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# Roy Wahle interview

Roy Wahle

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## CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

**ROY WAHLE**

10628 NE 13th Street

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March 11, 1995

The Living History Committee

Central Washington University

Retiree Association

400 East Eighth Avenue

Ellensburg, WA 98926-9904

Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to learn that a living history project is now in progress at CWIJ. I have suggested the possible joy in having such a group several times in recent years before “the opportunity to compile a meaningful document has rapidly...” disappeared!

I was a member of Central’s Board of Trustees from July 2, 1957 until June 26, 1969. It was an eventful and interesting 12-year term which was completed over a quarter of a century ago. I was a public school and college teacher and administrator during my period of tenure.

Be advised that recollections of events would be assisted if one were to review the minutes of the meetings during one’s tenure. Lacking that, certain impressions, or, perhaps, incidents do remain. However, the intervening years may dull remembrance which could detract from a desired authentic history. I would be happy to give additional time to your project if your committee could supply with historical notes pertinent to the period of my tenure.

The Legislature in it’s 1956—57 session had, at the behest of faculty members (particularly some at CWU), raised college board of trustees’ membership from three members to five members. A larger board would be more representative and, more importantly, more deliberative. Governor Albert D. Rosellini readily signed the legislation and, in my instance, said that he was looking for a “native son of Ellensburg who was also a reputable educator.” He thought I met his standards. I had no reason to anticipate his call. When I visited with him in Olympia he made it abundantly clear that he “launched” these college and university boards by his appointments. He would never apply influence or pressure thereafter pertinent to impeding board decisions on any matters.

Only on one occasion did he call me with reference to board action--actually, it was board inaction. His office, he said, was suffering some embarrassment with the length of time it was taking the board to select a new president. “Are you close to a decision?” he asked. I said we were. Sometime thereafter we announced the appointment of President James Brooks.

I served with both Presidents Robert McConnell and James Brooks.

I well understood that our authority as a board existed only when we were in session. I realized that any inquiries or actions I took in other individual instances concerning the university (it was a college when my tenure began) must be designed to help me become a more effective member of the whole board. As an individual I had no power nor authority other than to accept the respect of the public whom I represented and the faculty and administration with whom, as a board member, I worked. With my active public school involvement as a background I thought I readily understood the differences and relationships of policymaking and administrative functions. This difference was not always clearly delineated by some other members of the board. When instances occurred, I tactfully reiterated my perceived limitations upon the role of a board member.

Much new construction on the campus occurred during my tenure. It was a delightful time. We opted for using the work of several young architects with the desire that a creative and harmonious solution would emerge. Together the participating architects helped develop the overall campus plan. The campus you now see is the result. There were some delightful moments. The conceptualization of the Nicholson Pavilion is memorable. The “indigenous” and “surprise” art placed around the interior of the Bouillon building is another. In the latter instance, we invited several artists to come live in Ellensburg for a time in order to appreciate our people and our flora and fauna and to reflect their experiences in the art which they would create especially for the building.

Because several of us had been students at Central, we prevailed upon the administration and board to accept the recommendation that living or deceased individuals might be honored with the naming of buildings, etc. About the time the board had approved the resolution concerning the naming of buildings, etc. an angry crowd was reported to be tearing off the name plate on a school in the lower valley because the educator who was honored had fallen into disfavor! This oft quoted reason for naming buildings only for the deceased did not affect our decision despite the disquieting news from downriver!

The Roy P. Wahle University Complex was named shortly after I left the board. It recognized my continuing efforts to have sufficient and appropriate housing for married couples on campus. The inadequacy of such housing was a post-World War II phenomenon which I had personally experienced under the GI Bill when the university I attended for my advanced degrees had only inadequate housing for married couples planted on the edge of a football field.

Faculty—administration relations were a major preoccupation of the board members particularly during the closing years of the McConnell administration. The transition from education college to university status, with its attendant meanings for curriculum development and emphases, was also significant.

Dr. McConnell fulfilled a long tenure as a respected college president. He was blessed with handsomeness. He projected the demeanor of a college president! His wife was a gracious consort. He had great sons! Under his long tenure, the institution became recognized for its quality. His last years, however, were marked by dissension between his administration and the faculty. It was reported that the impetus for the creation of a five-member board of trustees, from a three-member board, was sponsored by certain members of the Ellensburg faculty with the hope that a larger board would better acknowledge faculty grievances--especially about faculty-administration relationships.

During these trying times, I consistently held that the board and its members must address the office of president with patience and dignity. I felt that the way in which the board dealt with faculty-administrative concerns, and the personnel involved, would help determine the quality of the future applicants for the office. Dr. McConnell resigned a year before he had planned to do so. (A brief review of CWU history may disclose that each of its presidents left the office in an atmosphere of controversy.)

