

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTIY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Youngstown State University Project

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O.H. 120

PROFESSOR DONALD ELSER

Interviewed by

Terence M. Lynch

on

May 12, 1977

DONALD ELSER

Professor Donald Elser, Chairman of the Speech and Dramatics Department of Youngstown State University, was born on January 15, 1915 in North Lima, Ohio. In 1931, after attending area grade and high schools, Elser enrolled in Youngstown College. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1935, attended the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1937 and received his Masters Degree of Literature from the University of Pittsburgh in 1939.

Professor Elser was hired to teach English in the Greenfield, Ohio school system. He continued to teach in area schools until 1942 when he enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Youngstown College for the Reserve Air Corps. Unable to make it as a flyer, Elser entered the Air Corps as a member of the ground personnel department. After getting out of the Army in the fall of 1945, Elser began teaching Speech and Theater in the English Department on a part-time basis. While teaching he worked on his first love, playwriting. In the early 1950's Elser became full time on the university staff.

Over the years, Professor Elser has written a number of one-act plays and has been a director in the university theater productions. Some of his published plays are, Balcony Scene, Pink Dress, Ticket in the City, Concert in the Park and Special Guest. He was also instrumental in

bringing WYSU - FM radio station to the university.

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INTERVIEWEE: PROFESSOR DONALD ELSER

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SUBJECT: History of Youngstown University

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L: This is an interview with Professor Donald Elser, chairman of the speech and dramatic department for the Youngstown State University Project on the history of Youngstown University in Professor Elser's office in the speech and dramatic department on May 12, 1977 at 11:30 a.m.

Professor Elser, could you please speak a little of your background previous to coming to YSU in 1946.

E: Well, I first came to the university in 1931 as a student and I graduated in 1935 with a degree in teaching. At that time of course, English, speech, theater, and everything were combined. So if you had an emphasis in speech and theater, you still came out with an English major. And I ended up with a provisional certificate to teach in Ohio in English and history strangely enough. I had a minor in history. I didn't teach the first year. One reason, I just wanted to travel around and do nothing, and another reason, I was only twenty when I got out of here and I was a little young to go out and teach and jobs were scarce as they are now. So I worked at various places including a music store, a trucking company and all of that for a year. And then I got a job teaching in southern Mahoning County out at Greenford High School which is now South Range having been consolidated when I was, incidentally, president of the board. They united with North Lima School where I had graduated. So I taught in public schools for quite some time and I next appeared at Youngstown College during the war when they had a

civilian pilot training program for reserve Air Corps people, since I was too old to go into the cadets. The Civilian Pilot Training Program was put into effect to take care of older fellows who were supposedly training for air transport command, ferrying planes and that sort of thing. My brother who was younger than I, was already in that program and he was teaching here in that program under the direction of Dr. Ford, who was chairman of the physics department. So I came up here then again as a student in about 1942, I think it was. I took my primary training here at Youngstown College and then went on to the University of Toledo and took my secondary training. Then I got into cross country and washed out. So that was the end of my flying. But I went on in the Air Corps as ground personnel. I got out of the Army in 1945, the fall of 1945. And I started teaching part-time here the following semester. We were on the semester basis at that time. I started here in the English department teaching speech and English composition on a part-time basis. At the time, I was very much interested in several other things and I was teaching part-time in order to make some money while I was making up my mind exactly what I was going to do. I taught speech and theater and then I started writing plays and published a few. I wanted to write and I didn't know how much time I should put into teaching and how much I should put into writing. So I taught part-time here for a few years. Finally they said that I could have a full-time job as an instructor in the English department teaching speech courses. There weren't too many at that time. I taught Interpretation. I taught a class in radio, and produced shows on the radio. We had shows on WFMJ every week produced by students. Later on we had some television shows. This went on for awhile and I directed some plays. I directed operas for Dana School of Music under the direction of Dr. Sterns who had been here when I was a student. I wasn't a music major but I sang in the glee club that he directed and got to know him quite well. So then I came up here and started teaching and he knew I had an interest in theater and a theater background.

In the meantime I had picked up a masters degree at the University of Pittsburgh. I had gone to the Conservatory of Music in Chicago and studied music. In the secondary school where I was teaching they said if I picked up enough credits to teach music I could get some extra money and I could do their musical program from the first grade on through high school, and that sounded interesting. So I went to the American Conservatory of

Music and picked up a number of hours for that. I got off into speech and theater more seriously and went on with that. Some time in the early 1950's I became full time here on the staff and continued to teach all of the speech courses and do some theater. Although Mr. Foley was doing a lot of the directing at that time, of the plays, I would direct one occasionally, including some one-acts of my own. We put through what we called a communications sequence which somehow absorbed the basic speech into a twelve hour English program which you probably know about. I was against it at the time because I just didn't follow the reasoning that if you speak well you necessarily can write well and vice versa. I just didn't think they belonged together. I was very much opposed, but I was just a minority and I was only an instructor. I forget when I became an assistant professor and I didn't know it for awhile. That is the way that we took promotions back at that time. Now they seem to be life and death, but back at that time they weren't.

