Interview with Cullom Davis
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Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, September 7, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today I start a series of interviews with Professor Cullom Davis. How're you Cullom?

Davis: Fine, thanks.

DePue: We are in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, borrowing one of their offices here. In the interest of full disclosure, let me say that Cullom is one of the pioneers. Maybe that's not a word you'd like to use, but one of the pioneers of oral history in the United States, a very influential personality in that respect. I was privileged early on that you agreed to be something of a mentor and occasionally guide me through the pitfalls of oral history. I really appreciate that.

Davis: Well, thank you. I would say that I wasn't a first stage pioneer. I could number and name maybe a dozen people who were. But I was a second stage; let's leave it at that. But, thank you.

DePue: We'll have an opportunity in later sessions to talk much more about oral history, but your career is much more than just that. We're going to concentrate in this first session on your early life and how you ended up getting to that position of being an oral historian and being one of the pioneers, a second-generation pioneer, if you will. I always start with when and where you were born.

Davis: Alright. I was born on May 2, 1935, according to my birth certificate, at the Copley Hospital in Aurora, Illinois.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your family background.

Davis: My parents both grew up in central Illinois. My mother's maiden name was Scripps, and she and many relatives lived in the small, west Illinois county seat of Schuyler. The family was a prominent family in town. The ones who really became world famous in the newspaper business were a part of the family that left Rushville and went elsewhere. My mother's father was a merchant—there was a dry goods store in Rushville—they owned some farms. They were not wealthy, but they were prominent and comfortable, comfortable enough that she went to college and graduated from college.

DePue: Where did she go to college?

Davis: She went to DePauw, not DePaul, but DePauw [Greencastle, Indiana]. At some point in my mother's adult life, her family moved to Peoria, which is where my father grew up. His family had been Peorians for three or four generations, and his father was a fairly comfortable man who attended to his investments. (laughs) How do they put it? There used to be a phrase for that. But, anyway, he owned a little bit of real estate in Peoria and—

DePue: Your father's father.

Davis: My father's father. He'd worked in an architect's office, but he wrote specs; he wasn't an architect. He was known around town as Judge Davis. He never was a judge a day in his life. But he was a very kindly man and lived in a comfortable home—this is my grandfather—widowed early because his wife died in her forties. So, I have memories of him, which I'll go into later. My mother's mother had also died. I never knew either of my grandmothers. They both died of probably heart disease in their forties. But I knew both of my grandfathers, one better than the other.

My parents grew up, fell in love, went to college—not the same college, my father went to Princeton University—but fell in love, got engaged, and got married in October of 1928.

DePue: Before the stock market crash.

Davis: Yes, before the crash. Dad had no trouble, because of social connections, getting a job in the biggest local bank. They were a very fashionable young couple. Within two years they had a daughter, Mary Locke Davis, born in 1930. But by then my dad had lost his job at the bank—I don't know exactly why, except obviously they were trimming back—and was unemployed for several years in Peoria and finally took a chance on a life insurance sales job in Aurora, Illinois. How he did in that sales job, I don't know, but he wasn't the kind of person who comfortably approached people

to try to sell them things. He was just…He was a lovely man, but he was not aggressive. I know that his father supported them during the period of three years or so in Aurora. I've seen pictures of their apartment, which was okay. It was really an apartment carved out of a home.

I know that my father had this job, but at some point it ended. Yet he kept going to work every day. This is one of these sad family confessions of going as if he were going to work. He took the train into Chicago every day, unemployed, and he would read the paper at the Chicago Library. He was ashamed, I'm inferring, embarrassed or ashamed. He wasn't drinking heavily; he was just ashamed that he, as an adult parent, could not support the family. So, he went off as if he were commuting to a job in the city. This happened for a period of time. I don't know the length of it, and I never had a chance to talk to him about it because I learned it after he had died. These were tough times for my parents. My mother didn't work, but she was busy with her daughter, and then in 1935, her son.

DePue: As far as you know, was your father still unemployed when you were born?

Davis: As far as I know. Now maybe he was trying to peddle life insurance, and maybe once in a while he would get a commission. But my impression is he was a flop as a life insurance salesman. He just didn't have that kind of personality, and I don't say that disrespectfully. So, to my knowledge, my paternal grandfather and maybe even my maternal grandfather were helping out.

DePue: Cullom is a rather unusual name. I know that's not your full name. What is your full name?

Davis: George Cullom Davis, Jr. So, my father had Cullom also, but he was known as George. I became known—to save problems in the family—as Cullom. I'm very grateful for that, although it's a name that I have to spell for people and they often confuse with being my surname rather than my given name. It's distinctive, and I'm proud of it, and I don't like the name George. (DePue laughs) For a long time I was George Cullom; then I was G. Cullom Davis; now I'm Cullom Davis.

Yes, it's a family name, probably Welsh, though none of us has ever investigated this. We're proud of it because of an ancestor who was a very prominent nineteenth-century Illinois Republican politician, Shelby Moore Cullom, who grew up on a farm in Tazewell County, Illinois, but was born in Tennessee. His father was a member of the State Senate, and then he was elected city attorney of Springfield in the 1850s and rose in Republican ranks, knew Lincoln, practiced some cases with law. He's not partner, but he was on either the opposition side or the same side with Lincoln on a number of cases I discovered when we got involved in that work.

He then ran for the State Legislature and was elected, re-elected, sometime in the late 1850s and then was elected for two terms, I believe, to the U.S. Congress, during the Civil War, not before the Civil War occurred but during the Civil War. For example, he voted on Andrew Johnson's impeachment.

DePue: For or against?

Davis: Well, as a congressman, he didn't vote to remove from office, but I guess he voted on the impeachment. He maintained a residence in Springfield. This is my great-great-great uncle. Then he became governor and U.S. Senator and before that, Speaker of the Illinois House. He had a fifty-year career in politics.

DePue: Now, the years I have for governor are 1877 to 1883.

Davis: That's correct.

DePue: Two terms, and then senator, this is amazing. I don't know if anybody has matched this in Illinois, senator from 1883 to 1913.

Davis: Thirty years. It may have been bested by someone; I can't think who right now. But you're right; it's quite a record. And he never was tarnished with disgrace. He made a couple of false steps.

I won't go into the details, but there was some corruption scandal while he was governor, but he was never tainted with it. Then there was a famous senate election scandal in 1908, involving the other senator, William Lorimore. Cullom had supported Lorimore, but it was Lorimore who bought votes and so forth. So, he [Cullom] led kind of a quiet, bland but successful political career.

DePue: We're going to jump ahead just a little bit here because when you were a history student—I think at the master's level—you studied—

Davis: Even at the undergraduate level. As an undergraduate at Princeton University, I had to write a senior thesis, which is comparable to a master's thesis. Mine was the political career of Shelby Cullom, though I found out that I couldn't possibly finish the job, so I closed it with his unsuccessful bid for a presidential nomination in 1896. I thought, that kind of caps things. I exhausted the Congressional Record and his papers and other papers. It's a pretty good thesis. So, I did that.

