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AN INTERVIEW WITH H. GEORGE FREDERICKSON

Interviewer: Bob Brown

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas

H. GEORGE FREDERICKSON

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AN INTERVIEW WITH H. George Frederickson

Interviewer: Bob Brown

Q: This is an oral history recording for George Frederickson on October 10, 2014. This is Bob Brown interviewing. So George, do you want to tell us something about your childhood and early years and development?

A: I was born in Idaho and grew up in Idaho in a little town called Twin Falls in south central Idaho on the Snake River. My parents are Scandinavians. My father was a confectionist, a candy maker and ice cream maker. That was the business that the family had. My schooling was pretty ordinary public schooling, made a little bit interesting by the fact that Twin Falls is a farming community. So we had a thing called harvest vacations for the young children to go out and help in the fall. School was out for a couple weeks so we could help with the harvest.

I'm one of nine children, the first of nine children. My mother was a high school graduate. My father finished his junior year in high school. They are both gone now many years. As a kid I think my interests were pretty typical for that part of the country and young people. When I was young it was the late depression, the Second World War. I graduated from high school in 1952. The interests were being out of doors, swimming, hunting, athletics. I took a fairly early interest in public affairs. I really enjoyed reading newspapers and current news and enjoyed the radio, particularly listening to the news.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

A: Right across the street from our house.

Q: Convenient.

A: Yes, the Washington School. The school is gone now. I went through the Washington School. A few blocks away was the junior high school and the high school. It was all within walking distance and very convenient. Almost all of our teachers were graduates of a nearby normal school, we said in those days. It would be like Emporia State, like an early version of Emporia State. These were people who had, I think, the equivalent of two calendar years of college education in preparation to be teachers. I think now we would look back and say they weren't very well prepared. But as I look back on it, I think they were wonderfully dedicated teachers. They were local people, very much a part of the community. I don't think we had what would be described as exceptional schooling and education. But we had very good, solid, decent education and, I think, a lot of support. You were made to feel like you were part of the community and that you were worth the investment of their time.

Q: How big was your community, your town?

A: In those days, about 15,000. It served a rather large rural area. It probably served 50,000 people, a big farming community. A lot of my classmates came to school every day on the bus. It would be similar to Kansas in those days and even in these days, I suppose.

Q: Where did you go to college?

A: I might say one other thing about high school. I particularly enjoyed athletics, which I think was typical of young men of that day. Then (the tape was running but I couldn't hear anything.

Then he continued.) I was influenced by my two best male friends. I went to the Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, about 300 miles away. So it was really going away from home to do that.

Q: What did you major in?

A: I initially thought I was interested in being a dentist. After visiting the dentist one time, I changed my mind. I had an unpleasant experience with the dentist. But my interest in news and current events was such that I eventually ended up majoring in political science. Midway through my college years, I served a mission for my church. (here again the tape was running but there was no sound.) It was in South Africa. So I was a 19-year-old boy on a ship to Cape town. I spent two years in South Africa. It was right at the height of the Apartheid and the taking over of the government by the nationalist party. The nationalist party were the Afrikaners who took over control from the United Party, which was the old British party. That really heightened my interest in public affairs to see what was going on there. They I went back home and finished my degree. I did a minor in accounting, which mattered later on.

Q: So you are a Mormon.

A: Yes.

Q: So then did you immediately go to graduate school?

A: Yes, I married in my senior year, a woman from Nevada. We were interested in graduate study and wanted to go to California. So I got admitted to UCLA and we moved where we started graduate school.

Q: That would be a big change.

A: Oh, yes. To a big city and to a big, very sophisticated university. I felt very much like a hick.

Q: Did you major in political science?

A: No, my interest had narrowed a little by then. I took an interest in the management of government affairs, not the politics of government, not elections, not campaigning, not public opinion, but in the day to day operations of units of government, particularly cities and states. The field here at the University of Kansas is known as public administration. That was my special interest. So my master's degree from UCLA is an MPA degree, a Master's of Public Administration.

Q: Very good. Did you get further degrees?

A: Well, I wanted to get a doctorate. I went across town to USC. It so happened that they had a wonderfully generous scholarship available. It included tuition and a monthly stipend. So we moved across town and I did my doctorate at USC. So we were extremely fortunate.

Q: A little closer downtown.

A: Oh yes, a completely different environment.

Q: So when you got your Ph.D., did you come to KU immediately?

A: No, we were interested in adventure in those days. We had a couple kids by then. I particularly, and my wife we good about it, wanted to go to the east of the United States. We'd been in the west all of our lives. So I took a job briefly at the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland and was not happy there because of matters having to do with my department. It's not unusual. After two years I moved to Syracuse University, a place called The Maxwell Graduate School of Public Affairs at Syracuse University, which is the number one program in my field. So I was extremely fortunate, not only to go east but to end up at the best program in the East, partly by accident. We ended up at Syracuse University. My first eight years were there.

