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George Town interview

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Smith: It is August 6, 1997. Our interview today is with George Town. Ham Howard is on the camera, and Milo Smith is interviewing. Now, George, on this beautiful bright and sunny morning, let’s start with a brief personal history of your life before coming to Central: Born, home town, family, education, military, so forth. Shoot.

Town: Born in Waukesha, Wisconsin, May 17, 1925. Lived there, went to school there, graduated from high school in 1943 and entered the military at that time and so I was in the military...

Smith: Which branch?

Town: Army.

Smith: Ours?

Town: Yeah. It was most helpful I think for social reasons, I think it was best to be on our...! was in the 86th division. We were in Europe. Then we came back. We were headed for Japan, and we were going under the Golden Gate Bridge on September 2nd, 1945. And so this was a nice long water trip, over the Philippines, and we came back in ’46, and so I was discharged then. And I entered college at the University of Wisconsin, and got married in June 16, 1948. Got, came down with TB in November, 1950. Went to the sanitarium; came out in, let’s see, no, I went in in November of ’48, and came out in September of ‘50. (?) And then went back to school. Graduated and got my B.S. Degree in Chemistry from University of Wisconsin. Went on to graduate school; got my Masters there, and, let’s see, that was dated in ’54, I decided to enter into a more profitable vein of endeavor, and went to work for the Boeing Company. And, Let’s see, that was November of ’53, and I worked there...

Smith: Which plant?

Town In plant two. Yeah, I was in the Aero-Space Division.

Smith: Here?

Town: Yes. And I worked as a computer programmer at that time. And then in September of ‘56 I decided to go back to graduate school, so I went down to Oregon State and entered the Mathematics graduate program, working under Bill Stone. And so was there, and had almost completed everything and Bill Stone died, and I lost heart and I never finished the thesis, kind of thing. I went back up to Boeing, then in December1960 I went came here in September 1972. And I was in the Mathematics Department; I taught some math courses and programming. And then it must have been about ’76, three or four years later, I was full time in the computer, they had a separate program at that time, and so then I had been in the computer science, it wasn’t known as that then, but anyway we were there until June of ‘96. And so that was roughly the span of career that I had.

Smith: Did you get in on the manual punching of cards?
Town: Oh, a wonderful experience. It develops one’s evil thoughts of technology to a fine art. It was, yeah, we, one of the major problems you have. Getting information into the machine. One of the really neat things that’s coming along is voice entering. They now have a relatively inexpensive voice entry of text, continuous dictation for about $600.00, something like that. And, you know, if you were doing, entering, had a lot of text to enter it would soon pay for itself. You think about all the secretarial help that you have. You can enter about ninety to a hundred words a minute, something like that. and you couldn’t anywhere near approach that in hand typing. Anyway, that’s one of the things that is kind of exciting and moving away from the grossness of having a card punched entry into a more modem way of doing it, and my experiences essentially spanned the whole range from the beginning when I was at Boeing we had serial number twelve of IBM’s 701 computer, and it was a vacuum tube thing. No operating system. Nothing. Every time you went on the machine it was a clean machine, and you had to do everything yourself, and so out of self-preservation, we had to develop support for the user to get in on the machine. But you had to be technically accomplished person to get onto the machine. It was not for amateurs to fool around with.

Smith: When did your retirement from Central become effective, George?

Town: June of ‘96.

Smith: June of ‘96.

Town: Yeah.

Smith: OK, what was your, what was the title of your academic assignment when you came to Central? Do you recall?

Town: Boy, that goes back, in ‘72. I think I was to teach Mathematics and Computers...

Smith: Did you have rank?

Town: Oh, yeah, I was Associate Professor.

Smith: Associate Professor to Seattle U. and was Director of the computer center there, and taught mathematics and programming, and then, let’s see, I stayed there until ‘72, and I.

Town: Yes.

Smith: Ah, ha.

Town: Yeah, I was Associate Professor in Mathematics and, I think it was straight Mathematics at that time because they just had one course in programming.

Smith: Now, when you switched over totally to computers did you maintain your rank?

Town: Yes.

Smith: You did.

Town: Yes. And, gee, I’ve forgotten when it was that I got full professor. It was possibly ‘85, ‘86, something like that, but I’ve forgotten the exact date, but it was somewhere around there.