DePue: I wanted to read a couple of quotes.

Davis: Oh, okay. From the master's thesis or from—

DePue: No, no. I'm afraid I don't have your master's thesis. This is David Kenney and Robert Hartley who wrote the book on Illinois senators called *An Uncertain Tradition*.[1]

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Here's what they wrote about him. "Cullom is a perfect example of how length of service does not automatically insure history's blessings."

Davis: (laughs) That's true.

DePue: And elsewhere, kind of a very thumbnail sketch of who he was politically, "able, durable, rather colorless, and generally conservative."

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: Almost, by saying "generally conservative" that's a way not to distinguish him from others in the Senate, maybe. I shouldn't necessarily be offering that comment. And finally, "Citizens of Illinois apparently took comfort in the fact that he did not crusade, rant and rave, or shout on the floor of the Senate. (Davis laughs) Stability, conservatism, and loyalty to Illinois were qualities that paid off for Cullom."

Davis: I think that's an apt…I could add to it a little bit, but I think that's an apt thumbnail biography. You won't see any monuments here in Springfield to Cullom. You'll see highways named for state representatives and parks named for someone who served on the city council, streets named for all sorts of characters; there's nothing like that.

DePue: Any regrets from the family because he didn't get much notoriety?

Davis: No, I kind of make fun of that. A couple of times I've given talks at the County Historical Society and whimsically noted that he is a forgotten man in his own home town. As an historian, I feel he deserves some stature, but I'm not trying to bang his drum. There's a Cullom Street in Bloomington, Illinois. There's a town of Cullom near Kankakee, and there is a Cullom Street in Chicago. Somebody recognized him, but we don't have anything down here.

DePue: Let's pick up the narrative about your father and his challenge to find employment.

Davis: Yes, right. At some point after my birth—and I'm not sure exactly when; I'm guessing maybe about 1938—they returned to Peoria because my father hoped

[1]*An Uncertain Tradition* is the first comprehensive treatment of the forty-seven individuals—forty-six white males and one African American female—who have been chosen to represent Illinois in the United States Senate from 1818 to 2003. (https://www.amazon.com/Uncertain-Tradition-Senators-Illinois-1818-2003/dp/B005Q7DKNQ)

he might find a job there because his father had connections, and the depression was moderating a little bit.

So, they returned with baby Cullom, maybe two years old, and my sister, Mary. A sign of their relative lack of resources was they moved into my mother's father's home, which in those days was pretty common, especially during the depression. Nowadays it's much less common.

So here was this elderly Scripps, who owned the home, and his son, my uncle, who was just finishing college, living there. My grandfather had a maid—just a daytime maid—and then here moved in this young family. So, it was a little snug. I slept on a sleeping porch, which was unheated, but had plenty of blankets. It was designed for healthy sleeping in those days. They thought fresh air was good for you, and maybe it was. It was a little snug, but that was the way they could live. I lived in that home for the first ten years that I lived in Peoria, until they moved away.

It was a comfortable home on the bluff of Peoria, which is often a fancy part of town. But it was the houses on the bluff side of Moss Avenue—which is the name of the street—that are the really fancy places. Our home was a frame home, probably had three or four bedrooms. It wasn't bad, but it was not in the fancy part of town.

My dad did get a job at a department store called Clarke and Company, which was the second or third best department store in Peoria. He could walk to work, just walk down the bluff on Main Street, and there was the store.

DePue: When you say second or third best do you mean selling higher quality materials?

Davis: Biggest, I think, biggest volume. A Block & Kuhl was a big one, and Bergner's was a big one, and then there was Clarke and Company.

Cullom Davis, 1940, age five.

So, Dad worked there. I think he was kind of a floor-walker; I'm not sure. You know what a floor-walker is? Kind of the floor manager. He was a very nice guy; everyone liked my father, but he wasn't aggressive, and he never really was promoted particularly in that job.

Finally, the store closed, and he was out of a job again. I can't remember when that was, but it was probably ten years later. We may pick up other aspects of his employment history, but it was a spotty one.

DePue: Would you consider the time that you were in Peoria, living with your grandfather and your father, now having a job, as happy years for you?

Davis: Yeah. It was during the war, not that that was happy for everyone, but sure. I had a natural childhood, walked to school, fought with my sister; my parents were loving—there's no doubt about that—mealtimes were pleasant. I liked my Uncle George and, as long as I knew him; I liked my Grandfather Scripps, but he died of cancer about a year or two after I moved, so I hardly knew him.

DePue: Who were the dominant personalities when you grew up?

Davis: I think—that's a good question—I think in different ways my parents. My father was much more accommodating; he never was strict with me. He talked about stories and history and famous people he admired. He was an interesting guy to talk to.

My mother was a little more disciplined, though she spoiled me; there's no doubt about it. I was the favored child; I have to admit. I was a pretty good kid, and I was a good student. Which of them was dominant? I think maybe, in many ways, my mother was the decision maker, I think.

Cullom, age 8, third from left in the first row, circa 1942.

They lived relatively modestly, though they had many wealthy, middle class friends. So, they had to make appearances. They would host the cocktail party at their home, not at some club. Not that that's a terrible liability, but I'm just pointing out, in their social circles, they were of limited means.

Every Thursday night for years, we would be the guests of my Grandfather Davis for dinner at a downtown men's club. Even during the war, I hate to admit, you could eat prime rib there; don't ask me how. It sounds crooked to me, but Grandfather would treat us to a good prime rib dinner because that was the day his cook had off. That was fun; that was an event to

look forward to every day. Otherwise, my parents didn't go out to dinner much.

DePue: Was your family religious?

Davis: Yes. They had had different denominational interests, but by the time I came around, they were Episcopalians, which was, of course, the socially prominent faith to have. I don't want to say that's what drew them, but they had many friends in the Episcopal Cathedral because it's a cathedral of the diocese of Quincy, but it's located in Peoria.

We went to the downtown cathedral every Sunday. I participated, was in the kid's choir. So, yes. Later, when I went over to school, I had religious services every day except Saturday. My faith was fairly strong. Later it diminished and died, but…I don't know how deep the religious faith was of my parents. It was what every family should do. We didn't talk big questions of faith and destiny in the house.

DePue: How about talks about politics? Did that occur?

Davis: A little bit. I didn't do much talking. It became very clear, though, that my father, at least—and maybe my mother—had voted for Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, during the depth of the depression. It was very clear that they had rejoined the Republican Party in the forties. Roosevelt began to be "that man in the White House."

My mother spoke disparagingly of Eleanor because she spoke in such a shrill voice and was kind of a busybody, my mother thought. My mother judged people kind of on their social bearing, and Eleanor just had different goals. I later came to really deplore that, taking that view of her [Mrs. Roosevelt] politically. But she [his mother] had the right to that, and she was that way.

