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Larry Lowther interview

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Smith: Our interviewee today is Dr. Larry Lowther. It is June 19, 1995. Larry, give us a little bit of a rundown on your family and where you were raised and where you went to school and so forth.

Lowther: Yeah, I’d be glad to do that. I came from a family of seven children. I have four brothers and two sisters. My father was a United Methodist minister in the Pacific Northwest and so I lived in many parts of the state of Washington. I was born in Centralia and we lived in Nooksack Valley and the Spokane Valley, Green Acres, Deer Park, Bridgeport. I went to college at the University of Washington. Took all three degrees there. I started out in teacher training - had a major in history and also in language arts. My first high school teaching job was at Twisp in the Methow Valley and I was assigned to teach English, Spanish, speech, coached the debate team, direct the plays and drive the school bus. I stayed there a couple of years and then went to Davenport - had somewhat similar assignment. Didn’t get into history teaching until I had a job at West Valley of Yakima - went there about 1955 and stayed for six years teaching history at the high school level. While I was teaching in high school I worked on my master’s degree. Then in 1961, cut loose and went back for the doctorate. I finished the doctorate in 1964 and got a job In South Dakota on the college level at a place called General Beadle State College. I think it’s now just Dakota State College at Madison, South Dakota. I was there for one year and then I heard of an opening at Central Washington State College for the fall of 1965 and I applied. I heard of the job through Walt Berg whom I had met when I was in graduate school at the University of Washington. Walt had come over to fill in the Pacific Northwest position because the person who had been teaching that, Charlie Gates, had been killed in an auto accident and I was assigned to be Walt’s T.A. and so he got to know me at that point and he later informed me when this job opened at Central and so I was hired. Began to work in the fall of 1965.

Smith: What was your first assignment, Larry, or class load, for example?