Smith: And your rank at retirement was?
Town: Professor.

Smith: Full Professor.

Town: Yes.

Smith: Good. Did you teach in any Department other than Computers after you divested your self of mathematics?

Town: No, I...

Smith: Totally computers the rest of your term.

Town: Yes.

Smith: Did you teach programming?

Town: Yeah, I taught programming, that was how it all began, and then they began to be more analytical, and you begin to have the development of things like data structures, and these kind of things, how system programming, and they began to organize it, and analyze. So much money was being spent, people had to begin to figure out what’s happening here, and so they began to get a more solid basis for the Computer Sciences. It’s really, a lot of it is, a course in Applied Mathematics, a lot of the analysis is mathematical analysis. They wanted to talk about improving efficiency, and things like this.

Smith: Early in your computer years here at Central did you get involved with teaching beginning operation of computers?

Town: Oh, yes. It was, most of it was pretty elementary at that time. We didn’t have much to deal with at that time...

Smith: And later in your career here, were you able to get out from under that beginning course and pass it on to somebody else?

Town: Oh, yes. But I still taught the 101 Course, even up til the last quarter I was here. I enjoyed doing it.

Smith: Good, good. What problems do you recall that you would class as significant during your period of employment here at Central.

Town: Well, with most Departments getting equipment money was a formidable task, and getting access to modern computing equipment was a major consideration, and we didn’t have much to begin with. And it took haranguing and nagging, and general whining to be able to get a hold of some money. I remember Ed Harrington eventually got a hold of some money, and I remember the first things, major purchases we made were some terminals for about a thousand dollars a piece. I think we got about twenty terminals, or ten, or twenty, something like this, and that must have been in the early Eighties, something like that. And we were accessing a computer at the University of Washington for a lot of our work. We did some locally, but it was primarily, the local machine was used primarily for administrative support activities. And they didn’t have a lot of time left over for the un-essential educational use of it.

Smith: Now, George, you may not be familiar with this, and I want to get it on your tape, but before you came, before there were computers on campus, there were rumors of computers coming, and the wonderment among faculty is, “Where is the budget going to accommodate anything as expensive as computers?” Well, we soon found out. Every Department on campus was told that we’re going to reduce
each Department budget a tiny bit in order to build a nest egg from which to buy some computers, and then we will hire a manual programmer, and we will start to teach a basic Computer Operation class with eight or ten computers, and faculty members, generally, sent up a hue and cry, “What? We’re going to have to have a budget reduction?” And then we were assured that the money that the Departments are going to save because of computers coming on campus, is going to more than make up for the amount that you’re going to be assessed.

Town: And other lies!

Smith: I don’t know if that’s ever happened. But I do recall that young man that came here as the programmer, sitting down there, not only with his punch card, but piles of short blue wires, and red wires, and yellow wires, and he was plugging one end here and one end there, and if he did it right, it came out right.

Town: Yes, yes.

Smith: And I can recall beginning students coming to my classes, after they’d been to computer class, and they would talk about how intimidating it is when they make a mistake and the computer says, “You dunce!”

Town: They’re not known for friendly responses to inadequate entry.

Smith: Right. Do you recall any humorous things that happened in your area, that you know about... That you could tell us about?

Town: I’ve thought about that, you know, we always had a good time, but I never think of it as being one outstanding humorous event, but then, them hiring me, that might have been considered one.

Smith: Yes.

Town: Fred Stanley and I worked together the entire time that I was here from 1972 until I retired, and he’s still here, and he and I always had a good time, Working with him was always a very good thing.

Smith: Good, that’s good.

Town: And working with Bernie Martin, he was the Dean at the time, and we got a lot of support from Bernie.

Smith: Sure, sure. Well, you mathematicians stick together.

Town: Well, if we don’t support one another, who are we going to get support from?

Smith: Which administrators and faculty come to mind as important leaders while you were teaching here, and especially in support of the computer program?

Town: Well, I’d say Bernie, and Ed Harrington was very supportive. He went out of his way to try and get money, even in those days of miserable support from the Legislature. I remember in the mid-seventies was a particular stark money time around the University. So he worked hard at it, and that sort of thing.