They developed the same attitude in the forties toward Adlai Stevenson, even though he was a prominent Bloomington citizen, citizen of international repute. When he ran for governor, my parents met him and his sister.

DePue: This would have been 1948?

Davis: Yes. He was divorced then, and I'm sure my parents were critical of that because that just didn't happen in our family. They had also met his sister, who kind of became the first lady of the governor's mansion when he was governor. I forget her name [Elizabeth "Buffie" Ives]. She was a character. She was an outspoken character, high–society-Bloomington. But my parents just disliked her. Because they disliked her, and they had been Republicans for a few years, they disliked Adlai.

That's the kind of talk I heard with my parents and their friends and their relatives. It was Republican; it was, part of it, gossip. But I remember, for example, my father was a great admirer of [General] Douglas MacArthur, a great admirer. And he despised Harry Truman for firing him [MacArthur].

I later discovered that MacArthur had broken a basic rule of service, in ignoring the commander-in-chief. Now, Truman may have made mistakes on that, but he had to deal with an undisciplined…But my father admired MacArthur for returning to Bataan [Peninsula], returning to the Philippines, and we all know…Forgive me, but I later learned that also MacArthur had let the airplanes on Clark Field [on Luzon Island, Philippines] sit after Pearl Harbor, not exactly a heroic gesture, also that MacArthur made a fetish of his return to the Philippines [October 20, 1944] as if it were a triumphant, personal act, rather than the United States, "People of the Philippines, **I** have returned." (DePue laughs) There was an egomaniac there, I later discovered. But my father loved him, even bought a long-play recording of his farewell speech, which I'm not sure we ever played at home, but he bought it—

DePue: The one to Congress?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: "Old soldiers never die…"

Davis: Yes, right. That was another instance of my father's…the political manifestation of my father's loyalty. He admired military heroes a great deal, of any stripe or period, and read about them.

DePue: You mentioned Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: You're apparently only six at that time, but do you remember it?

Davis: I think I do. You know what it's like; so many films have shown the radio, the big radio, with the people hearing the news of Pearl Harbor. (laughs) That's maybe what I remember. I know I remember the family being around the radio. Whether I actually heard Roosevelt's words or much of it, I think I did. I was very conscious with the war as a six-year-old; wars are kind of exciting. I followed the war with the world map and dye and thumb tacks and read books. My father brought me books about the war. I collected tin cans and chewing gum tinfoil, and I bought savings stamps. To the extent that a snotty, eight-year-old kid was a patriotic supporter of the war, yeah, I was.

My father didn't serve. He said he volunteered for the Navy, but they turned him down because his teeth couldn't handle the hardtack; I don't know.

DePue: He would have been in his late thirties?

Davis: Also, he was a little older; he was…right, he was in his late thirties. My uncle, George Scripps, who had lived in our house with us…Maybe he volunteered; I think he was drafted and served in the Army engineers in Italy. The war experience was something I knew…I had a booklet that showed the profiles of all planes, Japanese, German and U.S. I could spot a Japanese Zero if it flew over the house.[2] (both laugh)

We had an aunt; my father had an aunt—it would have been a great aunt for me—who lived in Carmel, California, a fairly wealthy, independent woman; I think she'd been divorced. She had a Japanese gardener and a Japanese cook. And she feared, early in the war, according to my parents, that the Japanese would hit the U.S., the western coast. So, she kept the trunk of her car loaded with canned goods, ready to split east if she had to. She later claimed that her Japanese gardener mysteriously left after Pearl Harbor, maybe out of fear, maybe he was rounded up, probably was interred. But she thought maybe he was a spy, and he had been in cahoots with the Japanese.

DePue: Was he first generation Japanese, or do you know?

Davis: I don't know; I don't know. It was part of the family folklore. (DePue laughs) Sorry, I'm departing from—

Cullom, age eight, at a Jeep's steering wheel, circa 1943. Photo taken at Camp Ellis.

DePue: What do you remember about rationing?

Davis: That it existed, and we had a stamp on our car, and that we had a victory garden so we could grow tomatoes and peppers and green beans. It was the patriotic thing to do. But I also remember—I told you about the prime rib at the private club—also, Dad had some liquor in the basement that he'd somehow gotten just before the war. I know they sold liquor before—

DePue: Yeah, that was thirty-three or thirty-four.

Davis: Yeah. No, this was post prohibition, but it seemed like it was kind of hoarded. Then he had a set of tires that were in the basement that had…Maybe he'd bought them before they were rationed, or maybe he used them with

[2] The Zero, also called Mitsubishi A6M or Navy Type 0, fighter aircraft, a single-seat, low-wing monoplane, was used with great effect by the Japanese during World War II. (https://www.britannica.com/technology/Zero-Japanese-aircraft)

rationing? I don't know, but they were in the basement. I always suspected…But in other exterior respects, sure, we followed the rules, and my mother had to be careful shopping.

DePue: But I've got to believe that for a young kid—and that's what you were obviously at the time—who later would have this love of history and politics and those kinds of things, this would be a very good time to be growing up.

Davis: Um-hum. It was exciting. It **was** exciting. My friends and I played war. The back of our house [was] on an alley. We built a little fox-hole (DePue laughs), away from my mother's garden. We played war, a lot; boys and girls played war.

DePue: Who were the bad guys?

Davis: I don't remember. I'm sure we took turns. But, I—

DePue: I mean was somebody playing Germans, or were they playing Japanese or—

Davis: You know, I can't remember. Maybe we were shooting at a mysterious enemy. I think that maybe we all allied ourselves.

I followed the war to some extent. I knew about Dunkirk, which was treated as a heroic achievement, and we know it was not quite that (both laugh). My father was an immense admirer of Winston Churchill, immense admirer. I am too, of course. That led to some history reading I did later in my life. So, the war had a big impact.

The politics of it, I didn't follow as closely. I knew about rationing. Of course, I showed you I knew about Camp Ellis and visited it.[3] But I didn't know the politics of the war. I knew that Mussolini was bad, and Hitler was bad, and Hirohito was bad, but I don't recall, at that age, knowing about the concentration camps until the end of the war.

We had some Jewish friends but not very close friends. My father would often say—and so would my mother— "Well, we know the Salzensteims; they're nice people; we don't know them very well." As I look back on it, that was their way of dealing with it. But they did have some Jewish friends.

DePue: Do you remember the end of the war, either V-E [Victory in Europe] Day or V-J [Victory in Japan]?

