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Interviewee: Richard Solberg

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

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Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing Dick Solberg on October 30, 1991. This is a continuation of an interview that was started two weeks ago. Some of this may be repeated material, but we'll just go ahead and wing it, Dick. (unintelligible)

Richard Solberg: There were so many goals and different positions, I suspect that I could fill up four tapes, but I'll try to isolate those that stand out a little more than others. As I mentioned earlier, I came on a short-term research grant and then quickly was hired on as a regular faculty member. But that research orientation that I had when I came was a major goal because I had been involved in all of my graduate and undergraduate work with research. I never had a typical teaching assistance ship in graduate school. I always had research assistance ship or research technician job. I was never in the classroom. So, that goal of research and publication was first and foremost.

Then, when I was thrust into the classroom, I continued my research; especially with the likes of Professor Meyer Chessin, who had since retired. Then the goal was to not become the best classroom teacher on campus, but rather, the goal was to become any type of classroom teacher, because I'd never been in the classroom. Which is almost a tradition in universities. There's no program of preparing university teachers in the graduate setting. Graduate students, they handle laboratories and they do this and that, but they're never really trained to be teachers. But, as soon as they get their Ph.D. degree, everyone assumes that they are good teachers, which is kind of amusing in itself. So I worked on becoming a respectable classroom teacher. I don't know how I did that, it was kind of "by guess and by gosh." Observing other professors, doing some reading, making sure that I knew my subject matter, making sure that I had prepared my lectures and laboratories as well as I could. It worked out. Again, as I mentioned earlier, I received some teaching awards.

The tradition is if you are a good teacher that means you must also be a good administrator. Then they snatch you out of the classroom and put you in an administrative position. Probably the first administrative position that I had, at least that I can remember, I was the assistant to the dean of the graduate school, who at the time was the academic vice-president, Frank Abbott. He didn't know where to put me, so he put me on the second floor of Main Hall, room 206, I can remember it well. It's now a conference room. It was undoubtedly the biggest office on campus. I think that it was even bigger than the president's office, but that was the only place that they could put me. So, I dabbled around in graduate programs, and programs reviews, and accreditation problems—things like that. My goal there was to learn how to become an academic administrator. Again, it was by "hit and miss," and "by guess and by gosh," and accident, that I was able to become administrator, because again there were very few places where you sort of learned to become a university administrator.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Well, people have always asked me that question and I always say that I've never done anything that I disliked. If I discovered something that I disliked, I immediately got away from it because I knew I would do a poor job at it. I enjoyed teaching, research, community service, administration, what-have-you. Then, I sort of slipped around campus in various positions, finally ending up as Dean of Arts and Sciences. I think the goal there was very, very simple: that was to try to provide the resources and facilities necessary for top-notch teaching and research, and find and hire top-notch people to do the teaching and the research. The difficult part of it was not having the adequate resources, as we are now facing. Secondly, doing the annual faculty evaluations, which I'm still involved with at the provost's office, where simply put, I had to make value judgments amongst a whole variety of professors. I would have to judge, in priority order, that Professor X in chemistry was more worthy of a limited number of merit salary increases than Professor Y in the English department or vice-versa. With 300 faculty members or more, 350-360 faculty members in the college, the question always was "How is it that you can place Professor Jones above Professor Smith in priority order?" or "How is it that you can say 'No' to someone who has been nominated for promotion?" It's very difficult. It's a quality kind of assessment and had to come to my own private mind to the level of quality of the individuals in a whole variety of different disciplines. That was by far the most difficult part, especially when some disgruntled faculty member would say, "How do you know so damn much about 25 different disciplines that you can come to judgments about people amongst all of those departments?" That was the most difficult part.

In Main Hall it seemed as if I sort of suddenly was placed in a position of having a complete, institution-wide view on all of those things that I thought I knew so well in the College of Arts and Sciences. Suddenly I discovered that there were things like schools of business and schools of law where faculty members were far, far different than the traditional liberal arts and science faculty. Well, as you can tell by the names of the schools, they are profession-oriented: the students and the faculty are directed toward a profession. In the college of arts and sciences, it's more of an underpinning in general education, with careers not first and foremost in the students' minds, or the faculty. That's quite a difference.