Q: Good. And then you came to KU.

A: Oh no. By then I was given some administrative responsibilities. I discovered that I enjoyed that and they discovered that I was able to do some of those things. I was asked the year I got tenure if I would be interested in an academic year leave to go to the University of North Carolina to be an assistant to the vice president for finance of the University of North Carolina system. That's a multi university, including N.C. State, etc., which I did. So we spent an academic year in Chapel Hill.

And while we were there the president of Indiana University, whom I happened to know was in my field although he was quite senior to me, asked me if I would come to an administrative position at Indiana University. So we never went back to Syracuse. We went to Indiana University for a couple of years as an associate dean, then to the University of Missouri for a couple of years as a dean in my field. By then I was very much on an administrative track. Then I became the president of a small university in eastern Washington called Eastern Washington University in Cheney and Spokane, Washington. We were there for ten and I half years.

Q: Wow.

A: Then I came to the University of Kansas. By then it was 1987 and I was 52 years old. Ten years was long enough to be a president. KU was kind enough to offer me a distinguished professorship. Did you know Edwin Stene?

Q: I did not.

A: It is in his name. He is a well-known man in my field. So we were just thrilled. I knew the University of Kansas moderately well. I knew that was a wonderful place to live and a great university. So we came and that is now 27 years ago.

Q: So you not only studied public administration but you have been administering.

A: That's right. About half my career was administration.

Q: What did you do here? As a distinguished professor you teach and you do research.

A: I taught and I took on a heavy research and publication agenda. I established a new journal in the field and wrote several books and multiple articles and did what distinguished professors do, chairing a lot of dissertations. I was engaged exclusively in graduate education. I had no

undergraduates, which was very fortunate because you can work so closely with students. So that was a joy and continues to be a joy.

Q: Yes, I noticed when I contacted you, you were usually in your office.

A: Yes, still.

Q: So you just retired last year?

A: Well, I took one of those phased deals. I took it I think the very last year they offered a five-year phase. So I took a five-year phase. That was over a year and a half ago. So we refer to it as the long good-by. But I go into the office every day anyway and putter around.

Q: It's a nice way to taper off, I think.

A: Yes.

Q: I got in on that too.

A: Did you do the five?

Q: I did five, before you, I think. I've been retired five years.

A: What department?

Q: Mathematics.

A: Good.

Q: Let's see. We're supposed to ask about any outstanding former students you've dealt with.

A: We are very pleased with the placement of our doctoral students. I don't know how good they are going to be, but we've ended up placing our doctoral students at Arizona State, American University, the State University of New York at Albany, the University of Texas, City University of New York. We've really placed well. To see them getting their tenure, their publication records, etc. has been....

Q: Do students in your area usually go on to academic careers?

A: Almost all have here. We've got a couple that are connected with Fort Leavenworth. They have military careers. But mostly in our doctoral program they have gone into academic careers. Some doctoral programs, particularly the ones at Princeton and Harvard, have tended to emphasize government work. It depends on the university. But our reputation is preparing young people for academic careers.

Q: Good. So you mentioned that you started a journal. Is that still going?

A: Yes, it was an interesting experience. While I was at Syracuse University I worked very closely with the principle editor of our primary journal, a man named Guy Waldo. I learned so much from him. I always thought to myself, "When I get finished with administration and go into academics, I would like to have a journal experience. Once I had been here at KU two or three years, I thought instead of being on the board of editors or the editor of an existing journal, I thought I saw the need for a new and different kind of journal in our field.

I talked to a lot of friends and had conference calls and meetings at conferences, etc., and decided to establish a brand new journal with what we thought was a fresh perspective. Which we did. The original issues were printed at Allen Press right here in town. It was very much a cottage industry. My wife edited the articles, etc. It is now published by the Oxford University Press and is ranked the best journal in the field. It is even better than the one that Professor Waldo edited, the man I admired so much. So that's been a great joy for us to see that journal be so successful.

These days you know they have all of these rankings, Social Science Citation Index and all these ways to measure things. You mathematicians, you quantifiers, have influenced all that. And so now when they say you are top ranked, this is usually some matrix of some kind or another, which is pleasing.

Q: Funny, everybody but mathematicians usually quantify things.

A: Yes.

Q: We try to go by the seat of our pants.

A: You are modeling.

Q: Yes. What was the philosophy of this journal?