[3] Camp Ellis was established as a World War II Army Training Center in 1943 near Table Grove, Illinois. About 125,000 troops trained at the camp during the war. A Prisoner of War (POW) camp for 2,500 German and Austrian soldiers was later added. The camp was declared surplus in October 1945. (http://www.lrl.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/CampEllis.aspx)

Davis: Yes. That I do visibly remember. I don't remember so well the V-E Day, but V-J Day, I do. We'd been awaiting it. When it occurred, there was loud noise coming from downtown Peoria, which was just down the bluff. So, my father and mother and I and their friends, the Gunthers, got into Mr. Gunther's big sedan, and we drove downtown. There was a big parade and revelry and a lot of drinking and shouting. We got stuck in a traffic jam. Some of the revelers may have had too much to drink, but they began sitting on the hood of Mr. Gunther's car. That worried him, and so there was a kind of an altercation, not fist-fight, but kind of an altercation. So, we then left.

But I was bug-eyed with excitement to see all the celebrating. I remember that day. I don't remember the announcement; I remember celebrating V-J Day.

DePue: How about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

Davis: Read about it, but I have no distinctive memories of it, except in…Well, this was later. In 1946 and forty-seven I was sent away to a summer camp, up in Minnesota. It was good experience for me to be away from the family for a while. When I got up there, there were traditions there. You had to memorize all the big ten fight songs and that sort of thing. It was a good camp. I learned how to sail and swim and shoot a bow and arrow and a rifle.

I guess it was forty-seven. The camp counselor would always have some corny joke, and during the atomic testing in the Pacific, he said, "You may have heard about the explosions there at a place called Bikini, but apparently the explosions"—how did we put it? —"didn't bik-ini difference at all."[4] Bikini, it was a play on words. I've remembered that for 63 years. That was post forty-five, but it was the atomic era. My knowledge of all that was pretty limited.

DePue: Well, let's talk about school—

Davis: All right.

DePue: …especially getting into the high school years. This would have happened after the war was over.

Davis: Yeah. Very briefly, I went to Washington Grade School, three blocks away when we lived on Moss Avenue. In 1947, my parents sold the house on Moss

[4] Bikini Atoll is a Micronesian Island chain located about halfway between Hawaii and Australia. Between 1946 and 1958 a nuclear testing program was conducted on seven sites at Bikini Atoll. These involved the detonation of a series of 23 nuclear devices by the United States on the reef itself, on the sea, in the air and under water. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bikini_Atoll)

Avenue that I guess my mother had inherited after my grandfather died and my uncle moved into his own home.

DePue: Was your grandmother not living?

Davis: No, I said both my grandmothers died back in the 30s.

DePue: Oh, that's right.

Davis: My parents decided to build a home out in Peoria Heights. They were able to buy a little slice of land that wasn't very expensive, but to pay for this home was going to be a major challenge. About that time, my father was out of work again, but they found a way to do it.

We lived for one year, after selling the house, in a tiny little cottage, bungalow, in Peoria Heights. I mean tiny; it had two tiny bedrooms. My sister couldn't really visit; she was away at school, so… (laughs) It was funny. Anyway, it was a little tiny place. My parents called it the acid test because, if we could survive that, we could survive anything.

Then we moved into this really nice, architect-designed home on the same street, not on the fancy Grandview Drive street of Peoria—which you've never seen; it's quite a drive—but on Miller road. There were some nice homes there, and they had good friends there. This was a comfortably designed home with a distant view of the country club golf course. It wasn't a fancy home, but it was nice, and they had to borrow a lot of money to pay [for] it.

At that point, I started going in sixth grade, eleven years old, to—so it was forth-six—to Peoria Heights Grade School. Went there three years, did very well. I did one in Washington school too. I went then one year to Peoria Central High School; it was then called Peoria High School, but when they built that it was called Peoria Central, which was the venerable, white high school in Peoria. I took pretty rigorous classes, Latin and algebra, not French yet, and I did well; I was a good student.

Studio portrait of Cullom Davis, age eleven, circa 1946.

DePue: You mentioned the white high school. Was there a sizeable black population there?

Davis: Yes. At Peoria Central? No, there was a black population, but there wasn't much.

DePue: In Peoria?

Davis: Oh yes, very large, on the south side. Most of the black students went to…I've forgotten the name.

DePue: Were those schools integrated then, in the late forties?

Davis: Slowly.

DePue: Did you have any experience with African-Americans at that time?

Davis: Yes. I did. Thank you for asking. When we lived on Moss Avenue, on the bluff, right below the bluff was a large population of blacks. In grade school, it was integrated, and I became good friends with a number of African-American kids. One was a girl named Tracy Hubbell, who was fun and nice, and then another guy, who was a very good athlete, and another, the guy was Junior Tracy, without an "e". He was a great guy, and we palled around. I don't remember ever visiting his house, but we had lunch together; we played ball together, and I had him over to the house.

One day after he had been at the house, my mother said, "Cullom, it's nice that you have your good friend Junior Tracy, and I'm pleased about that. But the time is going to come when you're going to have to stop having him come to the house." I didn't understand what she was getting at, but she had the racial biases that all of her generation had. I guess I was discovering that. It wasn't malignant, though I think they used the "n" word, as I recall; I think so.

DePue: How much of her attitudes would have been connected with, at least, aspirations to be of a higher portion of society?

Davis: Sure, sure, no doubt about it. She thought of herself as—she never was a debutante—but she thought of herself as high society, good family, you know, good family connections, sociable, a good hostess. That was probably part of it. It was the thing to be, but it was racial, sure.

DePue: Were you of the ilk to kind of rebel against this edict?

Davis: You know, I didn't. I have to be honest here. I was generally a pretty go-along kid. I guess I said, okay. I still saw Junior at school and, once in a while, after school. After I'd moved, I ran into him downtown, and we would visit. He was a worker somewhere.

The same with Tracy Hubbell, who went to my high school the year I went there. I got to know her, and she was very nice. I can't say we were best of friends. She had other friends; I had other friends. There were clubs there, and she was not in one of the girls' clubs. But I liked her; she was always a pleasant person and a pretty good student.

DePue: You mentioned earlier that you were kind of Mom's favorite, maybe both your parents. Why?

Davis: Well—

DePue: What was it about you, Cullom?

Davis: I was easy to raise. I basically obeyed the rules; I had an even temperament. My sister, bless her heart, she's still living; she's five years older; we love each other, but she's always had kind of a brittle personality, and she was a source of great vexation to my parents. They were proud of her; they loved her; she was bright; she went to college, but they clashed. I was always, I guess, kind of a welcome relief. (both laugh)

DePue: Which one of the parents do you think you take after more?

Davis: Probably my father. I resemble him somewhat, my bookish interests. Though my mother read books, it wasn't a huge hobby. My mother drank more than was healthy…Well, both parents drank more than was healthy. But it affected her. Though I, at a certain age, drank a lot myself, I developed more moderate habits in my thirties. And they smoked a lot. They were just creatures of a generation where you didn't know about all the bad habits that you had.

DePue: But what I know about your career afterwards, it sounds like you were much more assertive than your father was.

