

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

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Interviewee: Earle Thompson

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

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Note: The audio for this interview is very difficult to hear.

Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing Earle Thompson on July 10, 1991. Hi, Earle.

Earle Thompson: Hi, how are you?

AP: Good. Why don't you go ahead and state what your position was at the University and the years you were there, and we'll go from there.

ET: Okay. I was Dean of Library Service at the University of Montana from July of 1964 until the fall of 1983. While I didn't attend the University, I felt like I became a part of it in those years. My most significant experience, and the thing that I was really employed to do, was to plan and build a library—a new library building for the University. I almost lost my job when I first suggested that the most central point in the University for a library was in the Oval. They thought that was a little bit too much.

AP: Who was it that was the president at that time?

ET: Bob Johns [Robert Johns]. Actually I served under four presidents: Bob Johns, Bob Pantzer [Robert Pantzer], [Richard] Bowers, and [Neil] Bucklew. During that time there were also six or seven academic vice presidents so there was quite a bit of change, and, not so much instability, but at least uncertainty sometimes just about what the attitude and programs and responses might be. But the planning process for the new building was very rewarding. I only (unintelligible) to put in practice some of the things that I had learned, and then tried to do through the years. But the interaction with the members of the library staff and the members of the faculty and staff at the University and the architects were very rewarding. As a matter of fact, my entire time at the University was largely made—and the success that we achieved—was due to the support of the staff. People like Adelaine Midgett, Kay Griffith (?), Erling Oelz, Lee Nelson (?), Doug Mills (?), Lucile Speer, and some who are no longer here. Several of them are no longer here—Tim Brown (?) (unintelligible)—contributed a great deal to the planning process and to the philosophy of the library. The library, as it now stands, is the result of much interaction and planning, and it was quite a rewarding thing to see it occupied. It was also frustrating to see so many of the things we had planned for that we were unable to do because of budget restraints.

AP: What were some of those things that you—

ET: We've got a shell of a building and we got some new shelving, but we didn't get very much

money for new equipment to furnish the library. That led to some of the student comments in the *Kaimin* in those years about the vast expansion of the green carpet that looked like lawns that were not filled with furniture. It needed more carrels for individual study. We planned to have closed carrels for graduate research work, or to leave their materials in the library for a time (unintelligible). We needed more effective furniture for the staff—for their functions and purposes. But those things we were not able to do. As a matter of fact, we planned to integrate Instruction Material Services [IMS]—now occupies space in the old library building [Social Sciences building]—into a space underneath the mall between the University Center and the new Library building. They would have two floors under there to house Archives and Instruction Materials Center, which would have given them both a great deal of more space (unintelligible) proximity to the rest of the collection. But (unintelligible) before because of the cost of the building. We did get the building for about 18 dollars a square foot, at the time, which was quite an achievement (unintelligible). But all of that was part of the process of getting the building. You never get all you really plan and dream and hope. But I'm proud of the building as it was when we occupied it. Then we were able to modify it within means that we had years succeeding.

My most pervasive memory, though, of the whole university experience, was that of budget restraints. Frustration with budget restraints. I'm sure you get this from almost everyone you talk with. But it did become rather frustrating to make the same requests year in and year out—a number of years—without getting any satisfaction, meeting those needs. (Unintelligible) needs and plans. That tempered the whole attitude of the faculty, students, and staff at the University, in terms of their enthusiasm and their dedication. (unintelligible) was in a sense dedication to persist in the face of so much budgetary frustration. I think there was never a sense that the administration was not sympathetic to the needs and aware of the problems that existed. I remember Bob Pantzer, one time, made a comment that the state legislature needed to take a trip around the country and see how the rest of the world lived. I think this was the attitude (unintelligible) not getting any support from the state. Not only we at the campus here, but all over the state in higher education.

But I think that sense of frustration never, as far as I was able to observe, never developed into apathy. Sometimes into anger and irritation and irritability, but never into apathy. I do have fond memories of the spirit and energy on campus, particularly in the earlier years. This (unintelligible) spirit was more traditional in terms of an academic campus with its own humanities and their own sciences—environmental issues that involved everything from English literature into botany and biology and chemistry and so on.

