able to justify hiring.

KB I don’t quite follow. Could you be specific?

CM Well, sure. If you had, for example, in your History Department, a University-wide requirement … duh-h-h-h.

KB Lots of students. You’d need more professors, more square footage.

CM Yeah.

KB So why would an institution support its own demise? [laughter]

CM Well, it was rather difficult persuading the P.E. Department of that. And there were enough of us in the English Department to do away with the writing requirement.

KB Although writing continues to be a problem among incoming freshmen.

CM It’s only … much less than before. It was always a problem then. It might still be, but I haven’t noticed it so much. Now, it’s matters of grammar. Not many people put their thoughts in order, that’s another thing. But everybody ought to be working on that.

Well, anyway, those kinds of things are … trying to get as much back in the hands of the student, as opposed to faculty rules that really weren’t all that important for a person’s education.

KB And how far was Brooks willing to go?

CM Oh, he and I were always in sync.

KB Now, you were there through some volatile years.

CM Jim did a lot. Not only on the inside, of course – but he was a very good inside President – with the Legislature, the Trustees, the townspeople. So I didn’t have to worry about any of that, and he didn’t have to worry about so much of the inside.

KB So you divided up the roles. He was public relations and you –

CM No, I wouldn’t put it that way. It just naturally turned out that … I guess he trusted me to do what I was doing, and we always seemed to agree.

KB Now, I went to college in the late 1960s. Wasn’t that an era when requirements nationally started to be revised, loosened up?
CM  Oh, sure. Yeah. Where was your undergraduate?

KB  Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts. Well, who ... I guess I'd love to have a little sense of the flavor of the community, whether -- there are people who speak very nostalgically about a small family-like atmosphere, which was a little easier on professors coming in. Got a chance to know their students.

Is that a feeling you shared, or perhaps not?

CM  [Pause] Not so far as students were concerned. I never thought it was important to get a family relationship with students. [chuckles] But I think, with faculty, uh-huh.

I wouldn't say that in the purview of townspeople, but that's only me. People like [inaudible] comes to mind. And I'm sure there were others who were active in the town.

For one thing, there wasn't time. Somebody who's trying to work at being as good an academic as they can, as most faculty members are, just hasn't got time to go politicking around.

I think the town-gown myths had some truth to them. I think they're inescapable. You have to work, I'm sure, to avoid their becoming deleterious to the academic [inaudible].

KB  Well, there's a persistent feeling, too, that stresses remain between town and gown. Ambivalence in the farming community, perhaps, about this giant academic institution in their midst.

CM  I'm sure. That will probably increase, the bigger it gets; the bigger the University gets.

KB  Well, you bring up the problem with time, time management, of the professors. And it reminds me that there are those who feel that the thrust you encouraged -- to move away from an emphasis on a teacher's college -- imposed new obligations on professors to get Ph.D.s or advanced degrees, to publish or perish.

And how can that be done, given the teaching roles, and the committee and advising expectations that professors live with?

CM  Exactly. [pause] I felt that a Ph.D. should go without saying. That's just the ground entrance.

As far as the publishing or perishing, I think that was never a big deal. Words like "active in your field" or things like that sort of got around it.

KB  Well, I don't mean to imply that I have gleaned reminiscences that standards for publishing at Central were as high in the 1960s as they were at research one institutions.

CM  Oh, of course not.

KB  But there was, I gather, quite a new emphasis on scholarship that hadn't been there before.

CM  Yes, but continuing scholarship, the kind of continuing scholarship that only usually gets done if a person has gotten some training in it, use to it, in the course of getting a Ph.D.
And that was – it was difficult for a place like Ellensburg to do. First of all, the only Ph.D.s that were handy were from Washington State or UW. And you don't want a place just filled with people from one or two places.

I think I got my fill of travel. I tried to get the place's name, at least, in the placement offices of as many places the faculty said I could. I did a couple, two or three yearly.

They were sales trips. [laughing] And some of them were just out of this world. I remember one … I think it was in Pennsylvania. I walk into this interview room and we have a nice chat.

And the person says, “How far from the monument is it?” [laughter]

KB The other Washington. So it was hard to invite interest to come to Ellensburg?

CM But at least the rumors began to circulate that there was another Washington maybe.

KB Well, when I look at advanced degrees, it does seem as though people took advantage of summers and sabbaticals to get their degrees all over the country.

CM Yeah.

KB But you’re talking about injecting new expectations on top of a pretty demanding teaching role, I think.

CM Well, there’s demanding and demanding. This is another thing that always got to me. I may have done a little bit of it, I can’t remember. But I tried, I’m sure, in the English Department.

