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Oral History Number: 270-032, 033

Interviewee: George Lewis

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

Date of Interview: August 7, 1991

Project: University of Montana Centennial Oral History Project

Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing George Lewis on August 7, 1991. George, why don't you start out by just telling me the years that you were here and in what capacity?

George Lewis: First of all I'm a graduate of Missoula County High School and then the next year I started...I got a football scholarship to this U of M and I started out in 1945. Then I continued for two quarters there and then I got drafted and put in about 20 months in the airborne but I didn't go overseas. I was an uncommissioned officer in charge of the motor pool at Fort Benning, Georgia. I guess you can say that the majors were waiting for me to see what I'd like to do about their jeeps because we didn't have enough jeeps you know. (laughs) It was horrible. Then I came back here in '47 and then I went to school again and I switched my major to music; I was formerly in history and political science. I found out that I was spending all my time in the music school anyway and so I switched my major. Then, let's see, I graduated in 1950 and then stayed one year working on my master's degree. Then I taught at Helena High School for six years, vocal music, choir especially and then I went to Northern Montana College for two years teaching music education classes and all kinds of things at Northern Montana College because they had two people, my wife and me. So then I came here in '59 and I've been here ever since.

AP: And you taught mostly vocal music here?

GL: Yes, or voice related things like French diction or, let's see, how to teach lessons and so on. Of course when I first came here in 1959 I was given a fair amount of work. I taught one voice class, assisted with the opera workshop and had Music 134, concert music for non-majors, and taught 40 voice students.

AP: Wow.

GL: Then I was able to shed most of the stuff and today I only teach voice students.

AP: Great.

GL: Yes, you know it's too much to continue to do that for very long.

AP: Now do you teach the voice lessons here on campus or private?

GL: Yes. Yes, I teach part time. I retired six years ago and with counting my Army time, 35 years then. I'll go out next year with 42 years so that's a lot.

AP: So next year is the final retirement?

GL: Yes, now you're supposed to say, "You don't look that old."

AP: (laughs) Well you don't!

GL: Oh thank you very much.

AP: I never know how old the folks are that I'm interviewing so that's usually the safe thing.

GL: Well I'll be 65, you see.

AP: Is that right?

GL: Yes.

AP: That's great. You are in great shape.

GL: Of course I had a stroke, about 14 years ago I guess.

AP: That long?

GL: Yes, not that this will turn into a discussion of my stroke, but see I can't do anything with my right arm. I was paralyzed from the top of my head down to the bottom of my feet. I couldn't move this side of my body. So I've come a long way, but I'm glad I'm alive, let's face it. So I do the best I can.

AP: I think you're doing pretty darn well.

GL: Well thanks.

AP: Well since you were a student and you also taught here, I'm sure you have different perspectives about both experiences. Why don't we start talking about your student years?

GL: Okay.

AP: I'll probably be looking at these questions somewhat for guidance but if you have some thoughts right off the bat...

GL: Well of course, I originally wasn't into music education. We have three degrees at the University: a bachelor of arts which doesn't qualify you for anything; a bachelor of music, which says that I'm qualified to sing or play an instrument; and then a bachelor of music education, which qualifies you to teach. So I took the latter, then when I worked on my master's degree I

went the same way—master of music education. Then in the summer of '56 and '57 I was a student at Columbia University and I...you see back then they only had a doctorate in music education so I was kind of frustrated because I wanted to sing and so after two summers, the same thing happened at the doctoral level which happened at the master's level as far as course content was concerned, I was going around in circles. I thought, Gee, there must be a better way. So I went to France, my wife and I, of course, and studied for two summers, '59 and '64 at (?) under Nadia (?) and I got a quite a lot out of it, applied and stuff you know. I've toured Europe about eight times altogether and I've been in most of the European countries, of course including Poland and the Latvian countries and as far east as Leningrad. We traveled a lot, and I still sing with the Mendelssohn Club and the chorale. With that aspect we're going to Europe next year with the Mendelssohn Club again—southern from France and Spain.

