

THOMAS A. SPRAGENS INTERVIEW
Oral History of Centre College
Questions by John LeDoux and Bob Glass

Today is November 4, 1982. I'm John LeDoux, Centre College Archivist. With me is Bob Glass from the library. Today we are interviewing Thomas Arthur Spragens, President Emeritus of Centre College. Mr. Spragens was president of Centre from 1957 to 1981. The interview is being conducted in Mr. Spragens' office above the Farmers National Bank.

Mr. Spragens, I wonder if we could start out by asking you a little bit about your personal background. Could you tell us a little bit about your folks first?

I'm a native of Kentucky and was born in Lebanon in Marion County, thirty miles west of here. I'm one of seven children, the third of five brothers who were followed by two sisters. My father was William Henry Spragens, a lawyer and then long-time circuit judge in the Eleventh Judicial District of which Marion County is part. My mother, Lillian Brewer, was a native of Lancaster, Kentucky; my father a native of Casey County, Kentucky, where my grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather were all engaged in farming. Of my brothers, Henry, the eldest, was a college professor throughout his career, a mathematician, who served the longest single part of his career at the University of Louisville, where he was chairman of the mathematics department. Incidentally, the five of us all hold bachelor's degrees from the University of Kentucky. Henry received a master's degree at Illinois and took his doctorate at the University of Cincinnati. My brother next in order of age was John Brewer Spragens, who went from an undergraduate major in physics at Kentucky, where he earned Phi Beta Kappa Honors, into the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. He was throughout his life active in various church vocations as a pastor, as a seminary professor, and as an administrator of a central church agency. My brother, George, who was the fourth, is an engineer, served variously in corporate research, in the air conditioning business, as a consulting engineer, and for the past ten years with the University of Kentucky as the supervising engineer for their construction program. Robert, my youngest brother, is following in the footsteps of our father as a lawyer and now circuit judge in the Eleventh Judicial District.

My sister, Dorothy, married a Kentuckian, James Trice. She is a graduate of Agnes Scott with a master's degree from the University of Kentucky, and has lived with her family for many years now in the Philadelphia area. She is now chairman of the mathematics department at the Shipley School. The younger of the two sisters, Betty Spragens Griffin, is a graduate of the University of Kentucky Law School, and is now professionally engaged in the position of Friend of the Court to the Circuit Court of Fayette County, Kentucky. That is a position in which she serves in effect as a commissioner in the area of domestic relations.

Could you tell us something of your childhood and of your education, please?

My childhood was spent in the delightful small town of Lebanon, which at that time had about 3500 persons, I think. It's grown to about 6000 now. We had the good fortune of having good schools in Lebanon. Our superintendent of schools throughout my years in public schools was, as I recall it, a graduate of VMI. He was versed in the classical tradition of education. He was himself a mathematician, a fine teacher, and a fine educational statesman. We enjoyed in the Lebanon High School, which had at that time about 160 students, a very fine education offering

us four years of Latin, a thing that's hard to find now in public schools, and French. We had excellent training in mathematics and the sciences as well as in the literary disciplines there. We were, all of us in my family and other young people in the community, stimulated by good teachers. The school in one year (I think it was the year before I entered) had three students ranked highest in their particular discipline in the state-wide examinations they used to administer competitively to high school students throughout the state. That was at the time when they perhaps were conducting examinations in twelve to fifteen subjects altogether. Some of them represented different subject levels of one discipline; for example, the English composition and a more advanced English literature. But the school gave us a fine preparation for collegiate work. I went on from there, following others in my family, to the University of Kentucky.

I think you'd be interested in my college choice. I had the experience of being solicited for consideration of entry to Centre by the chief admissions officer of the College who at that time was the president, Dr. Charles Turck, who served as president of Centre from 1926 through 1935. Dr. Turck came into the Lebanon High School to speak at an assembly one morning during my senior year in 1934 and later to talk to a few of us in my class who were college bound. As he himself recalled later to me, to my surprise, I was one of four members of that senior class who comprised a male quartet that had some local regional recognition. He talked with the four of us about entering Centre, all of us being college bound, and held out to us the prospect that we might indeed as a foursome succeed what was then widely known in the area as the Centre College Quartet, all of whose members at that time were seniors. It was an attractive thought, but I elected to go to the University of Kentucky, and the other three came to Centre.

