

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Reuben A. Diettert**

**Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli**

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Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing Dr. Reuben Diettert on July 30, 1991. Reuben, why don't you go ahead and tell me the years you were at the University, what lead you to the University, and get some the background history.

Reuben Diettert: I came in 1937 and then retired in '72. That was 35 years here at the University. It was a time when it was somewhat difficult to get jobs, you know, in the '30s. I was just finishing up my doctorate at Iowa in the summer of 1937, and the next day after I got the degree, I got the offer from here to come and be on the staff.

One of the reasons I think I didn't have much difficulty getting this position was that I knew a number of people that were in the botany department here. I had known them when I taught in the University of Idaho from 1927 to '35. I attended meetings of Northwest Scientific Association in Spokane and a number of them from here were there too, and I think that helped a great deal to get the job here.

AP: What were some of the changes that you observed just coming from Iowa to Montana?

RD: Well, the changes were of course the type of university. The University of Iowa is quite different, I think, than the University of Montana.

AP: What were some of those differences?

RD: Well, I think it was a lot easier to become acquainted with people here than it was there. Of course, I was so busy working on my doctorate that I probably didn't have the time to become acquainted with a lot of people, except those that were in that general area.

The offer that I had here was offered to me for one year. It was to fill in for Dr. Waters who temporarily switched over to the School of Forestry. He wanted to try it out there for a year, and if he didn't like it, he wanted to come back to botany. Apparently, he liked it okay there. In the '50s Dr. Waters wanted to come back to the botany Department, so everything worked out all right because we needed an extra staff member anyhow. That's sort of the background of the way the position ran here, you know.

Of course, from 1956 to 1966 I was the chairman of the department. It was in those years that we really developed into an outstanding department. We were able to get the young men who were very well qualified in the various areas of botany, so that made it a real strong department. I can remember one time when a salesman came by and talked to me and said "They tell me you have one of the best botany departments in the Northwest. I've just known you a little while, but I go to these other schools, and they all tell me that you've developed a real strong department." The

thing that kind of bothers me now is that it has changed so much so that's it's hardly a department anymore.

AP: How has it changed?

RD: Well, they combined the zoology and they cut out a lot of the areas we had outstanding teachers in, so I don't know. Well, times change I guess, and that's one of the big changes in the last 60 years as far as my area was concerned.

AP: Who were the presidents that you were under while you were here?

RD: Well, the first one was Dr. Simmons. I really like him, but one problem that I think he learned about that too; he was a young professor in zoology and they picked him instead of some the older staff members. They didn't really like that and some of them came right out and said "We were here before he was, and we'll be here after he's gone!" So they really set out to get rid of him. I think he had a lot of abilities, if he'd had the cooperation with the faculty.

AP: So after Simmons was Melby?

RD: Yes, Melby came after Simmons and—

AP: What was he like?

RD: Well, I think he was what you might call a little "before his time". They weren't quite ready here for the ideas that he had. He served as chancellor for a while and I think that helped develop some of his ideas. So there was quite a change from then on, than what it was when I first came here.

AP: Do you remember what some of his ideas were and why he was so progressive?

RD: Not too distinctly. Sometimes I wish that I had a diary or something. See, that was about 50 years ago. I don't really remember the details.

AP: I see you have all those written down. Let's see after Melby was the acting president, Charles Leaphart.

RD: Leaphart, yes, he was school of law. He was appointed to it quite easily. I think he made a good president, but he didn't want to continue with it. I think somewhat like right now or in the recent past. Habbe would have made a tremendous difference. He just didn't want to stay where he was. I guess he figured he could do more good for the university there.

AP: Could be. And then Melby, do you recall him?

RD: (Unintelligible) He had been a chancellor, then he came back to the university and was a professor for about a year. But, the outstanding one throughout the years, I think, was McKean who came right after Melby. He was just retired from military service shortly before.

(unintelligible) But, he accepted a job with, I think it was Kansas State and he stayed there until he retired.

I think throughout all of the years I've been here, one of the big problems is not doing what we really wanted to here due to the lack of funds. It's always been a problem here. I think in all of the times we saw the easing of that situation was when McFarland was president. We got a number of buildings going and we got equipment that we needed pretty badly.