Lowther: Well, I was assigned to teach Early America, that would be Colonial America, American Revolution and also the Pacific Northwest History course and the secondary methods course. I was told that I was to be kind of a liaison to the schools as well and it was not at all clear to me what that meant. Walt Berg talked in terms of a clinical professor. I don’t know whether people remember that term. It was becoming popular in the 1960’s. There had been a great deal of criticism of the schools and someone had suggested that maybe there ought to be a closer working relationship between college professors and teachers in the schools and they came up with the idea of a clinical professor but no one really defined what that was or what such a person was to do. So when I came here I had the problem of how to connect with the schools and, you know, you just don’t walk into a school and say, “Hey, I’m a clinical professor and here I am.” I did some consulting work but it really wasn’t until I heard of the Washington State Council for the Social Studies, which was just getting organized in the 1960’s and really was - did not have much of a membership at that time but whenever they had an event I would go to it and then they got a little more serious about organization and in the mid 70’s and then I was asked to be President of the Council toward the end of the 1970’s. After that I served as their Executive Secretary and I found that one of the best things that the colleges could do for the schools was just simply to provide some stability for their organizations and so we established the headquarters of the Social Studies Council here in the History department at Central and I was the Executive Secretary and I would fill out forms, do reports, establish the relationship with the National Council and generally serve as a support for the teachers. I found that the teachers have a lot of imagination and they know pretty much what they want in terms of programming but they need to have some logistical support in order to keep the organization growing. It really wasn’t until I heard about History Day that I came into very close contact with the schools. About 19811 got a call from a friend of mine, Tom Pressly, who had been one of my professors at the University of Washington and he said he had heard about this thing called History Day which is supposed to be a good program for getting students involved in historical research and analysis and so on and so he thought that might be something we’d be interested in and so I told him that I’d try to get something going. So I called Larry Strickland, who was the Social Studies coordinator at - in the Superintendent of Public Instruction’s office, and he said he’d try to contact some of the people that he knows in Social Studies in the high schools and see if we could get
something going. Well nothing happened that year and I think it was largely because we started working with the high schools. We found subsequently that the schools that are most interested in National History Day are the schools on the junior high and middle school level and so nothing happened then. The next year Jim Keifert, who worked in the office of ESD 121, while at a national conference, ran into the executive director of the National History Day and this person told him that the state of Washington could have $5000 in start up if they do the program and so Jim came back with $5000 and he called me and a few other people and said would you be part of a steering committee and I said yes and he hired a young woman by the name of Margie Giordano to be the State Coordinator for History Day. So we got together and put the program into effect and 120 kids showed up at the first State contest which was held at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle. It kept growing from then on. I was the Judging Coordinator at that time for History Day and then about 1984 we moved the contest from the Museum of History and Industry to Central Washington University because there just simply wasn’t room enough for all of the kids in the museum. So I was kind of the contact person on campus to help organize the state contest. Then in 1985, Margie Giordano went onto other things and I was asked to take over as the State Coordinator, which I have been since that time. The state of Washington has developed a fine program and I do want to say that I think Margie Giordano deserves a lot of credit for that because she established the basic structural framework for the program and we have been building on that ever since. We have one of the most active - the strongest executive committees in the nation made up of teachers who work with History Day and they know what will fly and what will not fly. They have built a very strong program and Washington state, the students from Washington state, have competed very well on the national level. Since 1984, we’ve had at least one national winner in History Day and this past year, 1995, we had six national winners. The program does a lot for the campus too. I’ve been told by History Day teachers that before History Day started up they never thought of, that is, their kids never thought of coming to Central for college but since then a great many of them do. So the college benefits that way and it also benefits in terms of the public relations value. People appreciate, parents particularly appreciate the service that Central provides for that particular program. I should say also that in connection with History Day - had strong administrative support here at Central from the presidential level on down. Particularly some of the deans like Bob Brown and Don Cummings and Ann Denman have been very supportive and helpful as has the provost, Dr. Moore. So, as you can tell, I have spent a lot of time with the History Day program. Another thing that I have spent quite a bit of time with was the Teacher Education Committee which later became the Teacher Education Council. I was asked to serve on that committee and council and, with the exception of a few years, I was on the Teacher Ed Council during my entire career. I, of course, came to the council - the members of the council are not supposed to reflect or represent, I should say, the departments from which they come but they reflect the philosophy, the point of view of those particular fields, those disciplines. I know that I did. One of the things that the History department was interested in was trying to raise the academic standards for teacher candidates. Since we did not have too much success in asking for an increase in the grade point requirement, we attempted to do that unilaterally - to require that the History teacher ed candidates have to have at least a 2.5 or something like that in their major before they would qualify for a certificate. But the thinking on the council at that time was that it should be campus wide whatever the requirement was. So that idea was shot down. We also tried to insure that the candidate was strong in all courses. In other words, if in certain parts of the History major the person received grades lower than a C, we tried requiring that they either take those courses over or take substitute courses for them. This too was opposed by the council on the grounds that it violated the implied contract in the catalog. So we were not very successful in acting unilaterally to raise the grade points or try to raise the standards for teacher candidates. We were also part of a group on the council that tried to ensure that all of the candidates had to take some solid academic courses. At that time, teacher candidates were required to take the Pacific Northwest History class. There was some feeling at the time that this really wasn’t necessary for teachers and the requirement was pared back so that only those in Social Studies would have to take that course. Eventually the course was dropped as a requirement for teacher candidates, even those in Social Studies, unless it was written into their major. We, of course, wanted even elementary teachers to have a strong background in the academics. The thing that everyone was working with of course was the credit limit. When the Early Childhood Education major was proposed we were concerned that this major would be composed almost entirely of education courses and so we, the council, required that there be a double major at first. This was accepted but once the ECE program was established, then pressure was built to do away with the double major and simply have the students complete the ECE requirement. There was tension between those people from the academic departments and those from the Education department at
that time, but I should say that some in the education department were very sympathetic to the idea of a strong academic background for teachers. In fact, when Jimmy Applegate became the dean of Professional Studies, he sort of took the lead in requiring a stronger grade point so eventually teacher candidates had to maintain a 2.8 grade point average in order to qualify for the certificate. I spent a lot of time with the teacher education council. Within the department, I had to advise all of the teacher candidates as well as a few others, and since there would be forty to fifty teacher candidates, this was a pretty heavy advising role but there was just nobody else in the department who had that background in education in the schools that could take this on. I also supervised the Social Science majors whether they were teacher candidates or not. Fortunately there weren’t very many Social Science majors so that wasn’t a tremendous job. I took a temporary administrative position in the late 70’s, can’t remember just which years it was, as the Grants and Research man in the Dean of Graduate Studies office and did that for I think a couple of years and went back to the department and became the chair of the department in the early 1980’s. I was chair at the time of the big RIF. You may remember it when they closed down Hebeler and a few of the departments had to dismiss even tenured people. We lost two tenured positions in the History department. We challenged one of them when Shahid Refai was dismissed. We protested and took it through the grievance process and claimed that this violated the university’s own affirmative action policy to dismiss a minority person and we also argued that there had been some procedural violation, violation of the Open Meeting Act when they were trying to decide about the riffing itself. We actually won on the hearing level. It was the university who immediately appealed it to the Superior Court and we won there too and the court chastised the university in order for the university to reinstate Refai and the University appealed to the Court of Appeals and there we lost on a two to one decision and so Shahid Refai was then dismissed as a result. I found that the History department has been a very congenial department, easy to work with. We don’t have a lot of - haven’t had during my tenure - haven’t had a lot of internal bickering. Probably the most tensions developed in the period - late 60’s, early 70’s - when the department was its largest, when we had about fifteen or sixteen members of the department. There was more tension at that time. When we became smaller either through attrition or riffing then there was, seemed to be, much better feeling in the department. The department has always, while I was there, my observation was that it was very much interested in strong academic standards. We require writing in virtually every course - give essay tests, which we think is the only kind of tests to give and are honorary, the Phi Alpha Theta, has made very good showing over the years presenting papers at the Phi Alpha Theta conferences. We’ve had several of our master’s candidates win the master’s thesis awards. We had two of our professors, Kramar and Richards, get distinguished professor awards so I would say it’s been a very congenial, very strong, very good department to work with. That in essence is my career. Maybe you have some other questions.