I skipped over the biological stations I directed for a better part of a decade. I think the goal there was rather narrow and simple, and is only now being attained: that's the business of creating a physical facility for year-round use, getting it on to a good solid foundation of research-grant funding, as well as state program funding. It's functioning marvelously now, certainly not because of my efforts, because I was there thirty years ago, it seems now. It's getting close to 30 years ago, and other people have picked up where I started. That goal is being reached. My goal is being reached by others.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Well, I was reflecting on that this noon when the students were on the Oval protesting the tuition surcharge [1991], and I agree with them. I think the surcharge is a terrible thing. I don't think it's a terrible thing that President Dennison has made the decisions that he has made, but I think that he, too, would agree that having to do a mid-year surcharge is a bad thing. Doing it because of inadequate funding, well, when I reflect back, I can hardly remember a time when we didn't have, to one degree or another, some sort of funding problem. Inadequate funding by the legislature, which in turn is inadequate funding by the state, which in turn has to do with taxes or no taxes, or severance taxes for the coal industry, or problems in the timber industry, or railroads, or whatever it is. We, as a small state population-wise, have never quite figured out how to adequately fund all of the institutions that we have, and we have lots and lots of institutions per capita. We have those institutions because of the geographic size of the state, where it was very, very important to have a teacher's college in Dillon, and a teacher's college in Havre, and the teacher's college in Billings, and agricultural school in Bozeman, and a liberal arts university in Missoula. Because of the distances, we needed to provide educational opportunities at a distance.

For political reasons you don't change that, run around closing institutions; rather, citizenry votes to increase institutions and services. So, not only do we now have Flathead Valley Community College, a beautiful new campus, but FVCC has a branch campus in Libby. It's sort of like fruit flies breeding inside of a jar. You get more and more and more. They start bumping into one another, and the resources dwindle proportionately. That's something that has hung around year after year after year and comes up in different forms about every four years. It still relates back to the funding base, the revenue base of the state. I'm always surprised, as is everybody, that we do as well as we do for students. Students, bless them, they're not around long enough to realize that this is a problem that has existed essentially forever. They feel that it is a problem that exists right now, and is hurting them, right now, and it is. Well, I just read in the Chronicle of Higher Education that there are 29 out of the 50 states who are having mid-year budget cuts, and we're one of them. So, it's not unique and we shouldn't feel comfortable that we have twenty-eight states that are having the same problems that we are. But, we should realize that it's a national phenomenon, as well as a Montana phenomenon. Therefore, we should be acting at the national level, as well as the Helena level.

I would say in terms of challenge is that what we were talking about? Yes, that the challenge has always been not to keep the status quo, but to make the university ever-better: build new buildings, hire better faculty, pay salaries to faculty that are at least equivalent annually to the cost-of-living index, or something respectable to inflation. Build bigger, new libraries, buy more books, increase the budget for books and periodicals because of the expanding explosion of knowledge. The challenge has always been to better next year what we are doing this year, even if it's excellent this year. Excellence is something you strive for, it's not something you attain. I think everybody does that, students do that, faculty. Of course you have the "lunatic fringe" who are always messing around and getting the knife, but I think the average person is trying to better themselves and the institution day by day by day. Otherwise, we would still look like we did in 1950.

I wouldn't put this in the headlines of the *Missoulian*, but the University of Montana is a far, far, far better university—in the broadest definition—a better university today than it was in 1950. I'm not saying that the people were any better, that you know, we didn't have brighter faculty in 1950, than we have today...I mean less bright faculty in 1950. We just have more of them, so we have more brighter faculty. I think the students for the most part are better now than they were when I was around in 1950. I think the students are "tuned to the world" as they never were in 1950. They're still not tuned well enough, and that's what I mean by trying to get better every year. But in 1950, international affairs was really not big on anybody's list. If you wanted to, you could study international things, but you never read in the *Missoulian* much about what was going on internationally. There weren't enough international students on campus, you could count them on the fingers of your left hand. That's an example, I think, where the students are simply tuned into the world, the entire world now, and they weren't then as much. Similarly with the faculty I think. The resources, I think, that are available to the students now almost automatically make them better students by accident. The cultural programs that they bump into even if they don't want to, the art galleries, the music programs, the speakers that we bring to campus, things like the Mansfield Center, and the Institute of the International Students where they have dinners, things like this. It makes them better students.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: I don't want to make it sound as if the lack of resources is sort of the (unintelligible). It underlies anybody's ability to do better things. You can always find exceptions to that rule. It is often said that, or I have been often asked "How is it that a philosophy professor"—as an example—"needs more resources in order to philosophize better?" Well, that's pretty naive. There are thousands of philosophies, there are better ways to teach philosophies, there are new areas to investigate, new thoughts to be thought, and this requires travel, it requires correspondence, it requires library resources, time outside of the classroom. All of those things require, in one form and another, dollars. This applies to all fields. Some of the humanities look as if they don't need the resources that a chemist or a biologist need. Well, it's true, a philosopher doesn't need a microscope, but there are things that the humanities professors need just as desperately as scientists: they may cost a little less, but they still need them and don't have them. That's sort of another challenge: to try provide resources to areas that don't appear to need resources as badly as other areas. Social sciences, the humanities, and the fine arts, I think, are the areas that people think don't need resources as much as the sciences. The theory is that they don't need resources as much as the scientists who run off and get research grants, things like that.