There was a very liberal attitude on campus in the early years. (Unintelligible) I remember that. (Unintelligible) the *Kaimin* used to write many irritating editorials and comments (unintelligible). They reflected, I think, the attitude of the students at that time. There was quite a bit of commentary about the difference between the liberal attitude on this campus and the ultra-conservative attitude on the campus in Bozeman. I'm sure that did affect the attitude toward support in the University to a large extent. Most people thought money was going down the drain if those kids (unintelligible). They don't realize it was their kids who were doing these things that

they were objecting to. But the interesting thing is, that over the years, I was able to notice sort-of a switch in positions of the two campuses. Here, the student body and the faculty and the attitude became more conservative and more environmentally concerned. And we began hearing more and more liberal attitudes in the incidents at the campus in Bozeman. So I don't know whether they were becoming more urbanized and less cowboy-oriented or rancher-oriented, and we were taking a reverse track. It was interesting to note that we were not alone in the hotbed of dissension in the University System. Some of the early professors who were here in the early years such as H.G. Merriam, Walter Brown and John Lester in the English Department, who were giants in their fields. Lud Browman was a leading researcher and leading supporter of the library. I remember the years of Joe Mussulman and the Jubileers which was sort of a high point, it seemed to me in musical development. I have experienced some musical productions and (unintelligible). It seemed maybe they were high quality productions, in spite of being in a small-town on the remote frontier.

Again, not the quality, necessarily, but the emphasis had changed. It doesn't seem to be quite as traditional, from the point-of-view of someone my age, my background, and experience. Others might think that it's progress, the direction of the type of productions, type of instruction, type of curriculum, and so on, they have in these years as opposed to the more...I don't want to say genteel, but more traditional scholarly endeavors and experiences of some of the early years. I guess we were in a transition period from the (unintelligible) type of alumnus and the college attitude of our professors maintained a certain degree of decorum with ties and more formal dress, even though their jackets may be out at the elbows and frayed at the cuffs and so on. (Unintelligible) genteel tradition.

The people who are on campus today are no less dedicated to quality of education and quality of cultural backgrounds and all that. But it just seems a different campus and only natural...It comes with the territory of growing older, I suppose, to view with alarm what comes new and what's not part of your own experience.

A lot of the frustration and pleasure of planning and operating the library made a lot more tenable by the support from Friend of the Library. People like Art Deschamps [Arthur Deschamps], Lud Browman, Virginia Johnson, (unintelligible), and David Clay. They're all very strong in their support. Not only in fundraising, but in support in the legislature and with the administration. Attitudinal support of the library, not just monetary support. So very encouraging to have that sort of participation at all, which is not always present on college campuses. We were very fortunate to have a very active and long-lived Friends of the Library during that period (unintelligible) continuing interest in activities now. That was a major support in those early years.

AP: (Unintelligible) we can come back to. But one of the things that I would be interested in hearing about is what the administrations were like which you've been...Since you worked under four different presidents, can you describe sort of the characteristics of some of those different administrations along the years?

ET: Well, it was always interesting in the Bob Johns administration. Bob had large dreams, and they're exemplified in some of the buildings on campus. Some of the married student housing buildings, for instance, and some of the high-rise dormitories. So (unintelligible) dreams. He was not always able to put them in practice in a practical way, and he had sort of a brash attitude and manner about him that irritated a great many people. But he was always about ten years ahead of his time as far as academic planning and academic awareness. But it was sort of a turbulent period. He sort of kept things stirred up. Made everything (unintelligible) a momentum developed during that period.

Bob Pantzer did an excellent job (unintelligible) those years of academic unrest. He began then to experience the frustration of limited budgets from the state. I think Bob did an excellent job in balance, not irritating the powers that be in the state further. At the same time he was going to advocate for the University and maintain an even keel on campus during periods when other campuses were experiencing riots and disturbances and sit-ins (unintelligible). We had very little of that here. I think most of it came out in the nature of an ROTC sit-in and a famous snowball panty raid. (Unintelligible).