Davis: Yes, and that was drilled into me because they made it very clear…Mother and Dad even reminded me that my father had not gotten his degree at Princeton. He'd gone there four years, could have finished, but he never wrote his thesis. So, this got drilled into me because the inference was, if he had gotten his thesis and graduated, he would have held onto his jobs. Who knows? I think more he would have held on if he'd promoted himself more because he wasn't; he was a weak employee. So, they drilled it in me that, "it's a hard world out there, Cullom, and we don't have much money, and you're going to start working," because my father never had worked as a high schooler. "You're going to start working at a young age." I didn't object.

DePue: Did you have jobs when you were living in Peoria?

Davis: Yes, yeah. At age fourteen, I was a day-camp counselor for kids. I was kind of a life guard at a pool, half-day a week for three months. Then I got a job through my parents' influence, working on the railroad, the TP&W [Toledo, Peoria & Western] Railroad, which is an Illinois line that goes from the Indiana border to the Iowa border. It's all freight, but it avoids Chicago, goes straight across the state, through Peoria.

DePue: A different kind of job than working as a camp counselor.

Davis: It was. And it was hard work. First of all, I was on a section gang, which was a great experience. I learned a lot of words that I had never known (DePue laughs). But I obviously was over my head, and these workers—a lot of them Mexicans—p.m. would be out drinking all night and whoring, but they would be on the job there at 7:00 a.m. and pounding spikes into the rails.

I was worn out. I was sixteen or fifteen—I can't remember which—I was worn out. I'd go to the water thing often. The foreman just…He knew that the president of the company had kind of gotten me into this thing, and he disliked me. When we had to roll on a little flat car and then change a switch, he'd order me to do it. I tried, and I didn't do it well and so…Forgive me, one Friday he told me. "Aw, piss and go home." (laughs), which was his way of saying, "I'm not going to put up with this any longer."

So, I was out of a job over the weekend, but then my father's friend got me a job with a surveying crew, still hard work, out on the sun tracks, measuring for leveling work, but nice guys, engineer, civil engineer. They treated me as a kid, and I worked hard. I did that for two summers, and it was good for me.

DePue: Did the experience of getting fired, basically, getting canned, did that hurt you at the time?

Davis: I was embarrassed, but I knew that I was out of my league. So, it was a relief, honestly.

DePue: In other words, you figured out at that time, I might have to make money using my brain rather than my brawn?

Davis: I guess so, because, of course, they asked me, "Are you going to go to college there?" I got a little bit of that. My parents, at home, were saying that, of course, and my friends and parents were saying that. I think probably. I don't remember that light going on in my head but—

DePue: You mentioned that you only went to Peoria Central for one year.

Davis: Yes. Because my parents were counting on me being admitted to Princeton University, and they were afraid that Central High School, for all of its quality, would not put me in a position to be guaranteed admission. So, at great personal sacrifice and with a scholarship, they enrolled me at the Lawrenceville School, which is in New Jersey, five miles from Princeton and had always been considered a feeder school for Princeton. In those days Princeton accepted most of its students from private schools.

DePue: I've got to believe that Lawrence School, at that time, was a pretty pricey place to go.

Davis: Relatively. Now it's out of sight. It's the Lawrenceville School. Yes, it was, but I got a scholarship because my uncle, my father's brother, was a trustee—talk about corruption—and so they arranged…also my parents' income. My dad was out of a job for two years, until he got another department store job. They could prove that they were of limited means. My mother had a very modest income from some farms that she had inherited, maybe $5,000 a year or less, $3,000 a year. So, they qualified, and I qualified.

I was admitted there. It was a scary experience because I was a new kid there, and they always teased them [the new kids], and I had had hepatitis. I'd gotten hepatitis my senior spring in high school. How, I don't know, hepatitis Type A, bad food somehow. I had to spend all of that summer literally in bed because I couldn't exercise; I couldn't drink fatty foods. I had to learn how to drink skim milk, and I got a blood test every week.

Finally, that August the doctor said I could go away to school. But I had to keep drinking skim milk, and I could not do any intra-squad athletics—I'd been a very good swimmer in high school, even my freshman year—otherwise I would have gone out for the swimming team and probably gone out for others. So, I couldn't. I was a real nerd, okay? Here was a kid who was, on orders from a doctor, not to exercise. How do you make your name in a private…in any kind of school? You do something athletically. So, I got a lot of teasing. But I handled it okay, so I became fairly popular.

I was elected this and that and did very well in classes and very active in extra-curricular. I'm sure there were still my classmates who thought, Oh that dude is queer or a weakling. But I was very popular otherwise, even with kids who got a lot of teasing; I kind of often stood up for them. Not a champion of them, but I just had an open mind.

DePue: When you say—I'm going to put you on the spot here, Cullom—when you say queer, you're not meaning in the context that we would use it today [homosexual]?

Davis: In a way that…Well, that's a good question. In those days, you used "queer," and it could have a sexual…It could just mean weird, but it had a sexual connotation. I wasn't queer. I never, I never manifested…We all have thoughts, I'll say that. But I never manifested anything.

In fact, as a Boy Scout, before I went away to high school, one of our leading scouts—he was kind of the assistant patrol leader at summer camp—made a pass on me. It scared the daylights out of me, scared me. But he was clearly gay, and we were alone in the tent. I just…I didn't know what to do except to say, "No," and I left the tent. I didn't have any homosexual inclinations.

DePue: What was it that you were doing that you were able to distinguish yourself, so that you were able to form these friendships and get some notoriety?

Davis: I joined a lot of clubs, did well in those, was popular. As I say, I was popular, kind of, with some of the other wienies. (both laugh) Also, I had a sense of humor, and I got along well with people. Gradually I made those friends. But I did very well in a theater club; I did very well in the chapel ushers club; I carried—not the chalice; what is it?—the cross at daily chapel services; I got great grades. I'm sure they thought I was a real straight arrow; that's probably the way to put it.

At home, I was a hell-raiser. I was dating the same girl a lot, and we were doing a lot of things, and we drank. So, I was a Jekyll and Hyde sort of character. But at Lawrenceville I was a straight arrow, as far as they could tell.

DePue: I assume, when you're staying at home, that's only during the summers, when you come back.

Davis: Right. Oh, I sometimes…Once in a while, my parents could afford to have me come home, not for Thanksgiving but for Christmas, always.

DePue: I assume on the train.

Davis: Yes, yes, which was a day-and-a-half trip and then changing trains in Chicago.

DePue: In boarding school, how many roommates did you have?

Davis: My first year I had one. My second year I had two. These were in what was called houses, small dormitories of maybe thirty-five students. My last year, which was senior high school, we called it "fifth form," different terminology. I had three roommates in a nice suite, with a separate bed. Two of us shared one bedroom, and the other one shared the other and then kind of a common room.

So, I had roommates, and they were all friendly and fun. I became popular. I was elected to the Fifth Form Council, which was the student-elected body; I think all the straight arrows probably voted for me (laughs). I won honors; I won awards, so I was a distinguished, Lawrenceville graduate.