Smith: What was your initial rank when you came to Central?

Lowther: It was Assistant Professor.

Smith: And it is now what?

Lowther: Full Professor. I got the rank of Full Professor in 1974. I should say that I would - took one year’s leave of absence from 69-70 when I went over to the University of Washington to work on a federally funded project in elementary education which was very interesting to me. So now I am a Professor Emeritus.

Smith: What is your status now?

Lowther: Yeah, that’s it, Professor Emeritus on finished retirement.

Smith: You are on phased retirement?

Lowther: Right, yeah, that was - that I think is a great program. I understand that John Shrader had a lot to do with establishing it. I think it is something that works well for the university and certainly works well
for the individual professor who wants to keep his hand in the teaching game but doesn’t want to have a heavy load.

Smith: Well, Larry from your viewpoint, are there any administrators and faculty that come to your mind as important leaders while you’ve been here at Central? Significant to your program especially?

Lowther: Well, I’ve been very appreciative of Bob Brown and Don Cummings, the deans of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences because, of course, the strong support they have given to History Day but I think they have been fair in their dealing with the departments as well. I didn’t have much contact with the presidents of the university. I had a very good relationship with Jim Brooks but I didn’t have too many direct contacts with him and probably even fewer with his successors although they have - I have had some dealings through History Day with them and they have been very supportive. I think that within the department we’ve had very good leadership from the various chairs. Beverly Heckart is currently providing very strong leadership. Dan Ramsdell, Kent Richards were all very good leaders. Walt Berg, who was chair at the time I came, I think was a strong chair but he was a person who was not liked by everyone including a great many of the students. Walt was a kind of nineteenth century gentleman, very stern in his approach to students, usually, although he was unbending at times and felt I think that Central needed to have tremendous upgrading in terms of its standards and he worked toward that end. My understanding was that he was not too popular outside of the department and often rubbed people the wrong way.