AP: That's wonderful. What were some of the observations as a student or what campus was like?

GL: Okay, I got off track...

AP: Oh no that's fine I enjoyed it; that's all part of history.

GL: Well I enjoyed my work here very much and it's good thing that I was a young man because the last quarter was kind of ferocious. I had the lead in the *Barber of Seville*, the opera, and (?), and then I had eight courses that I was taking and I graduated in eleven quarters. At first I wasn't a music major, you see and so I had a lot of catching up to do but meanwhile of course I had a daughter and a wife, important things to do on the outside. I graduated in 1950, took a year until 1951, then went to Helena to teach. As far as my role as a student and a faculty member, I think you sort of grow into these things. I didn't feel that I was any less prepared than anyone else for either one, so there's not much to say about that or maybe I've forgotten a little bit.

AP: What was the University like as a student?

GL: Okay. Well you see, I came back in the flood of World War Two veterans and I think, here to fore, we had during the war nearly 900 students all told you see, and then the number mushroomed right after the war to 3,500 or 4,000 students and then when I came back here to teach I think, we had just about 7,000 students, and a little bit all the way since that time. Now I suppose we have 10,000 students, or there are lots.

AP: A little over.

GL: Yes. As far as the work has been, I loved my teaching because I loved having the students and that's the main thing. If you don't like students, you have no business teaching. I think generally, I'm pretty well solidly built into this institution because I've been here so long. Of course I have less to do now, of course, but I try to give a student a half an hour or an hour

lesson that means something to them. I think in music we can get away from the common ordinary happenings of the day, you know, maybe the political things happening. We can just brush that off and go back to the music. I'm glad that I'm in this discipline you see, if I were in the discipline of political science or history then I would have to take my time to interpret all of these things that are going on around the world and maybe I'm just glad not to have to do that. In other words, I can take a short song and be completely at ease with it, or Schubert, and teach my lessons and I think my students like that. I guess what I'm saying is, if you like those things going around in the Near East and Russia and so on, you better choose a discipline that makes you talk about it, but I'm interested in music and so I don't talk about those things so I don't get into any trouble at all.

AP: That you know of anyway.

GL: That I know of.

AP: Well actually one of the questions, and you answered this partially but there may be some more that you want to add, but just what was your philosophy or your vision or your attitude in your approach to teaching? You did comment a little on that but go ahead and...

GL: Okay, I think we've been around the circle about three times in our philosophy of teaching music. We survived the hippie generation and so on. We've talked about it weekly in the faculty meetings that I attended. I don't go to faculty meetings now because I'm not here on that day and maybe thank the Lord but anyway, in other words, how to put the screws in the best of the student without his knowing about it. It's big problem now, you see, because number one, you want them to like you but if I had my druthers I'd rather they respect me than like me and that's been my philosophy of teaching all the way through. In other words, maybe I've given my best as I see it and that's all you can do. As far as grading is concerned, most of the music students get good grades because they want to be there in the first place and so we have a very high grade average, per say, like Philosophy, they can give Cs and Ds and Fs but usually we don't give very many Cs and Ds and Fs in music because the minute you give one of those grades the student is no more. But anyway I've enjoyed my work and I wouldn't know what it is to do anything else. I suppose given my desires, I'd do it again. Does that answer your question?

AP: It does. What changes have you observed over the years with students and social attitudes and teaching activities?

GL: Okay, when I first came here we used to be called to chaperone every dance that the sorority put on. They quit that I guess, at least I haven't been called in 20 years. When we were young, either the fraternity or sorority was on our backs every Saturday night. So I guess that I'm saying that there was a time when the morals of students were a concern of ours. I think that time has changed; I don't think they worry about that now because the whole University experience has been different in that respect. I think maybe that's all for the good and I hope that whoever listens to this tape understands that I'm sympathetic with parents but they can't

control their morals forever. So I don't worry about that and I think it has to do with maybe my own convictions too.

AP: How so?

