

DR. FRANK HECK
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Questions by John LeDoux and Bob Glass

Today is August 17, 1982. We are beginning an oral history program here at Centre College. My name is John LeDoux and I will be conducting the interview. I'm the Archivist here at Centre. Also contributing to the interview will be Bob Glass of Doherty Library. Today we are interviewing Dr. Frank Heck. Dr. Heck is a long-time resident of the Centre College community. He has been a professor of history from 1948 until 1974, and he has also served as Dean of the College from 1955 to 1965. We are conducting the interview in Dr. Heck's office in Grant Hall of the Regional Arts Center.

Dr. Heck, if you could, we would like to start out with your personal background, beginning with your parents, if you would.

Well, I was born in Racine, Wisconsin. My father was Victor Heck and my mother was Ruth Parom Heck. I went through the elementary schools there and through high school, with the exception of one year that we spent in Milwaukee.

What was your father's occupation?

He was a machinist.

And did your mother work, or was she in the home?

She was never gainfully employed after marriage. She had been a public school teacher before their marriage.

Did your folks have an interest in history? How did you happen to develop an interest in history and political science?

I guess just by the reading that I did as a young boy as a steady patron of the public library in Racine, Wisconsin. No, I don't think either of my parents had any particular interest in history. They were interested, I think, in their children doing well in school, and while not financially able to do much about higher education, they were strongly in favor of it.

Can you tell us a little bit about your ethnic background and your family?

My father's parents were both born in Germany and brought to this country as children in the 1850s. My mother's ancestry on her father's side went back to colonial New England, 17th Century. On her mother's side, her mother was born in this country of English immigrants.

Let's pick up again with your schooling. You completed basic education in Racine?

Right.

And then, if you could, begin there and then go on to your college years.

Well, I attended college at Lawrence College, now Lawrence University, in Appleton, Wisconsin, and received my B.A. degree in 1925. I had qualified in Wisconsin to do high school teaching, which in that day did not require a tremendous amount of, shall we say, special courses in education. After an interval I did teach in a high school in northern Wisconsin for a year and a half beginning in January, 1926, and then went on to graduate school at the University of Minnesota. After a year at Minnesota I taught again for a year in a high school at Fairmount, Minnesota, and resigned late in the summer, I'm ashamed to say, to take a job in the state teacher's college at Peru, Nebraska, in 1929.

I'd like to back up just a little bit. How would you characterize Lawrence when you attended? Can you kind of capsulize what it was like there?

Lawrence was a liberal arts college with an enrollment that varied, I suppose, from nine to ten hundred--maybe twelve hundred--during my undergraduate years. I don't remember how it varied, you know, which was the higher, which was the lower. I think probably the early years were the higher because we were then in a postwar bulge of enrollment such as Centre was in when I came here in 1948. Many of my friends were several years older because they had had military service, and some of them perhaps years of employment before going into military service.

What was the community like, just the basic lifestyle of the people?

Of course Appleton was, I suppose, a town of twenty-five or thirty thousand at that time; it's considerably larger now. This of course was in prohibition. This was always one of the big hassles because this is a community where people naturally are accustomed to their beer and whatnot; and the college, of course, tried to prevent indulgence and violations of the law and didn't always succeed. In those days I was a very strict prohibitionist myself.

How would you characterize your first teaching assignment? What do you remember most about those years?

In high school?

Yes, your very first teaching assignment.

Oh, I had no intention of teaching for any length of time. I was following the example of a chap who was my senior at Lawrence by three years and in age by perhaps six years, who had taught two or three years and saved up enough money to go to law school. It was my intention to save up enough money to go to law school. Well, of course, salaries were not quite as high when I began as when he began. But after a very few weeks, I decided that I liked teaching too much to leave it. I really had a good time. I was scared to death because, as I hinted, I had never done a day of student teaching. I had observed some good teachers teaching in the local high school, but I had never done a day myself. I had never taught anything bigger than a pledge class. I went there in the middle of the year. My predecessor had been fired because he couldn't keep order. I had some misgivings as to whether I could keep order. But I found that by looking them in the eye and speaking firmly, I was able to keep order. I liked the experience, and I decided that I would perhaps look forward to college teaching in due time. I had an awfully good time in that place. I liked the kids and I liked their parents, those whom I knew, and just liked the community at large.

