

Interview with Mr. Robert W. Orr

Director of Library

By

Dorothy Kehlenbeck

September 29, 1966

Interviewer: I am very happy this morning to have Mr. Orr with me. He is director of the University Library. Mr. Orr, there have been several locations of the Library on the campus, haven't there?

Orr: We've had four locations to date. As some of you will recall we had a centennial celebration in 1958. The first Library location was in Old Main which burned eventually, I believe that's right isn't it, Mrs. Kehlenbeck?

Interviewer: Yes.

Orr: The first books which the Library secured came from a \$2500 appropriation which former, the late President Welch had and took east to buy the books to start the Library. In 1891 the Library--I don't know whether that was because Old Main burned or not, was that true?

Interviewer: No, Old Main had not burned at that time, it didn't burn until about 1900.

Orr: In any case, in 1891 the Library moved to Morrill Hall, one of the oldest buildings on campus now and there was one floor, or most of one floor given over to the Library. Mrs. Kehlenbeck in her photo collection has a photograph of that library. In 1913 the Library moved back to the sight of Old Main Hall, it was then called, the new building was Central Building and is now known as Beardshear Hall where the Library stayed until 1925. I never did see it there but it was located in a series of rooms, lobbies, corridors, scattered everywhere, even down in the basement of the building because there wasn't room elsewhere for it. Then the first separate library building was constructed in 1925 and opened in spring of that year. And at that time, believe it or not, the enrollment was under 4,000 students. And the president, President Pearson, at that time thought that the Library building was of a size that we

would never fill. Well, it was filled within five years, the bookstacks part at least, after completion. Then we stored books in the Memorial Union, over where the band shell is now located, and in 1940 built an elaborate storage building, all to house books which could not be housed in the main Library. Now as everyone knows the enrollment has been increasing, it is now over 15,000 students and believe it or not at busy times students sit on stairways and even on the floor. We are encouraging dormitories, fraternities, sororities to allocate special areas for study and to maintain quiet hours at least from 7:00 in the evening until 10:00. Well, Dorothy, that's our situation regarding the location of the Library and the growing enrollment, and the crowded, it makes professors mad, angry rather, when they can't find a place to sit down and the students, too. For that reason we are opening at 7:00 in the morning and we are running midnight, until midnight seven days a week. And it may very soon come to 1:00 a.m. in the mornings.

Interviewer: I'm sure that the increasing enrollment is affecting the Library in other ways and I know that we have expanded as far as the first addition and there are other areas of expansion. Would you like to comment on that?

Orr: We have been studying library expansion for over a quarter of a century. I've been here that long. I've been here since 1926 as a student and many designs have been drawn during this quarter of a century period. The first addition to the original building was opened in 1961. It was out of date before it was completed because there wasn't enough money to build a wing or an addition the size we needed, but it was opened in 1961. We are now well advanced in studying plans, developing plans and specifications for a second addition which will extend farther west and will, thank goodness, remove Building N, one of the early barrack build-

ings which you still see dotting the campus. We hope to have this second addition completed in time for occupancy early in 1969 or hopefully very late in 1968, but it is coming. A third addition has been approved by the Board of Regents and funds, as I understand it, will be sought from the Legislature in, well next year, '67 isn't it, Dorothy?

Interviewer: Yes.

Orr: For this third addition. Now that will end the additions on the original building. At some time in the distant future there will be a second library building, probably designed especially for undergraduate students. Some other universities have these facilities, starting out say with a hundred volumes, books designed especially for undergraduates. The time will come when we, too, will have such a structure. The size of the book collection, Dorothy was going to ask me that right now or very soon, back, oh, a quarter of a century or more ago we had a hundred and some thousand books which for a university library is a mere pittance. We now have five hundred and eighty thousand or so and it isn't going to be too many years, believe it or not, until we'll have a million volumes and with the growing enrollment, the increasing numbers of faculty members, a million volumes won't be any too many. Now, up until now we've emphasized the basic and applied fields of the biological and physical sciences and social sciences and certain other areas that you find listed in the catalog. But we're starting now to round out the coverage of offerings in instruction and research and including now liberal arts and humanities. These had been service courses in these fields up to date without any degrees, master's degrees or doctor's degrees being given. Therefore we've been able to sort of skate along you might say on a minimum of expenditures for material in these

fields. Now that graduate work is starting in these fields, the library will have to spend a great deal of money to build up these collections in liberal arts and humanities in order that students will have the material they need for advanced degrees.