AP: I know (unintelligible)

RS: I don't remember all of those that I named, but I just a while ago mentioned Meyer Chessin. He was my first plant physiology professor, and he got me into doing research. In fact, we were working with some plant viruses when I was a senior. The day after I got my degree, I had to go back into the laboratory and greenhouse in order to finish up some assessment of damage to tobacco plants. I said something like, "Hey, I've already got my degree in hand, do I really need to

go back and finish that little bit of research?"

He said, "Well, you may have your bachelor's degree, but you don't have adequate knowledge yet about plant viruses." Essentially what he was saying was that just because you have a piece of paper in your hand, it's not an end-all. I've often used that with students and administrators and faculty and everybody else. I'm often prone to say what we ought to do to be more efficient is to give every entering freshman or transfer student a baccalaureate degree the moment they enter. Then, if they want to hang around and get an education, that's fine. If the only reason they're coming to college is to get a piece of paper, then give it to them: maybe charge them fifty cents for it, but give it to them, and let them get on their way, and let the rest of the serious students get busy.

I didn't mention Bill Craig. Was only here a very short period of time. He was the academic vice-president, worked with Bob Pantzer. Ran off to Vermont as president of a small school, and then went to California. I don't know where he is now. He was very, very—I thought—bright, maybe one of the hardest working people I have run into. He was always two and three days ahead of me on any particular work project. There were people—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RS: —exceptions. I was amazed at their commitment to Yellow Bay and western Montana like Jerry Prescott. Now there is a new housing complex named after him. He taught for twenty-one summers in succession (I believe), came out from Michigan at his own expense, (we barely paid visiting professors enough to pay the food bill in the dining room), and then when he retired in Michigan, he moved to Yellow Bay and lived in one of our little houses, and did research in the building. He was the first resident researcher up there.

Orson Miller, still comes out about every other year from the East Coast. He was a faculty member, yes: we always tried to hire well-known, nationally known faculty members who gave a sort of national aura to the program. They brought their graduate students with them.

Ben Foote from Kent State—an entomologist. You asked who I was impressed with and influenced by. The thing that impressed and influenced me is that these people were so committed to Yellow Bay, it was as if that were their home institution.

Another person I continue to be impressed by because she's still around, is Pat Douglas, in the business school. She used to be the vice-president for fiscal affairs, I think we called it. She was undoubtedly one of the hardest working administrators that I have ever known. The interesting thing was that I don't recall any time when she addressed a problem, and came up with facts, figures and solutions that she wasn't absolutely accurate and absolutely right, whereas the rest of us would bumble around with this idea and that idea. She'd cut through all of the excess rhetoric and pinpoint things so clearly and succinctly that most of us, our jaws would go slack when she would make a presentation. I think she worked herself into a little bit of bad health because of that. She discovered that and said, "Enough's enough!", and she went back to the classroom. By all reports she's one of the best teachers in the entire school.

Nate Blumberg was once dean of the School of Journalism. That's interesting. There was a time when there was four deans, and their names were: Bolle, Bolin, Blomgren, and Blumberg. They all sat on the council of deans at the same time: forestry, School of Fine Arts, Business School, and Journalism. Blumberg, Blomgren, Bolle, and Bolin, and we called them the "Four Bs." But anyway, Nate Blumberg, he's still around. I think he lives up on Flathead Lake. I was a new, pretty "wet behind the ears" dean and he and I hit it off pretty well because we accidentally had the same kind of philosophy on matters. We frequently found ourselves in the minority, especially on issues concerning students, student rights, [and] first amendment rights. We'd hold forth and yell and stomp and beat the table (all in relatively good fun), but we were serious in our stances. I still see him now and again, and whenever I see him, he still has his forefinger banging on somebody's breast bone, on one subject or another. Probably one of the most well-read and incisive characters I have met, next to Smokey Joe [Kramer] who I mentioned earlier. Administrators aren't supposed to be all that bright you know. I've just about run out of characters.

