

Just very generally, I was wondering if you could reflect back on your years at Centre--just general comments--is there anything you really wish you could have done that just didn't occur or anything you'd like to change about it.

Very little. This may be an admission of the limitations of my imagination; but when I came to Centre in 1957 at the age of 40, as I suggested, it seemed to me a situation where if things went well one could with great satisfaction give a major portion of one's professional career to that single situation. In the course of my presidency we did set goals from time to time. Somehow we were always able to realize them, and they were ambitious goals. I can't think of anything that, if we didn't accomplish it directly, we had not somehow found a better answer and seen it accomplished during the course of that time. I suppose I have had the good fortune among persons who have been in the category of college and university presidents to have one of the most satisfying experiences one could have.

There were things had I been continuing for another five years; yes, there were things yet to be done. But they were simply things growing out of the passage of time that become new priorities. I have no regrets about any part of my experience at Centre College; it has just been a wholly satisfying experience, and I feel I've been unusually fortunate in the good luck that has attended those years.

But I think this is a good time to observe that the achievements of those goals have involved the remarkable efforts of a lot of persons; you might say the whole of the organization, the whole of the constituency. I could always lean on, and did, in various roles of importance in the College, persons who were more competent than I. I knew a little bit about the general management of institutions; I had had the good fortune of having very early experience in higher education administration. I came into my first presidency probably better prepared than most presidents do, and certainly I came to Centre far more prepared in terms of the knowledge of the role and its potential, and also the limitations that constrain it than probably any person who ever became president of the College before in its 140-year history to the time of my coming; or 138 years I guess it was at that time. But I had the good fortune to work with remarkable people. Some of them preceded me.

At the time I came to Centre, Frank Heck was dean of the College; a remarkable man, soft-spoken, quiet, modest, but a splendid dean, a very wise educator, a very fine scholar; and I felt highly privileged to work with him over the approximately seven years that he remained in the deanship after I came. At a given point he felt that he wanted to get back to more active scholarship and to teaching, and to reduce the demands. He looked at the expectations of the late '60s in terms of growth and recruitment of faculty, and he asked to be relieved in an orderly way. But he was a remarkable associate. I was just very fortunate to find a person like that in the leadership of the faculty when I arrived.

He was followed by Charles Whittle, who was an alumnus of Centre whom we had brought to the faculty about three years before he assumed the deanship as a professor of physics. He led us through the period of curricular reform and on up through those years of turmoil, as well; a man of great intellectual capability. He came to Centre when he was not quite sixteen, graduated at 19, and had earned his Ph.D. by the time he was 22, as I recall it. He had studied on a postdoctoral fellowship in Belgium before most people would have completed a masters degree.

But he was deeply interested in undergraduate education, and a man of tremendous energies. He, as I say, served until 1972. He was deeply fatigued by the end of that period. He also had accumulated some scars; some tensions had developed within the College, understandably. These were not personal antagonisms. It was almost inevitable in an institution that was going through that period of turmoil in the life of the country in general; and for an institution that completely turned itself inside out, as we did in the curricular reform. That took a lot of guiding and goading, though the faculty had committed itself to a given line of action. Whittle's contributions to this College are just hard to measure. There are just so many things that grew out of that area for which he should have full credit. He certainly was tireless in the pursuit of recruitment of faculty members at a time when the availability of competent people was most limited. He traveled from coast to coast interviewing people from Stanford to Harvard, to Chapel Hill, to the University of Texas, where ever we had any prospects or even where we just thought there was graduate departments that would have the kind of persons we wanted.

Then, as we faced the need of replacing him, we agreed that... Though I recall I asked the faculty to create a committee to consult with me on that appointment. Their first position was: "We have a large number of very able people on the campus; we really don't see any point in looking very widely." I suggested, on the other hand (by that time I had been here fifteen years), that it might be useful to have in the central administration someone who brought in the fresh perspectives that could be brought in from outside. The committee acknowledged that that was a theoretical advantage. So I suggested we might consider--not widely advertising it, not conducting a broad, broad search--but that I look around and talk with persons whom I knew around the country, other college presidents, to see if I could get some suggestions. We wound up having three persons who were all willing to talk with us about it, of whom this committee said; "Any of those three are better than anyone that we could appoint from inside simply in terms of experience."

Out of those three came the invitation to Mr. Reckard to come as dean of the College. He later became academic vice president, or vice president and dean, changed then to provost and dean to signify that he was accepting responsibilities outside the academic area for internal management. But Reckard brought new and fresh and important qualities to the College. He's a man whose experience had taken him into wide areas of scholarship, of intellectual life, and to a greater acquaintance with persons not only across the country in higher education but also in England, where he had spent time in two parts of his life. He is a man of really remarkable intellectual sophistication. He added a new quality of breadth to our visions, I might say. He and Mrs. Reckard probably did as much entertaining in the past ten years as Mrs. Spragens and I--a lot more internal. The numbers of students who passed through that house and put their feet under Mrs. Reckard's table would be hard to count, I am sure. He also added strength to our convocation program, a lot of imagination there. I would say the College during his years saw more outside persons coming through who added to the intellectual and cultural life of the College than had ever before been the case. We just had a larger window on the world. Part of that grew out of the development of the Regional Arts Center which was nearing completion at the time he arrived, and the growing maturity and outreach of the College in every respect. Those three persons are a big part of the secret of the development of the College during my years.