So this went on for quite a while and I did a number of things with Dr. Sterns in the Dana School of Music, Gilbert and Sullivan and things like that. He would do the music and I would do the staging, and I enjoyed it. Finally Mr. Foley died suddenly of a heart attack. They called me in and said then I would have the entire program of Theater and English. It was Theater and Speech, but it was still in English. I thought that we should move toward a department in these two areas because the only way we could grow and add staff and get anywhere would be to form a department. I can't give you an exact date; I know it was four or five years before we went State. So it must have been around the early 1960's that we formed a department of Speech which included Theater and Radio. And it was pretty rough going because we had no basic speech courses. They were all in the English department. We really had no courses at all that were service courses. We were kind of existing on our own majors and minors of which we had very few, and we limped along with a small staff. Mr. Crites was the first faculty member because he had been teaching speech before and had slipped over into social science. I got him back into speech. And we had a lot of part-time people. We had Strouss' Auditorium where we started giving some very good productions. We did give at least one Shakespeare play a year. We did a lot of the classics. We were giving a program of about three full length plays a year together with one-acts. We had quite an active program even though we were just a very small department. We added courses slowly and I started building up the faculty. I added a lady named Mrs. Maryann Hartman who

came in and did our forensic program. I had been doing the forensic program, the radio and the TV and directing all myself. It was kind of a one man thing. And then teaching fifteen hours too which was ridiculous but that's the way it was back at that time. And gradually then I got people in to help because I just couldn't do it all. I got part-time people, I had a lady named Mrs. Dorothy Gmucs who came in who helped direct. I would co-direct and produce. All the sets were built by students; I had no scene designer. I had a student, Joe Flauto who was very talented. He is now teaching, professor of scene design at Indiana University. He designed the costumes and the sets, the students sewed them, built them and did everything. We produced some very great shows I think. I have a lot of nice pictures and slides and tapes of the shows. Right now we have eight faculty including myself plus about eleven part-time people. In the last three or four years the size of the department has doubled. Right now about sixty percent of our classes are taught by part-time people. We have some very fine part-time people, except it is not quite the same as if they would be full-time. Then they would do committee work for one thing but they don't get paid for that. They don't get paid much at all in fact. I have been very lucky in getting good people.

I have been here at the university since when I started as a student and everything was all in one building. As a matter of fact, the year that I came here in 1931, Jones Hall wasn't finished in September. Jones Hall wasn't finished. We were in the house that used to stand there where the library is. I don't know whether you remember that, the old brick house, the Wick Mansion.

L: Oh yes, I remember.

E: There was a coach house in the back which was used for faculty offices since the main building wasn't open. I came up here in the freshman class and we were all meeting; faculty, students, everybody in that building, the coach house in the back, and the two churches. We had our gym down at the YMCA, our classes down there. Then in about a month we moved over to Jones Hall in time for what they called at that time, hell week for freshmen which has luckily disappeared. It was absolutely ridiculous; for example, snake marches. We had one through downtown Youngstown and I ended up--well we were coming down a stairway in Woolworth's five and ten cents store. The stairway is on the opposite side of the building where the escalator is. There used to be a stairway going up there. We were marching all holding on to the

shoulder in front of us or holding on to hands, or something, and as we came down the stairs, the upperclassmen were there whacking at us with paddles. And a fellow took a swing at me and I ducked and I went right through the door and smashed the door and glass flew every direction. And later on when I came back up here I met the temporary head of the university whose name was Nearpass. He was standing, I remember up on the third floor talking about this march downtown and said that was just ridiculous. He said, "I understand that one of the students went through a doorway at the Woolworth's store." And I said, "Yes, I understand that too." I wasn't about to tell him who it was. But that was back in the ridiculous days.

We broke into the Warner Theater, which is now the Symphony Center, at about 12:30 p.m. The show had just started. The movie had just started. And we came tearing through the front entrance and I still remember the usher swinging something at everybody. I think it was one of those velvet ropes that they used to channel people the right direction. He was trying to keep people out by shouting, "You can't come in here!" He just got tramped underfoot and we went on in and scattered over the theater. Finally they stopped the show and tried to find everybody, but it was pretty difficult to locate everybody. Finally they just gave up and then everybody stayed for the show for awhile and then left. Once they got us in there it was dark and they could no longer get us together again. We weren't about to gather into a line and march back up the hill anymore. So we came back up when we were good and ready. But that is when you had what they call "hell week". They stopped that around 1947, about the time the veterans came back. The veterans coming back after three years of hell in the Army weren't about to be put through another hell week as freshmen by some seniors who more than likely hadn't been in the Army at all. Fraternities held out with the paddle bit for quite some time but you don't see that now. I mean it has been quite a long time since I have seen anybody walking across campus with a paddle. At that time, freshmen had to wear a beanie and carry a basket of cigarettes and matches for the upperclassmen. Girls had to carry gum and candy and go through a lot of nonsense. Well you can just imagine veterans coming up here and being told that they have to wear a beanie and run around bowing to the upperclassmen. So hell week just went down the drain when the veterans came.