Just sitting people in front of an instructor – just that – makes it demanding. But why should people be sitting in front of an instructor all the time, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday?

KB You’re suggesting that students should be sent off to do some of their own digging?

CM Yeah. Or if you’re going to meet, meet longer.

KB These are still serious questions in Ellensburg. The early 1960s, when you came, is the time when an awful lot of new master’s degrees were permitted at Central. Did you have any hand in that, any opinions about the introduction of master’s programs, and the T.A.s – graduate assistants – and higher level of –

CM I wouldn’t have gone along with T.A.s. I don’t think that was a question when I was there.

KB Why not? Why wouldn’t you have gone along with it?

CM What for? What are they going to be doing? The only question I would raise would be is the faculty and the library sufficient.

See, the whole business of things going downhill. And the T.A.s, I can understand how they come to be thought of as a necessity. Especially if you have to have “seat” time. You can seat people in front of them.
KB Did you have anything to do with adjuncts? That’s become a bigger and bigger issue on campus. Was that an issue in the 1960s?

CM No, it wasn’t. Huh-uh. Although it would be an interesting possibility, case by case. How is it now, for example?

KB Well, in many cases, introductory courses are taught by part-timers on campus. It’s cheaper than hiring additional full-time faculty with benefits.

CM Oh, yeah. There’s some of that here for the evening things that we do. I think it’s … the people might be very good, but it’s cheap.

KB And in Ellensburg, compared to metropolitan Seattle-Tacoma-Olympia area, there were fewer people with advanced degrees to choose from. So you invite the same people over and over again, and build a commitment, a loyalty, that the benefits don’t reflect.

CM Oh, I just don’t like that.

KB We voted to unionize this year, and the contract’s just been issued. The Trustees will pass on it next week. And it is giving a better deal to the part-timers than they had before, I think.

CM It ought to be.

KB What about – we call them "centers" – our branch campuses? Did you deal with that at all in the 1960s? How significant a portion of that was your responsibility or your interest?

CM It wasn’t my interest. And I think – I could be wrong about this, but I think they became into being … in the very early 1970s? Or late 1969, something like that.

KB Well, it’s my understanding that Central has been offering teachers courses around the state since the 1890s. And it goes up and down, the degree to which that’s done or required.

But yes, I guess in the mid-1970s, especially when the financial situation grew dire, it became wise to send some of your professors –

CM Yes, indeed. Let’s get some credits here.

KB Yeah. I suppose Evergreen experienced some of those financial tensions as well.

CM Evergreen has experienced tensions since the day we opened! [laughing] Before we opened even!

KB Well, how was it that you came over here? Did you campaign to be the first President of Evergreen? Were you recruited? How did your work in Ellensburg shape your decision, or your resumé, to come over here?

CM [Pause] Jon Ericson, who was Chairman of Speech at Ellensburg, was on the committee that the Trustees of Evergreen established to find someone. And he said, “Why don’t you toss your name in?”

So I did, not thinking it would amount to anything. I mean, here is somebody from Ellensburg, for godssake; and people were applying from all over the place.
And I told them what I thought the place ought to be when I got interviewed, thinking, Well, that took care of that! [laughing] But they called me up.

KB So it turned out that you were thinking what they were thinking, about what the new school should look like.

CM Well … uh … I’m not sure they really understood what all of that entailed. I had to explain that to them constantly in the course of those first months.

But they did understand that if we’re going to start a new place, there’s no reason for it to be just like all the other places. I think [inaudible].

KB And – although my interest is in your Ellensburg years – I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about how, this being a State institution, helped or hurt that vision. I know Hampshire College in Mount Holyoke-Smith area was doing this similar new school, but privately.

CM Yeah.

KB How was it different to do it with State support?

CM You have to follow the State rules if you’re really after it. But there’s no reason to start acting like one.

You know, supply all the numbers and be careful with the money, all of that business. But the constant … checkup on people … sometimes when people get into a minor administrative post, they start thinking like a State employee. That’s bad.

KB Has Evergreen managed to resist the impulse?

CM To a great extent. But I can’t say that it isn’t always there. And you hope that administrators keep a hand on those reins. Probably have more of them than not.

KB Well, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the evolution of the 1960s in Ellensburg? Obviously, they helped you form your goals for education, but I wonder if could sort of look at the overview of your years there, and tell me if you saw changes? Good and bad?

CM Oh, I think it was all good. I’m not speaking just because I was there. It was all good because the funding was better. You could do things with the money. Dave Burt, for example, who was in the English Department …

KB And just died a few weeks ago.

CM … together with two or three other faculty put on a Symposium every year. Took up the whole campus’s interests. Those things cost money. But it was there.