DePue: Were there some of the students there, maybe some of the legacy kids, who were a little bit more rebellious from—

Davis: Oh sure, sure. They were hell-raisers. If they could get away to New York on some flimsy excuse, they would drink themselves silly. I did once. There also were international students from wealthy, Latin American families, including the son of Fulgencio Batista, the dictator of Cuba (laughs). These were spoiled kids, miserable kids, often. Their parents really were getting rid of them, so they sent them away to school. I befriended them; they were nice kids. One of my best roommates was a guy from…He was an American, born in Mexico and spoke, of course, fluent Spanish. Like all Mexican boys of a certain

stature, he had had his first sexual exploit with the family maid. Another story… (laughs). Sorry, I'm turning this a little raunchy. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Were you ever lonely?

Davis: Yes. I know that first fall I was lonely, because it was hard to make friends; I was teased a lot. My grades were good, but it was...My parents must have picked up on that. Maybe the house-master or the school master called my parents or wrote them, saying, "We're a little concerned about Cullom. He seems lonely," because, lo and behold, my father came out to Dad's Weekend in November, not Thanksgiving; it was just a Dad's Weekend.

That was really unusual because they didn't have that kind of money. I think they were worried about me. I was glad to see him. I don't remember it as being an emotional time. I know I was glad to see them, and it was a good idea. I'm sure they had been advised by the authorities. But I never, never considered quitting school. When I did something, I did it. Not that I had enormous courage, but I just…I followed orders (laughs).

DePue: What were your academic interests? By this time, you're becoming more aware of those kinds of things.

Davis: Um-hmm, um-hmm. I loved French; I was very good in French, won awards in French. I loved mathematics, did brilliantly in algebra and solid geometry, and I liked history, had a good history master. And I liked Latin—I took tough courses—liked physics.

History was among the courses I liked, and we read the, then standard, American history textbook by…Samuel Eliot Morrison, huge thing, no pictures, all text. It was the conventional, upper division, high school text, college textbook, for that matter. I plowed through that; it was pretty dull, but I liked history.

DePue: But you listed several other things before you got to history. I guess I wasn't expecting that.

Davis: Yeah. Well, I just was a good student. I loved mathematics, well enough that I got placed at Princeton in an honors calculus course.

DePue: That's the next question because, obviously, when you get to your junior or senior year in high school, the question is, what am I going to do after I graduate?

Davis: Right, right.

DePue: Was there ever any question of that?

Davis: If I thought about it at all, I assumed, in the environment that I was in, that I would go into business. Not until I was in college did I work for one, a brewery, Pabst Brewery, two summers. Then…Actually, I guess my last year at Lawrenceville, I worked for Pabst Brewery, not that I ever thought about a permanent job at Pabst.

But my final two years in college, I worked at Caterpillar, [Inc.], [the] international home office of Caterpillar in Peoria. I didn't work in the foundry; I worked in the advertising division, a white-collar job. I was just an intern, but I wrote copy, did stuff like that.

DePue: We got a little bit ahead of the timeline here.

Davis: Yeah, I'm sorry.

DePue: No, that's fine. My impression is that you went to Lawrenceville in the first place because the expectations were that you're getting into Princeton.

Davis: Right.

DePue: And good kid that you were, you never questioned any of that?

Davis: No, though a funny thing happened my senior year. My—what do you call it?—placement advisor, I guess they were [called], said, "Are there other colleges that you want to apply to?" I said, "Well yeah, I've admired Amherst a lot." It's not an Ivy League school, but they call it a little Ivy League school. I don't know why, but I'd heard about Amherst, and I thought, Well, I didn't apply to Yale or Harvard, but at least I applied to Amherst.

Lo and behold, the fall of my final year, I got turned down at Amherst. My placement advisor was furious. He said, "What are they doing? You're this outstanding student; you expressed an interest in Amherst." He called them, and I guess they said, "We just knew from the grapevine"—or whatever—"that he's going to go to Princeton." Maybe I had filed kind of an uninspired application. I don't know, but they did reverse themselves and offer me a position at Amherst.

I chose Princeton. It was more this placement advisor's fury at my being turned down…It's always good, of course, to have a backup. But I probably was a shoo-in for Princeton.

DePue: Were you something of a legacy to go to Princeton?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Even though you said your father had not graduated?

Davis: Didn't graduate, but he was an alumnus, and my grandfather attended, and my uncle attended and graduated. So, I was very much a legacy, and I had the advantage, although going to school in New Jersey, of living in Illinois. They did try to get some sort geographic representation. I think I was probably a slam-dunk.

DePue: You graduated from high school in 1953?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: At that time there was a draft. Was military service any part of this equation?

Davis: No. I don't even remember it becoming an issue. I must have known it, but I was going to college. I don't think I even had a college deferment; I just…I was eighteen, and I can't remember. I may have paid a visit.

At some point I paid a visit to the Peoria Selective Service Board. I talked to someone there, and I'm sorry; I can't remember. Maybe they said, you can qualify as a college deferment. I don't remember that, but that could be, because I wasn't then bothered again until the senior year of my college. So, I guess I had something.

DePue: With the Korean War over, in July of fifty-three, there just wasn't the need.

Davis: That's right. Exactly. Thank you. I didn't mention that, but I was aware of that, that I was one of those in-betweens.

DePue: You spent basically three years of high school at an all-boys school. And Princeton, I believe at the time, is an all-boys school. Did you have any reservations because of that?

Davis: Yes. I did. But it was the custom then. There was no prep school in the country…Well, there were a few, but they were all boys' schools or girls' schools. The colleges, the good colleges, were all men's schools. I didn't like that. I had a great girlfriend. We went steady for eight years before marrying.

She came out to the spring prom at Lawrenceville, three years in a row. She had to take the train out and live in a neighboring home, off campus. We were strictly chaperoned, but she made it. Then she was admitted to an eastern college, and she visited more than she should have, Princeton. And I visited more than I should have, her college, Connecticut College.

DePue: Did she pick that to be closer to you?

Davis: Yeah. Yeah. It's a pretty good college. Unfortunately, because of our romantic life, she was dismissed from Connecticut College (laughs) at the end of the year. I wasn't from Princeton. She then had to pick another eastern college, and she did, up in Troy, New York. We were a heavy item.

DePue: You haven't mentioned her name.

Davis: No. Her name is Marilyn Whittaker. We met in dancing school, seventh grade.

DePue: Dancing school?

Davis: There was a dancing school for the children of the middle class at the YWCA. We learned how to be polite. We didn't take it to heart, but we learned manners and dancing. I met her, and we started seeing each other, which really meant that I went to play basketball at her family's basketball court and kind of hanging around.

Then we had permission in eighth grade to go to Saturday matinee movies. There would be an occasional mixed party with chaperones. In high school it got more serious. I could drive; she could drive. We became a real item in high school. Then, when I was away, Marilyn dated. It was logical; I was gone for nine months of the year. But when I came home, we were back. For three years she dated, but we remained committed.