When I came up here to teach I had mostly men in my classes. Girls were very much in the minority. I would have a

speech class of twenty and there would be two girls in the whole class. They were all single girls then because married women just didn't go to school then. Older fellows and older girls were unknown. In 1939, 1940, 1941 my wife started up here then and she was married. She was one of the few married students on the campus. But after the vets came back that all changed, because the vets were mostly married and older. They attracted other older people who felt that going to college was not only for kids but was also for older people and the whole complexion of the place changed, including a lot of the childish pranks that you were supposed to be doing when you joined fraternities. That held out, they were still doing some silly things in the 1960's. I think that all ended about the time of the riots. I remember coming one morning here and finding all the phone booths on the campus full of bricks. During the night somebody had to prove something for a fraternity and had to go get these bricks somewhere--stole them, I don't know how they ever did it.

A lot of people predicted that the vets would be terrible students but they were the best students I ever had. I always liked all the students here, but I think I identified more with these fellows. They were my age and I was in with them. I taught speech and many of the speeches given consisted of one kind or another about the Air Force, the Navy and the Marines. We identified with each other and we were continuing to a certain extent, some of the things that they had been doing in the Army. We got together and discussed the good old days which weren't so far back. Sometimes they were pretty terrible, but in retrospect they make interesting speech topics. The girls were completely lost in the classes. They would get up and talk about what they did last summer. "I went to Lake Erie," etc. The men would talk about what I did two summers ago on the bombing raid with the 8th Air Force over Hamburg. (Laughter) And a poor girl would get up and talk about homecoming and Struthers High School!

I remember the Jambar ran articles about girls protesting that they were being treated by the men on the campus like their older brothers or fathers. Those fellows were great students. A lot of my forensic students went down to city hall, down to the court house. Go downtown and you will find a lot of them were up here going to school. So I will go down there and at the police station and hear, "Professor Elser, remember me?" A surprising number of lawyers, judges and people

like that downtown have taken speech courses either from me or Mr. Crites, who was here for quite a long time and who died a few years back. I have been here as I say, since it was that first little building and then to Jones and then to a lot of barracks where we would have classes. And the cafeteria, the faculty room was about three times as big as this room. Most of the faculty came here to eat here on campus and the conversation was great. You got to know everybody and made a lot of great friends. I guess there just aren't very many people around anymore that go back on campus farther than I, 1931, as a student. Now I can't say as far as teaching here that I am the oldest because there are those who have been here longer. Mrs Dykema, for instance, was here before I was and there are others, staff-wise too. But I am going on 31 years which doesn't seem that long. I'm certainly not going to be here 31 more years though. I have watched it grow from Youngstown College to Youngstown University to Youngstown State University and survived, intend to survive until I retire.

L: Who were some of the outstanding professors and administrators in the years that you spent here?

E: Well of course, after Nearpass, it was Dr. Jones, our first president. He was here until we went State. Assisting Dr. Jones was Dr. Smith who was a great fellow, a Rhodes Scholar. Some people, looking back to when we were small, look down their noses at a little college, a little liberal arts school, first supported through the YMCA. They got away from the YMCA partly because any money they raised would go right back to the YMCA and you felt that you weren't building a college, you were building a YMCA. They finally set it up as a privately endowed institution with a self perpetuating board of trustees. And it became the largest private school like that in the state. By the time we went to a state university, it was the largest private institution that is, non-municipal. Akron was a municipal, Toledo was a municipal university, and of course, there was a state university, but this was a private school and a large one. Dr. Jones was president until President Pugsley came here. Dr. Smith was very well known throughout the country. He was one of Dewey's speech writers when Dewey ran for president and lost, which we always kidded him about. He was a fine fellow. I just identified with him and we got along well. He came here I think, shortly after I left as a student. There was Mr. Pickered who was business manager, Freida Flint who has died some years back, was doing all the public relations here. It was just one nice big happy family.

Something that is impossible now as big as we are. I mean you just don't know many of the people on the campus. I used to know every professor here. We became good friends regardless of what area they were in because you didn't have the feeling of the divisions like you have now.