AP: What was that all about?

ET: Well, one winter night, some student began throwing snowballs, and somebody got excited and called the cops. Got a lot of publicity. This was during a period when you were having panty raids all over the country on college campuses, so there had to be one accident, at least, here. I think there was only one, as best I can remember.

But as things went in that period of time, we had very little actual disturbance on campus. There was always tension and unrest, going to naturally catch on from other activities going on in the country in the period of the Vietnam War and the Korean War—the aftermath of all of that. So Bowers inherited the effects of all that, and I think he had a time struggling with the effort to stabilize, and at the same time, try to go forward. The cumulative effect of budget constraints on the academic process and total physical activity of the campus and so on became more and more evident during his administration and that of Bucklew. I think that's when you begin to find more and more of a defeatist attitude from many of the faculty on campus. At the same time, that determination on the part of those who had been here a good many years, to hang on and see it through and fight it out. So I think that was the trend of the campus.

I'm not sure that Bob Johns could have coped as successfully with the later element, the later attitudes, or that the later presidents would have been as successful as he in his own period. (Unintelligible)...been able to observe as children grow, each child is influenced by elements of society of their own period. So what your brothers experienced and were influenced by is somewhat different from the things that you were influenced by and experienced. So I think that same thing holds true in a society on a college campus. There were some advantages, I think, to being a small college. Yet, the way budgeting is done, you have to grow. So as you grow, you experience some pain.

I remember...This is an example of this sort of thing we experienced. We were able to sell legislative committees and the administration on the idea that the library needed to computerize, not only to take advantage of technology but to enable us to tie in with other libraries in a network and not have to expand our own collections as rapidly and as much as what we could draw on other collections and share materials that we might have that were unique to our collection that someone else might need and share their unique collections through computerization. Also, it was an idea that would enable us to eventually get more effective service for less growth in staff. Well, you sell that idea to the legislature and tell them in the long run this is going to save money, so they approved the development of the computerized system but they immediately cut your staff budget, because it's supposed to save money. But in the growth period, you need more staff, or at least no less staff, to feed the data into the computer system and make the transition. So that's the sort of thing that we began to experience. The ideas were good, but the effect in support was lacking. So that sort of thing was typical of the last ten years or more of my experiences (unintelligible). Of course, I've been out of it for eight years now, so I only get the echo of what other people are feeling and what's going on. But I think that was the trend of the nature of administration (unintelligible).

As just an aside, you may not want to insert this in your tape. Before I came up here, there was an article in *TIME* magazine about the University of Montana being graveyard for presidents (unintelligible). You notice this mound that's near the side of the Lodge [Emma Lommasson Center] with flowers to make (unintelligible). Somebody commented that that (unintelligible) tombstone graveyard of presidents.

AP: (Laughs) I think we should keep that in. That's funny.

ET: (Laughs) Of course some of our...the more recent presidents did have a little longer tenure here. Some had (unintelligible) for a period there. I thought that was an interesting comment, graveyard for presidents. (Unintelligible)

AP: (Unintelligible) still dealing with a lot of the same challenges (unintelligible).

ET: Oh, yes. I don't know what the answers are in this. Most college campuses, now in my experience, most academic libraries experience the same sorts of problems that we always faced here—growth, expansion, support, development, and so on. I've often commented that I would be mighty happy to have the resources that, say, University of California Berkeley were complaining about was inadequate for them, but I'd been happy to have had that level of support and funding. So it's all relative matter, I suppose. The point is, we were not unique in experiencing these things. In fact, what was unique to us was (unintelligible), and I think other areas of the state (unintelligible) to some degree more successful because there was more population, more money. It was hard to have a university, higher education system of six major units, with a population of 800,000 people than institutions in more populous, more wealthy states. Those people who are our peer institutions but it's hard to establish a level of peers with the same circumstances. There

are not so many states that have such low populations with a large expanse of territory. So I think we probably had to cope with the means of wanting to have the same degree of...same level of higher education system as states like Colorado and New York, Minnesota...without having their resources—population, tax support, whatever. So that's part of frustration, yet it is such a lovely part of the country to be in, so you give up some of those things. But it's like the earlier years, institutions in Colorado used to pay less because they felt that the benefits of the area were in part of the compensation for faculty being at their institution. That didn't pay the bills. You could enjoy it, but you couldn't enjoy as much because you couldn't pay the bills because your salary wasn't that high. So there's something of that I think—the attitudes (unintelligible) anticipated somewhat now because the cost of everything skyrocketed everywhere, so you had to cope with that.

