Nancy Lester interview

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Interviewer: ELDON JACOBSEN
Camera Person: CARLA KAATZ

Jacobsen: Today is July 30, 1997, and we are interviewing Nancy Lester, Emeriti Professor from the Foreign Languages Department. At first we will ask Nancy to give us some of her own personal background, kind of a little narrative about yourself, prior to your coming to Central. Would you do that, Nancy?

Lester: Well, all right. I did make some notes here so as to remember that I was born on Christmas Eve in 1927, and my mother was quite displeased. She missed all of Christmas. I grew up in New Jersey, hut my parents were Southern, and were part of that large migration of people from the South to New York City. They both worked in New York City, and I was brought up in New Jersey. They thought children should be brought up in the country, so they commuted. And I went to Middlebury College in Vermont, and after that I started to teach in Colorado. My father died, and I went home, my mother was ill, and I took care of her and sort of raised my younger brother. I only had one brother. While I was raising him, we all moved out to Colorado and stayed there.

Jacobsen: Where did you teach in Colorado?

Lester: Oh, the first place I taught was Carbondale, Colorado. In fact wrote a book about it which actually got published. It was fun. Then my career was very checkered, I moved around a lot. Teaching sometimes high school, sometimes grade school, but I couldn’t go to graduate school until I got my brother off my hands. So to enjoy myself, after I got him graduated. I went to Europe and taught for the Army, and lived in Frankfort, Germany for a couple of years. Traveled all over Europe did some work in Scotland in a library there, and then came back with the idea of doing graduate work.

Jacobsen: What years were you teaching for the Army?

Lester: ‘57-8-9. They now call it Civilian Personnel, but in those days I worked for the Department of the Army. It was called. And then came home. Taught high school. Decided I would be a Spanish teacher, so into graduate, well, no, I didn’t go to graduate school right away did I? No, I somehow qualified for a Fulbright Professor job in Ecuador. Spent a year in Ecuador. And then came back to graduate school at the University of Colorado, where I did the Master’s and the Ph.D.

Jacobsen: You apparently picked up the knowledge of Spanish while in Ecuador or before.

Lester: Well, mostly in Ecuador, but I had been studying it, I studied it in college some. When you teach it, you learn it pretty fast, and I had been forced to teach it various times.

Jacobsen: And you finished graduate school where?

Lester: At the University of Colorado.

Jacobsen: Colorado. Did you come directly to Central when you got your Doctorate?
Lester: No, I came here A.B.D., and that was a hassle teaching. Most people who have to teach and write a dissertation at the same time have a terrible time. See, I was always crossing the pass to Snoqualmie to get to the library in a snow storm, but I finally got it done. So I stayed here.

Jacobsen: You came to Central in what year?


Jacobsen: 1970. At what rank?

Lester: Associate.

Jacobsen: Associate. For historical purposes, could you tell us approximately the salary you came in with?

Lester: I haven’t the least idea.

Jacobsen: You haven’t the least.

Lester: Not the least.

Jacobsen: That’s fascinating.

Lester: I can’t, numbers just go out of my mind and things about pay. Whatever they pay me I take.

Jacobsen: Whatever they paid Associate Professors you got.

Lester: Yes, that’s what I got. Actually, I was pretty well paid I think because I did have a lot of experience.

Jacobsen: Oh, yes.

Lester: Say twenty years before I came here, but it wasn’t in college.

Jacobsen: What teaching assignment did you have then? What Spanish classes?

Lester: When I came here? Anything they needed, and that was the way it always was. Usually I would teach two sections of Beginning Spanish through the year, and one upper division course.

Jacobsen: Did you find anything that was problematic in those early years, other than the fact that you were trying to get your dissertation done while teaching?

Lester: Problematic. Well, the first thing that struck me was that they spoke, the administration spoke as if this was going to be a vastly growing campus. And one glance around convinced me that it was not going to do that, and in fact, I talked to some other people and we agreed it was not going to grow anywhere near as fast as they thought. That seemed very problematic. We felt we might lose our jobs. In fact one of the German Professors did, (?)

Jacobsen: Do you remember who was Chair of the Department at the time?