Smith: Well, now, how about the.. .What has been the attitude of Presidents to the Computer Program on campus?
Town: I would say they have been...

Smith: Starting with Brooks.

Town: Yeah, I would say with Brooks that we got pretty good support, and then when Garrity was here, we got pretty good support then. I would say the Presidents have generally been reasonably supportive. They haven’t gone out on a great long limb to do it, but they have done reasonable support.

Smith: Well, I can still remember Garrity saying publicly one time, and he probably rued the day, that he was looking forward to the time that there was a computer on every faculty office desk.

Town: Yes.

Smith: And that it could be tied into the campus computer system, and he had great ambitions. I don’t know how far they went.

Town: Yeah.

Smith: Have you memories of problems that existed between the teaching faculty and the administration?

Town: Yeah. Burt Williams was one who identified himself as a modern day Luddite. He was against technology in general and computers. And it was only because Ed Harrington pushed on him that he was willing to support it at all. And so, at on time I had a teaching load, I was teaching about three courses, and I counted up, I had somewhat over nine hundred credit hours in one quarter, as a load. So that kept me busy, out of the pool hall, anyway. So eventually we got some help in doing that kind of thing.

Smith: Do you have any knowledge of any problems that arose between faculty and the Board of Trustees?

Town: Not in particular. I don’t remember any particular incident.

Smith: Good. Do you recall any significant differences which arose between students and faculty?

Town: Oh, yeah, I remember one student, he was from the Middle East, and he gave trouble to me, and then to another instructor, and then to, who was it? Was it... Bob Brown. I remember. Bob was somewhat taken back at this problem. But anyway, I’m sure that Bob would remember this individual. But I think this is a unique difficulty that came along.

Smith: Was it a problem of language, or a problem of basic philosophy?

Town: I think more a problem of basic philosophy involved. He just didn’t seem to understand the whole idea, what was going on here, and he didn’t like it, and he made his dislike known.

Smith: I can recall a young man that called our home several times one quarter while Helen was teaching him in English 301. And he kept complaining about his grades, and yet he was warm and friendly and nice, and he finally told Helen, “Where I come from they give some consideration for what kind of a person you are.” He expected some kind of a break.

Town: Friendliness was part of the grade, huh?

Smith: Right. And she admitted that he was a charmer, and his problem was that he had been charming his way through school for years.
Town: In lieu of work, charm was applied.

Smith: Now, George, we’ve come to a list of short titles here, if you’d like to make comment, tine, if nothing rings a bell, we’ll move right on. The salary schedule.

Town: It was low. Inadequate is the term that comes to mind. The Legislature, again, being the fundamental impediment to growth.

Smith: Now, did you ever run into the Faculty Code?

Town: Never really any real problem with it. It provided also a means of a framework of employment which then wasn’t arbitrary, and that’s a good thing.

Smith: Academic freedom at Central?

Town: I’ve never had any problem, but then, by the nature of our product, it tends to be non-political, and that sort of thing.

Smith: You might, however, we’ll stop right here for a moment; there was some problem with vulgarities on Central computers.

Town: Oh, vaguely I remember something about that.

Smith: Maybe we ought to try to air that a bit because that’s part of our history?

Town: I don’t remember much about it.

Smith: You don’t need to mention names.

Town: I don’t remember much about it, except that somebody sent some mail, as I remember, and there was some use of words that was not fully appreciated in certain orders, and so they, there was something about that, but I don’t think much came of it.

Smith: Was there any noticeable hand slapping over in computer area?

Town: Certainly not with the staff and faculty. It’s just that we were told, you know, avoid that kind of thing and so we tried to tell the students. I think it was one student sending a mail to another student, an inappropriateness of language at that point.

Smith: Faculty and Administration collegiality? That was a hot word years back when there was an element of faculty on campus that felt that the administration and Board were trying to run the College without any viewpoint, or input from the faculty. That our collegiality had just gone down the drain.

Town: I think there was a point where the faculty began to be an annoyance in certain respects, and on the other hand, the faculty felt the administration wasn’t listening to them, and so there was, not every suggestion that has come from a faculty member is outstanding. And I think that not every administrative policy decision has been above reproach, and so I think there was a period of time when there was hostility.