I had career ambitions which I thought would be served by combined collegiate study in business and then in law; and Centre had no particular business administration curriculum, though offering a major in economics, of course. The University of Kentucky had a separate college of commerce, and I (misguided as I came later to know) entered that University of Kentucky College of Commerce. After a year and a half in that program, I realized I'd made a grievous error. I went to the registrar's office and to the appropriate deans' offices and arranged to transfer into the College of Arts and Sciences, where I majored in economics, which I might have done and would have done had I elected to come to Centre in the first place. The interesting thing about that undergraduate experience is that it led me to a keener appreciation of the significant values of a broader, more scholarly undergraduate training than that that's offered by many of the professional undergraduate colleges in the larger institutions. That very experience and what I went through in correcting my errors led me, once I got into education administration, to be particularly interested in undergraduate education and particularly in fostering the traditional liberal arts learning at that level.

As I approached the finish of my undergraduate work, I debated between going on into law as I'd earlier planned or going into public administration. My adolescent idea of going into the general world of commerce and business had been diminished by virtue of a growing interest in public affairs over the period of my collegiate years. I resolved that by deciding to go into the area of public administration. I spent a postgraduate year employed in the Kentucky state government in Frankfort beginning in June of 1938. The following year I accepted a fellowship to study in the graduate school of public affairs at Syracuse University, at that time considered to be probably the leading school for training toward a career in

public administration. I went to Washington during the summer intervening between the two years of that master's degree program at Syracuse, and became deeply engaged in work with the Bureau of the Budget at a time when the government was undertaking to build up its personnel. I was asked to remain on, though I had gone there on a temporary appointment, and after consulting with the dean at Syracuse I decided to forego the rest of my graduate program there. I was placed in a position which both he and I valued as being a highly educational setting as well as one professionally satisfying. And that concluded my formal education. (I still maintain a very close relationship with the members of my Syracuse graduate school class. They have come to the Centre campus three times during our years here for reunions of the group.)

Thus it was that I became well launched into the field of public administration. I served primarily in the federal government for five years following, from 1940 to 1945.

A wholly fortuitous chain of circumstances I won't even try to trace led to my being asked by Stanford University to take on an assignment with the University serving in effect as their Washington representative. This was at the conclusion of World War II, and the universities and colleges were facing major challenges as they looked at their postwar role. After some thought I made that move, but with the understanding that I would serve them for a year or at most two years. If after one year in our mutual review of it, we decided that it would be desirable that I continue in that place for another year I was prepared to do so; but I intended to return to government service after that time. I never did do so. I became more deeply involved in the affairs of the University and became assistant to the president. That led me then fully into my career in the world of university and college administration.

While we are on it, maybe we could just pick up with your career history up until the time you had the offer to become president of Centre. Then I'd like to cover a few other things and then get to your Centre years.

I remained at Stanford from 1945 to 1951, initially as a special assistant to the president and based in Washington. But after nine months there, as the summer of 1946 approached, I was asked to bring my family to the campus in Palo Alto, California to assist with some of the internal management development problems that went along with the expected growth then of the University in 1946 from an enrollment of 4500 in June to 7200 in September. That was the outgrowth of the massive return of men in the service either to pick up an interrupted education or to take up collegiate learning for the first time. By summer's end I was in a new continuing assignment as assistant to the president. I served in five years under two presidents and two interim presidents. The untimely death of President Tresidder under whom I went to Stanford had me for a year aiding two men who served consecutively as acting president while the search for a permanent successor was in process. I then served for three years with President Wallace Sterling, who came in as the permanent successor to Dr. Tresidder. Sterling, incidentally, served at Stanford for more than twenty years and came to be known as one of the outstanding university presidents of our time. (He later spoke at my formal induction to the Centre presidency.) I remained in that role until I was invited early in 1951 to join the newly formed Fund for the Advancement of Education, which was a foundation subsidiary to the Ford Foundation and wholly financed by it. It was charged with carrying on the interests of the Foundation in the area of higher education, or institutional post high school education.