And at Nebraska State Teacher's College then, you were there until 1933?

I went there in 1929 and I left there in 1938. During that time I'd had two full winters of leave for graduate school and then a semester at the end for finishing my dissertation. It was a place where it was rather taken for granted that you would teach the year round--teach a long summer school as well as the winter terms. Well, I did not teach summer school from 1934 on, but worked rather on my dissertation. But I was associated with that state college for a number of years, from '29 to '38 in all.

What was the effect of the Depression? What do you remember about those years at Peru?

Well, I remember that when I returned, having passed my doctoral prelim's, I sustained immediately a reduction in salary which was never restored during my remaining five years at the place. But, of course, in those days we had no federal income tax and no state income tax; and the dollars did, of course, go much farther than they do now. But the dollar amounts were unbelievable. I think educationally the thing that the Depression brought that college was students of superior quality who would never have gone there in ordinary times. We got some outstanding students in the '30s. On the other hand, it enabled them to keep better faculty than they would have been able to keep in ordinary times; so that it was a pretty good faculty, particularly as far as the younger people were concerned. We had rather interesting and able students in greater proportion than you would normally expect in a place which was prepared to admit any high school graduate. Some of these men and women went on to rather distinguished academic careers and careers in other fields.

And from there you went on then to Miami of Ohio?

Yes. As I finished my doctorate in '38 and got the degree, I moved to Miami University at Oxford, Ohio. I was at Miami officially from then until I came here in 1948. During that time, though, I was absent four years for military service. So it was four there, four away, and two back after the war.

Could you again, as you did with Peru, characterize your years at Miami? What type of community was it?

Well, Oxford, Ohio, is not as tiny a community as Peru, Nebraska, by any means, but it still is a community that's dwarfed by the University. The community was built for the University and lives for the University and did then. When I went there, Miami had about 2800 students, as I remember, in four colleges or schools; liberal arts, education, fine arts, and business. When I left in '48, I think it was probably six or seven thousand, perhaps. My appointment was primarily in the school of education, though I always had some teaching in liberal arts, also. It was a queer appointment--hard to explain--but that was the situation.

What do you remember most of the years at Miami? What's impressed on your memory the most about your years teaching there?

Oh, I don't know. I think some of the friends that I made among the faculty, my colleagues. And the fact that I met my wife there seems fairly important, though we weren't married until 1945.

Was she a student?

She was a faculty member when I went there. She was either an instructor or an assistant professor in physiology, which wasn't exactly what it said it was, either. It was a department which served immediately, perhaps, as far as she was concerned, students taking courses in nature study as a part of their preparation for being elementary teachers. But she also taught some courses which were more appropriately classified in the designation of physiology. Before we were married she had--she was a graduate of Miami herself--attained M.S. and Ph.D. degrees at Cornell in biology.

What was her background? Where was she from?

She grew up in Ohio, not far from the University, probably. I can never remember whether it was fifty-odd miles or seventy miles, but something like that, from the University. She grew up on a farm in Darke County, Ohio, which is spelled D a r k e.

For the record, could you give us her full name, please?

Edna Drill--D r i l l.

And you were married--what was the date of that?

We were married in 1945--October, 1945--while I was still in uniform.

You were in uniform until '46?

Yes, the end of June, I think, in '46.

I want to get to your years in service. But I wanted to ask you; what were your memories of the effect that the coming war years had on the college, of the students' life? What do you remember of it?

Well, I don't remember too much, personally. My wife would remember much more because she taught there during the war years, up until '45. But I took leave because I was drafted, in plain words, in the summer of 1942, so that I really was there after Pearl Harbor less than an academic year. I think that the immediate effect was not tremendous in those first months except as, I suppose, boys who were members of National Guard units and so on were called up. But I don't remember too much about that year particularly.

I know I was hunting around for direct commission opportunities, which I didn't locate. I was glad afterward I hadn't.

Could you describe your years in service?