Lester: Yes, Jim Bilyeu came the year that I came, and I knew him from the University of Colorado. He was in charge of the TA program there that I worked under.
Jacobsen: You came at a fortunate time then because you’ve heard some of the history of problems the Departmental Chair before you came.

Lester: Oh, the famous story. I just missed Chambers. You’ve heard about...we’ll cross reference here to Eva Carne’s story about Chambers. Look it up if you want a really good story. But I missed that one.

Jacobsen: Well, you were fortunate.

Lester: Were you in on that?

Jacobsen: Well, I was temporarily in administration, and so was involved in hearing all about it at least, and trying to assist the Department in surviving.

Lester: The Department was certainly in an uproar. What’s his name came in, I’ve forgotten his name, name’s go away. I’m getting old, but laid a pistol on the table and said, “Now,...” This sort of calmed everybody down.

Jacobsen: Had Jacque Wachs been there still, or was he long gone?

Lester: I think he was gone; I don’t know.

Jacobsen: He was another very powerful person (?). He was the caliber that Dr. Chambers (?) He added a lot of(?).

Lester: Yeah, he did. Well, I did not.

Jacobsen: So you came under rather smooth sailing.

Lester: Well, yes. Jim Bilyeu has always been a person who likes to sail smoothly, and of course, it’s almost impossible in a Foreign Language Department to do that. So, you know, there were ups and downs. Would you like to hear a funny story. I remembered a funny story.

Jacobsen: I would.

Lester About that. I’ll tell you the moral first, so you can know. It’s not easy to be Chairman of a Foreign Language Department because the people, their cultural reactions are totally different from what you might expect to find among Americans, and Jim Bilyeu being an American had come up with this idea which I think came down from some Dean, that we should all review our offerings, our entire programs, and revise them. And this was broached at a Departmental meeting, and at that time we were teaching German, French, Spanish, and Chinese. And these were the reactions: First the Germans were definitely enthused, organisieren you know, “We are going to organize.” And so they immediately set out to write down schedules of where they were going to have their coffee klatch and discuss everything, and in about two weeks they had their entire program destroyed and rebuilt some other way. But in any case that day they were extremely excited about the idea of re-doing the program. Then it moved on to the French. At that time we had two professors who weren’t speaking to each other, and one gave the other a slight glance, and said, “I know what I’m doing.” And that was the end of that. Then it moved on to the Chinese Professor and he smiled a sweet, polite smile, “If! wrote down what I was doing, none of you would understand it.” And that was the end of that. So when we got to the Spaniards, the people who at that time there were several real natively Spanish-speaking people, and they just sat there and sort of looked a little bit sad, and didn’t say anything. And I know why. And that’s because anyone who is natively Spanish, or even Latin American, was basically teaching himself. “There’s the textbook, read it if you want that. Come to the class to get ME,” as Martin said, you know. I remember one student saying to him one day, “I missed class yesterday. Did I miss anything?” They all say that. “Did I miss anything?” and he said, “You missed ME!”
So that was the entire meeting. And of course, Jim Bilyeu went home, with another white hair on his head, you know.

Jacobsen: It’s interesting to hear Foreign Language because you could almost identify with distinctions. Believe it or not, a lot of those distinctions do exist in other Departments, depending on the slant that you’re taking, a theoretical decision which operates.

Lester: Yeah, that is true, but these four reactions were cultural in each case.

Jacobsen: Yes. Because we think of different language as more easy to identify.

Lester: Yeah, but they very much surprised Jim Bilyeu.

Jacobsen: He just didn’t expect it.

Lester: No. He didn’t. Well, onward.

Jacobsen: Are there Professors in or out of your Department that stand out in your recall for one reason or another.

Lester: Professors, in the Department. Definitely, I think, Enrique Martin is super special. He’s still there, and how the man survives the work load he’s under, I do not know. There are everyone, you know, they’re good people, and we got along very well, I thought, but I thought he was especially fine, as a teacher. Of course, Eva Came, in German. And I’ve always thought that Professor Schneider, who is superb, simply because he has so many things he can do. The real Renaissance Man. OK.

Jacobsen: What about, were there other faculty that you want to bring out?

Lester: Well, out of our Department, I just wanted to mention Beverly Heckart, a superb worker, (?) attempt to put things together.

Jacobsen: How about administrators? Did you have much opportunity to find out anything about them, other than your Department Chair?