GL: Well, I'd rather not get into that. No, suffice it to say that as far as sex and so on, I don't worry about whether the student who walks in the door is a virgin or not, let's put it that way, because it's none of my business. Took me a while to get over that because I was brought up in a fundamentalist church and you know, I don't say they're wrong but they don't have it all right either. Does that answer your question?

AP: Yes, and actually you've answered some of the next question too about some of the rules, regulations, social standards were like when you were here and how they've changed.

GL: Yes...I didn't have any trouble living morally when I was a student and I don't have any trouble living morally now. But what I think, and the thing of it is, everybody has to make up his own mind. If you talked to me 20 years ago I'd say, "I'll make up your mind for you."

AP: Times have changed?

GL: I think so.

AP: Who were some of your favorite teachers?

GL: Of course, Lester, who I studied voice with for five years. That's going back a long ways. I've forgotten the names of my favorite teachers but you know, I was here to get out some time and the sooner the better to start working and so I never worried about whether I had a favorite teacher or not. I just did the work and turned it in. That is my favorite saying I guess. I enjoyed some of them, some of them I didn't enjoy but I learned a lot, see, so I don't know whether that answers your question or not.

AP: It's your own interpretation, there really is no right or wrong. What were some of your favorite classes?

GL: I think the performance when I was singing, in other words opera workshop, choir, we had a big old group. Because I was doing something that I considered important and yet my unfavorable classes were just as important looking back on them now as my favorite classes because I'm looking at it as a teacher, not a student. I realize what I would have missed if I didn't go through the rigmarole of some of my unfavorable classes. Don't you find that true at all? The older I get, the more I realize that the faculty has a plan and...

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

GL: ...it means little to the faculty member because he thinks that his work should be the favorite of everybody, whether it is or not. So I guess what I'm saying is that looking at it from both ends in the same school, it doesn't matter, because I've looked at it from both ways. Does that answer your question?

AP: Who were some of the people you remember best or people who made the most impact on your life?

GL: Now I do remember...Eugene Andrie, and some instrumental...Justin Gray, might not have heard of him but he was the band director back when I was a student. Walt Able (?) I think the ones who impressed me the most maybe, were the guys or the gals who asked me about what I considered important at time you see, and so often as a faculty member we fail to ask those questions but I think, well in other words, I think you have to be aware that you're doing the best job possible either as a faculty member or a student member and if you can say yes to both of those you've led a happy life.

AP: What were some of the traditions at the University that you remember?

GL: "Singing on the Steps" and of course, the Silent Sentinels.

AP: Were you in it?

GL: No, I wasn't. I don't know...I could've been, of course, but I was married right after I got out of the selective service.

AP: Did you meet Jeanne here?

GL: Sure.

AP: Oh.

GL: She was two classes ahead of me but I got out of the service and so she graduated in '48 and immediately had to be teaching at Sentinel School. Now my stroke is coming into view again. She taught many business men in Missoula today and elsewhere.

AP: Oh, is that right?

GL: Sure, the lawyers and such.

AP: How did you meet her?

GL: Met her at the practice room actually, I was getting the word that she could play accompaniments and so I asked her if she could play a couple of accompaniments for me and one thing led to another I guess. I've been married for 43 years now and I haven't been sorry for a day of it. I just don't know what I'd do without her.

AP: Any of the other traditions that you remember on campus?

GL: Oh, there was a Silent Sentinel, no Silent Sentinel was for the men and wife belonged to an organization that was for the women.

AP: The Spurs? Spurs was an earlier woman's organization. The Mortarboard?

GL: Mortarboard, yes. Mortarboard of course. Are those still active?

AP: Silent Sentinels is and Mortarboard is except it's co-ed. They're both co-ed. Then I think they still have The Spurs because they had The Spurs when I was going to school.