All in all, I would say the overall experience at the University was one of gratification, because I was content to stay in the academic environment. It has helped me to maintain a more youthful attitude here, being involved with students and to see students develop over the years. Certainly, there have been cultural advantages at the University (unintelligible) lecture programs (unintelligible). So I supposed I would say I'm satisfied to have been diverted from my earlier plans into academia and into the library world. I did profit a great deal of from sort-of extra-curricular activities that I was able to participate in. By virtue of my position at the University. Involvement in Montana Library Association, American Library Association, most particularly, the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center, which was a cooperative interlibrary lending facility here in Northwest, which was rather unique (unintelligible).

AP: (Unintelligible)

ET: Well, it was an agreement, or a program, under which the libraries—academic libraries and public libraries, too—in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana agreed to share materials and maintain a universal catalog, so that you could communicate with the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center and they would directly request to the library that held the material. We could get our interlibrary loan material more freely and more rapidly than if you tried to call around all the various public and academic libraries in this area to determine who held this material and so on. So it was a rather ambitious project, and it was governed by a council of representatives in each of the states involved. By virtue of my position, by law I was a member of the state library commission, so I became a long-term delegate to the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center governing board. So that (unintelligible) very rewarding and also I was able to draw on the experiences and attitudes, successes, failures of other library directors of both academic and public libraries in the area. It broadened the whole horizon (unintelligible) to have a more (unintelligible) view of our planning as we developed plans for the new library building—an awareness of what was going on (unintelligible) aspects of the library and so forth. So that was a major advantage to having a position (unintelligible).

AP: You may need to go back and tell me a little more about what led you to the University of Montana in answering this question, but when you became the dean of the library, what were some of your philosophies (unintelligible)?

ET: Well, I think what brought me here was the opportunity for a job (unintelligible) LSU in Baton Rouge [Louisiana State University] and my prospects for advancement there seemed to be more slowly developing.

AP: And you were working in—

ET: I was assistant director of the library at LSU, and this opportunity came open. We had recently gone through a major building process at LSU, so I was full of the ideas of building and planning and so on. I think that was a big factor in my getting this position at the time. As I say, I was (unintelligible) building and planning to build a library. Nobody anticipated at the time that—

[Break in audio]

ET: —the whole field of librarianship and academia was undergoing changes to more openness, more idea of access to materials, whereas earlier librarians were very protective of their collections. They were kept in closed stacks behind the counter. I'd love to see it out on the shelf (unintelligible). Newer library buildings and collections were more open. People could help themselves to the materials and browse and have the advantage in determining whether or not they want this book or that book (unintelligible) wait for someone to find it and to retrieve it. They could look at two or three books at the same time. So, the open access and the philosophy to libraries is something relatively new at its time. This sort of opened up a whole field of attitude toward access and reference service and assistance to the students and faculty in terms of lending policies and so on, which were more open than they had been in previous years and previous library experience. A great example is the annual report that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote (unintelligible). He was greatly pleased with the success of the year because at the end of the year, every single book was back on the shelf. We were pleased to find the books were in use as long we could eventually get them back.

I remember a great consternation that occurred. In the old library building, there had been an early forms of the archives collections and special collections in the Montana room which was kept locked and the shades drawn to a large extent. It was available only to scholars approved by the history department or the librarian. Jaws had dropped and almost bodies dropped when we opened that up to general use. It was almost a sacrilege, but those were the trends in libraries for academic research at the time. So, in our planning process, we emphasized accessibility—ease and accessibility. Of course, that sometimes ran away from us. We wanted to make the whole thing accessible. Just at that time, there was more emphasis on the accessibility and the availability of resources to the handicapped. The new laws required that we have a certain space between the aisles of bookshelves, which reduced capacity (unintelligible) to a certain degree. We had fewer rows of shelves in than we anticipated. We had space standards that had to be controlled. So accessibility sometimes has its cost.