Lester: Well, very little, actually. I didn’t have much contact with them. I personally liked, and got on very well with Dean Housley. And I think that’s because we were both thoroughly private school type, and he, furthermore, knew what I was doing and asked me about it and pushed me to publish. He actually nagged me, you know, but I could say, he would be the only administrator I have ever met at this college who took the least interest in what I was doing. There was a very polite one, and one I have always liked because he liked me, I liked him, and that’s Dean Brown. But he had no idea of what I did.

Jacobsen: You mentioned publications. Are there ones you would like to call out that you did publish.

Lester: Well, I didn’t publish a whole lot. I published two or three articles, which I thought were earth shaking, but nobody else seemed to think so. (?)

Jacobsen: You mentioned publishing a book about the town you lived in.

Lester: Oh, yeah. That was a novel.

Lester: Yeah. I did that when I was... The name of it? It was called A Stranger in Angel Town. I’m sure you couldn’t possibly find a copy of it anywhere.

Jacobsen: Not published widely.

Lester: Well, it was published by an international publisher, and they were surprised that it went to printing, but that was that, you know. After that I had to make a living. I published that when I was twenty-three.

Jacobsen: You did?

Lester: Yeah.

Jacobsen: The town must have had some profound interest on you.

Lester: Well, it was so totally different, you know. To leave suburban New Jersey and go to the wilds of darkest Colorado where if you had eight in your class, you had a lot.

Jacobsen: How did you enjoy that kind of rural teaching?

Lester: I loved it. I always sort of wished I had retired in time to get a hold of the Damman School out there, and try my hand at a one room school. I would have loved that.

Jacobsen: Would you have started a bi-lingual program?

Lester: Oh, yes. Sure.

Jacobsen: Do you value that?

Lester: And singing. There would have been singing.

Jacobsen: Do you recall any differences, and I’m following somewhat the questions that you received, between students and faculty?

Lester: Well, just a few individual ones, you know. I didn’t see mass uprisings of unhappy students ever. This didn’t come to my knowledge.

Jacobsen: Again, you came at the right time.

Lester: Yeah, Uh huh.

Jacobsen: The sixties were a little...

Lester: Were they different?

Jacobsen: ... little bit of turmoil.

Lester: Yes, in fact Zwanziger told me that the design of the Psychology Building... I said, “This thing looks like a fort.” He said, “It was designed to protect the teachers.”
Jacobsen: Well, that’s a myth that does exist. It hit the student paper, and things like that, but it is a myth. They designed it so that there’d be less traffic for the faculty offices and would be a little bit more privacy, but still inviting students. It was just handier for the students. They didn’t have so far to go to class.

Lester: Yeah, well, that makes it...

Jacobsen: It makes it more of a story.

Lester: Yeah, Zwaniger made it a good story.

Jacobsen: Yeah, well, he, I don’t think he originated it. He got it in the newspaper from some student who proposed it, and he liked it, and pushed, and of course, he was prominent in the design of the building.

Lester: All I know about salary, which isn’t much, is that I felt annoyed every time money appeared to raise the salaries of people teaching kindergarten through twelfth grade, and no money appeared to raise the salaries of professors at the college level. This annoyed me, but as far as within the school year, I’m (?)

Jacobsen: Let’s move to another area, a faculty concern for many, the Faculty Code. Did you become involved in any way with that?

Lester: Yes, I worked on the Code Committee for very, many years. In fact, I called up Beverly Heckart this morning to find out what had become of a couple of things, and she did tell me. First, one of the last things I worked on was the proposal for family leave, and when we presented it to the Trustees a few years ago, the reaction was a very huffy, “How dare you come in with this,” sort of reaction. So I called up, and she said that they now have got it through just this year, but without pay. Then another thing I asked her about was, “What about the unionizing tendencies”? Has anything developed there because everything we tried to do failed because there were three different possible representatives, the AAUP, The WEA, and the AFT. Well, they finally have gotten the WEA and the AFT together and those two will represent the professors, I guess. This, as far as I understand, is something that is in front of the Trustees, and they are mulling it over privately. But for some reason or another, very little happens. If I could stick my two cents in here about Trustees.