One could never overestimate the importance of Mr. Rall as the business manager of the College, which was the title under which he came here in 1959, later made financial vice president and treasurer of the College. Under his effective general management we rebuilt the campus. I recall Mr. Reckard, at the time of my retirement, made joshing references to the numbers of bricks that were laid on the campus in my administration and all these were my achievements. I may have had something to do with the conceptualization of construction, but Mr. Rall managed every bit of it. In his more than twenty years with the College now, I suppose he has put in forty years of effort. No one knows the hours that he has given to prudent, effective management of this College. I don't know of a senior business officer who more universally commands the respect of a faculty than has been the case with Mr. Rall. Here again is a man of great intelligence. He was in public administration at the time we invited him to come to Centre, and I considered his coming as one of the most important elements in the effective achievement of the goals of the College over this period. Others--I could go on forever!

And one should not overlook Max Cavnes. In his long years of service as dean of men, he was a man who, during those difficult years in student life on the campuses, served to provide a lightening rod for student emotions. He was a man whom the students called the "Sheriff", but there was not a man on this campus who did not know for a certainty that if he was in any kind of difficulty that he had a friend in that apartment in Breckinridge Hall. Max Cavnes didn't maintain an office for years and years, and he would never put anything on paper; he carried his office in his pockets. But his influence on the graduates of this campus over the years is just hard to totally describe.

We have a remarkably fine faculty. We've had great good fortune. I think I said when we started our discussions that the greatest strength of the College at the time I came here was a faculty of competence, whose being here could attract other young people; and that certainly has proved to be the case, and it continues to be the case. It's a remarkable small faculty, and I have felt privileged over the years to have had the kind of relationship to it that we have enjoyed.

I'm going to ask you to take on the role of a prophet for an instant. What do you see as the outlook for Centre through the '80s and beyond?

The '80s and beyond are going to be years of limited growth for higher education. As a matter of fact, there may be an element of contraction as has been going on for the last few years. Higher education has been getting a lesser portion, I guess, of the gross national income over the last four or five years than it had enjoyed for fifteen years before that, or twenty years. It will be a different time in American higher education. I think Centre is very well positioned to continue to serve its role during that kind of period. We have a strong faculty; we have physical facilities that need little else done to them during that period of time, assuming that the College maintains its stance of being a small and selective college of liberal studies. And there is a built-up assurance that the financial resources of the College will grow--not as fast as we'd like them to grow--but that backlog of \$20 million in deferred gifts was a very comforting thing to our new president when he looked at Centre as a place in which he might put his professional efforts for a period of years at least. I have nothing but confidence in Centre's future. I think we are going to possibly see the enrollments of the College drop. Now there is a choice to be made there. Do we want to stay at 750 or 800, or would we be prepared to let things settle

back to a level of 600 to 650, if our share of the market doesn't change. I would not try to say what would be the wisest decision in those circumstances, though I think Centre will always undertake to be what it has been for a long, long time--the best college of undergraduate liberal studies in the lower Ohio Valley. Just how that's to be realized, I'm not sure. But when you look at Centre's situation and compare it with that of other institutions, the needs for the future and the resources to meet them would appear to be in as favorable position here as one could find in most of the institutions of our acquaintance. That's due to the tremendous loyalties of a large constituency--large certainly for a small college like this. It has proven out over the years to be true that Centre has a remarkable group of alumni. I recall when it was announced that I was coming here, the president of Westminster College in Missouri at that time, a man named Davidson, said to me, "I envy you the alumni that Centre College has." I was startled to hear him say that, because I knew he had grown up in Pennsylvania and had done all his academic work there and had never been near this College. But somehow he had the impression that Centre, which was not too much unlike his Westminster College, had a far stronger body of alumni than most colleges of our size and character. And I would say that's been proven to me in my twenty-five years here, that it is a body to be envied. Their loyalties, their good judgments, their wisdom about the College that they want to sustain has been quite remarkable. So I have nothing but the greatest optimism about Centre's long-run stability and effectiveness as I look to the next couple of decades.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, I would hope that given the continuance of good health which I enjoy today that I can continue to involve myself in some useful activities. I am, as you know, doing some consulting work in higher education, and I hope to continue a certain amount of that and to take some serviceable role in the pursuit of the common good in ways that I can. I hope also to be able to have a little more time for personal pleasures, more travel, more reading. I'm also enjoying being able to do my own work on my yard and grounds. It was awfully nice to have somebody mowing that huge lawn at Craik House; but it's nice to be removed a bit from an institutionalized life and to live a more personal life. What I might be giving most of my time to for the next two or three years, I'm not sure; but I'm sure I'm not going to be bored. I do welcome the chance to continue to enjoy the good things that happen on the Centre campus. My wife and I feel very fortunate to be living in this community. It's as nice a spot for retirement as we were able to imagine, and we look forward to continuing in quite a different way of being part of the Centre community.