Perry Mitchell, appointed as interim president until James Brooks was selected, gave good and faithful service to the college.

During my tenure there was no attempted influence from specific legislators, political parties or citizens groups.

Under current definitions, we were a board with a “liberal” outlook. We championed academic freedom as essential to the concept of a quality place of learning in a democracy. The informed observations expected from qualified faculty members were to be respected. The possibility of some kind of relationship with “academic efficiency” never emerged. Participation in intellectual discourse and argumentation among students, faculty and administration was protected and encouraged. Suppression of ideas was anathema.

Education, music, business, art, industrial arts were among those departments which made contributions to the state. The music department was truly prestigious. Wayne Hertz leadership was acknowledged.

Budgetary limitations imposed by the legislature were matters for concern. I was especially attentive to any imposition of limitations upon enrollment. This reflected a concern that all people who could enhance their lives by attending should be admitted to higher education at a reasonable personal cost. (This concern for the availability of universal higher education inspired my interest in the community college movement in this state in which “open enrollment” is supposed to be practiced.)

When I was trustee, the major coordinating board among the three colleges was the Joint Board of Trustees. It was an informational and advisory group for the respective three separate boards. Its periodic meetings were useful. All members of the three separate boards were ipso facto members of the Joint Board.

The most significant items of business during my service were 1) the appointment of a president; 2) campus expansion; and 3) university status. (So dedicated was I to the teachers’ college concept that I held reservations about the impending regional university status for the three colleges and a consequent and undesirable modification, I felt, of the mission of the institution.

The search procedure for a new president was thoughtful and arduous. Board members understood that the choosing of a president was the most important matter that would ever come before us. We involved the faculty in the screening process and reserved for the board the final selections for interviewing. We divided the task of visiting each of the communities of the candidates where we informally talked with individuals who knew the candidate’s life and work. We opted for youth, enthusiasm, organization and dedication when we finally selected James Brooks. He was not our first choice, but, as it turned out, we came to believe that he was our best choice. We were very happy with our selection. He kept the board informed. He was courteous, enthusiastic. He was a young man with vision. The faculty welcomed him during my tenure. He cared about students. With his wife, Lillian, he was rearing an exemplary family. He realized CWU’s obligation to give leadership and develop acceptance among citizens in the community and in the State. He was always cheerful and surely gregarious. It was a happy time.

Prior to my membership on the board, Victor Bouillon had capably acted as board chairman for a number of successive years. Soon after the board was composed of five members rather than three members, we voted to rotate the chairmanship. It was a good decision. I served yearlong terms as chairman of both the CWU Board and the Joint Board of Trustees.

The president served as the secretary of the board, if I recall correctly. We never questioned the arrangement. It would be awkward to have a member of the board or someone outside of the university’s regular staff serve as secretary of the board, in my opinion.

Relationships were productive among the board, the president, the faculty representatives and the student organizations during my tenure. All attended board meetings with regularity and presented reports as appropriate. Recommendations for action were reserved to the president in most instances. If one was offered from another source, we were consistent in our request for presidential comment and/or recommendation.

“Town and gown” tensions, which may have existed, did not, according to my recollection, affect board business. When, with special government assistance, we forced the purchase of certain adjacent lands upon which to expand the campus, there were community reactions. I am not aware that these reactions were contentious.

There is one anecdote I delight in telling. It is about the genesis of the design for the Nicholson Pavilion.

Ralph Burkhardt, the young architect for the building, and I came to a meeting traveling from Seattle via a Milwaukee train. During our evening meal aboard the train, I remarked that I surely hoped that something could be done to assure vision lines in the new gymnasium. I had that day been in Hec Edmonson Pavilion at the University of Washington and chafed at the number of supporting posts that obscured vision of the floor during game time. “I wish.” I said. “That we could hang the ceiling of our new pavilion from a sky hook!” Burkhardt responded instantly: “We can if that’s what you want.” He then briefly sketched, on a napkin, of course, the exterior of what became the pavilion. I countered that my opinion was that of one board member, but I would attempt immediately to influence an agreement among faculty, administration, and other board members.

You now see the result. Nicholson Pavilion’s gymnasium and athletic practice area have an uninterrupted view within. The unique exterior supports of post and cables reminded me of my father and other Kittitas Valley farmers who often improvised immediately needed repairs on farm machinery by using omnipresent bailing wire. For a time, among my intimates, the pavilion was referred to as “Wahle’s folly.” I was complimented by their acknowledgement!

I hope that these remarks, which parallel somewhat your Sample Questionnaire Outline--Form E--Board of Trustees, will be useful for your purposes.

Again, my congratulations upon attempting to collect source materials for future historians before it is too late!

Very truly yours

Roy P. Wahle, Ed. D

Professor Emeritus

Seattle University