Lester: I don’t think any body of people should be entirely without another governing body over them. These Trustees never received a set back of any kind until the question of the light poles came up last year, and that was something, you see, that the town understood. I think as the town understood it Fritz Glover had the sense to back down on that and they reconsidered. It was the first time I have ever known the Trustees to actually reconsider anything. They have always behaved in a very dictatorial way. I don’t think they should have that kind of power. There should be some recourse. I remember hearing a speech by Norman Cousins years ago. It was at the time of the Cold War, and he had had a discussion with a Russian gentleman of importance, and this fellow said, “What have you got that we don’t have? You know, we’ve got a democracy. Everyone is educated. Everyone is taken care of, and so on, there is no unemployment, and so on and so on. What have you got that we haven’t got?” And Norman Cousins reply was, “Freedom of access.” And that is what the professor does not have here with these Trustees. We do not have freedom of access.

Jacobsen: Very interesting. I think you’ve implied another thing there where you mentioned Fritz Glover that the nature of the Board can change a great deal depending on who is on it.

Lester: Yes, and that is a local man.
Jacobsen: Yes.

Lester: Besides being a highly intelligent one. It helps to have somebody who is actually in the town. Many of these Trustees come from the Seattle area and they just missed it.

Jacobsen: And then even he has dived into and found out about local problems far and beyond what many previously locally appointed Trustees have to do.

Lester: Well, I have a high opinion of him.

Jacobsen: Yeah, well, I think most everyone does. I’m glad you called it out to the tape.

Lester: Yeah. OK. Fritz Glover. Good guy.

Jacobsen: Another topic if you care to comment on is academic freedom.

Lester: Well, I didn’t have any problem with academic freedom, and I’m not sure anyone else did, really, that I knew.

Jacobsen: I think you implied something about faculty-administration collegiality, in other words, there wasn’t too much inter-action, if I heard you right.

Lester: I don’t think there was a lot of inter-action, really, no, and I don’t think that a lot of the professors had a lot of respect for the quantity of administrators we had. A few of them, they had respect for, but there seemed to be a number who weren’t doing anything, more than we needed. I don’t know. I myself thought highly of Dean Schliesman. And of course, dear old Jean was our secretary and I was very fond of her. Well, let’s see?

Jacobsen: Faculty Senate?

Lester: Well, yes. As I said, I served years and years on the Faculty Senate, and I was involved in it, and I felt that the general faculty thought it was of no use, but they did toil away there, sort of like water dripping on stone, and eventually some things do get done, such as this family leave. (?) Once in a while they will rise up in a body about something, and I think that’s important.

Jacobsen: To turn to town and gown, or community-college relationships, do you have any perception?

Lester: Well, I have heard that there was a problem there, but I haven’t seen it personally. Of course I keep sheep, and so I have this whole other connection to the farming people, and maybe that way I fit in a little bit better than some do.

Jacobsen: Well, it’s a, retrospectively, depends on issues. There were issues sometimes, for instance, you may have heard historically that we had this symposium a series of years, and some of the speakers were ultra-liberal, at that time there was quite a reaction.

Lester: Was there?

Jacobsen: And then there have been other issues, some pulled together, such as the electric poles you are talking about. There have been other times, such as establishing a business in the SUB that would be tax free to some of the business.
Lester: Yes, some of that has come up since I left, too. So I really don’t, I didn’t have much to do with that. The only thing I noticed about town and gown at all was when we started collecting money. (?)...At first we’re supposed to do it with businessmen, We and the businessmen are supposed to go out together. I found, and I think other people did too, that the businessmen got much better results if they went alone, as they went out around the town. If they took a teacher with them it was, unless the teacher was a friend, by accident. It didn’t always work.

Jacobsen: You’re implying that there was some kind of little barrier.

Lester: There was a little barrier there.

Jacobsen: You mentioned Faculty Senate. Why that organization, or otherwise? Did you get involved in long range planning, or so you have an impression?

Lester: Well, I perhaps shouldn’t say this, but I’ve always thought long range planning is one of the biggest wastes of time on this campus that can possibly happen. They’re always coming up with these Russian five year plans, and they go off into retreats, and they talk, and they talk, and they talk, and this isn’t the way things get done. The way things get done is when somebody says, “Hey, I have an idea, and this is my idea. What do you think?” It’s not these humongous piles of paper. I remember one that was about this thick. It was called the “Yellow-Peril.” No. as far as I’m concerned, long range planning is, everything happens on this campus, is really retro-active.