The Dana School of Music was acquired along the way. It came down from Warren, Ohio. The Dana School of Music was one of the big music schools in the midwest. It was little Ivy League compared maybe to Peabody and Juilliard and some of the big music schools on the east coast, but it was very well known. In fact, it's speciality was brass instruments. They provided a lot of the players for John Phillip Sousa's Band and other big bands back at that time. People would come from miles, thousands of miles to study at Dana. Well, it fell into hard times and it was limping along. And the university bought the name, really, and acquired some of their remaining faculty and brought them down here to the campus. They had to call it the Dana School of Music in order to use the name Dana, that was part of the agreement. It was probably one of the first independent schools within the college. We had the school of business administration and started the school of education, and we gradually worked toward the different schools. That was in the 1950's, I don't know if anybody ever looked down their nose at what we were back then. We were small but you got a good education. When I came here as a student I ran into some great people. We had a lady teaching English named Eleanor North, who is still alive somewhere. I saw a reference to her in a newspaper and I wanted to check through public relations to find out about her because I would like to write her a letter. She was a grand person. She traveled a lot and later left here and went on to teach somewhere else. I took freshman English from her and was having a difficult time because she said I couldn't spell!! But during the time that I was taking her course, I sent a short story to Writer's Digest-- and I got honorable mention. I got a letter saying "You are not included in the first hundred prizes, out of two thousand or three thousand entries, your short story was not included in the prize winners"--I have a copy of that letter somewhere--"Your story was included in the next two hundred entries!" And I took that to class and showed it to Miss North. She didn't give me an A, she just gave me a B. I don't know what I would have had to do, win the contest, to get an A.

This was during the Depression and it was hard to get money even though tuition then was much lower. You

could get a meal in the cafeteria, a full meal for a quarter. The cafeteria at that time was in Jones Hall back where the admissions office is located. That's where the cafeteria was. And you could go in there and get a full course meal for a quarter. Or I could go downtown to the Isaly's Dairy and get a ten cent milkshake and pay ten cents for a minced ham sandwich and have five cents left over for miscellaneous things like saving it up for the end of the week and going to the show or something downtown. There were at that time, at least seven or eight motion picture shows running all the time. They had a live show at the Palace during the day and a live show at the Hippodrome at times and then the old Park theater down on East Federal ran what they called vaudeville. This was second grade, third grade vaudeville and a movie for something like thirty cents. So while you people have Kilcawley now to waste your time in, we went downtown and sat in movies, saw live stage shows, big bands and that sort of thing. Oh, there must have been at least eight or nine theaters including the burlesque. When we would want to cut classes, we would go down to a movie. I did my share of that because I was interested more or less in the theater and I could always use it as an excuse for research!

L: What was a typical day like for you as a teacher here?

E: Well, for one thing, I had eight o'clock classes most of the time. I wanted them, I ran into difficulty when I started directing plays because you would run late at night and then have to get up for an eight o'clock class. But I was interested in getting all my classes in the morning because I wanted to go home and write. And we weren't bothered with committee meetings like we have now. I would just have classes in the morning so that I could keep a writing schedule, because at that time, I was doing some writing. And also sometimes I would go up to a high school and direct a play there, mostly mine. They were a good place to try them out. But I would come in in the morning and teach most of my classes, four mornings. I had evening classes occasionally.

L: Is the university different now than it was when you first arrived?

E: Well mostly it is a matter of size. And the bigger you get, the less you have the feeling of one big happy family. The people on the campus here that are my friends, I don't see them for weeks at a time unless I go hunting for them. There's buildings spread all over. All that section over through there, where the power plant is, used to be the Elms Gardens where everybody would hang out. And beyond

that, up the street, somewhere up in there, was the Elms Ballroom where the big name bands used to come. This was apart from the university. And on weekends we would go and listen to the big bands play there. This was the social life. The Elms Gardens was one of the closest bars to the university but it of course was up-the hill and seemed far away then. When you think how close the university now runs to Stambaugh Auditorium! At that time, Stambaugh Auditorium was way up in there somewhere. Our entire thinking now about the university in relation to other parts of town has changed. Downtown is no closer; I mean, it is right where it always was. But I don't think the downtown is as important now to the students maybe as it was then, because we are more self-contained here. Students can come to the university and find something to do on the campus all day long. A big library where anyone can go, a student center which we never had. The student center used to be places like the Elms or downtown someplace, that sort of thing. So that is one thing about the university; there are more activities going on. You would come in as a student and there wasn't too much doing. There were the fraternities and they would have their dances and after all you could have a dance down in Strouss' Auditorium in Jones. That would take care of all the students who come. They still have a big ball up in the center of the ceiling which they finally got working for the last play. One of those crystal balls that turns and reflects. It went out of commission ten years ago when there was a leak upstairs in one of the labs and the water came down and burned out the motor, but they fixed it for the last play. I noticed it was working. That was it, that is where the dance was. The band would be up on stage. Of course when I first came here to teach, Strouss' Auditorium was only half as big as it is now. The stage was at the other end and they turned it all around and added on. And at that time, that was a big addition, that was a big deal. We had a new stage and all that. Now it is in the past, forgotten by most but not forgotten by those who worked there. But there is more for the students to do on the campus now. More places to eat. We have always had a cafeteria, but that got tiresome after awhile, and you couldn't change around. Now there are a couple places over here that you can eat, move around. And the faculty room besides the main cafeteria; you would wait in line with the students and eat the same food and then walk into this faculty room and sit there. At that time there were some very good restaurants downtown. They are scarce now. But the Tod Hotel; we used to go down there quite often at noon and

eat. That is one way things have changed,

There is more paper work, more committees, more complications nowadays it seems, than there was then. And I am talking about my involvement as a chairman. I think the more you get involved in administrative work, the more you're conscious of some of these things that go on, the red tape, it seems red tape anyway.