A: Well, the field is an applied field by definition. It's the social sciences and applications, which applied economics, applied soc, in terms of theories of leadership and group behavior and politics. Our principle journals at that time were sort of half and half. They were half applied and half theoretical. And the more I thought about it I thought, they don't do... We were always critical of the applied side. We didn't do the applied side very well. And I got thinking in my field the field is an applied field. Our journals tend to be half application and half theory. There's a lot of criticism because it wasn't applied enough.

The people who are city managers and state executives and federal executives read the journals and they don't help them much in their application. We took that very seriously. I got thinking maybe the problem is just the opposite. Maybe the problem is the weakness of our scholarship and our theory. We need to stop trying to do the work of the practitioners for them. Let's do our work as academics and scholars. If we do that work well, they can read it and take what they find useful in it, without our trying to guess what they might find useful. Sort of a reconceptualization of what a journal ought to do.

It ended up being an argument that this is an unapologetically theoretical and empirical journal. So it is going to be based on field research, on hard data, case studies. Every article has to have a hypothesis and some theoretical premise, some findings and some conclusions. We weren't sure how that would be received. It had a very mixed reception to start with. But it didn't take long before people sort of gravitated to the idea. The early issues were very carefully selected. We solicited some of the best people and tried to get it off to as good a start as we could. Now there are two or three other journals that have come on that have copied this model, which is what often happens, I suppose. So it was a new and different argument which was successful. And I think it is uniquely connected to KU. The editorship was here. So it has been good for KU.

- Q: Sure, very good. Okay, you mentioned early on that you were married and your wife went along with you moving to the east. Do you have children?
- A: Yes, and by the way, she is in her 16th or 17th year of being a regular reader for this program, Audio Reader.
- Q: You didn't need any of those directions.
- A: No, I did. This is only the second time I have been in the building. I drive her here and she goes in. We have four children. Our eldest lives in Omaha and they have four children. He's a physician. His oldest son Joseph was a student in the MPA program here. He got an MPA degree. Then he went to work for the state of Kansas. Relatively recently he decided he wanted to be a physician like his dad. So he's finishing up his premed and will be applying to med school. He's going to go into medicine. Our second son, who also has four children, they live in Bloomington, Indiana. He runs a computer business, which is not surprising these days. Our daughter Lynn lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan and works for the University of Michigan. They have three children. Our youngest son, David, and his wife live in northern Virginia. He's an executive with the U.S. Department of Labor. So he's a bureaucrat. He's the only administrator that I have produced.
- Q: Does he call you for advice?
- A: He has a Ph.D. He has a Ph.D. in public administration. But instead of going into teaching, he went into practice. He did his Ph.D. at Indiana University.
- Q: Very good. Now that you are retired, you haven't been retired very long, is it mainly work?
- A: Well, we go on a cruise occasionally. We go to reunions. We try to travel about a bit. Such work as I do is less intense and more like a hobby than work. Or like they used to say in the Soviet Union, "I pretend to work and they pretend to pay me." Part of it is routine and habit. We have a very gentle and easy life and at this stage, that seems about right to us. But I'm awfully grateful to the university to provide me a place to work.
- Q: Are you still active in your church?
- A: Yes. Such as it is with elderly people. Mostly it's just going to services. I will occasionally teach a class. We are a lay church. But we are still active, as are our children.
- Q: Good. No let's see. Is there anything else we need to talk about here? You were not here in the sixties and seventies, were you?
- A: No. The unrest and turbulence I am not familiar with.
- Q: You were in Washington then?
- A: Yes, or in that period when I was bouncing around from place to place. I have taken an interest in certain controversies. I've done some research and writing on the KU athletic ticket scandal. I've got about half of a manuscript done on that. I wonder if I will ever finish it. It makes the people in Strong Hall very angry. They would like it to go away. If I were there, I would feel the same way they feel. But it's been fun to do research on. It keeps me interested.
- Q: The places you were in the sixties, did you observe any student unrest?

A: Oh yes. At Syracuse University, the university was closed down. Later when I was at the University of North Carolina that was in the latter phases of the protests against the war, etc. I was able to watch it close because I was right in the administration. I got to see a lot of that. It was fortunate because virtually every university president lost his or her job during that period. They just couldn't keep jobs. My presidency came just after that. I was so fortunate because even excellent presidents, like at KU, they burned down the union.

Q: Part of it.

A: That doesn't reflect very well on anybody. It was just sheer luck, the timing of my presidency. We had a few little problems and I thought we handled them pretty well. But nothing like the big problems of the late sixties, early seventies.

Q: It was very hard. Let's see, what have you noticed about the university, the changes since you've been here?

