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Interviewee: John Stewart

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

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Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing John Stewart on July 19, 1991. Why don't you go ahead and tell me some of the background as to your affiliation with the university and the years that you were there?

John Stewart: Yes, my association with the University of Montana goes back to my father's career here and also my stepmother's. My dad, John W. Stewart, known as Jock to his associates, came here in 1922 following the death of my mother in Vermillion, South Dakota.

He coached first as the football coach. In those days, there weren't a lot of assistants to any coach in the system. He was head football coach for one year, and then he was head basketball coach and head track coach for ten years, from 1922 to 1932. He was also during the same time the athletic director so the situation was quite different in those days. They didn't have a lot of assistants coaching in any one sport. All these positions were more or less combined into one.

In those days, too, the University of Montana was part of the Northern division of the Pacific Coast Conference so they could be at University of Idaho, University of Oregon, Oregon State University, Washington State University, University of Washington as well as of course competing with the Bobcats and other smaller schools. It was really quite different from the present time.

He retired in 1932 and went back to the university and got a masters degree in Sociology and was a good friend of the then instructor, Mike Mansfield, in the social sciences area. Mike used to go fishing with us and go camping with us at various streams like Rock Creek and the Blackfoot.

My mother, after her graduation from the university...now this is my stepmother I'm talking about. When my dad came out here, he remarried in 1926 to Gertrude Hubbard. She worked in the President's office following her graduation from 1922 until early 1920s and then moved to the residence halls' offices, where she worked under Monica Burkes, who was quite a character around the university for many years. After Monica retired, Leonard Katzmeyer (?) was the director of the residence halls system. She worked under him for quite a while and also the business office. She retired, if I remember, about 19...probably in 1965 or something like that.

In my own case I moved out here at the time that my father remarried in 1926. I can remember acting as a mascot for the university basketball and track teams. I went to school in Missoula and eventually attended The University of Montana starting in 1937 and graduating in 1941. The president at the time, I think, was Dr. Simmons. The students at the time thought highly of

Dr. Simmons, but the Board of regents did not so there was a big squabble eventually in spite of the support of the university and at least I think most of the faculty at the time supported him, but he was fired.

AP: Why did the Board of Regents—

JS: My memory doesn't tell me why the problem arose, but apparently it was an administrative problem he had rather than his relationship with students or faculty. I can't remember who was the next president after he...You probably have that in your list somewhere.

AP: I do. Was it [James Allen] McCain?

JS: It might have been McCain because after I got my Ph.D. in Chemistry at the University of Illinois, I worked a year as a research chemist at Standard Oil in California. When I heard there was an opening in Chemistry here in 1946, I applied by phone. Dr. Jesse, who was head of the department then, hired me just over the phone. No further to do. Quite a change from the present systems we have to go through: committees and all the national guidelines of affirmative action and the rest of it.

I came out here in the fall of 1946. I do know that McCain was president at that time. I'm not sure...I don't think he'd been there that long. I don't know who was president between '41 and '46. In any case, McCain was one of the good presidents. He went on to the University of Kansas where he was president for quite a few years.

I taught in the Chemistry Department then from 1946 to 1978. I became head of the department for 10 years. Then I was Dean of the Graduate School for about 10 years, after which time I retired. That was 1978. I was on partial employment for one quarter a year and worked as Assistant Academic Vice President during that time.

AP: I'm sure with all of the different positions you've had throughout the years, you have some specific memories or highlights (unintelligible).

JS: When I was first a faculty member, the university was much smaller. Enrollment was maybe at 3,000 or so. Things were more on the chummy side, you might say. Everybody seemed to know everybody. Since the faculty was much smaller, we got to know people much better. Instead of having things done entirely by committees, as it is done now, there were general faculty meetings, at which issues were discussed, decisions made.

The only really important committee during the years that I was first at the university was the Budget Policy Committee, which was a very powerful committee elected by the faculty. The chairman of the Budget Policy Committee was really thought of as rather a wheel on the campus. During much of the time when the Budget Policy Committee was powerful, the position of chairman was often rotated between Lud [Ludvig] Browman, a member of the

Zoology department, and Roland Jefferson, who was chairman of the Physics department. Once in a while, Dave Mason from School of Law would get in as chairman. These people seemed to rotate the job amongst themselves for year after year.