In thinking back, this university has been, for better or for worse, pretty much my life since I was sixteen. I was away from it for awhile but then I got back. While I was away, my brother and his wife were going here. And of course, I was coming back to dances and things because I still knew a lot of the people. A lot of people that I ran around with were still in school. And then by the time my brother got through, I think he graduated by 1937 or so; my wife started here in 1940. So I was back and she started here as a freshman in 1940 and I was back on the campus to dances and everything and then I got back when I was flying in the Air Corps Reserve and then there was a period of war where everybody got away from everything and then I came back and of course I've been here ever since except for a few summers I used to take off and vacations periods. But Youngstown College, Youngstown University, Youngstown State University has been pretty much my life. I have other interests. I've been writing. I have some plays that I've published, although I have been writing less since I am chairman because I don't have time, but I intend to remedy that. I am going to go back to some writing. The satisfaction of writing and getting them published, I have to have. I like that feeling.

Right after I got out of the Army, we moved to the place where we live now. We've lived there ever since. My dad graduated from here, my wife, my brother, three of my daughters, their husbands, so when we get a gathering of a family group and bring up Y.S.U. we can reminisce considerably because my oldest daughter came here and graduated with a Speech and Theater major and married a young man whose father was dean of men. Mr. Gillespie was dean of men and Dennis, his son was here, he had been at Harvard. He came back then he went back to Harvard and finished but he was here for awhile. My second daughter met her husband here; he's in philosophy. She graduated from here with a major in Art, he graduated with a major in Philosophy. He's now at Chicago University working on his Ph.D. in Philosophy and she's there. She graduated from Art Institute, Chicago and teaches art in Chicago. So when we have a family gathering, my brother,

his wife, one of his sons and most of my family all graduated at Y.S.U., it's not hard to get a conversation going going about this place.

L: Have the students changed at all over the years?

E: No, I think that with the exception of the Vets who are an older group, I don't think they've changed. There's no great argument on that I suppose. I don't think they've changed, I still get good students and students who don't know where they're going; some who find their way and some who don't. But I think we have a lot of good students here; always have and I think the proof of what we've had here is in the success of many of our own graduates who have been scattered around. They go places. I know at one time and I think it still exists, some of our departments here were well thought of in graduate schools. The Business Administration has a good reputation, Engineering has a good reputation. My son-in-law got into the University of Chicago graduate school with no difficulty. There are good students and bad students. You always get a bunch of people that say, "Oh, I went to Youngstown and didn't learn a thing," well that's true, that's the reason they didn't finish. That's the reason they didn't graduate. You can possibly go to Harvard and not learn anything for awhile. They won't keep you but you can go there and loaf. You can go to the best school in the country and say you went there and didn't learn anything, which is probably true. But if they graduated, that's proof of something.

L: What was President Jones like?

E: Oh, I liked President Jones. He was here for a long time. I always got along fine with him. I had a lot of respect for him. He seemed to have one formula which worked. He told the Board of Trustees, "I run the University and you fellows get me the money." And he stood behind his faculty. We went through the McCarthy era here and we had no trouble at all. I'd sound out in class against McCarthy and say all kinds of things and I never heard a thing. Now I know he would get people calling in and saying; "This fellow and that fellow said this and that in class," but he seldom if ever, passed it on down. It stopped at his office. I liked him, we always got along fine.

L: What was the general view of the people of the city of Youngstown towards the University and College?

E: It ran to all kinds of degrees of interest, admiration and criticism. We were so small sitting up on the hill. For one thing, now, we're one of the major industries in Youngstown, not only downtown but in the whole city. And we have an economic clout now we didn't have then. We were small and contained within one block. And we didn't even think we would expand on this side at all of Wick Avenue. There were no plans to ever expand over here. At one time they thought they could move the entire operation up to Wick Park, but that was stopped because somehow in the deed or whatever it is that the Wick's had when they gave it to the city, they wanted to keep it as a park and not construct any buildings or anything within it except the one building they have there now, which serves as kind of a picnic and gathering. So that was out. I think probably, as far as the college is concerned, we weren't big enough to be all that noticed. We were here and we had a Law School, incidentally, back at that time which made it possible for many, many fellows downtown right now to be in law who wouldn't be if it wouldn't have been for this law school we had here. It finally went out of business partly because it was taught by all part-time faculty, lawyers, judges, some of the best judges in the courts down here would come up and teach. Primarily an evening school and it couldn't exist then, we had to go full time and it became a costly thing and couldn't be supported but it was a part-time law school. If you go downtown and shout down the hall of City Hall or the Courthouse, you'd be surprised at the many graduates from the Youngstown Law School who will stick their head out of their office and say, "I was there." I can name more than I have fingers on my both hands the fellows down there right now that I taught, some in debate, some in forensics. So those of us who went up here and those of us who were here had great respect for the place. I think we couldn't come up to say, Ohio State, there's a snob thing about going to Ohio State and all that. And of course Kent was not as big as it is now. Kent for a long time struggled with the fact it at one time was a two year teacher's college. You could go there and in two years get your teaching certificate and teach and when they went into a four year university, they had to live that down. I think the thing that we had probably that made people kind of look down their noses--and this is no reflection of the YMCA--was that we were kind of a branch of the downtown YMCA up here on the hill that had a library and a few classes and if you went up here somehow you'd get a degree and I think that was part of the feeling people had. It's no reflection on the YMCA except the YMCA's function is not in the area in which we operated, but there are other

schools, in Cleveland for instance that were connected with the Y there. I think that's a nice thing that the YMCA took that over and got it started, and helped get us started. But it became mutually agreeable, finally, not to be connected.