The basic philosophy that I brought into the position was to open the collection and make it as available as possible and, at the same time, to develop the collection in areas that had not been developed previously. Sometimes (unintelligible) faculty to make recommendations. We expect the faculty to be experts in their field and let us know what materials they needed that were basically inherent to their curriculum. Sometimes they were a little too lax in doing this, and they'd come to you the day after registration and say, "We've got this in our course. We need all these materials, and you don't have them!" so it was sort of like coping with the bookstore. They [faculty] don't let the bookstore know ahead of time what text they'll need, and at the last minute students came in and can't find them. So we had that sort of thing to deal with.

We tried to develop a corps of specialists in the library and that's one reason we had the type of library organization that we developed which was on an individual subject basis—humanities, social science, science. We tried to develop a staff that was knowledgeable and experienced in those subject areas so that they not only were more assistance to the students and faculty using the collection but also more assistance cooperating with the faculty in developing more collections. (Unintelligible) best approach to library organization (unintelligible).

Again, it's not the least expensive way to go about it. You need a variety of staff and a staff located in various portions of the (unintelligible) building to my recollection. It's not the sort of thing where you used to be able to have one person on the reference desk and two people at the circulation desk and three to check out books. It takes a great deal more staff now. I think that it was slow to accept, that transition of traditionalism to the library process.

That was all inherent in the library profession, but we were able to broaden the use of the library in terms of the hours and the size and nature of the collection. Policies were instituted in terms of use and library lending. Those were the slowest things.

Not only I brought with me to the position, but the changes were just inherent in librarianship in general all over the country. It would have come, I think, anyhow sooner or later.

AP: Now when you came to the campus, you already knew that you were going to be responsible or at least involved with the building process. Was it up to you to do the research on what kind of building? Did you kind of call the shots?

ET: Oh yes, we developed our own plan, but we had to sell that plan, in part, to the architects to get them to follow our plan and function. An old adage in architectural design is form follows function. So many buildings in the earlier years were built as monuments almost (unintelligible) function.

The old library building which was annexed is the perfect example. The original building itself was functional enough within the period it was built and which it was used. Then when they built the annex, there was apparently a lack of understanding and communication between the librarian and the library staff and the administration at the time.

What was built was in the terms of the contractor who built it. It was a warehouse. He said, "I was told to build a warehouse." It was really not functional in terms of the service of the library. So yes, we did the planning. We did the research on what was needed and what the standards were and what the current practices were (unintelligible). Attended building institutes and paid visits to other libraries. Then were fairly successful, I would say, in selling this concept or these concepts to the administration and in turn, to the state architect who had to pass the plans to the legislature. So we did that successfully, and the administration was very supportive as far as (unintelligible). It was considered a great victory. (Unintelligible sentence) So there was at least some dedication to the academic aspect of the library, but we did get good support and not only on campus, but support from campus and the legislature and the state governor (unintelligible). It took a while. It took a long time for our turn came up in the building priorities for the state.

As I said before, we got the basic elements of the library, but we were not able to carry out the more detailed aspects. (Unintelligible sentence) New furniture, new desks, new tables. I said, "Hell's bells, we use orange crates." Of course, he didn't entirely mean that, but they had to choose. They had to choose. You got a building, make do with what you've got and be pleased with what you've got what you got. [Unintelligible portion of audio]

Each new library administration had its own ideas about how things should be organized and arranged and implemented (unintelligible) administration and the staff at the time (unintelligible).

AP: What did you like best about your years here at the University?

ET: I suppose the thing I liked best was the interaction and contact with members of the faculty and administration. There were periods and instances when there was friction with the faculty or some elements of the faculty over library policies or library attitudes and so on. Depended on whose ox was being gored at the time, I suppose, but overall it was a very good relationship. I think that was the enjoyable part of that, and there's satisfaction in (unintelligible).