Smith: What specific contributions do you feel that you have made to the progress of your department or the school that you represent? For example, in the development of new courses, development and the revision of curriculums and so forth.

Lowther: Well I think that in terms of the history program itself, I have perhaps preserved certain courses rather than developed them. For example, when the person who taught Women’s History was riffed, I picked up the course just to keep it in the active curriculum. I thought it was something that we should have even though I wasn’t a specialist there. Eventually when Karen Blair came she was able then to take over the course and do a much better job than I had been doing. The same thing was true with Black History. When the person who had been teaching it left I picked it up just to keep it going. The one course that I developed myself was the History of Social Services in the United States. I developed this more at the request of the Sociology department for the benefit of their Social Work majors than really for the History department itself. But since the mid 60’s anyway, since Social History has been coming more and more into its own, I think that it was important that we have that course. That’s a course that has also been taken over by Dr. Blair. I think probably my greatest contribution both to the university and the department and the school as a whole has been my work with History Day of course, rather than curriculum development although I did have quite a bit of responsibility in connection with the Social Science major and with the development with the teacher education majors as with the history and social science teacher education majors and I attempted to provide a balance within those majors so that they would have an acquaintance with other social sciences as well as some depth in history.

Smith: Now, through all these years of service at Central, what major campus committees have you served on?

Lowther: Well, the Teacher Education Council is about the - that is the major one. I’m sure I served on some other committees. I served on the Senate for a time. I was on the Senate at the time of the Gulf War and was responsible for introducing that controversial resolution condemning military action in the Gulf - but that was just for a few years that I was on the Senate.

Smith: Now we’re going to put you on the spot. Are there any programs or activities on Central’s campus that you feel are not justified on a university campus?

Lowther: No, just by definition a university is comprehensive and I suppose you could have a great many things on campus. There are always some programs concerning which I’ve had some doubts about the
academic level of them. I’ve never been too sure about, for example, Leisure Studies, but this is something I don’t know a great deal about. No, there aren’t any that I would want to mount a crusade in order to get rid of.

Smith: We know you as a married man Larry, were you married before you came to Central?

Lowther: Oh yes, I was married in 1947 before I went to college. I probably should have mentioned that, shouldn’t I. (laughs) I met my wife, Betty, in Colorado Springs when I was in the army serving at what was then Camp Carson. She was working at the Alexander Film Company in Colorado Springs. We were married and went through college - that is, she supported me through college and then we’ve been together ever since.

Smith: Now you mentioned that you were in the service there. It was the army?

Lowther: Yes, the army.

Smith: What was your capacity there?

Lowther: Well, I started out in the 35th quarter master pack -crew, which was a supply unit for the 611th field artillery battalion which was part of the tenth mountain division and we worked with mules until the mules were sent to Greece. Then I was transferred over to the camp headquarters and did clerical work from then on. I found that if one is literate and is able to type, usually in the army you get assigned at one time or another to clerical work. I served for a couple of years at that time, from 46-48, and went into the reserves and was called back at the time of the Korean War in 1950 and was in the pipeline until, again, somebody discovered I knew how to type and I had had some college so I was sent to Fort Lewis to process the other guys. I served for a year at that time and then got out of the military and have not had anything to do with it ever since.

Smith: During your service in the military did you earn any G.I. Bill that you used later?

Lowther: Right, in fact that was my original motivation for signing up in 1946 - to get to college. I went clear through the master’s level on the G.I. Bill and which I appreciated very much. It’s been one of the great programs in American history.

Smith: Now Larry, we are going to move to some short subjects and maybe you can find short answers for them. Would you please comment as the subject suggests to you at this moment - the Central Washington University salary schedule.