L: How was the University promoted to the general public?

E: We had representatives going out to the high schools and ads in the newspaper, and word of mouth, and that sort of thing.

L: Is there any one person who was in charge of it, the promotion?

E: Freida Flint was in charge of publicity at that time. She did all of the publicity out of the office in one of the towers over there. We had no trouble getting coverage from the Vindicator at the time. They would print pictures of our plays, and students and articles, as they do now. So we had good newspaper coverage and we had representatives go out and talk to the high schools.

L: What do you think has been your major contribution to the University?

E: Mine? Oh, I don't know. (Laughter) What I like to think about, WYSU, I got that on the air, literally. Back about 1950 I got the idea that we should have a station. I have an amateur radio license--when I was here in that old building after we moved out of the old house. In Jones there was room there and I had the station there. But I got the idea that we ought to have a campus station, that is a public station that is a public FM station back in 1950 when FM started out and nobody said it was important. Everybody looked down their nose at it and even one of the local stations made the mistake of giving up their FM license and channel and hasn't been able to get it back. Well, that was their mistake. I sent and got application papers for a license. I thought that maybe we could acquire some free equipment from somebody including that station that went off the air but they sold their equipment to someone in Mexico. We never had the money because as a private institution, we were always looking for money for buildings and salaries. So when we went state, I figured, now is the time. I went to President Pugsley and gave him my suggestion for a station and he said, "Well, it sounds good but what is involved?" I said it involves getting someone here to help and I said I know of a fellow who knows all about this since he has put a station on the air like we want. Mr. Greceovich put WKTL, one of the first educational stations around, on

the air; owned by Struthers High School. I said, "He and I have talked it over and he thinks that a University station here would be a good idea." Well, President Pugsley said, "I don't know; it could be a big pain in the neck. It could be a big pain in the neck." I said, "I think it's a wise move." "Well," he says, "Why do you think we should have one?" I said, "Because there's only about one channel remaining on the FM band for educational use and if we don't get it someone else will and then it will be too late. There might be something available with a limit of fifty or seventy-five watts, but we want a super station, we want one with fifty thousand watts." He kind of laughed, so I said, "I want to get Mr. Greceovich on my staff because I have no full-time person teaching radio and television. Let's get him here and then maybe we can consider the station." So the President was giving a speech down at Struthers for commencement, and I called Mr. Greceovich and I said, "President Pugsley is down there now; you get him up into WKTL and show him your station and tell him this is the kind of station Elser has in mind. You get him up there." So, he got him up for an interview and the next day he called me and said, "Say, I talked to that man Greceovich down there and I saw that station. Do you think he'd come in and teach?" And I said, "Yes, I think he will." He says, "That's a nice set-up down there. I didn't know what you were talking about. I didn't know it could be so nice." So I hired Mr. Greceovich the following fall and we went in and had meetings with President Pugsley to explain the cost. We had the cost of the station all laid out, told him what we wanted. We wanted it not as a propaganda thing for political groups or anything like that, we said that we could get a license if we sent to Washington and explained that we wanted strictly fine arts programming, that we felt we could get this one channel, fifty thousand watts. So finally he called me and he said, "Go ahead." During the summer I went off on a trip around the world and he had called Mr. Greceovich in and said, "Where is Don Elser?" and he said, "Oh, he's out in Asia someplace." "When he comes back let's get together." So we got together and finally he said, "The money is available, go ahead." So we applied for a channel but we couldn't find a fifty thousand watt channel that wouldn't interfere with other stations. We interfered with a station in Canada, clear over in Canada, with fifty thousand watts. And finally we got permission from the FCC for twenty-two thousand-five hundred watts, which still made us the second most powerful educational station in the state. Ohio University is the only one with more power than we had, and they had fifty thousand

watts. Everybody said, "Why do you want fifty thousand?" Well, what's the difference between horse power in an engine? You know, the idea of having it. A lot of our students have worked there. We have quite a large audience. The ratings in the evening are the highest of the FM stations around. My hope is that nobody gets in there and tampers with the program and fools around with it, that it continues the way it is because I think it's a great public relations thing with the people in town who have influence, money and all that. We went off the air for a month to put up a new tower and we had all kinds of people calling and writing. A fellow called from Hubbard or Sharon, angry as the devil. He said, "My friend, my neighbor and I have just put in fifteen hundred dollars worth of hi-fi equipment and," he said, "You go off the air the next week. What do you need, money, what do you need support? What is it?" "No," I said, "We'll be off the air because we're putting up a new tower, a new antenna."