DePue: Let's go back to Princeton.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Did you like going to Princeton?

Davis: By and large, yes. I found it a great intellectual atmosphere. I liked most all of the professors, who were interesting and very accomplished people. I had good roommates, though we were a little bawdy. Of course, the drinking… Although you couldn't have women or cars, liquor was open season. So, like a lot of college students, I did much more drinking than was healthy, and it was permitted. College…It was kind of hypocritical; they didn't care if you drank yourself silly, but if you were caught with a girl in your room after 6:00 p.m., or if you had a car parked off-campus, you could be kicked out.

DePue: What was the legal drinking age in New Jersey at the time?

Davis: Twenty-one, but the campus town—

DePue: When you say, permitted, they just kind of ignored what was going on.

Davis: Yeah. There were clubs, not fraternities, clubs; they were able to buy kegs of beer, and we could go to the clubs and so on. It was just a wink, wink and nod.

DePue: Getting into Princeton now is a real challenge. What did it take to get into Princeton at that time? What kind of classmates did you have?

Davis: If you went to a prep school, that helped. If you were from Illinois, that helped. If you had really great grades, that helped. If you were a legacy, it

helped. I don't think my admission to Princeton was some enormous achievement, the way it would be if I were applying today. I think I was destined (laughs). Everything was in my favor. Today it's a very different matter, very different matter.

DePue: At that time especially—and maybe this is much more a term that would apply to Boston and Harvard—the Brahmans of American society, those elites at the time, was there an element of that at Princeton?

Davis: Oh, absolutely, a lot of snobs. I got to know a lot of snobs at Lawrenceville but also at Princeton. They'd gone to all the right day-schools and all the right prep schools, and they had the right summer homes on Cape Cod. This was a world that was unfamiliar to me. They would travel; on spring vacation, they would go to Bermuda. I would either stay at Princeton or go home (laughs).

DePue: You weren't invited into that circle very much?

Davis: Hmm, no, no.

DePue: Were they snobbish towards you?

Davis: Not overtly.

DePue: It was just kind of an understood arrangement?

Davis: Yeah. Some of them went, paying their own way, just to raise hell down in Ft. Lauderdale. I didn't have the kind of money to do that. There was a little bit of resentment on my part or jealousy, whatever you call it, envy, envy.

That was true even in Peoria. A lot of my friends had parents who had a summer home in Michigan or Wisconsin. I didn't, but I worked. The fact is, I liked working. Your first job you feel, my gosh, I can earn money. I had good paying jobs, at the railroad and then at Pabst Brewery for two summers and then at Caterpillar for two summers. I didn't object, because my parents weren't taking vacations themselves; that was one way in which they crimped. I enjoyed that. I had a sense of accomplishment.

DePue: How about academics? I assume that you continued to excel in academics.

Davis: At Princeton?

DePue: Um-hmm.

Davis: No, I struggled, partly because we were all valedictorians (laughs) to some extent, and I also goofed off a lot, procrastinated, drank, traveled on weekends to visit my girlfriend. I did reasonably well, but I was getting the equivalent of Bs and Cs my freshman year.

DePue: Equivalent? Didn't they use that grade system?

Davis: No, it was a point system. One or two courses I really loved and got Bs in. One, I only got a C because they couldn't give me a lower grade; that's the honors calculus class. I was hopelessly over my head in calculus, taught by a brilliant mathematician of international reputation. I was there with a bunch of kids who were mathematical geniuses. I had been great in prep school in math, but I didn't belong in that section. If I could have gotten out of it, I would have because it was a year-long course, met every day of the week. By the second week, the professor was sick and tired of me. It was all cumulative learning, so I was already out of it and struggled the whole time. But because it was an honors class, he couldn't give me a grade lower than a C. That was the rules of the college.

DePue: At what point did you get to select a major? Was that right at the beginning?

Davis: No, not until the end of my sophomore year. I took a fair number of history courses. I liked them. I loved one history course my sophomore year on modern American history, taught by Eric Goldman, who was a great lecturer.

I took a great course on the renaissance by another famous historian. I took a course on American foreign relations, which I really liked, and European history, a great teacher on eighteenth century Europe. I was liking history, even my first two years. For me it was a snap.

I knew math was going to be my major. I took a couple of French language courses, because I had been so good in French. But I cheated…Well, we were supposed to read, in the original French, these novels by famous French novelists. But I'd get the English editions and read them.

DePue: I suspect you weren't alone in that one.

Davis: No, but I was lazy. It's not as if I couldn't read them. I was good at French, but lazy. Science, I always knew wasn't my field. I took a required biology course and kind of liked it, but it wasn't my…I took an economics course, didn't like it that much; took political science, I enjoyed. But history was for me a natural major. That was an easy decision to make.

DePue: This is kind of going back to the nature of the student body. I'm just curious if there were any GI Bill students who were going there as well?[5]

Davis: There were earlier, even during the war. They had a special program for Army students to go on an intensified basis. But it wasn't like the public universities,

[5] The term GI Bill® refers to any Department of Veterans Affairs education benefit earned by members of Active Duty, Selected Reserve and National Guard Armed Forces and their families. The benefit is designed to help service members and eligible veterans cover the costs associated with getting an education or training. (https://www.military.com/education/gi-bill/learn-to-use-your-gi-bill.html)

where they were swarming with GI Bill students. By the time I went, in fifty-three, I don't remember. Maybe they were housed separately or something. I don't remember many of my classmates…I can't think of one of my classmates who was really GI Bill. A lot of them were ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps], a lot of them, and naval ROTC, but not GI Bill. I don't know whether it was because of the cost of the school or its high standards or its prejudice. I don't think it could have been prejudice. But they liked to have young, eighteen-year-olds entering the college.

DePue: Did you have any interest in joining either of the ROTC programs?

Davis: I thought about the NROTC [Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps]. But it did circumscribe somewhat my choice of courses. I talked to a few advisors and some other students and finally decided that I wouldn't. I might have liked that. I had friends who did it, and they weren't hurt by it, but I did have a wider range of course choices. And there would have been weekends I would have had to stay in Princeton (DePue laughs).

DePue: That's kind of what I was thinking.

Davis: I don't know that that registered, but it certainly would have changed my social life.

DePue: How about some formal extra-curriculars. We know what, informally, you were doing for extra-curricular activities.

Davis: I continued my interest in theater. I had been president of the theater club at Lawrenceville. I had been a specialist, not in acting, but in backstage work. I really did great work as an electrician and making flats and setting designs and so forth, and I loved it. So, I joined a very prominent Princeton University undergraduate theater club, which every year staged its own original musical and took it on the road, which was a huge amount of…on the road, on the train.