Smith: In my thirty-six years here, I found that there are two words that were the source of considerable misunderstanding, all thirty-six years, and those two words were, “Shared Governance.”

Town: We don’t give up power that easily here, one way or the other.
Smith: How about the Faculty Senate? Any attitude as to whether it serves a good purpose, or poor purpose?

Town: Oh, I think it serves a good purpose. I think that it has some administrative function, particularly in terms of faculty evaluation. When there is a problem, often the administration will approach it through the Faculty Senate, if need be.

Smith: Did you ever spend any time as a Senator?

Town: I did for one quarter I was a substitute in there. At one time I was Chair of the Department, and the person who was Senator from our Department, then continued, and I never had, really an opportunity to do that.

Smith: How about town and gown relationship?

Town: I never had any problem.

Smith: No.

Town: No, I really had no difficulty.

Smith: I could anticipate that there might be some traffic from around the town, since you people were specialists in computers and computers were slowly creeping into businesses and homes, did you get contacted much by the business community?

Town: Some, but not a lot. About the time when they began to get seriously involved in it, while there were consulting people around the town. It went on pretty much without a great deal of impact from our Department.

Smith: Can you recall, George, any truly outstanding students who, perhaps, have gone on into the area of computers as dealers, or as consultants? Can you think of any names?

Town: Well, downtown at Computer Central, Marc Helgeson is locally making a significant impact, and I think he is doing a very good job down there. A number of our students, all of our students are out someplace in the workday world doing good things. a number have gone on to graduate school, so we have, I would say, an area where our students don’t have a problem getting a job.

Smith: Good, good.

Town: Employment in general is very good, but always the computer science and related areas have been very good.

Smith: Well, some years ago when we bought our first computer, we bought it from a young lady who had just started her business down in the Lower Valley Mall, and she was a product of Central, and she had a very successful business. I think she still has. Sam Rust had bought a computer from her. He had known her as a student, and then he was the one who advised us, and we went down and talked it over with her and bought. And she spoke very highly of the computer program at Central in spite of George Town.

Town: Well, it’s a problem, but, you know, they overcome these difficulties.

Smith: Is Chris Smith a product of your program up here?
Town: Yes.

Smith: How about long range planning at Central? Were you ever able to do any in computers?

Town: Well, let’s see, next week we’ll do this, and maybe we’ll think about two weeks from now. The major problem has been the lack of a long range commitment financially because most of our activity was money driven, and until the Legislature puts the money on the table, we can’t do much.

Smith: Yes. I can remember in our area, George, after McConnell was remodeled and so forth, and so forth, we were told, “Now that you have the facility that you say you needed, now we expect you to start doing some long range planning, but it must not cost any money!”

Town: Yes, indeed.

Smith: Do you have any feeling about building naming policies?

Town: No. I think not.

Smith: How about academic organization?

Town: Oh, I think there’s a great deal of organization differences going from one school to another, and a lot of it’s personality driven, and it will always be that. There’s some kind of logic associated with, why one Department is in this School, or in another School, and it all, a lot of it depends upon the people involved in the particular institutions.

Smith: Has the computer program been consistently in the same School?

Town: Well, let’s see, it was in the Science School when it began with Bernie, and then it was, when they consolidated, it was in the Big School for a long time, and then when it was split, the Big School was split, then we went into the Science and Natural Science thing. Primarily, it’s been in the Science area, as it well should be.

Smith: Do you have any feeling concerning publish or perish at Central?

Town: I don’t think they have put as heavy an emphasis on publishing. They have been consistently strong on trying to make instruction a strong point of the school. And so they pay attention to what the students think about the instruction.

Smith: How about research vs. classroom teaching as an evaluative tool?

Town: I would say that there has to be some research in order that a person advance. I think that’s a given, but it isn’t as strongly emphasized as the teaching component. and then there is the public service function that is involved. Our end of it, it’s relatively easy to do the service end. There are other things that might be more difficult to do. I would have, maybe I don’t understand it, but I would have difficulty in, in say the English Department, thinking about service activity, in something like that, but in ours, it’s relatively easy.

Smith: Well, there are certainly some disciplines, such as History or English, in which the end product is not nearly so visible, but when a student comes in and is totally intimidate by a key board, and ends up being able to utilize the advantages of that computer in one quarter’s time, you can easily prove that you have been some benefit to that student.