Well, I was drafted and sent for basic training to the great quartermaster establishment at Camp Lee, Virginia, now Fort Lee, Virginia. We had just a one-month basic training program, after which we had two months of what was called technical training in which I learned to be a warehouse foreman; which, I want you to know, is the highest noncommissioned employment available in the quartermaster corps, as I understood it at the time.

But meanwhile I had decided that the prospect of my ever being anything more than a Private or PFC was very small, unless I could get a commission. So I had applied for OCS, though I was a bit old for that. I did go to OCS in a matter of a week or two after I'd finished the so-called technical training at the same post. We just marched up the street about two miles and moved into different looking barracks.

What happened?

Well, I graduated with my class in the spring of 1942, so I was an officer and a gentleman, presumably. I think they had more quartermaster officers and gentlemen than they needed right then. So I was sent with some of my classmates to Francis E. Warren, Wyoming, which is now something else, I think, near Cheyenne. There we went through the motions of helping them train more basic trainees and technical trainees for a couple of months. Finally they sent me on down to Camp Campbell, Kentucky, here, where after some fumbling around on their part in finding me a job, I got to be the officer in charge of the Army clothing and equipment establishment. I can't think of what the title or branch or something, but anyway, it was a small factory where you fixed shoes and clothes. I ran that outfit for about five months, at least, until I was transferred elsewhere.

About that time a friend of mine was in the historical branch of the Air Transport Command at Washington, or near Washington National Airport. They had gotten authorization for an additional officer, and he wrote and asked me if I would like to come and join them. I wrote and said, "Sure, but I can't live in Washington on a Second Lieutenant's salary." He said, "Well, we'll get you promoted." And so I said, "Sure, I'll be glad to go." Though I didn't mind this job, it was quite interesting, really. And furthermore, we had a system of accounts whereby we proved that we were saving the government money every month.

That's probably why they moved you on!

Well, no, they didn't move me on. They were not glad to lose me. They consented to lose me if they got a replacement--a suitable replacement. Well, it just happened that a suitable replacement walked in about that time. So I went to be practicing my profession in the Air Transport Command and did that for the rest of the war and for nearly a year after the war.

What types of duties did that involve?

Well, primarily, we were writing, ourselves, in headquarters and having people write in the various divisions of the Command, overseas mostly, a factual account, presumably a documented account, what was happening, what they were doing in this division and that division. Oh, we did other things which were rather peripheral. We drafted the commanding general's monthly report to General Arnold by scouting around in the other divisions and finding out what they thought General Arnold ought to be told at this time. It was a nice job. It was certainly far removed from anything difficult or dangerous.

I believe you had published some of the work on Air Transport Command?

Well, after the war I was employed as a civilian on a contractual basis for two or three summers to write, with a friend of mine who had been in the same command, the chapters on the Air Transport Command for the seven-volume history

of the AAF in World War II, which you will find in our library, edited by two very distinguished historians, James Lee Key and Wesley Frank Craven. I finished my share of that work along about 1952, I think, after I'd been at Centre for some years.

And you were discharged then in '46?

Right.

From there you went back then to Miami?

Right. I taught two more years at Miami and in 1948 came here.

For the record, could you--we want to elaborate on it, of course, but could you describe your career history from the time you arrived at Centre?

I came to Centre as a professor of history and, as I look at the catalog, political science, which was my major. But the only year I ever taught political science as such was one year in the post Korea, shall we say, academic depression, when our government man went on leave, and I did take a couple of elementary courses in government. I was also brought here to be the chairman of a general education course that was then virtually required of freshmen called Introduction to the Social Sciences, with which I was involved for several years and actually taught in it two or three years.

Before we move on, how did you happen to come to Centre?

Well, I was definitely interested in leaving Miami. I didn't like my assignment there particularly and didn't like some of the people who were, shall we say, my superiors there. I had always had the desire to land ultimately in a liberal arts college more or less of the type from which I had graduated. So I learned of a vacancy here and made application for it and was duly interviewed, and when offered the position, finally decided it was better to take it than to stay where I was.

From the time you arrived here--you had begun to describe your career history here--if you could proceed with that.