One of the big problems with McFarland was that he never had developed the knack of getting along with people. I got along with him fine; as a matter of fact, while he was president, I was asked to be the chairman of the Botany Department. So, I worked very closely with him. He also asked me to serve as the chairman of the Grounds Committee to see if we could beautify the campus a little more. So, I think I helped quite a bit in that respect. As a matter of fact, he hired an architect one summer. He was there about a week. That was McFarland. The next day after he left, McFarland called me up to his office and he said "I don't think we need anybody from the outside. You can do that." See, I got along real well with him.

AP: What were some of those things that you did?

RD: Well, the trees on the campus were too crowded, so close together, just like my trees out here. So, one of the things was that we decided to thin them out. That gave the ones that were left a chance to really develop into beautiful trees. Then, there were places that needed trees, so we had some planted there. On the whole, it is a beautiful campus.

AP: Going back to the presidents you worked under, it looks like the next one after McFarland was acting president Greg Castle. Do you recall him?

RD: Dr. Castle was in the Zoology Department and was chairman of that for some time. Botany and zoology were in the same building at that time. Another interesting thing is that there were four of us that went out fishing together and after that summer session, we'd go out together for a week. Dr. Castle is one, Dr. Hefner was the chairman of the Bacteriology Department is another one, and Charlie Hurdler, the head of Phys-Ed Department was the fourth one. The other three are gone, so I'm the only one of the four left. We had a wonderful time, the four of us together. Not only did we go fishing together for that week, but on our weekends we'd get together and go fishing. We fished every spring 15 miles from Missoula.

AP: Then Harry Newburn.

RD: Yes, I got to know Harry just to know who he was. He was at the University of Iowa when I was there working on my doctorate. So we met and we had a number of times talking about things. It helped me a lot knowing him. I can remember one time when we had the Northwest Scientific Association meeting here and I was chairman of local arrangements. Newburn and I don't know who else it was, sometime before the meeting asked "Who is taking care of the arrangements?" He didn't know and the fellow said that I was. "Oh," he says, "there's no problem then." So, you see, I got to know him pretty well.

[Robert] Johns, the next one. I think he was his own worst enemy. He just did things that really hurt me. He could have been a topnotch president, but he did some things that just didn't fit in. So he didn't last here.

AP: Like what?

RD: Well, I don't know if I should really mention some of these things but, he wasn't too good with some of his relations with people, sometimes in his office... I won't go into details of that. About the time when I was ready to retire I met with him and said "We've got to start looking for somebody to replace me as chairman." I was still chairman of the department at the time. I said I was going to be 65 in the coming year. (They never held to it strictly but when you got to 65 you weren't supposed to be a head of a department any longer.) He asked "Why do we have to look?"

"Well," I said, "I'm going to be 65, and I'm supposed to retire."

He said "Whoever did that? You're doing a good job, why don't you just keep on?"

Then, an interesting thing about Pantzer. He served as an acting president there for a while and for John List. The interesting thing is that when Pantzer was a student here, I had him in one of my classes.

AP: Is that right?

RD: Yes. We got along real, real well. Pantzer was a good president. Of course, I retired before Pantzer left. I retired in '72 and Pantzer retired in '66. I mean '74, he came in '66. I said "Gee, I don't want to retire, I'm going to be 70."

Well, he said "If you'd like to finish out this year..." I was 70 during registration week, so they let me finish the whole year. I said, "I'd really like to stay longer." Pantzer said "We'd like to have you longer too, but we can't pay you anything."

Now, they have it so if someone wants to stay longer, they can. But, actually what they're doing now is setting up a thing so that you can retire much earlier, younger than they used to. Hard to believe that was 19 years ago in June when I retired. I'll be 90 in September.

I got to know Bowers. I got acquainted with him just by having a meeting with him, just to talk things over. The same way with Bucklew, and of course, Habbe, I've known a long time. Same way with Koch. I really haven't gotten to even meet Dennison so far. So, that's an idea of various presidents that were here while I was active at the university.

AP: What were some of the activities and organizations that were going on campus while you were there? Or maybe the ones that you were involved with.

RD: One of the things that I got involved in was I had to organize a science fair, state-wide, and we had our first science fair in '56. I was the director of that for 18 years. I think they had the 35th science fair this year.