I was invited to take on the position of secretary and treasurer to that Foundation as it was being formed. I was one of the initial group of four professional persons who were involved in the development of that Fund which made major contributions in its own name to the improvement of higher education during the '50s and on into the '60s, before it was merged back into the structure of the parent Ford Foundation. I was in that position for less than two years when I was asked to consider the presidency of Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri. I did accept that invitation and went into that position in November of 1952. At that time I was, incidentally, 35 years of age. I served in the presidency of Stephens for five years until I (after some consideration) decided to accept the invitation to come to Centre as its president.

We came in November of 1957. As you have earlier noted, we remained in that responsibility--I say "we"; I think of my wife and myself and to some extent to the family, because it's an all-engrossing role--we stayed in that role for twenty-four years with a great deal of satisfaction until my retirement from the presidency in November, twenty-four years later, in 1981.

Could you tell us a little bit about your wife and her background and something about your children?

My wife was Catharine Smallwood, and for the record let's spell her name, it's most often misspelled; it's "C-a-t-h-a-r-i-n-e", who is a native of Mississippi. She was born and educated in Mississippi, a graduate of the University of Mississippi, and her home for most of her childhood and adolescent years was in Oxford, Mississippi, which is the seat of the University of Mississippi. Her father was a banker in that community. She and I met in Washington where we were both employed after our college years and were married in 1941. We have three children. The first bears my name, Tom, Jr., and is now a professor of political science at Duke University. He has been at Duke since he completed his doctorate there; the exact year I don't recall. But I'm pleased to say he's well established and well recognized as a specialist in political theory; and though he has stayed very close to the academic community in the ablest sense as a political theorist, one tends to write for other political scientists more than for the general public, but he has four published books. He is married and has two children.

Our second child, a daughter, Barbara, is married to Lynn Kelley, who is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University and holds his master's degree from the University of Wisconsin and a doctorate in political science with a special interest in international affairs, specializing in Latin American affairs, comparative government. Barbara herself took her bachelor's degree in English from Emory University and her master's degree from the University of Wisconsin where she and Lynn met. They subsequently lived in New Mexico while he completed his doctorate, then moved to Missouri where he was assistant professor and then associate professor of political science at Webster College in Webster Groves in the St. Louis metropolitan area. About three years ago they came to Kentucky when he accepted the deanship of Midway College in Midway, Kentucky, which is a two-year women's college. They have two children. Barbara herself has gained substantial competence in counseling. She took a master's degree from Wisconsin in rehabilitation counseling. She has worked with children who have become wards of the court, and has worked in counseling with adolescent drug abusers. She dropped from her work when they came to Kentucky but is now employed as a counselor and a referral officer in the department of psychiatry for the medical school at the University of Kentucky.

Our third and youngest child is David, who is a 1973 graduate of Centre after taking his first undergraduate years at Denison University. He holds his law degree from Wake Forest, is now engaged in the practice of law here in Danville, and is married to Carol Tate, a Centre alumna, who is now part-time member of the Centre faculty and director of music for the Presbyterian Church in Danville. They have one child.

Just for the record, I don't recall if you gave it; could you give the date of your birth and also the date of your marriage?

I was born April 25, 1917; married on May 24, 1941; married in Oxford, Mississippi.

Could you tell us briefly what your hobbies, activities, special interests have been, apart from your career, through the years?

My wife will tell you that Centre College has been my hobby and my special interest. The recreational sport that I've been most interested in is tennis, though I must say I neglected it for quite a time my first fifteen years at Centre and before that time. But that's a game that I enjoy playing with such people as our late dean of instruction, Harold Hanson, and Barry Dixon, and some of the faculty in other parts of the College. My primary recreational indulgence with the family really had to do with water sports, I guess. I play golf with my wife who is, I would say, a better, certainly a more diligent golfer than I. With the children I learned to water ski years ago, and we still water ski together. Just this past summer I succeeded in getting our oldest granddaughter up on water skis at the age of eight. That's the recreation I find that bridges the age gap almost better than any I know, a sport that has some physical component in it, yet can be indulged in at the same time by people of all ages and sexes.