Jules Karlin, a retired history professor—he was, well, still is, a fixture on campus. He was my

tennis coach. He used to be sort of the honorary coach of the varsity tennis team. He was once the official coach, but for some reason, I don't know the exact details, he got mad at the administration, the president at the time, for I don't know what -- not fixing up the tennis courts or something. He quit, but he was out there every afternoon coaching just for the heck of it. He's still riding his bicycle back and forth across campus, still doing his research.

Well, those are a few of the people I remember.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: I've always said that the best aspect of this university is that it is far better known in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, than it is in Ekalaka, Montana. My point being that we have a better reputation out of state than in state. People in general just don't understand deep down in their guts the significance of our ranking of Rhodes or Truman Scholars or the law school's successes in the Moot Court competition—things like that. That's one aspect that I like about the university; it's been called the "Harvard of the West", or the "Harvard of the Rockies." I've been to Harvard, and I wasn't all that impressed with Harvard. As a matter of fact, the thing that I really like, and am impressed by, is the commitment of the faculty members to deal with the students on a very personal basis. It looks like we're getting too big to do that anymore.

For the most part, when faculty members come to Montana, they fall into, or are thrust into, that culture that we have developed, wherein each individual student is an individual, not just a number occupying a chair. We don't run the university like a business. We don't because we don't have any product. We don't have any objective product, I mean. We rearrange some connections between and amongst brain cells, and that's about our only product that we can show. Some improved ability to think after some years with us is about all we can talk about. But, the faculty thinks that is important, it's why they exist, and they feel the closer that they can get to individual students, the better it is for the student. If you turn that around, the students appreciate that very much. The transfer students and the international students, and parents invariably speak to university's commitment to have faculty members deal individually, as much as possible.

When I say "deal individually", that simply means pay attention to the individual, not spend every day teaching the student. I think it certainly existed in 1950. I think I told the story about Reuben Diettert, too, haven't I? My entire college, university program on a wall on a piece of butcher paper? I guess I didn't tell you that yet. This is how he advised me. He had a great, big sheet of brown butcher paper and he'd roll it out, and he had it blocked out into years—each year blocked off into quarters. Then, he would go in and he would write in the courses I ought to be taking on each quarter, in order to finish my degree in timely fashion and meet the requirements. We called them "group requirements" in those days, general education requirements.

I had to take ROTC. I had to know how to swim. I had to take six quarters of physical education, and so on. Not that that four year schedule was immutable, or not changeable, because things might change. Well, then he'd scratch it out and put in a substitute, then he'd have to move a

course from here over to there. Then, at the end of one or two years the paper was looking sort of messy, so he'd get a new one and fill it in with all of the courses I had completed, say in the first year and a half, and what it looked like for the rest of the years. This went on and on and on. You could almost envision the light quarters and the heavy quarters, and what I had to do in the way of prerequisites. I know that I spent at least four hours a quarter with him, doing nothing but making sure that everything was in order, that everything was okay, and how I was doing in other courses, and if I did badly in a prerequisite course, I was going to have a tough time in another course following because certain things in course "A", you had to know it in order to even get started in class "B". This went on and on and on. Of course, I took courses from him as well.

Anyway, that was sort of the advising attention that I got. In one form or another I think that is still done: individual files kept on every student. You could say that has nothing to do with money. But if professors are expected to do that with now 10,800 students, and if they're going to give that much time to doing a good job at advising students the way we want them to, then there are only so many hours a day...Well, for instance they can't teach as much. We could double their teaching load if we said "Don't you dare talk to students after class!" So, there's always that balance, and the balance is getting more and more difficult. We always expect all professors to do research, and community service, and answer their telephone, be in their office, prepare for lectures, do research, guide graduate students, write research grants, oversee the research assistants, be on university committees, be on committees downtown, lead the Boy Scouts, and help Girl Scouts, and be president of Kiwanis, and travel to Great Falls to give a commencement address, and all of these things that I think the public doesn't realize that faculty members do, and yet they do them.

AP: —the other side of the coin (unintelligible).