Jacobsen: Retroactive?

Lester: I mean, it’s after the fact. “Do you think, OK, I can see we better have another Science Building.” You know, this is after you’ve busted out of the one you’ve got, you see.

Jacobsen: It parallels, a little bit, what someone commented on long range plans. Well, it makes good file material. It stays there.

Lester: It reminds me of when Papas first came on campus, you know, and we had some kind of conversation somewhere, and then later on I said, “Well, how are you getting on?” A couple of months later he says, “I’m still going through piles of little paper.” and it wasn’t “little piles of paper.” It was “piles of little paper.” A big difference there.

Jacobsen: He’s pretty good at focusing on the issues.

Lester: Yeah.

Jacobsen: Do you have any thought on building naming policies?

Lester: No, I have no comment on that. They can name buildings how they like. I don’t care.

Jacobsen: Or academic organization. The way academia is organized, you find that a little bit by saying other people have commented to you and you somewhat agree there might be too many administrators.

Lester: Yes, and I think there are probably too many committees, and so on. But you have only to say, “Let’s have a committee,” and there are certain people who just fall upon it with great joy.

Jacobsen: Committee type people.
Lester: Yeah.

Jacobsen: Did you feel the impact of publish or perish?

Lester: Well, as far as our Department went, that was not a big problem. We were teaching as fast, as hard as we could, nearly all the time. As far as publishing went, one had to publish a little something in order to get promoted, which is what we mostly did. But the only person that I know of who really took that very seriously, did not get promoted. Got very, very angry. Went to the Dean. Was not backed up by anybody, and resigned and left here, because what was needed was teaching.

Jacobsen: Do you have further comment about the promotion policy?

Lester: Well, promotion. I think, perhaps they should get a set of rules that is actually rigid. That’s probably the only suggestion I can make. There arose a hassle a year or two ago in the Foreign Language Department, after I left. I missed all the fun. First there was Chambers before I came, and there was this mess after I left. That was because someone was hired by rules which we have not used in our Department. And this angered a lot of the members of our Department.

Kaatz: (?) teaching?

Lester: ‘93. So I think, I don’t know, but I think probably each Department, or maybe the whole school should have set rules.

Jacobsen: So the person knows where they stand.

Lester: Yes, and so that a person cannot twist arms and say, “I will only come here under thus and such conditions.” I don’t think that should happen. It certainly made a mess.

Jacobsen: Well, now, what’s up next, I think we’ve pretty well covered, research vs. classroom teaching.

Lester: Yes, well, as far as our Department went. I really don’t know how Martin does it. I really don’t know. He gets thinner every year.

Jacobsen: It is a heavy load. I think much of the campus is aware of Foreign Language’s load.

Lester: It’s a heavy load, and I know Departments where they give courses they prepared twenty years ago, and they give three lectures a week in two courses, or maybe three courses. They take up two exams per quarter, and that’s all the work they do. Whereas we are every night working.

Jacobsen: (?) maybe even composition.

Lester: Now there is another horrible job.

Jacobsen: (?) you can ask the examiner why he questions the verbal communication in class, probably after class. (?) only about an hour (?) It should show.

Lester: OK, well...

Jacobsen: Do you recall any campus emergencies, while you were here?
Lester: No, not a one. The only thing that happened, there was a flood in our building, but I was in Mexico then.

Jacobsen: What was the flood?

Lester: Well, they decided to save money and not heat the building over Christmas. So all the pipes froze. They don’t do that anymore.

Jacobsen: That’s something we, I hadn’t heard of. I guess we get isolated in our business, Know anything about hiring policy or practices?

Lester: Well, I would put that in where I was talking before. About promotions.

Jacobsen: Oh. (?)

Lester: Yeah. I would assume that that was the (?) for them together.

Jacobsen: Do you have an impression of our particular student body on their preparation for college, or readiness?