A: Well, I came mid Budig and through the Hemmenway period. Now the Gray-Little period. I was a little surprised and continue to be a little surprised at what seems to me to be a moderate level of smugness, particularly of certain faculty. Certain of my colleagues don't seem to be sufficiently reflective, appreciative. It is very easy to be critical of this dean or that provost or whatever and to assume that your own department or program is wonderful and the university is crazy because they are not giving you twice as much money. Those conversations always sort of surprise me.

I think that the university has generally been well led. I've said this—I'm not sure that I'm right but I say it anyway—that is I think the University of Kansas squeezes as much education out of a dollar as any research university I'm familiar with. We don't have a lot of money. If you want a special project to do something, well, we'll get a little money here and we'll find a little over there and see if we can make it work. That seems to be the typical Kansas way. But I think they do squeeze an awful lot of education out of what we have.

But there is this kind of smugness. I can understand why someone living in Garden City might think of the Jayhawks as a little spoiled, etc. I am impressed at how passionate the people of the state are about athletics at the university, how important that is, and how that has influenced things, sometimes disproportionate to its importance. The problems we have with football, never ending problems, and the joy we have with basketball, etc. That's been interesting to watch.

I share with virtually all my faculty colleagues some concern with what our future is going to be. The state continues to pull back, the increasing kind of privatization of the university and the growing importance of grants and private giving, philanthropy. You kind of worry where that's going. I think we're generally well led. I am really impressed with the administration of the Endowment. Those people are really good administrators. They're lucky they are sort of walled off from the rest of the university and don't have the kind of turbulence we have. They don't have to worry about rape over the weekend and all that stuff. But the Endowment is really well done. The regular university I would say is generally well led. I think this idea of the bold aspirations, are you familiar with that?

Q: Vaguely.

- A: If I wanted to, I could be openly critical of that. I'm not sure it's well thought through. But it is what it is. Our administrators are determined to make it work and I think we need to support it. But I was kind of hoping the new administration, new, I mean Gray Little and Vitter would come up with a strategic plan that wasn't just like every other university in the country. Bold Aspirations could be K State or Iowa State or Iowa. I was hoping they would come up with something uniquely Kansan, something that was different. It seems like we've got the brain power in the faculty to convene a couple dozen of our smartest people and come up with something like that. But the idea, let's hire a few more big name professors, pay them well, and hope that will push us up the rankings. That's seems to me to be trite because all the other universities are doing the same thing.
- Q: Yes, sure. Competition that way. I noticed in my years that when you have a problem, one of the first things people say is, "Let's see what other universities are doing." Which can help.
- A: There is one university, Arizona State, which has a distinctly different model. They have said, "We are not going to worry about U.S. News and World Report rankings. We're going to ignore that. We are going to serve the state of Arizona. Here's how we are going to do that." They are still very selective. They are growing like crazy. They are doing very, very well. But it's a different model. I was kind of hoping that Kansas would come up with a different model. But we are where we are. And I think we are fortunate to be here. It's a beautiful campus. The state has invested wisely in it. We do the best we can.
- Q: Have you noticed any big difference in students over your time here?
- A: Yes. My attitude toward students is not very useful because I worked almost exclusively with graduate students. So it's kind of hard for me to know. I hear my political science friends, some of them talk about how the students aren't any better or they are worse. But I don't hear as much of that as I used to. But I really don't know. Our doctoral students are every year better. Our master's students—our program is ranked number one in the country at the master's level—so we are very selective and we have a real Cadillac program. It runs beautifully. If I've noticed anything, it is that we are improving at the graduate level in my particular program.
- Q: Do you have many foreign students?
- A: We do, both at the master's and at the doctoral level. I was just in Thailand, invited by one of our former students to come to Thailand and give a paper. Koreans and Columbians from South America. Yes, I think it is typical of KU graduate programs. There are always a sprinkling. I don't know whether you have it in math. But my guess is that you do, Indians, Asians.
- Q: A lot of Chinese now. It's changed over the years.
- A: I know in statistics there are very frequently a lot of Asians. We have, I would say, a quarter of our finishing doctorates, are persons from other countries.
- Q: Do your graduate students do any teaching?
- A: They do. We work with Political Science in that. So we have TAs, not many.
- Q: Okay. Anything else you'd like to talk about?

A: No. The only other thing that I think is important is context. It is interesting to me what an accommodating, pleasant, generous place Lawrence is. It's just a sweet place to live. And how challenging the state of Kansas can be. We have the challenges of our state and its unique politics and our city and its unique environment. It's been interesting. One of my colleagues for these many years is Ray Davis, who is the father of Paul, who is running for governor. So that has been most interesting to watch.

Q: No doubt. My second son is a contemporary of Paul Davis. He didn't know him well.

A: He's a fine young man. He may be governor.

Q: That would be nice. I shouldn't say that. Okay, so I guess we can stop.