Other interests of mine outside the College have run to a general interest in public affairs, community affairs. I have during the course of my years at Centre served on bodies outside the work of the College. During the term of Governor Breathitt I was a member of a commission for the study of higher education in Kentucky that he appointed and which produced, about 1965 as I recall it, a very extensive study of the needs then existent and the projected needs for higher education in Kentucky.

About ten years ago I played an active part in a move to reform the judicial system in Kentucky. It was culminated with the successful adoption of a constitutional amendment which reorganized the state judiciary in substantial ways, created for the first time a supreme court. Prior to that the highest court and the single appellate court was the Court of Appeals, which is now an intermediate court, and which substantially reformed the administration of justice at the county level. We won't go into all those details; but that was an effort in which I became involved and gained some satisfaction in the way of extracurricular activity.

In 1968 I was a delegate to the infamous Democratic National Convention in Chicago. I was pushed out front by a group here in Boyle County interested in advocating the candidacy of Senator McCarthy for the Democratic nomination at that time. You may recall he was seeking the nomination in primary opposition to Vice President Hubert Humphrey. This group approached me and asked whether they could nominate me to serve as chairman of the County Democratic Convention, where they

hoped to present a slate that might go from this County to the State Convention favoring Senator McCarthy. They knew that I, as a matter of practice as a citizen, declared myself a Democrat, and they knew that I attended the occasional conventions of the Party here in the County that meet every other year or every four years. I always felt that was one obligation that a citizen should have, to take some part in the work of the political system. In any event, I allowed them to put me in nomination for that position, and they mustered a majority at the convention and elected me as chairman instead of electing the County Judge or someone else who might normally have been elected. I discovered only after they had successfully elected a McCarthy slate that the chairman of the County Convention was supposed to chair the delegation to the State Convention, and so I had a moral obligation then to go to the State Convention. At the State Convention I became a somewhat visible figure for the McCarthy group which was in general a younger group of persons without much visibility. Being a college president I got singled out. The Convention was wholly controlled by the Humphrey group. But Senator Humphrey had sent out word that he would like to see a few opposing delegates sent up to Chicago. I was asked if I would allow my name to be put up, and I did, not expecting to go, thinking that one of the alternates could take my place. But my son, David, who was then very much interested in the political activity of the time rather challenged my conscience to feel that unless I was barred by other things, that I should go. I agreed to go if he would accompany me; I went, but he didn't. He got a job and was going to earn some money in the summer. So I went, and the other two children gathered from Durham and Madison, Wisconsin, to be there with me at the time. That was my one foray into active national politics; a very interesting experience. It did lead me to find a topic for my opening convocation in the Fall. If you want to know about my experience in Chicago, look at my address to the Convocation in September of 1968; it treats with that episode in the life of the nation.

I also have maintained a continuing interest here in the local community in certain elements in the affairs of the city. I served for quite a few years in the first municipal Council on Human Rights which was set up as an agency of the city to moderate problems that might develop in the area of human rights, inter-racial relations, and that sort of thing. And, though in no official capacity, I've taken a considerable interest in urban renewal activities, city planning, and things of that sort. All that grows out of my background, I guess, in the interest in government and public affairs.

My wife and I have always enjoyed an active social life in this community. She is a very good dancer, and she gets me to the dance floor more often than I might otherwise get there. She and some mischievous women students occasionally used to get me on the dance floor; but I always thought that I was competing uphill against Professor Hazelrigg, so I didn't keep that a part of my most active extracurricular life.

Bob, did you have any questions at this time?

On the second side of the tape we'll be moving into your years at Centre. Is there anything you'd like to add referring strictly to your background that we haven't discussed yet?

No, I think not, thank you; except that I think it's fair to say that my coming to Centre was probably governed by the fact of my interest in the region as one who'd grown up in it, whose forebears on both my father's and mother's

side had lived in the region (within 50 miles surrounding Danville) for three or four generations, and my having grown up here and being educated here; those facts influenced my decision when the question of coming to Centre was raised. I guess I consider myself one who has his roots very deep into this part of the world. In that respect I think I was luckier than those who grew up on the desert or the prairie. I like this countryside.

Tape 1, Side 1 (Part 1) Thomas A. Spragens Interview for the oral history of Centre College. Transcribed April 26, 1985. Edited by Mr. Spragens and retyped on May 31, 1985.