At one time, any plays given were just given as extra curricular activities. And it didn't matter whether they were given or not, nobody really cared, but the students did. Forensics at one time was treated as extra curricular. Radio, well, if you can get some students together to put on a radio show okay, "But you don't get any funding." It was mostly commercial donating time. In the area of radio, television, theater, I think I've probably been as active as anybody, probably more so since I've been here longer. Now, my job as chairman has been to get some good people in there because I'm not going to be here forever. Gradually see that in these different areas we have some good people coming in and they can go on and build and go on from there.

- L: Looking back, is there anything you'd like to have changed?
- E. In looking back on my life there isn't a thing I wouldn't do about the same. If I ever had the chance to do it again, I'd do it the same.
- L: How about in terms of the University and it's structure?
- E: I always have my two cents worth to put in. No, I don't think so. I think that it developed about the way it could develop over the years with the people who were here including myself. And in our individual areas, we I think, did the best we could considering the circumstances and if we had to do it over again, I think there

might be different ways we'd go about accomplishing things but I think that the whole pattern would remain pretty much the same because it had to follow, that the way it was done was the result of the people in it, the environment, the money, all of those things. And I think they've done a remarkable job over the years here in creating all that's been done and carrying it through. My concern at the moment is that the academic side used to have much more input into everything that was done. My concern is that slowly, that somehow seems to be slipping away from academic. And I think that is dangerous because the academic part of the university, with all of its faults and it certainly isn't perfect, still establishes guidelines that I think are good for the University because we are an educational institution and we are an educational institution that exists for the students and we sometimes I think, lose track of that and we feel that we have to entertain the whole community. I know we have to have good relations with the rest of the community but there's a limit to what we should be doing for the community at the expense of what we do for the students. As we are bigger here and sit on the hill and are noticed more by the public, the question you see, is how much are we going to let the public dictate what we are. Now, in the past when we were small, we were what we were because we believed in what we were and the public did not dictate, even though we had large gifts given to the University, there were no strings attached and the academic side of things was very strong. Decisions were made, simple decisions were made that should still be made by the faculty, by the chairman, by the deans. You have to remember that if students don't turn up and the professors don't turn up all these other things will be meaningless. Take Kilcawley over there, why should Kilcawley exist if we have no classes? Tomorrow we could close down Kilcawley completely and we'd still have a University here. We'd still have classes. And I would come in in my car and park out there and go to my class and meet my class and the students, as many students do, would come in here and get in their cars and go back home. I'm a little annoyed at times to find decisions being made by people who seem to forget that if it wouldn't be for the students and the professors, everybody else could go home.

L: I have a few questions I'd like to clear up here. What year did you graduate with your master's?

E: 1939.

L: When were you at the American Conservatory of Music?

E: Summer of 1937.

L: Could you tell me some of the names of the plays you have written?

E: Well, there are a whole lot of them there. Those are five, Balcony Scene, Pink Dress, Concert in the Park, Special Guest, Ticket to the City. Balcony Scene, that play has been given thousands of times. I collected two dollars every time it was given. It's a five dollar royalty play, now ten dollars [1980] and I've collected forty percent of the royalty which was two dollars. The total amount of royalties that I've collected up till now, over a number of years was around nine or ten thousand dollars. So you figure at two dollars a performance, not including a lot of people who neglected to pay their royalty, which we won't talk about here. It had a strange history. It was turned down by Samuel French, which is the biggest play publisher in the world. They turned it down because they said it was a good play but it wouldn't sell. And it was turned down by a number of other companies. And it ended up with Row Peterson, then it became a Harper Brothers play, and now, if you look in the Samuel French catalogue, it's in there because Samuel French bought out the Harper Brothers play department. It's one of their best sellers. (Laughter) So over the years I was vindicated there and I have to laugh when I go up to Samuel French and talk to Abbot Von Nostrum, the president of the company and kid him about that. It was another gentleman who turned it down so I can't blame Abbot. But those five are my one-acts and they sell very good and then I published a number of others. I was writing for awhile what was called 'the high school class plays' for seniors and junior plays. And I'd write those specifically for that type of cast and audience. I was writing under three or four names. I had pen names. I had a summer theater production some years back, equity production on the east coast at the Ivory Tower Playhouse made the theater page of the New York Times. I had a lot of fun with that play. All of those one-acts have been televised, not on network, but a lot of them by universities, and some high school. I know, because they have to write to me and get permission since I own the television rights on all of them. Just recently, down in Alexander, Virginia, I haven't heard from them, I gave them permission to telecast but I said I would like one of their tapes. I should get back to writing some more because Samuel French is my agent and they want some more one-acts. But I don't have time to do it. Ticket to the City,