Interviewer: Mr. Orr, just the fact that you have a library to put the books in, actually to house the books is only a small part of your problem, isn't that right?

Orr: Well, that's right. There's a matter of staff and Dorothy, you're no problem you know, in fact, I couldn't get along without you. But to give people some idea, we have about twenty, I'm going to give these in round numbers, professional librarians who have master's degrees in library science from library schools. In addition to those twenty we have fifty so called non-professional assistants who--typists, stenographers, book chasers, shelveers, messengers, all types of non-professional employees. And then working along side these fifty full-time people and in many cases doing the same work are eighty student employees working from three hours a day up to, well I know when I worked here as a student I worked up to thirty hours a week and some students still do that. This means they have to stay up very late at night to get their assignments and it's a difficult job but it can be done and is being done and if it weren't being done some students wouldn't be in college.

Interviewer: Mr. Orr, more and more books are being published and more and more journals are being published, this creates a problem for your staff also, doesn't it?

Orr: We are storing books right now in some cases in packing boxes and unfortunately the cockroaches have gotten at some of them and we've quickly taken them out of the boxes and put them out in the open where

they seem to be less vulnerable to cockroaches, silverfish and the like. Now when we mention book collections, Dorothy, I might say that by that term I don't mean books and magazines alone. There are other types of materials which are included in book collections such as theses, microfilms, tapes, microcards, microfiches--if you wonder what microfiches is it's a sheet form of microfilm-- and the library has these materials of all of these types. The so called microforms like microfilms, microcards, and the like require special readers because they are reduced in print in size. I might say, Dorothy, in case you think the people who may listen to this sometime are interested, we have six main areas of activity here in the library. We have two whose duties include the acquisition of materials through gift, purchase, and exchange. We exchange with countries all over the world even behind the iron curtain and the bamboo curtain, so called. These are research agencies which are needed from world wide sources on campus here for the research being undertaken here at Iowa State. Then we have, in addition to the two Acquisition Departments, we have a department which processes this material. In other words, catalogs it and gives the books, magazines and so forth call numbers and makes catalog cards, in other words get material ready to be used. Then we have two departments that do nothing but help patrons use the materials, these are the Circulation Department and the Reference Department. And the people at those two places are available to help anybody who comes in wanting to read material and can't find it. We're on an open shelf, open service basis and some people do need help. The sixth main area of activity is called Library Use Instruction. We have five full time instructors teaching students how to use the library. Now this is quite a chore, it's quite expensive, but I really believe it pays off because when the students

graduate from college they won't have a professor at their elbows to give them the answers to questions they may have. So they've got to learn to look up material on their own.

Interviewer: Mr. Orr, I'm sure that the philosophy of library work and library science has changed through the years since you became interested in library work.

Orr: I don't think I remember back this far but in the early days in this country and still in Europe to some extent there was a custodial complex. In other words the emphasis is on keeping the books, preserving them, not letting them get lost or stolen or torn up or what have you. Today the emphasis is on use. We'd rather have a book used up than to have it stay and gather dust on the shelf. And I think every library in this country, in fact I'm certain of it, will emphasize this aspect of the use, the purpose of book collections. There is the story of one eastern university once, the librarian was asked how he was getting along and he said, well, every book was on its shelf but one and he was after it then. We no longer follow that philosophy.

Interviewer: If you don't mind, Mr. Orr, I'd like to get a little bit personal. You mentioned that you worked in the library as a student and I believe you have been here in one capacity or another ever since, isn't that right?

Orr: Well, I was going to end up this saga by saying I'd been here forty years except when I spent nine months getting my library degree. This is true, from 1926 until the present time. I think I have a little mileage left, not too much. But over these forty years as alumni and visitors groups to the campus can testify there have been many, many changes in buildings and design of the campus, size of the campus, size of the student enrollment, of the staff, the programs of study, research, extension, everything's grown and expanded and is continuing to do so.