AP: (unintelligible)

ET: (unintelligible) budgetary frustrations. It was all a cumulative effective (unintelligible) and those converged because (unintelligible) wear more and more and more, increasing demands and the growth of the student body and the growth (unintelligible), changes in faculty and development of new academic programs and so on on the campus.

At the same time experience reductions, having to go through the process year after year of reducing the number of journals and subscriptions, for instance, where you should have been adding subscriptions and journals. (Unintelligible) enthusiasm and expectations, so I think everyone over there experienced it and still experiences, some of them. Putting up with it for various reasons (unintelligible), but seems to have been for a number of years now the basic attitude of the campus. The effort to do more with less or more with the same, and even the same

becomes less with inflation. (Unintelligible) materials, personnel. Because as salaries go up, the cost of materials goes up, the cost of physically maintaining campus goes up. Even if you maintain the same campus, the same size faculty, the same size library, the same collection, just to keep the same journals that you had last year because they are ten or forty percent more (unintelligible). So it's a losing battle, but that was the thing that I enjoyed least about it.

AP: If you were to relive it or do it all over again, would you (unintelligible)?

ET: I don't know that I would have stayed as long if I had known in advance that I'd be here so many years. I had some opportunities to leave when I was here, but I was still in the process of planning and opening the library and I wanted to see that project through. Perhaps in terms of my own career, (unintelligible) but there would have been other costs and other frustrations. (Unintelligible sentence). It's a good place to raise your kids. (Unintelligible sentence). So, I suppose one never has, not hindsight, but foresight. Foresight can't become hindsight, so I probably would have...if I had to do it again, I probably would have went out of state and not stayed in the same place so long, but again who knows. I had determination to see the project through (unintelligible).

AP: The library was actually finished in 1973?

ET: Yes, '73.

AP: Now was it during your years that the Mansfield collection also—

ET: Yes, yes. (Unintelligible sentence). That was in '81 or '82. Actually, the library was given the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library name at the time we occupied the building. Then Mike had been sending book material, but also collectible items that he got in Japan and gifts and things that he had acquired. Many of the things that are in the Mansfield collection now, he had sent along at various times when he was getting into his retirement and planning for his retirement. Then more came after he retired. So that was a sort of genesis for the Mansfield Center, or the Mansfield collection.

The Mansfield Center itself was being developed in the last year that I was there, I guess. It was after I had left that the Center actually occupied physical space. But the Mansfield collection was part of Archives and Special Collections, and I developed a pretty good (unintelligible).

AP: (unintelligible)

ET: (Unintelligible sentence). Mike has been very thoughtful to the University, and had a special relationship with Dale Johnson the archivist.

AP: Anything else that you'd like to share? Observations or insights or memories?

ET: I think we about covered it. In many ways, it was an overall rewarding experience, but in many ways an overall frustrating experience. I would be hard put to make a guess as to how that balanced out, which was more predominant, because I guess the rewarding aspects occupy one portion of one's mind and the memory of the frustration occupy another portion. It is kind of hard to equate the balance. There were ups and downs. I'm not sorry that I came to Montana. (Unintelligible sentence).

AP: (unintelligible)

ET: Yes. (Unintelligible sentence). I suppose one shouldn't get into the question of the attitudes which lead to the budget restraints and lead to legislative attitudes or attitudes (unintelligible)—what the elements contribute to conservatism in the state and so on. (Unintelligible sentence). I don't have a guess as to what made all this this way, but it's just a part of nature to be in a state of this size and resources like Montana. (Unintelligible sentence).

AP: All right. (Unintelligible sentence).

ET: No. If there would be anything I would reemphasize, is the pleasure of working with various members of faculty and administration. A minimum of conflict, minimum of harassment and disagreement. The pleasures of working with a good staff—(unintelligible) competent staff—who are able to cope with problems along with the development of the (unintelligible). The support of the Friends of the Library. It was an outstanding experience. So overall I'd have to say it was a happy balance. At the same time, I'm pleased to be out of the rat race. As one gets to a certain age, there is a portion of (unintelligible).

[End of Interview]