Of course, we went through numerous presidents during this whole period of time. It's hard to even recall who they all were. I think some of them were very well liked and some were not liked at all. One thing about the faculty at the University of Montana, it seemed to me...especially when I was on the faculty in later years, there always seemed to be a faction of the faculty who, the minute the new president came in, started plotting about ways to get rid of him. They would meet over coffee in the student union building. You could see them gathering their forces to find out ways that they could plot the downfall of the new man. We used to refer to the "white hats" and "black hats".

One of the most contentious periods of time was during Dr. McFarland's reign as president. He seemed to stir up more factious elements than anybody else that had ever been here, as far as that was concerned. He was very autocratic. He would have committees, but he would override their views repeatedly. He would singlehandedly plan buildings, for example. He would tell the architects what they should have in the way of the new building.

I remember one time that...rather typical, I was on an athletic committee too. We were having to pick a new football coach. One of the members of this committee was Bob Pantzer, who was then just a member of the Business faculty. Not faculty, but staff. He had the position of comptroller. We met for as many as 48 hours a week just on this committee trying to pick this coach. Long hours at night especially. We got our candidates all chosen, our final candidates, for him to make the final decision on. We gave him our favorite ones. He thanked us. He called the committee together the next day and said, "We had a late candidate and I've picked him to be coach." We were all a little bit disturbed. In any case, that gives you an idea of how he worked.

Anyway, there were a lot of excellent faculty members through the years. I always felt that the reason that they were here, basically, was because they liked the climate, they liked (unintelligible). They liked outdoor activities. We were able to keep good staff in spite of continually having lower pay than they could get anywhere else. I think the generally sort of collegial atmosphere of the place was attractive to a lot of people. We've had a generally good student body in spite of the open enrollment. I see the record of Rhodes Scholarships this university has accumulated as evidence of that.

AP: Who were some of those significant faculty members (unintelligible)?

JS: First of all, as a chemistry student, there was a faculty of three: Dr. Bateman, Dr. Howard, and Dr. Jesse. They were all quite different. Dr. Jesse was also the vice president later in his career. He was a very firm disciplinarian. I was telling the people at the reunion last month that I can remember sitting in a class the first day under Dr. Jesse. He said, "I want you to look at the

person on your left, the person on your right. They will probably not be here at the end of this class next term." He was a toughie.

I enjoyed Dr. [John] Shellenberger in physics. He was around for many, many years. He used to have a little dog he took to class, year after year after year. Even though they put a ban on having people bring dogs on campus, he figured his dog was really a person and not a dog at all. He didn't pay any attention to the rule.

I had Mike Mansfield in one class, a survey of social science. There are some other people that I remember best from my days as a faculty member. Dr. [Warren] Severy in Botany. Dr. Peter, also in Botany. Dr. Peter still resides in Missoula. Tim Gelling in Wildlife and Forestry. Wonderful environmentalist in the true sense of the word. Dr. Linnaeus (?), who used to be in the Math department. He built the home the current president. (unintelligible). He was a writer of text books, work manuals in mathematics. That's how he got his money.

We had some very controversial characters, among them Leslie Fiedler in the English department. There were always, again, factions that approved or disapproved of individual faculty members, in the same way that there were factions about presidents.

When I first came onto the faculty in 1946 and 7, they had arranged for a place for new faculty to live out at Fort Missoula. It had some old, big-framed buildings that they had used for non-com [non-commissioned] boarders in the days when the fort was active. Each of these buildings had basically four apartments in it: 2 upstairs and 2 down. They were big apartments. They had ceilings about 10 feet high. Of course, no insulation: each one of them was heated by a coal stoker furnace in the basement. The residents, the poor faculty members who lived there, would take turns taking care of this furnace: seeing that the stoker was working and feeding the stoker with coal. Of course, the coal had spikes in it every once in a while and it would go haywire. Everybody would freeze until we got it fixed.

There were quite a number of faculty that lived out there. I would say about 20 anyway. Fiedler was one of those. In my particular apartment house, there was LeRoy Hinze, who was a drama professor for a number of years, Mel Morris, who was a forestry professor for a long time, and a Major in the Military Science department, (unintelligible). We would pool rides to the university. We had big gardens that we'd plant. (unintelligible) It was quite an interesting period in all of our lives.

AP: What were some of the other activities that you were involved with on campus?