RS: Well, the resource problem is what I like least. You know you could beat that drum to death forever. I guess what I like least about the university is the constant attention that everybody has to pay, and therefore, the time wasted to things over which we have no control. We can't control what any given governor does. We can't control what any given newspaper column or columnist writes, and we shouldn't, heavens no! We can't control what the local business community or chamber of commerce or council of churches and such, do and say. So, we are a social service-type institution. We exist because society wants us to exist. Society wants us to play a leadership role. It is a fact that probably a university community has the best atmosphere, ambiance, and personnel for higher learning. In the best sense of the word, higher learning, and that is our goal: ever higher. Yet, the restrictions, various and sundry kinds of restrictions, under which we are placed, frequently prohibits that. The budget is the easiest example. That if the price of scientific journals inflates, as it does at the rate of about fourteen percent per year, if our budgets are even nicely increased at five percent per year, then our library periodicals are off by nine percent. So, the scientists, or anybody that uses journals, are restricted. That's what I mean by restrictions.

If the student body population increases percentage-wise, as it is now doing, and we do not have adequate classrooms, microscopes, facilities, or what-have-you, then we are restricted from giving adequate attention to the quality of instruction that we provide. If the fuel bills go up, we either sit

in cold rooms or we pay the bill for adequate fuel, which takes away from library books or something else, you see. So it's always that trade off and that squeeze and that restriction.

We are now restricted on student housing. Well, it's interesting because here we are sitting in Brantley Hall and Corbin Hall and North Brantley Hall which were once dormitories, but there was a need to place a restriction on the further development of buildings. At the same time, we were trying to get out of the housing business, and trying to privatize it. Well, the restriction was that private enterprise didn't pick the ball up when we threw it. Now private housing is not available, and public housing is not available in the way of dormitories, because we flooded into the public. We put you [Centennial Office] in a dormitory room. This was a dormitory room. So now we are in that kind of restricted situation. Well, the students are in the restricted situation. The governor is not going to have any taxes, which is a restriction, so therefore, we dump it on the students: they get the negative effect. There are a thousand examples. That's probably the sort of thing that I dislike most.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Oh, I think the most memorable time was during the days of the anti-war student protests. That was an interesting time because actually that's when the university presidents went directly to the legislature for their budgets. Because we were having a few more students all the time, the argument was we had more students, we need more money, and we frequently got some more. The legislature also built us some buildings, seemed like we had a new one every three or four years. The students were awakening to the rest of the world in the way of war protests. The professors woke up to that fact too, so it was a very vibrant, kind of intellectual time.

I think the negative side of that was that many of the professors of the early 1970s were students themselves during the protest days, and they came to university with that kind of laissez-faire attitude that really they were no more experts on anything than the students that they were teaching. We would, figuratively speaking, hold hands and trip down the paths of ignorance together. That had some very negative effects on the curriculum that have taken years and years and years to correct, but we're okay now. A lack of requirements, reduction in requirements for broad general education, exposure, grade inflation, professors who simply said, "I'm incapable of grading students so in order to make it fine for you, everybody in the class of 200 students will get an 'A'" —that kind of thing. That's the down-side.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Oh my goodness! I can answer that very, very easily because I've never been anything else. I don't know what it is to be something other than University of Montana. I can go back and say that I worked in lumber mills in western Washington during the summers in order to help out with the college, university expenses, back in the early '50s. I put breeding saddles on turkeys in Pullman, Washington during Christmas break in order to have enough money to buy the family Christmas presents and buy some groceries. I do have experiences like that. But in terms of how the

university shaped me, I can't separate the two. I just can't separate the two, because I am the university.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Pay attention to history. Be knowledgeable on the history of the university far enough to get a perspective on what's going on at any time. Show more respect for university professors. Find out what university administrators do to earn the fantastically high salaries that they receive. They all have swimming pools and drive Mercedes-Benz automobiles, Jaguars, and the like. We all know that. That's my advice to almost anybody I guess.

My advice to people off-campus is to get on campus. Very, very few people in the state of Montana have set foot on the campus of the University of Montana. Oh, lots of people come for football games, but even then, it's only around 15,000 and there are 800,000 people in the state. I think that until people become aware of any institution, whether it's rehab services or Forest Service, you cannot rely on what you read in the newspapers, hear on the radio, and see on TV in terms of forming sort of an impression, support or non-support, criticism, or pat on the back or anything else until you have sort of walked in our shoes a little bit. Most people don't do that. I'm prone to criticize the Forest Service. I've only been in the regional office two or three times in my life, and it's just a couple blocks away. So one needs to be careful. My point is that it is the state's institution, and the state is comprised of people. So, people ought to, if they're even within ten miles of the place, they ought to come and see what's going on. Talk to students, talk to faculty, go to the labs, take a class, meet the president, find out who the janitors are—that sort of thing.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Yes, I think that these interview sessions should be half as long.

AP: (unintelligible)

RS: Let's see, anything else. No, except I didn't cry so much in this one.

[End of Interview]