Wayne Hertz of the Music Department put on Verdi’s Requiem. That cost. But it was there. We had the Philadelphia String Quartet in residence.

So, all of it. A lot of things happened.

KB The expansion – the doubling of the campus size, by buying land north of the railroad tracks – were you involved at all in that? Did that –
CM No. No, Ken... gee, I've forgotten his last name... he was old... and here I am thinking of somebody as old! It's gone now, I guess.

And I'm sure Jim Brooks did all of that. And then, there was always the hassle with the railroad.

KB What do you mean?

CM Getting the railroad out of there. [pause] It was important to do, and it got done. It was...

KB Well, how did the Ellensburg experience finally shape your goals for Evergreen? What did you learn to do and not do?

CM All the things I've been talking about. [laughing] It wasn't just Ellensburg, it was a combination of everything I'd been –

KB You said you were involved in retailing as well?

CM Yeah.

KB What was that role? Were you selling?

CM Insofar as it has to do with academics, it had to do with an internship program.

I worked at Brooks Brothers for a while, [inaudible]. You know, those things, I think, are much more important if you're going to be going into business, as opposed to sitting in front of a Business prof.

KB They call it “service learning” now. Isn't that the community involvement?

CM I guess. [laughing]

KB Is Evergreen planting students aggressively throughout the community?

CM Not aggressively enough. Well, we're [inaudible] state. But I think probably Ellensburg has a lot more good experience with that, because of the teacher internships. I don't know if they still do, but they were looked after assiduously, as far as I could tell. And that's expensive.

KB So, the student tasting their application of their knowledge in the world is what became a priority.

CM Yeah.

KB Well, do you have any last thoughts that you haven't shared that you'd like to tell about people, leadership...?

CM Just tell me something about what they're saying over there about me – which I doubt, it being so long ago, but just in case – that I can say isn't true! [laughter]

KB Well, I do think that the new Administration is eager to continue professors to study, to develop, to research, to engage their students in their research.
And the young professors, who have been hired to replace the folks who came in the 1960s and who have retired recently, seem very happy to use their training and talent to do research.

But the teaching level remains high at the institution. And serving a large number of students is going to come into conflict with a 24-hour day.

CM Yes, no question about it. I don’t think you can expect, with the kinds of demands on students, I don’t think you can expect many books of the faculty. Or even decent articles, as far as that goes.

It’ll happen, just because some people are extremely talented and driven about what they do. But to expect it of everybody is not realistic.

KB Were the students in the 1960s chafing at all these regulations? Did you find that there was wide interest in the community, and in the world? You sort of left before the Vietnam demonstrations erupted.

CM Oh, they were happening.

KB Were they?

CM Oh, yeah.

KB And were they faculty supported, faculty led?

CM There was a lot of argument on the faculty. These were the early years, so there was place for argument. It wasn’t as if it was like it was in the later years.

But, for example, at my inauguration here, Nixon had just bombed Cambodia the night before. [makes choking sound] But still, there was a lot of discussion amongst faculty about Vietnam.

But to answer your question about students being concerned about curricula requirements and all that. Some, I’m sure, probably were, but not most. [End of Side 1]

(Transcription of Tape 1 of 1, Side 2)

KB Yes, “Tell me what hurdles I have to cross to get the paper and go on with my life.”

CM Yeah, and what’s the next one?

KB Are you suggesting that if you remove those hurdles, they’ll find their own paths?

CM Oh, that gets them all upset. I know you don’t want to hear about Evergreen, but … students would come here for a year or a year and a half and just can’t stand it. Other students come as transfers and just eat it up.

You know, it puts a lot of tension on a student when she has to figure, first of all, figure the place out. What should I do? If I do it, is that a good thing? If I don’t do this, is it bad? Students have to make those decisions all the time.

KB I take it your own education was pretty laid out for you.
CM  Yeah.

KB  And did you chafe against that, or …?

CM  Not especially. Hey, if we can send them out to get killed at age 18, they ought to be taking some responsibility for themselves at age 18.

KB  Well, are schools doing better at fostering independence, or not?

CM  You tell me. I don’t know. I don’t know any other place now except this. [laughter]

KB  Well, maybe we both should start going to conventions. [laughing]

CM  Ohgod I hate those things. [laughter] Don’t tell me that you love to go to these American History Association things!

KB  It’s a little bit overwhelming, but it’s a nice chance to meet old friends.

CM  That’s true.

KB  Well, any last thoughts?

CM  No.

KB  Well, thank you for your time. I learned a lot.

CM  Oh, I’ve enjoyed talking with you.