In 1930 I started work, if you want to go on with this biographical sketch, I started full time work in 1930, became director in 1946, twenty years ago and I'm still working at that job and I hope to be for a few years more to come. Now the person who's been interviewing me today is Mrs. Dorothy Kehlenbeck who is in charge of our history collection and I think now would be a good time to turn the tables and put her on to let her tell about her work which, as a matter of fact is very, very important. Dorothy.

Interviewer: First I would like to say that I've been ever grateful to you for giving me the opportunity of doing this work. I don't know how in the world I was ever so lucky to be asked. But I remember at the time when you approached me you thought it would be a part time job for about a year. Well, that was thirteen years ago and I must say I've enjoyed every minute of it. In 1953 the Alumni Achievement Fund donated \$2500 to put some historical material that was stored around in boxes in some kind of usable order. My first job really was to sort pictures and classify them and also devise a classification system for the correspondence and papers pertaining to the University.

Orr: I'd like to say, Dorothy, at this point to interrupt, that we got this \$2500 due to Dr. Hilton's interest in such a project.

Intergiewer: Yes, I'm glad you mentioned that. In fact, his interest became so great that when the \$2500 was used up he was willing for the project to continue and has been very interested in it ever since. The Iowa State History Collection has been housed in what's called the Library Conference Room. It's a very lovely room, paneled walls and ceilings with a very interesting fire place. This room has had other uses, hasn't it Mr. Orr?

Orr: The original name for this room was the Faculty Reading Room. We hoped

to have easy chairs like they have at clubs, you know, where you sit and watch the people go by and nice books, or nice bindings, but we've never been able to do that. We've had to use it as a classroom, as an office, a workroom. And as a matter of fact, it has been used in one sense or another as a workroom since the building was opened.

Interviewer: It's certainly had an interesting history, the last thirteen years at least. One of my most interesting collections is the George Washington Carver collection of letters, especially with Dr. Pammel. George Washington Carver graduated from Iowa State in 1894, received his master's degree in 1896, was also for a short time on the faculty. Dr. Pammel was a close friend of his, they maintained correspondence all through Dr. Pammel's life. The Tuskegee Institute and the George Washington Carver National Monument were both interested in this correspondence and had it copied. So as well as having the originals here there are copies to be found other places. We also have requests from school children about Dr. Carver and I have prepared a brochure, a bulletin sort of thing, which I can mail out to these children to answer their questions, especially about his years on the Iowa State Campus.

Orr: At Tuskegee, I guess it's called a museum that has Booker T. Washington material as well as George Washington Carver and Dorothy, I believe you've been there too, have you not?

Interviewer: Yes, but not in recent years.

Orr: Dorothy doesn't know this herself yet, but two days ago I had a telephone call from a nice lady in Des Moines who is going to give to Dorothy some old Bombs and there will be one or more letters from Carver among the materials which she is going to turn over to Iowa State. And of course we're very eager to obtain this material.

Interviewer: We're always eager to get material like this. Another part of our collection is what we call the Pammel papers. It's really the nucleus of our collection. Dr. Pammel was chairman of the History Committee for a good many years. In fact he dates back a good ways. He came onto the campus in 1889. Because of this interest he kept a good many papers which are really a valuable part of our collection today. Dr. Ross, who has been our college historian, in fact wrote two histories of Iowa State, is another important contributor. He also served on the History Committee for a good many years. I wish that I could convince other professors that this is the ideal place to deposit their important papers. Perhaps I haven't done as much as I should in trying to educate these gentlemen that this is the place for administrative papers as well as papers from professors. I sincerely hope that at some later date more progress in that score will be made.

Orr: Dorothy's defense here that this is by no means her fault alone. Many administrators regard their files personal property and for that reason and I suppose other reasons too, we are not able to get our hands on that correspondence and other materials. In fact, I think, Dorothy has more correspondence from early presidents like the former President Beardshear than she does current administrators.

Interviewer: Yes, it is true that I have papers of some of the older professors more than of the more recent ones. As Mr. Orr said, in 1958 we celebrated the Centennial and that was the year that I worked full time rather than half time as I usually do. It was a very interesting year. One of the things that I enjoyed doing was compiling a chronology of important events of the first one hundred years. I have continued that on a yearly basis and in 1962 a five year supplement was published. I'm hoping that perhaps after ten years we could incorporate it in the

others and have a chronology of the first 110 years.