AP: Is that for the state or for the nation?

RD: It was for the state. Then, the top two exhibitors are sent to the national science fair which, later on, became an international science fair... the students from various countries, Germany, England, Japan, to name a few of them. That has been one successful operation that I started and is still going strong, and is one of the best in the nation.

AP: Great.

RD: Yes, it has been beneficial to the university I think too, because each year on the average around 400 students come to the campus as exhibitors. Some of their friends and families come too, so it's a good thing to get the university to cooperate with the schools of the state. The event gets some good exhibitors here.

Another thing that I started and is still going is—it's not very educational, but it helps get the faculty better acquainted with each other—and that's an organized bowling league in 1948. It's still going. I bowled in it until this last year. I had a stroke and wasn't able to bowl last year, but maybe I'll get back in it this coming fall. I'll try anyway. There's very few my age that get around to bowl. That's been a good thing; they let their hair down and become acquainted with each other. We had as many as twelve teams and there are four on each team, and usually there are some substitutes; so there are I think about 60 people or more who get involved with that every year. It's different ones so it's not always the same numbers. Some drop out. Those are two outstanding things that kept on after I retired.

Another thing that I did was to help organize Anaconda Company to sponsor the state fair. The regular fair that they have at the end of July. They sponsored that for 20 years. Then the Anaconda Company sort of changed a lot of things so they dropped out. The person that helped me organize that was Nel Simly who was the biology teacher at Silverwood at that time. Later on he transferred over to a high school in Spokane, and he retired here a couple years ago. So, he helped get that going too. That helped out in giving...it wasn't scholarship...but funds for students to go to higher education, and a lot of them came to the university here. So, that's another program that helped the university.

Another thing, this wasn't directly associated with the university, but I'm a charter member of the Missoula Rose Society, and I think I'm the only active member in that as a matter of fact. I was the president of it for the third time two years ago. So, we sponsored the Memorial Rose Garden.

AP: That's right by my house.

RD: Oh! I helped judge rose shows of the Northwest and Spokane and Richland, Olympia, Portland, and several other places. For a number of years I've been a lifetime credit as judge in the American Rose Society. That's the only reason I grow roses. This is the only small rose garden I've ever owned, about 100 roses there. I had a bigger bed in the backyard a number of years ago, but it didn't do as well. This has more protection I think. So, I just leave it in this area.

I also became involved in what's called the Missoula Round Table, it's a group of...it's entirely men so far but some of these [clubs welcome] both sexes eventually. This was, I'm trying to think of the year...about 40 years ago. When I joined the group. It was just a small group, I think it had only been going for a few years. There were about ten of us that would meet the first Sunday of every month somewhere, in one of the restaurants. So, here again I'm trying to think of the year when I was president of that...somewhere in the '50s. I decided that if we were going to ask somebody to speak to us, a really good speaker, and somebody that was well known, we ought to have a bigger group than the ten or twelve you know. So, the year I was president we developed up to nearly 50, and it's still going strong.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

RD: What else do you want me to talk about?

AP: Well, you had mentioned earlier that funding was one of the great challenges when you were there. What were some of the other challenges that you met either as a chairman or as a professor?

RD: Well, I think one of the things that I personally had problems with was the teaching load was much too heavy. I would have as many as 30 hours in the classroom a week. Well, now days if they have more than eight or ten, they yell that it's too much. So, actually that was one problem that we had, not having enough staff for teaching, and those that were teaching were taking all of their time. They didn't have the time for doing any research. It started to ease up quite a bit about the time that McFarland was president. I was not only the chairman of the botany department at the time, but then they decided to combine botany and microbiology. So, they asked the microbiology staff, "Now which department would you rather go with, zoology or botany?" And of course microbiology and zoology were in the same building, and botany was over by itself, and the microbiology staff voted unanimously to go with botany. So for two years I had two departments. I figured that this would not last forever, so I kept the records separate, so it was just like running two departments rather than one combined department. The administration had no objections to it. Eventually I said "I think the time has come now when they can go on their own again." [Mitsuru] Nakamura was the top man then, and I said "I think he can do a good job of handling that." And so, we switched over to that. It was really an easy switch because the records had not been combined, they had been kept separate. I'd have a staff meeting in botany one day, and then on another, a meeting in microbiology in another building. We didn't have a weekly meeting in microbiology as we did in botany, we had a meeting every week, usually just a noon meeting. Once in a while we'd call a special meeting, when certain things needed decisions right away. What's next?