In 1955 our then dean, who was a very good friend and a man whom I liked and respected, and still like and respect, Jameson Jones, resigned to become dean at his alma mater, Southwestern at Memphis, to my very considerable regret. I had no desire to be a dean and no desire to see him anywhere other than where he had been for the last several years. But he was quite naturally determined to resign, and the president offered me the deanship. I accepted it, with a couple of conditions, and continued in it for ten years. I resigned after eight--asked to be relieved after eight--and I was relieved after ten. No, at the end of eight I asked to be relieved after nine. I gave them a year's notice, but it took two years to make the arrangements that were finally made. So then I returned to full-time teaching, which I did through 1973; and then in 1973-74 I had a half-time teaching position and finally retired.

I want to get back to the second section of the interview and elaborate on a number of areas. I did want to ask if you'd discuss with us your publications through the years, your major areas of research.

My doctoral dissertation I published in 1941 under the title The Civil War Veteran and Minnesota Life and Politics. The Civil War veteran in general had been my, shall we say, research interest until I went to the Army. And then in the Air Transport Command of course I became interested in that aspect of military or aviation history and worked on that, shall we say, until 1952. I have never been able to do much in term time as far as research is concerned. I think that my teaching loads have always been too high for doing much research in term time, though I've done a little but not much.

When I finished my work with the Air Transport Command history, I was sort of casting around for something because I think every teacher ought to have a research interest. I was interested in John C. Breckinridge and had been encouraged by some people who knew something about the subject to take him up because there was no adequate biography. He was a graduate of Centre. I imagined that there was more material here than there turned out to be. We had a very nice research grant opportunity here about that time. I can't remember just what it was named. Oh, yes, it was the Carnegie Foundation which made available through the College some funds for faculty research; I think the first time that had happened here probably. In the summer of 1953 I had a grant and began to work on that, and worked in the summers of '53 and '54 and produced an article in the Journal of Southern History on "John C. Breckinridge in the Crisis of 1860-61." Then in 1955 I was caught in the dean's office and didn't have time, really, to do any research until I got relieved from that in '65. In 1966 I spent the summer in Europe, so I didn't do anything that summer. But in the summers from '67 on I really began to work seriously at my Breckinridge research. I thought of doing a fair-sized biography of maybe 300 to 350 pages. Through the years I had received communication from and heard about people who were going to do a biography of Breckinridge, but they always gave it up. So, I figured it would always be there. But somewhere along the line, I heard from an ambitious young man in California who was, I think, still an undergraduate when he first wrote me, who persisted in John C. Breckinridge. And, oh, maybe about the time when you could say my research was nearly finished, he brought out a volume which amounts to 687 pages on John C. Breckinridge, crowded pages, as you will see if you look in the library. It's really a remarkable job for a chap who had no graduate training in history at all. It has some weaknesses, too, but it's really a remarkable job, considering, and he won a prize for it.

About that time there was underway the plans for what turned out to be the Kentucky Bicentennial Bookshelf, which involves now, I think, forty-five or more volumes on various phases of Kentucky history. I was invited to do a volume in that on John C. Breckinridge. They were supposed to be, I think, limited to 112 or maybe 120 pages, and mine is quite a bit longer than that. But still, it's a short book, a short biography of John C. Breckinridge, which was brought out in 1976, I having been free to work on it full time until it went to press.

During my years in Danville I have been an active member of Trinity Episcopal Church, which you see on Main Street. Its bicentennial was to occur in 1979, and I had long had the idea that I ought to do a bicentennial history of the Parish. This I did and brought it out just in time for the bicentennial in June, 1979, under the title of A Century and A Half on Main Street.

Looking back and considering all of the different possible areas you've run across, are there any research topics you wanted to delve into particularly, and you'd still like to, that you've not gotten around to?

Oh, I suppose there are many things, but you know I'm getting old, and why should one work so hard when he's reached a certain age? I had given a little thought to some local history things. I would like to, and I might still someday do an article, if I can find the time and ambition, on slavery in Boyle County, for instance. Something of that sort. Oh, there are many things, but really nothing that I've had an overpowering urge to do.

If you could, would you describe some of your professionally related activities, hobbies, activities within the community that you were particularly active in through the years?

I think that my chief activity in the community has been in connection with the Trinity Church where I've been really quite active and a lay officer much of the time; not for the past four years, but much of the time 'til then. I think there are a lot of things that you ought to retire from when you reach a certain age.