the one on the right, was given at Youngstown University, Special Guest was given, Pink Dress was given and in the book, Ticket to the City and Pink Dress is listed the original cast for the production here at YSU. So I figure the University gets a little publicity because there are dozens of those play books sold around over the country and you open it up. I don't have a copy loose here, and it says, "The Pink Dress was first produced by the Drama Guild of Youngstown College with the following cast under the direction of Theodore Berhnt." Ted incidentally, now has an advertising agency in Trumbull County in Warren, he has his own agency. And he kept track of some of the other people who were in that cast. Ticket to the City was given after we were a university. And that cast here again including Mr. Morano, who teaches out at Austintown, and a number of others who are out in the world making good. Writing plays is a difficult thing because you just don't publish that many, like a novel or something. I won a contest a few years back from an outfit in Cleveland and got my play produced up there. I have a couple right now I have to finish and send out. I'm utterly frustrated with sitting here, filling out papers, and signing my name. I'd much rather go back to my writing.

L: What year did YSU - FM first go on the air?

E: It has been on the air about eight years, 1968, yes about eight years. I have to check. I lost track of these times. Just to keep in touch with it, I've had a program, not for all the eight years, but a Broadway show thing I like to do. I like to do it because I like to keep in touch. But I've done about 270 or 280 of those shows on YSU. I was just getting ready to go over and record something today. I enjoy it. I don't get paid. It doesn't count as my job here as chairman of the department, but I like to keep in touch with the programming. Of course, when it first went on the air, I did a lot of interviewing of people. I remember I have a tape, I interviewed Lillian Gish, the famous silent screen actress, she was a lovely lady. I interviewed her and sent her a copy of the tape that we broadcast over WYSU and she sent me a note back saying she's putting it in the Library of Congress. They have this big file on Lillian Gish and silent movies and she sent the tape down there to be put in the Library of Congress (Laughter) I have a note from her saying that.

L: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

E: No, but I'll probably think of a lot of things after you leave. I could go on for hours, you know, after thirty years you accumulate a lot of things. Not that all of it is right on the tip of your tongue, but one thing leads to another. A lot of the things that we had to do, the things we had to work with, the lack of funds in many areas, I could go on for hours talking about things like that but a lot of that is not probably so much history as it is nostalgia but then it's the same thing, I don't know. But I could tell a lot of interesting stories of things that happened here. Our commencements which we used to move around; we'd have them at South High Field House, Struthers Field House, Jones Hall Strouss' Auditorium, Stambaugh Auditorium, always moving around. I was a marshall for quite a number of years at these commencements. I was a marshall finally, once again at this last commencement, spring commencement they call that? But I was marshall again after about fifteen or so years. But how it has changed. We were marching in up here. We were marching into many of the other places we had commencement. We used to hold commencement out in one of the field houses and then we'd have what we called Baccalaureate which has been done away with. Baccalaureate is kind of a hold over from the YMCA days and Baccalaureates were more or less associated with the religious aspect of the school. We have a lot of high schools that have done away with Baccalaureates. They've combined it.

Commencement speakers, some were terrible. I can remember some terrible commencement speakers and even when I see the old timers around here and mention them, they still know what I'm talking about. (Laughter) And there were some good ones. By and large, I don't care for commencement addresses at all even though I've given some at high schools over the years. I don't know, that about covers everything at the moment I would say. As I sit here I could ramble on forever, not forever, but all day.

The library was entirely contained within that room. There was a small reading room off to one side, then it was moved to the fourth floor of Jones and was entirely up there until at one time, when Jones Hall was built, believe it or not, I don't know whether anyone mentioned it, it had a radio studio here, complete with a window for the controls and a studio. And the idea was at that time that it would be used for remote broadcasts from the campus to the other stations

connected by telephone lines, but it was never used for that. It became the English office. And the library, for awhile, the library was up on the fourth floor, before we finally moved into our new building.

I'm going to mention, when I came here to teach, my office was in the old coach house or barn. At the rear back there was a barn. And the English offices and my office was there. And you could still open the door and look into some of the horse stables and see some parts of the barn because that's what it was. It was a barn with horses that pulled the carriages around, up and down Wick Avenue back some decades before. But it was changed slowly over to a library, then of course, it was changed over to Dick Weber, I think had his office down there for campus repairs, parking things. We were up above in the English office, then we moved the English offices from there into the fourth floor of Jones about the time that the new library was built, or the old library was built. And the library was moved from the fourth floor and that opened up a space for offices and the English department moved in there.

L: That was around 1956?

E: Yes, around in there someplace. I have to go back into my files and dig out Jambars and things like that because I don't keep much of a diary. Some people do and I should. I can see where it is an advantage because I can look back and I'd say it was about this time and I can be off anywhere from three to four years. When I went here as a student, the library was down on the main floor there and we had that one office there. Well they've changed it so much now that I can't point out specific spaces because they've changed it all around. But you could put the reading room down in the lobby of the new one over here and have plenty of space left over for book stacks, because there were not that many students. In fact, when I came here as a student, there were less students here than there are now professors. With that I conclude.

L: Thank you. (Laughter)

END OF INTERVIEW