Town: Yeah, yeah...
Smith: But in History and English they have trouble...

Town: It’s a long term learning...How long did it take to learn some modicum of skill in the language?

Smith: That’s right.

Town: It takes a long time to do it.

Smith: Do you recall any campus emergencies, George, that may have affected your work?

Town: Oh, we had a fire, I can’t remember how long ago...

Smith: This building.

Town: Yeah, there was some, over in the Student Union Building. Wasn’t there a big...?

Smith: There was one in the Student union Building, in the basement.

Town: In the basement there...I think those were, there were a couple of times we had fire around, but only peripherally involving us.

Smith: Up on this floor of this building, there was a little theater over here, 410, and there was a fire set in on that stage one afternoon, and we found out, much later, that it was a distractor fire, that there was a man in the building who had been going around checking offices, looking to see if he could see any secretarial purses lying around, and after the fire came and was put out, and the secretaries got ready to go home, many of them had purses missing. And the fire was set. Do you have any attitude, or opinion concerning hiring policies and practices?

Town: I think that the reasonably flexible, so that one can specify within a particular Department, needs that can be written down, and I think that Affirmative Action requirements are not so difficult to meet now, and nowadays I understand they aren’t there, but in general. We had a problem trying to get applicants from the pool because there weren’t many women in computer science. Less than ten per cent of the graduates were women, and you can imagine the bigger schools were able to achieve their employment much easier, say than Central was able to do it. So we were lucky to attract Michelle Kidwell to the program. She was attracted to the small school, and that sort of thing. And so it was very nice in that regard.

Smith: Where in the past years, George, where has Central found their computer instructors?

Town: Well, now with other schools, the programs now they’re in, almost every major school in the country has a Ph.D. program in computer science, and so they’re a good source of these people who are properly trained.

Smith: What’s your opinion formed over many years concerning the quality of students that we get here as freshmen?

Town: I would say I don’t find them any worse or any better than throughout the country. One can complain about, you know, they aren’t properly prepared from high school, but it’s a difficult task, primarily in the writing skills area. I think this is probably the one that’s easiest to identify. Reading is another area of which we have difficulty assessing because we get the secondary effect, after they have read then we ask them about, to do something, or explain something, and so we see, “Didn’t you read this?”
Or something like that until you’ve got to wonder. But the writing skills are directly observable and that’s one of the more difficult things.

Smith: George, is there any possibility that in computer sciences you may attract a slightly better student than the average?

Town: I would say we have the ability to attract people who are scientifically oriented, and so that tends to be those who have pretty good GPA’s in the process.

Smith: I would assume that the better students are those who would take the second course, the third course, the fourth course, but that you might get a little of everything with the first course.

Town: Yes. I would say that once you start doing analytical processes, you have to have a mathematical background, and so those who were reasonably successful in mathematics have a very good chance of being successful in...

Smith: In these happy years at Central, were you ever the recipient of any awards or honors?

Town: I got some awards from the Association for Computing Machinery. I was active in that organization from the beginning, and so while I was at Seattle U. I was very active over in Seattle at the chapter, and I was a member of the National Council for the A.C.M. So I received several rewards from that.

Smith: What is your feeling, or your attitude, or opinion concerning faculty unions?

Town: I think, generally speaking, unions come into existence because of administrative actions, at being thought of as not being very helpful, and so the faculty seems to need a strong arm at times. And I, in a certain sense, you can think of them as reactionary in the sense that they are reacting to actions by the administration that are not very favorable, and so they try to develop a power base.

Smith: There are a great many faculty people who have told me that they thought that unions were excellent for day laborers, but they had no place in academe.

Town: Well, I think the reality is that not every administrative system is very satisfactory, and so they will get their back up and won’t do anything, and so you begin to have to have a power. The individual faculty member doesn’t have much power, and so if you’re going to work in a power-based system, then the faculty union is one which is going to have to come into existence.

Smith: Now this next question, George, requires you to put your pride in your pocket and be blunt open and honest. What specific contributions do you feel that you made to the progress of your Department or School. For example, development of new courses, revision of curriculum, revisions of majors and minors, introductions of majors and minors. Shoot!