My chief hobby, my wife's also, and this is something that we had in common long before we married, is bird watching or birding, depending upon which term the speaker prefers. We play a certain low grade of bridge, which we both enjoy. In a very modest way I have enjoyed travel through the years. That's about it.

Is this area a particularly good one for bird watching?

It's good enough. It's good but not as great, shall we say, as a place on one of the major migration flyways like Lake Michigan, on whose shores I grew up.

Is there any area apart from your years at Centre, which we'd like to get into in a minute or so, of your personal background we've looked at that you'd like to make further comment on?

I don't think so.

Bob, did you have anything you'd like to ask?

Maybe just one question. When you were Dean of the College, what were your teaching duties at that time? Did you teach classes?

Yes. When I became dean in 1955, the College was pretty hard pressed financially; and I'm sure President Groves was not in a position to go outside in the market and find himself a dean. He had to take a faculty member who was here. We had that year, according to the official record, 446 students the year I took over as dean. I believe I'm right in saying that I taught always two classes a semester. We were on the semester plan. It was either until Dr. Cavnes came in 1958 or until Dr. Lee came in 1960, I normally taught two. After Dr. Lee came, I normally taught one. In the last year that I was dean I didn't teach at all, but otherwise I taught always one class and sometimes two.

I'd like to move into the second section and elaborate on your memories of Centre and the community from your arrival here in 1948. I wonder if you could begin by describing Centre the way you remember it when you first arrived here. Give us a sketch of the College.

I think the most distinctive thing was the fact that here was a small college with two campuses approximately a mile apart. And the men's campus was here, the women's campus was a mile away where the present Danville High School building is located. They were still talking, I think, officially in 1948 in terms of coordinate education--not coeducation, but coordinate education. And we still had some sections of required courses that met on the women's campus for women. My first two years here I taught a section of that introductory course in social science on the women's campus for women only. I also had a section on this campus which was for men and women as it turned out.

What were the differences in the course for women only?

There wasn't any difference. It was a class which was convenient for them because they didn't have to get on the bus and come over here, or walk over here or ride their bicycles over here--but each of those first two years, I know. I think that's when we abandoned it. My predecessor had had a sophomore level class in American History for men on this campus and women over there. I think he'd had five women take it. So I decided we couldn't afford that kind of luxury and we cut that out my first year. But there was one or two other required courses that had sections that met over there. And at that time all the work in music, drama, and speech met on the women's campus where there were various classrooms and facilities. There were no proper facilities for labs, so none of the science courses met over there.

Were there any courses offered then which would not appear now that were strictly for women and that were not even offered to men?

Home economics. We had a program with two faculty members in home economics, and it presumably led to some special certificate in home economics. That continued for a couple of years, then we had a more truncated offering in home economics which was finally dropped when I was dean, along about 1960 or thereabouts. We also had, and I don't remember how this started, a course in shorthand and typewriting which was also dropped about 1960. And that met over on the women's campus, but it wasn't closed to men. And, of course, the home ec. courses were not closed to men. I remember particularly after they cut the thing down to a one-instructor program--well, this will be one of my stories: They had had Mrs. Nichols, who before her marriage had taught-- Do you know Mrs. Nichols, Katherine Nichols? She had taught in this home economics program. She had been one of the two. She had a Miss Smith, and before her marriage she was Miss Cameron. Katherine had a very fine course in interior decoration which was highly respected and taken by men as well as women. But when she married and Miss Smith left, they brought in a young red-headed lady to teach home economics who was, shall we say, physically attractive. The boys thought that this would be fine to take a course with her. As it turned out, she no doubt was well qualified in cooking or sewing or something, but she wasn't well qualified in interior decoration. The course turned out to be what I called "tabletop varnishing." It was good for boys with strong arms and, shall we say, not very active minds. I remember that I refused to sign up an advisee for it. I would not sign an advisee up for that course. But one guy foxed me and he got the registrar, who was young and inexperienced, to let him change his registration after I had signed the card. So he got to take the "tabletop varnishing" course. He was the only one of my advisees who did.

Tape 1, Side 1 (Part 1) Dr. Frank Heck Interview
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