Orr: I believe, Dorothy, the History Committee as such was discontinued about the time we started planning for the Centennial. I remember I was walking up the steps of Beardshear one day and I met Dr. Hilton and he stopped me and asked if I would take over the general chairmanship of the committee for the Centennial which was a very innocent sounding inquiry at the time which developed into a great deal of work in many committees before we did celebrate it in 1958. And then, of course, in 1959 our name was changed from Iowa State College to Iowa State University of Science and Technology. This for some reason couldn't be done during the Centennial year but was done the following year. Now Dorothy, you have many visitors coming in to see you. What do they want?

Interviewer: I have many students who come in to use the collection and that's the fun part of my job. I really enjoy helping the students and the contact with them. I have reporters from the Iowa State Daily who want to write articles, students preparing themes who need information on history and history of the buildings, photography classes need information for their cut line, students in speech like information about the traditions, legends, history of the school as well as its organizations. Students come in to borrow pictures, I have lots of those, for Veishea and Homecoming displays. It really is a great satisfaction to help these students, especially when they show such an interest and don't seem to be doing it just because it's an assignment.

Orr: The number of files Dorothy has here, and I think it borders on about nearly thirty all together, plus additional ones on top, and these files contain pictures, correspondence, other materials, thousands and thousands of items. And they're well organized, well classified. She's

the only one who knows how to find the material, that is most of it and with the exception of Dr. Ross, Dorothy is better versed on the history of Iowa State University than anyone else on campus.

Interviewer: Thank you, Mr. Orr. As far as sort of an educated guess I've estimated that I have about 23,000 pictures and about 600 different files of information of one sort or another. Another thing I've been doing recently of which this is a part, I've been trying to build a library of living history, having interviews with faculty members who have been around the campus a long time and who have contributed much. I've had interesting interviews with such people as Dr. Buchanan, Dr. Spedding, Dr. Lush, Dr. Kildee, Dr. Bliss, Dr. Ross, to name just a few.

Orr: Dorothy, let me interrupt here. I called Mr. Pride, Harold Pride who's formerly director of the Union to find out, in fact I called him this morning, if he had been interviewed on the history of the Union and he thought he had but in the lists you have here I don't see his name, have you interviewed him?

Interviewer: Yes, I have interviewed him. That was one name I didn't think to put down.

Orr: I might say also that Mr. Pride is starting, sometimes you get these things started and never finish as Mr. Brown, my predecessor once decided that he should write a history of the Iowa State University Library which unfortunately it never did get done. I've kept, I don't mean to brag on this, Dorothy, but I've been a member of the Board of Directors of the Memorial Union since 1948 and I now have something like eight bound volumes of correspondence and other materials related solely to Memorial Union and these I'm going to make available for Mr. Pride's use when he writes his history.

Interviewer: That's a remarkable record. I'm delighted that all of that historical

material has been kept. Often that isn't the case and you know now I've become a regular squirrel. I don't want to throw anything away for fear it will have some historical significance sometime.

Orr: You sound like an out-of-date librarian.

Interviewer: I'm afraid maybe I do. Another interesting part of my work is visiting with alumni when they come back on Alumni Days. I have had interviews with such people as Henry Wallace, Earl Shreve, Mr. H.J. Brunnier, as well as Mr. and Mrs. C.Y. Stevens, Mr. Stevens before his untimely death. As I've said before I think I'm the luckiest person in the world to be able to have done this work and I've always felt it was the best job on the campus. Again I'd like to express my appreciation to you, Mr. Orr, for having given me the opportunity.

Orr: Dorothy, I'm intending, at least as long as I have anything to say about it to keep you here. I used to know Dorothy a long time ago as a gracious hostess in her own home and that was the only capacity I knew her and I felt when I was there that I certainly had to be on my good behavior. I still am, incidentally, when I visit her home. But now I've known her as a colleague since 1953 and I admire, respect, and like her very much as a colleague and we just couldn't operate without her.

Interviewer: Thank you, Mr. Orr. I can't imagine working for a nicer boss or working under more pleasant conditions than I have during these last few years.

#