AP: What were some of the goals that you had as chairman; what did you hope to accomplish?

RD: Mainly to give a good, sound program, and have good teaching and we accomplished that. Also, we developed at that time a doctorate program in botany. We were able to give these students a well-rounded education. Although it was difficult at times, when they finished their degrees, to get them jobs, in time we got positions for most of them. Just the other day, one that got his degree here retired from Oregon State where he got a job, and was an outstanding teacher and research man over there. I haven't been able to follow all of them through, I don't really know how many doctorates we gave, but times have changed. Instead of just having just straight botany and zoology and so on, although they can get degrees in that, there's a lot more or less environmental degrees, which is okay.

Here's another thing—we probably should have written these down before—we had a lot of students coming during the summer taking extra courses in botany or zoology that were high school teachers. I got a plan; I had some help from Dr. Carlton who was the Dean of Education at that time, and also Dr. Gebhardt who was jointly in botany and the School of Education. I said "I think that we can do something for these biology teachers by having a special degree for them."



So, we worked out a schedule where they could get the degree in five summers' work, by just taking courses and not having to do a thesis. What they wanted was increased knowledge in the courses that they were teaching. So, we had quite a time to get that through. As a matter of fact, zoology opposed it because they said it would be a weak, watered down degree and so on. To make a final decision on that, the [Faculty] Senate met to take that up and discuss it...I think Abbott was vice-president at that time...several of the deans were there and got into arguments and decided the viewpoints on that. They finally voted on it and decided to go ahead and recommend the degree. I had to have some pretty strong arguments against higher-ups like the dean and vice-president. After the meeting, one of my friends who was in there too, said "I voted for it because you had better arguments than the rest of them did." (laughs) That turned out to be really good because soon we were able to get a National Science Foundation program to aid these students. They all got—I forget the exact amount—but it helped them so that they could come summers and work out a degree. Of course, the degree required more credits than it would if they had a thesis. I think only a few of them chose to go by the thesis way. We had some real good students not only from the state, but across the country. This was a place that was not limited to teachers in this state, so we got them from all over the country. I think there were about 40 of them. I don't know if any of them still work on that degree, but I think in the last few years there have been a few still going here towards that degree. It really helped these science and biology teachers throughout the country. What's next here?

AP: What do you feel some of your greatest accomplishments were during your years at the university?

RD: Well, I think I look at the fact that I was able to get programs established and the activities are still going on. I still have people come at the basketball and the football games that were students of mine going back into the '30s and '40s, who come and they still remember me, and they'll tell me that I was the best teacher [they] had here. I think that was one accomplishment that I was able to give them a good, sound education in botany.

AP: Are there any students that stand out in your memory, anyone really extraordinary?

RD: I'm trying, it's hard to pick out certain ones after you've had them for 35 years. Yes, we had some outstanding students in the various fields. As far as botany is concerned, until we offered the doctorate, they went elsewhere to get their doctorate degree and they'd [other schools] write back to us: send us more! The students were tops, so we helped them accomplish that by giving them a good foundation in botany.

AP: Were there any other people on campus, whether staff people or faculty members that stood out in your mind as being extraordinary? Personalities that you remember and really made a difference?

RD: It's kind of hard to single out certain ones. I think practically every area had at least one outstanding person, but it would be a little difficult for me right now to pick out certain staff members that were outstanding. So, I think that this is a little difficult for me at this time to recollect certain areas. We did have some that were outstanding and weren't here very long; mainly because the salaries were low. We had one outstanding person in botany that had to

leave, and the research he was dealing with, things like genetics material, plants especially, and that was Dr. Otto Stein. Later, after a few years here, [he] found a much higher paying job at the Boston University. I think he's probably retired now. I think it was the same in other departments; they'd get someone here that was really tops and then they got offers to get twice as much pay, so we couldn't really blame them for leaving. Although they said they don't have any complaints against here, except that we have to look after making a living. The chance for advancing here wasn't too good. Although, as I look back to the staff that's still here, most of them stuck it out and they said they'd rather be here with a little less money than somewhere else. So this is a good place to live.