GL: Yes, I think if I can relate to traditions I think they are very important for the younger students especially because they're out of high school and there used to be a whole group of things, the ones that come to college, and I think it's great that we have The Spurs or you know, but actually once you get into the meat of the study that you're thinking about or trying to make it in, these things become less important. I think we should have traditions because I think that's part of the growing up aspect of college life because what's basic, you weren't the same student as a senior, you see you're learning new materials. Of course, I think, you see I was president of the freshmen class at this University in 1945 but going to the Army for so long got me out of step with the class that I was in so I think I had my fill you know, not fill but I was on the Central Board and all of those things and they took time and they still take time but you got to watch it because I was involved in everything.

AP: What did you like best about the University?

GL: Okay, are you thinking as a faculty member or a student?

AP: Well, I think maybe we should address both.

GL: Well, I worked hard as a student. I got good grades; I graduated with honors. As a faculty member there was nobody who told me how to do anything. I figured that all out for myself and I'm thankful for that because I think everybody is different and the serious faculty member says look, I didn't do so good on this course, and I've got to include this course or I don't think you teach the same way twice actually or a very small percentage of faculty members do that. Like the thirtieth year is the same as the second year, I don't believe in that because we all improve, if anything we get worse but I think we all improve and that's what I find difficult about the students that I have now, I've got to keep telling myself, "You said this to a group of

students last year, but this year you haven't said it so you have to say it." I find that that's the best thing about teaching is that you have to repeat yourself so often. So if I'm repeating myself now, please tell me about it.

AP: There were several presidents you must have worked under, there must have been several. Maybe you could tell me about what it was like to work under some of these administrations?

GL: Okay, actually it didn't matter to me what president we had because they left me alone to do my work but I came over here in '59, the acting president was the...He was the chemistry...

AP: Jesse?

GL: No. I knew him because he was a member of Missoula Kiwanis Club.

AP: Gordon Castle?

GL: Yes, right, okay. Right, and then I had Harry Newburn, and Johns and Pantzer...

AP: Then Bowers.

GL: Okay and then...What's the most recent ex?

AP: Koch.

GL: Right and then the current one [Dennison]. I remember when we had Johns as president and for all that he did wrong at this campus he did several things right. The walkway...

AP: Walkway?

GL: The brick walkway.

AP: Oh in the oval.

GL: Right. The fact that he burned the football field on a Sunday afternoon, we didn't like that at the time but it was the thing to do. Well we moved out to South Avenue and put up that one and then we got a new one, Washington-Grizzly Stadium, but if he had not done that, no telling what we would have today. He invited the Association of University Professors, well, we had him on the program once and of course I was young and brash at that time and I asked him point blank, I said "What do you want me to do as far as the presidency is concerned?"

He looked at me right straight in the eye and said "When I want to know the price of a sheet of music I'll call you." Putting it blunt, you see. I enjoyed his work here but he was blunt and of course no one is blunt in that fashion nowadays. He got several things like that but the music

school went on, that's the important thing I think of a University system, you can have lousy administrators or good administrators and the work of teaching the classes goes on and on and on providing that you pay a certain minimal rate for your faculty members. I loved the pay and I could've moved back East and so on when I was in New York and working on my doctorate and so on and I could've moved like Jim Andersoll (?) did to the University of Connecticut but he's back here now, he retired. Do you know Jim Andersoll?

AP: I don't. I've heard the name before.

GL: He was the band director after Greg.

AP: Okay.

GL: I guess a composer of merit and so on but anyway I really enjoyed it here. What else do you want?

AP: What were some of your goals as a teacher?

GL: To make a (?) voice teaching per say, everyone is not as good as they could be with my knowledge of voice teaching and teaching them so that they wouldn't get into trouble with their voices. Speaking of trouble with their voices, I haven't had a single student...Well, I have had three students in my years of teaching who had nodes on their vocal cords and they were not caused by me but I helped them get over them. I have had extremely good luck as far as illnesses. I know the doctors who are in town to treat vocal patients before but I haven't had any trouble at all in that respect. Mostly I've had trouble with those who've been away teaching for a long time and use their speaking voices wrong. They're singing their speech you see. They've got a way of lowering or raising the pitch of your speaking voice and so on and then the cords come together in a different way and then all the sudden the nodes are gone.

AP: What were your greatest accomplishments during your years at the University?