Town: Well, I was here from the beginning of the Department, so I had a hand in, a major hand in all of it, developing from ‘72 until I left, and so I wasn’t the only one involved, but certainly I had a major hand in it, in all of the key areas that you mentioned.

Smith: Now, for fear that we won’t get Fred Stanley in front of the camera, what is Fred Stanley’s responsibility in the computer area?
Town: Well, he is technical support, and the program would not have been able to function hardly at all without Fred’s very capable and wise support and counsel, and these kinds of things. He’s made the program able to function because he provides the technical support and good advise on how we should go. I think without Fred the program would be much less than it is now.

Smith: Where does the computer area depend for the purposes of repair and maintenance of computer equipment...

Town: Well, there is a computer maintenance, part of the electronic maintenance in media. That’s where it began, and I think it’s split off from the media maintenance, but that’s where it came from originally.

Smith: Now, what major campus committees did you serve on, George?

Town: Oh, Curriculum Committee and Parking Violations Committee. Those were two that I probably spent the most time in.

Smith: Now which campus committees do you think were the most significant to progress?

Town: Well, the Under-graduate Curriculum Committee probably has the, that’s where most of our students are involved, and that’s where most of the action is concerned with the degree development, and those kinds of things, General Ed. requirements.

Smith: Did you ever serve on a building committee?

Town: Yeah...

Smith: ...Or in your case, the possible renovation of a building.

Town: Yeah, I was involved in the renovation in, where we are now. That required a...

Smith: In Hebeler?

Town: In Hebeler, yeah. It was a major renovation that was done when they decided to let go of the program for, what was the program that was there that used Hebeler? Part of the Education Department, and they decided, then, the school, the experimental school was not an appropriate part of the University, and so they disbanded the program.

Smith: Did you ever serve as an administrator, George?

Town: Department Chair.

Smith: Department Chair.

Town: Yes, that’s in the Computer Science Program.

Smith: Did you feel that you had a sufficient amount of authority as a Department Chair?

Town: Well...

Smith: Were you given authority very carefully by your Dean?
Town: I would say that we were more like a company clerk in the Army. The real signing authority was in the Dean’s office. When you hired somebody it was done through the Dean’s authority. When you had a complaint against a faculty member, it was done through the Dean. Deans have the big strong arm in dealing with...

Smith: You know, George, I believe that right up until, under three different Deans, as a Chairman I would call to talk about budgets and about an allocation of funding, and all three of the Deans said, “Milo, I can’t give you an answer until I talk to Ed.” So, there were some areas which the Deans weren’t free to make decisions, and those were the money areas.

Town: The money isn’t all of it. It’s 95%, but it isn’t all.

Smith: Now this next question has come about because there are some disciplines on campus that some faculty members feel do not belong here. Are there programs, or activities on campus that you feel are not justified on a University campus?

Town: Outside of illegal things, I think any reasonable-identified activity is worthy of study. If it has a reasonable intellectual content, then I think it can be well-established here. There are certain things that you normally would expect like math, and science, and English, and history, and those kinds of activities which are fundamental to all human learning. And then we begin to get out in areas that depends on where the emphasis is...

Smith: Well, I’m thinking of a short term Dean that we had at one time who felt that technical courses, by all rights, belong in a technical school, not on the University campus. And he was adamant about it.

Town: Yes, yes.

Smith: Have you any relatives who’ve attended Central, George?

Town: A couple of my children have attended...

Smith: Good.

Town and my eldest son graduated from here.

Smith: Good, and what’s he doing now?

Town: He is Sergeant and Deputy Sheriff down in Yakima County.

Smith: Well. Now, will you please close with a statement of your feelings about your career at Central. Was it pleasant, collegial, challenging? Would you do it again?

Town: I think, yes, to all of those questions, and I must say that I enjoyed myself here. If I hadn’t, I would have gone elsewhere, and it was worthwhile being here. Living only a block from campus is one of those things that is hard to evaluate, but I didn’t have a great deal of stress getting from my office to my home, and vice-versa. And so in that regard, I can’t imagine how much money I saved just in parking fees.

Smith: Might you have been happier living in a society where you could select your friends instead of having them forced on you?

Town: Well, it’s one of those things we’ll never know, will we?
Smith: Well, George, we thank you very much.

Town: Yeah, you bet.