This might be a good note to conclude on. During your twenty-four or twenty-five years in office, I was wondering if you had accumulated one or two interesting stories or anecdotes that have become personal favorites that you'd like to leave us with?

When you suggested that question some time ago, I thought about it briefly, and nothing popped into my mind. Those kinds of things, for me, tend to come out when I am thinking about a particular topic of interest. I'm not one who remembers jokes, for example. I'm not one who has a store of those, and I guess I don't carry anecdotes of my experiences in my mind very easily unless it's apropos of something when it is. I have a lot of warm and enjoyable recollections of things that affect our life at Centre. But no, I don't know that I treasure any one or two episodes above anything else.

One other thing I would like simply to put on the record--I have spoken of the colleagues I had in the administration of the College and the strength of this faculty. But the board of trustees... Again, my experience at Centre involved working with six chairmen, I think, of the board over this period. They were a remarkable group of persons; all of them feeling a great sense of responsibility to the College, all of them concerned to provide leadership in their way to the board, none of them ever inclined to want to cross the line between what is proper trustee responsibility and the proper role of the presidential leadership of the College. But where else might one have had persons of the character of the six people who served as chairman of the board during my time here--I don't know.

But when you consider the talents and the strengths of persons such as our present chairman, James Evans, who is Chairman of the Board of the Union Pacific Corporation and the director of three of the largest corporations in the country, a trustee of the University of Chicago where he took his law degree; but a man more fully dedicated to this institution than any other external cause he serves.

Chauncey Newlin, one of the ablest tax lawyers of his time, a senior partner in White and Case in New York, who was considered to be probably the best corporate tax attorney in New York twenty years ago; but who gave so much of his time and effort and thought, and who helped to bring to the College financial resources in his time that no one else could have brought to our service.

And Golladay LaMotte, who served a shorter term between those two, a Kentuckian who lived in the state, but whose outreach in the state perhaps is as great as anyone else. He is a man who was a leader in the agricultural community and in the general business community in the world of finance. He held high responsibilities with both the Farm Bureau and with the Chamber of Commerce. I know of only one other man in Kentucky in my time who might be comparably evaluated.

Ewing Boles, who still is active as a trustee emeritus, was the president of the Ohio Company, the biggest investment banking company in Ohio; past president of the Investment Bankers Association of America, outstanding in his field and who has been a generous contributor to the College; but one of the ablest chairmen I have ever known of a body such as the board of trustees.

Before him Elbert Sutcliffe, and before him Ike Lanier, who was the chairman when I came here. Those people just remain etched in my memory for the qualities of leadership they brought to Centre's volunteers. It's the work of persons like this that have brought about the results that lead me to say we really accomplished everything at Centre in my time that one could have wanted to accomplish. That's not to say there's not room for further growth and development, but the things that we were able to do almost exceeded one's best expectations because of the kinds of support that we had.

I have one final thought. When you were discussing changes in students and, I guess, just students in general at Centre, one thought came to mind: Anyone who has the leadership of a college or any large institution for a period of time as a person of authority deals from time to time with, may be a subject of jest, whether in a newspaper's April Fools issue or items like that. You had something like twenty-five years of this. You must have had to have a very good sense of humor.

Oh, I suppose so. I always enjoyed the editorial cartoonists in the Cento and the way in which they treated the presidency. One has to recognize--at least I never felt personal offense if my role or responsibility seemed to be lampooned. Perhaps I should have, but I never did. I considered it to be something that grew out of the fact that I occupied a given office, and that I carried certain responsibilities; perhaps a sense of humor, perhaps just a sense of perspective about the job. I never walked away from the fact that so long as I served in the presidency of the College that I had kinds of responsibilities that had to be exercised. They had nothing to do with ego satisfactions or anything else. This was a task that I had undertaken. But I also recognized that as I did those things, I was necessarily going, sometimes, to take positions that would not always be popular. But that's no reason to feel offense if one finds disagreement or finds criticism or finds even jesting, or at times somewhat serious lampooning. That's all a part of the game; it's all a part of the life. I have never really felt the pressure of criticism. I guess I always remembered when I was a young fellow and how I looked on things and appreciated, really, the perspectives of persons who may have had reason to differ with where I may have stood at any time. By and large this has been a campus on which good will far outweighs malevolence. That's one of the nice things about having been at Centre.

Are there any brief closing thoughts that you haven't mentioned you'd like to add before we conclude this interview?

I think not. There may be things that later I would think of that I might want to add to my recollections of things that are significant to the development of the College, but not at this point. Thank you for listening so indulgently to my extended recollections.

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your recollections.

Tape 4, Side 2 (Part 8) Thomas A. Spragens Interview (concluded)

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