AP: What did you like best about the university?

RD: I think throughout the years it was so easy to get acquainted with people on the staff and in all departments. I can remember there was a time when I knew every faculty member, and knew their wives, and knew how many children they had, and I knew if they had a car, what kind of car they drove and so on. Some places that isn't possible. I think that still exists; it's easy to get acquainted with other people in the university.

AP: What did you like least about the university?

RD: I think the least I've said before is the struggle with pay and salaries. The fact that, at least in botany, it was difficult to get the equipment that was really needed. We had some old microscopes that I think were the first ones that were ever made.

One thing that did help us was that there were members of the staff both in botany and microbiology that were able at that time to get pretty good grants. With those grants they were able to buy equipment and good equipment, which stayed here even after their projects were through, so that helped out.

I know another time they had some money left just for getting microscopes, so each chairman that used scopes sent in a request for how many they really needed and what they'd be used for and so on. I put in a request, and I think at that time there was something like \$25,000 available for microscopes, and I got \$20,000 of that for the botany department. So we were able to replace a lot of those outdated scopes that were difficult to get.

Of course, there was also a time when we did have some money to go attend meetings in our fields and in recent years that had been pretty short I think. It used to give a little help along with expenses.

AP: Are you ready for a couple more questions?

RD: Oh, trying, you know.

AP: Ok, what were some of your favorite classes that you taught?

RD: Oh, gosh, actually I liked most of them, but perhaps the best ones were the ones with (unintelligible) majors in the advanced courses, rather than the general botany. Although there were times when I had some real good classes in that. You know, right after the war, we had a real big enrollment, I had one class I think it was 225 students in general botany. Generally the auditorium was filled from front to back. That was kind of a difficult place to lecture because it was long and narrow. My voice, I guess, carried pretty well, better than it does today. This was a real good bunch of students because they were somewhat older; a lot of them had been in the services and now they came back to get their education. I think those were probably more inclined to really get down and work than those that were fresh out of high school. Sometimes I think it would be a good idea to have some kind of work program for students for a couple years after they graduate from high school and then go to the university. I know it made it a lot easier for me to work on my doctorate, I could do better work after I had taught for eight years at the University of Idaho before I went after my doctorate. I suppose you learn a few things a little better when you've had some experience in that field.

AP: Do you recall any certain memories of, oh, maybe little stories that happened, or memories of, oh I don't know how to best word this, but just memories that stand out, that made your experience at the university more unique than any other experience that you've had.

RD: I don't know. There are several things I can think of. One of them is during the war years it was difficult to travel. You were limited on the amount of gas you could get and so on. For the summer session they'd put on a number of things to entertain the youth, and one of them was for several summers I was asked to supervise a summer picnic. We had a good turnout, and we had a lot of fun having those.

Another thing I did one summer was once a week I gave a program that had a lot of slides of vegetation and flowers and so on of the region. I gave an hour program on it once a week. We got good attendance there, and students enjoyed those and learned more about the plants.

Another thing that I enjoyed about what I accomplished I think were especially the courses in local flora, the spring flora in the spring and the summer flora in the summer. A number of students that had that course would say "You know after I had this course now I see things that I've never seen before!" They developed a sense of observation.

AP: If you were to relive your experiences or you had the chance to go back in time, what would you do differently? What memory experience would you want to relive?

RD: I really don't think I'd want to do things any different than the way I did. I enjoyed doing them that way, and I felt I got good results from them, [and] I can say students still tell me that they enjoyed the courses that I gave, and so on. So, I don't know how I could have improved them any.

AP: Was there a favorite period of time during your years there? Was there a certain decade you found most memorable for whatever reasons?

RD: Probably the first few years after the end of the war. Like I told you we had the students that were really here. Of course there was still others that came in directly from high school, but these

older ones sort of set the pace for the others. So, I think that was a good period, a few years after the war.

AP: Any other memories, insights, observations, anything else you'd like to share?

RD: Not really.

AP: Thank you.

[End of Interview]