Lester: Well, when you teach Spanish you get a great many who are not at all prepared for college. They come from Sunnyside and Prosser, and they speak Spanish, but if you tell them they have just pronounced something in the past subjunctive, they couldn’t care less. It’s a, I would say in the what, twenty-three years that I taught here, I had about eight or nine truly outstanding students. Most of those I don’t hear from now. Then I had quite a mass of just middle class, good kids, you know. And then I had, I would say, fifteen or twenty per cent of these people who were really yet not ready for college at all. Which, you happen to get more if you teach in Spanish.

Jacobsen: Because they feel that they can get an education and(?) or something.

Lester: Well, they think they know Spanish. They know Spanish. They talk it.

Jacobsen: In their particular way. As you say.

Lester: Yes. And they want a job in social work, so they have to get the credits in Spanish, you see.

Jacobsen: The grammar is their own style.

Lester: Yeah, but very often their grammar was wrong. But that doesn’t make too much difference it they’re going to be working in Sunnyside.

Jacobsen: Do you see any relationship between that and that “Eubonics” situation?

Lester: I suppose so.

Jacobsen: They have their style and use it. You’ve commented on Senate and Union, any other comment about other faculty organizations that you’ve mentioned?

Lester: Well, no, I don’t think so. You did talk about...
Jacobsen: I would like you to pick an area that you feel you would like to comment on.

Lester: Time is getting on here. I thought.... Do you want to change that? I know you’re worrying about it.

Jacobsen: You can turn this up.

Kaatz: You’ve got about five minutes.

Lester: OK, I wanted to give two reactions which aren’t exactly the usual. As you know I did teach Spanish all those years, and there’s a line in the “The Quixote” I taught the course on Don Quixote, in fact I still teach the Douglas Honor’s Lecture on that, but the line that still sticks in my mind which I wish everyone on this campus is, “Comparisons are odious.” And I think the Merit System should be scrapped entirely. And I think the idea of having a Distinguished Professor is excellent, and two or three of those per year, that’s enough. But in the Merit Systems half the people get a raise, the other half don’t. Nothing is worse for the collegiality of the school than that. I would like to see Merit as an idea scrapped. People don’t become better teachers because they’re forced to compete. It doesn’t work that way. They are better teachers because they care about teaching. That’s all. That was one thing I wanted to say. However, collegiality here has certainly survived. I know many people in the East, they retire and all their friends scatter to the four winds, they’re totally alone. Whereas in Ellensburg, people stay. And that’s because they have friends here, and they stay in spite of a horrendous climate.

Jacobsen: Yeah: It’s not exactly ideal.

Lester: No, it’s terrible. But they stay because we are settled; we have our friends; don’t want to lose our friends, and so this collegiality definitely is a good thing here. It has survived everything.

Jacobsen: Do you think that has something to do with size?

Lester: I think it does, yes, and somewhat isolation. It’s a small town. Who else will we know, you know?

Jacobsen: I was interested in your comment on the promotion policy. Did they have a system in your Department whereby you kind of nominated others, or voted on them, (?)?

Lester: Uhm hum, we did. I invented it.

Jacobsen: Oh, you did.

Lester: Yeah, this was, we had a terrible fight once before I went down to Mexico one year, and they had a way, they had inherited, weighted voting, so that your first choice for Chairman, or whatever, was worth four points, and your second was worth three, and so on, and so on. It turned out that way that in a faculty of say ten or twelve people, if three people put four points on one man, he would get elected and he would not represent the majority, you see? So I invented a new way to do it. It required repeated voting, and it’s tiresome, but it works. So I was proud of that. My one contribution to political science in my life.

Jacobsen: Good. I know some other organizations that have that, in fact it’s got a name. The “hare system” H-A-R-E.

Lester: The weighted voting?

Jacobsen: Yeah, four, three, two,...

Lester: Yes. Well, it kept it so you don’t have a majority of people behind you in that case.
Jacobsen: That’s true.

Lester: Going to quit now?

OFF TAPE WHISPERS

Lester: She’s worried about it. All right. Is there anything else?

Jacobsen: Well, it all depends on whether we, you have other things that you would like to have expressed to contribute to our history of this organization. I think the comments you’ve made have been very additive to what we have. Some comments show that you have an opinion that others do, plus you have some unique ones. We enjoy those.

Lester: Well, I really believe that a college gets on better if it isn’t set up as a competition. And I think that’s important.