JS: One of the interesting things was, as a student and also later as an early faculty member, was a function called Aber Day. It honored Daddy Aber, who planted a lot of trees on the original campus. The students, under the guidance of the Physical Plant personnel, would gather together in the morning to rake up leaves, weed flower beds, or various other campus beautification projects. For the morning anyway and then things would kind of fall apart. They'd

have food for us and then students would disperse with beer kegs to the hills and (unintelligible). Even as a faculty member, I can remember going out and working on those little crews in the morning. I'm not sure just when that whole thing went by the wayside. It's too bad. It was this thing that all the university could do, but it's a little harder to do as we get bigger.

I've got a few notes here—

[Extended pause]

AP: Maybe you can tell me about the changes that you've observed over the years with students, social attitudes, teaching, (unintelligible).

JS: I think that, just in general, I saw a change in the work ethic of students. They didn't seem to in general...There are exceptions, of course. They didn't seem to be as willing to work hard to further their education. A lot of the students during the time I went to school were not very well to do. They had to do various jobs around the campus during the school year and summer just to attend and so they were pretty serious students. A lot of them worked as waiters and at various dorms, sororities, and fraternities. Or they would work for the Physical Plant or for the Athletic Department. There weren't the kinds of athletic scholarships. In fact, scholarships in general across the board for students...Students, if they wanted support, they had to work for it, either at the university or downtown or in the community someplace. I think this made for, in general, a more serious type of student.

I don't think that I saw any particular changes in the faculty. The same sort of things seemed to prevail. The professors who stayed there came and stayed because they liked the smaller kind of university. They liked the climate, hunting and fishing, and the general advantages of living in Missoula.

AP: Did you notice any changes just with your philosophy, in regards to teaching or just life?

JS: I can't pinpoint anything that occurs to me like that.

AP: When you were a faculty member, did you have any particular visions or goals that you wanted to see accomplished during your years there? What were they and were they accomplished?

JS: As a chemist, I was particularly interested in seeing our graduate school grow. I worked hard to get approval, which finally came through in '60 something, for a Ph.D. program in Chemistry. We worked together with the other science departments, who had similar interests, to see that we had a nucleus of Ph.D. granting departments in the basic sciences. There was cross-fertilization, particularly in the biological sciences, mathematics, geology. It was really a tough way to go. It's hard to find the finances to do that, as far as the school official, or the state

financing where it's as hard to come by as it is here. The professors that were interested in research and graduate program have always had to get out and dig for federal grants to supplement both their own research needs as well as funding for students to work under them in a graduate program. That's just a continuing battle. I think one reason why we have been able to hold on to some of our extra professors in this department is because we have an advanced degree program, especially our Ph.D. program.

As the Dean of the Graduate School, what I was particularly interested in was interdisciplinary advanced degrees, which were rather unusual. We started a...at that point, it was called a Masters degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, where a student can devise his own program. It had to be one that was made up of a combination of several different fields, all centered on one area. This program had to be approved by a committee of faculty and then by the director of the council before any individual student could be approved to get into this program. That was kind of an exciting.

We had another (unintelligible) that was instrumental in helping to form a Master's degree in Environmental Studies, which was a unique type of degree in the country as well as here.

AP: What do you feel was your greatest accomplishment during (unintelligible)?

JS: I think I'm proudest of the work as Graduate Dean and the fact that I was able to get the Ph.D. program in Chemistry through the state (unintelligible).

AP: Are there certain memories that you have, incidents that occurred within the faculty, administration, or as a student? Highlights or (unintelligible)?

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

JS: I think we've gone over some of the biggest challenges that I personally had: trying to developing the graduate program in Chemistry and, as dean, getting the Environmental program started.

AP: Your greatest challenges are pretty much the same as your greatest accomplishments, too?

JS: One thing that made a big difference in the way that administrators, especially, have to work with the university now is the changes in the national and state law. If you hire somebody, you have to go through this huge rigmarole. You have committees examine the applications from all over the United States. A committee comes to its conclusion and that has to be passed on to the department for approval. The department passes it on to the dean for his approval. Then it goes on to the administration to check on who should be invited to campus for interviews. Enormous amounts of time are spent on these pursuits, which may or may not turn out to be worthwhile.