Lowther: Well, I’ve never felt that it was terribly generous. I have particularly had concerns about the merit pay system which I have seen as primarily a way of holding salaries down because we’ve never funded merit at this university. We have sort of taken turns as somebody got merit this year and somebody else gets it next year and so on and the assumption I think underlying merit that there is some people that have merit and there are other people that don’t have merit I think is faulty. If an instructor has no merit than the instructor probably should be dismissed but the idea behind merit is to hold the salaries of just the competent people down and those who are super stars, try to pour the money to them. I don’t think it has worked that way because the faculty itself has rebelled against that sort of idea so we have had a kind of a rotating principle in merit. But eventually everyone will get some merit pay and you can just wait your turn.

Smith: Now, do you have any thoughts or opinions concerning the faculty code of policy and procedure?

Lowther: No, I haven’t had any great run-ins with the faculty code. I see the faculty code, of course, as an administrative item, not something that represents completely the interests of the faculty. I have been a
supporter and during much of my career I was a member of the American Federation of Teachers. I think the faculty really needs a labor union to represent them because they are more and more treated like hired hands.

Smith: Okay. Now do you have any particular sentiments concerning the Senate form of faculty representation on this campus?

Lowther: Well, the Senate does not really represent the faculty. In many departments, taking the senator’s job is regarded as a chore and if you could - you try to find out someone who hasn’t done it and will take it for a few years and give it to them. I don’t think there is the feeling that the Senate does anything that is vital in terms of the curriculum and the welfare of the faculty and so on and that the Senate, again, is held somewhat in contempt by a great many faculty.

Smith: Okay Larry, now do you have any particular feeling concerning that problem on some campuses and hasn’t really reared its head much here - the publish or perish syndrome?

Lowther: That’s never been a problem for me. I think that particularly in our department that there may be more pressure at the present time for new young faculty to publish, but I don’t think there has ever been a publish or perish philosophy. I have published very little. I have spent most of my time, when I wasn’t teaching, in public service and that apparently was successful during my tenure. I don’t know whether it is going to continue to be successful because I see more pressure developing on new young faculty to publish something.

Smith: Do you have any particular sentiments concerning hiring policies? Hiring and retention policies at Central?

Lowther: No, I - in our department the hiring has been pretty much departmental fare, which I think it should be. It should be done by the departments and the decision concerning tenure should also be a departmental matter. I think also the question of promotion should be something controlled by the department. I think the upper echelons of the administration should have very little to do with hiring and dismissal of faculty.

Smith: Now you’ve been here long enough that you can see some changes I suppose, but do you have any comments concerning the pre-college preparation and the quality of students who now come to Central as compared to those who may have been here when you arrived?

Lowther: I think probably I have changed over the years so that my standards are not quite as high as they were when I first came. I - it’s still pretty difficult for a student to get an A from me but it’s I think less difficult than it was for them to get B’s and I do have the impression that the students in the mid 60’s were a bit more literate than the students today but its only an impression and I don’t really have any hard data on which to base that. I’ve found, of course, that within the History department students who generally have an interest in public issues - read newspapers, watch McNeil Lehrer report, or some of the other good news programs, documentaries and that sort of thing, those students generally do well in history. Students who have been interested only in teenage problems then don’t have the conceptual framework to do a very good job in history and I think we’ve been getting a higher proportion of that kind of student more recently - students who just don’t have that conceptual framework that they need to do college work.

Smith: Now, would you share with us the observations that you may make concerning town and gown relationships.

Lowther: Generally, I think the university has had a good relationship with the business people downtown, although there have been a - recently, tension of course, about the university competing in certain matters but I think there was a survey done once which indicated that the farming interests in the area have less
interest in, concern with, are less supportive of the university than commercial interests downtown. Generally I would say that there has been a good town/gown relationship.

Smith: Now, as we come to the very end Larry, is there an area we have not touched that you have something you want to record?

Lowther: I can’t think of anything right now. I suspect that ten minutes after we finish then I will remember all of the things I should have said.

Smith: All right Larry, we thank you very much.

Lowther: Thank you.