GL: I think my greatest accomplishment is being on time for the lessons that I've taught all through the years.

AP: That's a great accomplishment.

GL: Well, actually I have good students and you know these students have a certain amount of time which they can sing within the voice lessons and if you get out of time with the students then all hell breaks loose because they're late for their classes or something like that. So I make sure that I'm on time for every appointment. Another thing, I think students that I had, I teach them in such a way that they don't have bad things come from my teaching, you know. How's your piano by the way?

AP: Great for years.

GL: Yes.

AP: We won't get into that.

GL: Why not?

AP: Because this is about you.

GL: Oh.

AP: If you had the chance to go back in time what would you do differently or what memory or experience would you remove?

GL: I guess I'd blow my own horn more. Let's see, University professors these days, they've got to blow their own horn because if you don't nobody knows you're on the faculty. I'm not the kind of a guy to blow his own horn so that's the just the way I am so I've never gotten a special raise or recognition and I've never gotten less than average pay but I've gotten normal pay as far as the raises are concerned because I won't toot my own horn and sign up for special raises. If somebody else toots my horn that's fine but nobody wanted to do that; they cared about themselves.

AP: What kind of time was your favorite or most memorable and why?

GL: Well the stroke of course, because that has cut down on my conducting and all that that I used to do. Of course I've have to learn so much over again, and fast of course but you take the pronunciation of the French language of course. Well, we won't get into that but I kind of had to learn all over again how to do it. Do you know that I didn't know the alphabet in English when I had my stroke?

AP: Is that right?

GL: Oh yes, A, B, C, D, and so on. You know, that's kind of scary and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, to say nothing of my friends. Of course I don't have any anyways, I'm that way, but actually life has been good to me and I think the fact that I was allowed to teach...I guess I did alright but it wasn't up to me really, of course before my stroke happened you know. I lost a lot but I'm getting it back every year.

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

GL: Let's just leave it at that. First of all, I belong to the association of teachers of singing, the national association and the MENC, the Music Educators National Conference, and the

University professor organization. Of course, we have a union, I'm not a member of the union. Community music class, I've sung in the Mendelssohn club about 25 years and I dropped out in my stroke but I think maybe 25 years with the chorale. I directed the chorale for 17 years and I had my stroke and I have not directed since that time. Church choir, I directed for 17 years the University Congregational Church. Then my wife directed one of the Lutheran choirs and we decided overnight that we would quit the both of them so we haven't been involved in that for quite a long time.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

GL: Community work...

AP: Good continuation.

GL: I've been all kinds people within the community, well, I was and I think that's important for someone in music because granted that most music courses are not...Well, they don't know what we do in the music school but they know if it sounds good or not, you see and so I directed the chorale, symphony chorale for 17 years and the church choir for 17 years and I got a lot of programs. Of course starting out with a symphony chorale was the direct result of Andre's work with the orchestra you see, until he retired and I directed the chorale, then Joe Mussulman took over and the present director is Donald Carey and so I got my singing voice back but I'm lazy, I don't sing solos anymore.

AP: Don't you with Mendelssohn?

GL: Well, I can but I'd rather not because of the...I guess it's the nerves that I'd rather not tackle that because of my nerves. In other words I don't know. I used to tackle them every which way, but I think there comes a time when people's nerves get the better of them or something. I never thought I had a nervous problem but I guess I do, not in my history but that's that.

AP: You know one question I forgot to ask you is how did the University affect or shape the person you are today?

GL: Oh, I think definitely it shaped me, maybe I'm a little more cynical than I should be but I don't think that you can call that the University's fault. I think in a positive way, I think the constant turnover in administration has been a cause for alarm but I don't think it has influenced me to that degree, maybe some people teaching in other areas you know, like political science, the whole world is political. Political scientists should be right in the middle of that and sometimes we don't like what they say of course. I hope when I said my stand about Schubert, Schumann and so on that nobody has anything to argue about.

AP: Anything else?

GL: No.

AP: Thank you.

[End of Interview]