There have been some instances where it just doesn't work out as well as the old way, where you simply called somebody from another school on the phone and said, "Do you have one of your outstanding graduate students getting a degree that would like to go in to teaching? Or do you have someone really good or do you know of someone else that might be willing to move?" Anyway, (unintelligible) Of course, they spend money to bring in four or five candidates for any position. In terms of hiring, it has become almost a nightmare. You find that a lot of candidates aren't really that serious. They apply simply because they want a trip out West or something. Then they fade out at the last minute. They decide that they really aren't interested after all. It's hard to weed out the serious ones from those that are not.

This applies all the way up to the presidency. I don't know how many times they've ended up five final candidates, they get them out here to interview, and they say, "Oh, we're really not interested." They should have known that before it got to that stage.

AP: What did you like best about (unintelligible)?

JS: The part I liked best was teaching, particularly in the laboratory, hands-on experiences, laboratory chemistry. I enjoyed both the large lecture classes too and the smaller classes. Teaching the students was much more enjoyable to me than the later administrative job. The latter had some interesting challenges as well, but I liked to teach.

AP: What did you like least about it?

JS: The elements that I mentioned before, where people—

[Mostly unintelligible passage discussing faculty members' proclivities to form factions]

JS: No matter who was president or who was dean, they would always find ways to work to get them removed. It was just incredible.

AP: If you had the chance to go back in time, what would you do (unintelligible)?

JS: I don't think I would. I think I've had enough variety of experiences at this university. I don't think I would have wanted a different life.

AP: Had you always wanted to teach when you were growing up?

JS: No, not really. I thought when I went into chemistry that I would prefer to be a research chemist in the industry. Having tried it for one year, I found it to be rather duller than I had hoped. The research was too oriented around what the company wanted. I couldn't do what I wanted. I found that having a position as a professor, I could combine doing what I wanted to do in research, as long as I could get it funded, with teaching.

Until I got into it, I had no idea that I would like teaching until I actually tried it. It was kind of a strange experience to come from...I had done a little teaching as a graduate assistant when I was getting my Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, but I had no real experience in lecturing. Being suddenly thrust into lecturing classes of several hundred in general chemistry and so on was a pretty intimidating experience for a while. I did a lot of copying of techniques that I borrowed from other faculty members. It eventually grew from that. I certainly found that I liked it.

AP: What did you like most about it? Interacting with students?

JS: Yes. Interactions with the students. To try to find ways to make a subject, which is pretty much intimidating for a lot of students, especially if they aren't majors of the particular subject, in my case chemistry. I think that is quite intimidating for a lot of students and half were actually some other major, for example forestry or pharmacy or some other science, such as geology, biological sciences. To try to find some way to show them a relevance of what they were learning in chemistry that they could apply to their own field or to show how it is basic to understanding science in general was a real challenge. It was pretty rewarding to see some of the reactions from the students.

I suppose that it was always discouraging every year to see the reaction of the state legislature to what they felt was the needs of the university system in general. It was chronically underfunded. It doesn't seem to be on the horizon that it will ever change. They'll keep trying to whittle away at it is my own feeling, shared by many others. The Montana University System should change the way it operates by having less institutions. Instead of that, they've started funding more. You can't expect to have real quality when you go for quantity instead. We could get by very nicely as a state with three institutions of higher learning and not have to fund all of

the other smaller, more or less, city oriented colleges that are springing up here. Particularly, if we're really interested in having a quality graduate education, there's just no way this can continue to grow with the current philosophy of the state legislature. Unfortunately, in the past, the Board of Regents have not been very supportive either. Those are the two types of upper controls that the university system has had.

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

JS: I don't know. I think I'm running out. (break in tape) One incident regarding Dr. Richard Jesse. I recall that I had been teaching as Assistant Professor for three or four years. I went in to see Dr. Jesse as head of the Chemistry Department to ask him how I stood in the matter of coming up for a raise in rank to Associate Professor. He said, "You haven't really had much of a teaching load here. It seems to me you do a lot of hunting and fishing and general recreation. I don't know whether you really deserve this raise or not." In those years, I was teaching 26 to 28 contact hours a week. The average load now is maybe 10 to 12. And trying to do research on this. This more or less blew my mind. I don't think I was very nice in my remarks to Dr. Jesse. I pointed out all these things to him and I did get my raise in rank.

[End of Interview.]