DePue: But they're own original? Somebody has to write it and the music for it—

Davis: Yes, all original. They had a professional director to direct these students, but these were students who love…Harvard had the same sort of club, called the Hasty Pudding Club; this was the Triangle Club. They liked to write music; a lot of it was really corny. Most of it was satirical songs, with satirical titles. It was a revue show, so you could put together…the scene by scene, they didn't have to really connect a lot. But I got involved in that, enough so that, while I wasn't eligible my freshman year [to] go on the road, I did my sophomore year.

DePue: Were you in front of the spotlights or behind the scenes?

Davis: No, I was always behind the scenes.

DePue: You had no interest in getting on the stage?

Davis: I just had grown up doing that at Lawrenceville, so that was familiar. I didn't ever have that stage itch. I later discovered I have certain skills as a public speaker but acting…I can play myself pretty well (DePue laughs).

DePue: At what point in time do you start thinking, "Oh my God, I'm going to graduate from college, then what?"

Davis: Yeah. I want to make one reference back to my father, because my father, I've told you, loved to read. Probably he would have had a successful career had he chosen to be a librarian, but that was unthinkable for a man of his social standing in those years. He would have been a great librarian, and he would have had a secure job. But he read assiduously, all the time, and he read certain things.

He loved western history, American western history. He loved the story of Wyatt Earp and the OK Corral. He loved General Custer (laughs), thought he was a hero. I told you he loved Winston Churchill and Douglas MacArthur; he read those biographies. And he admired Robert E. Lee. He read a famous, biography of Robert E. Lee by Douglas Southall Freeman. I know he admired Lincoln because his great uncle had known Lincoln, Shelby Moore Cullom. But I don't remember him…Well yes, he did read the Carl Sandburg four-volume biography of Lincoln. So, sure, he liked Lincoln.

I inherited, I think, some of that enthusiasm for biography and history. I know I did because we talked about it. He talked about it a lot, and I know I was an interested…I want to make that clear, that he was one source and that one teacher at Lawrenceville taught me history that I really enjoyed, and then I had professors at Princeton whom I really respected and admired. Those were what led me to the major. It didn't lead me to a career.

I was convinced in the 1950s that I would enter a job, maybe in banking, perhaps in Peoria, where I had connections, or maybe in advertising, since I spent two summers my last two years at Caterpillar. I really liked advertising. I discovered I had a certain skill for writing advertising copy. Those were my ambitions.

At Princeton in those days advertising was…Madison Avenue was a **huge** suction of Princeton students into the workplace. (laughs)

DePue: But wouldn't that suggest that, if think you've got a career in business or something like advertising, that you would want to take business courses?

Davis: No, because I wasn't going to go into the accounting department. I would go into marketing. In those days, if you were a Princeton graduate, they said, "Look, he'll learn what he needs to know on the job. If he can write and conceptualize, he can be a marketing executive; he can be a salesman; he can

be an executive." It's the classic liberal arts bias, which is much reduced today from what it was.

But no, that didn't…I did take an accounting course; that wasn't a bad idea. I didn't take any management courses. They didn't offer them at Princeton. I didn't take any education courses. They didn't offer them. Even after I got kind of interested in education, my senior year, because I was teaching after-school athletics at a local day school…I may have mentioned that to you.

Princeton day school had these kids and they needed to hire people at $1.25 an hour to oversee the after-school activities and athletics of their students. So, my roommate and I got jobs. We made about $8.00 a week, but it was spending money.

DePue: Well, $1.25 an hour doesn't sound like much today, but it wasn't too bad at that.

Davis: It wasn't bad, no. So, we'd spend two hours there, and I kind of liked it. I liked working with kids. That opened up another possibility for me as to a career. I didn't give it a lot of serious thought until the last months of my senior year.

I interviewed for a job at Procter and Gamble, which was **the** ultimate advertising career. You'd fill shelves at some grocery store for six months, and then you'd be a brand person, and then you'd work your way up the ladder. You'd be making a fortune and drinking three martinis with lunch and dating the secretaries at the office (laughs). That was the symbol of that life. Well, I didn't get offered a job.

I was offered a job at Caterpillar to come back permanently. I had that in the hole, and I liked Peoria, had a lot of friends there. I could interview for a banking job in Peoria if I wanted to, but I never did at that time. But I did decide to interview for a couple of prep school jobs. I knew I couldn't get a high school teaching job because I didn't have any education certificates or courses.

So, I interviewed at a school called Choate, which is one of the prestigious, eastern prep schools. I didn't interview at Lawrenceville because I thought that was a little too precious; I'd been there. I interviewed at Choate. They wanted me and my young wife—about-to-be young wife—to be house masters for one of the houses. I thought, That's a heck of a way to begin a marriage, with thirty adolescent, over-sexed kids under your roof (both laugh). Largely for that reason, I turned them…They offered me the job, and I turned them down. I talked it [over] with my fiancée, and we agreed that wasn't…

Then I got this invitation to meet at Princeton with a man who was visiting Princeton, hiring students for jobs at a Honolulu prep school, Punahou School.

DePue: How do you pronounce that again?

Davis: Pūn-a-how.

DePue: Just like it looks.

Davis: Actually, yeah. Of course, it's a Hawaiian word, and a lot of Hawaiian words don't pronounce as they're spelled. He was a character. He wore white suits, and he had white hair. His name was John Fox, and he had a miserable college education himself, something like Southern Arkansas School of Mines or something. But he had landed this head master job at Punahou because he was so handsome, suntanned, great clothes, and he was kind of a…He is kind of a fake.

But he figured that he could bring a lot of class—that's capital C, class—to Punahou by hiring ivy-leaguers. He made the rounds every spring, and he went to Yale and Dartmouth and Princeton, and he hired people. He hired six of us my year at Princeton, classmates. Out of a class of 600 people, six of us got jobs at the same school in Honolulu, and there were a couple of Harvard people. This was irresistible. It wasn't to run a dorm; it was to live in a school-supplied apartment, with my bride, on campus, but separate. The salary was $4,000 and the chance of summer work, if I wanted to be a life-guard. And they would pay me half of the airfare to get there, not to get back (both laugh).

DePue: Let's see, you've got a—

Davis: And they would pay—forgive me—they would pay a small stipend if we started having children, so much per kid (laughs). What a place! So, I accepted the job and signed up.

But then my draft board got in the way. I had to go have a physical—I was 1-A—have a physical up in Newark, New Jersey, which scared me, not Newark, but to see the kids who passed the physical. These were not physical specimens. Some of them, if they squatted, they couldn't stand up without going over to a bench. Or maybe they were faking it; I don't know (both laugh).

I passed the physical, so I had to talk with my draft board. They said, "You're 1-A, and you could be called." I'll try to make this fast. I told Punahou that I to put off my job because of this. So, I went back to Caterpillar, working, not permanently, but temporarily, to wait out the draft board. I waited a month and then a month. The draft board kept saying, "Well,

you could be called." I did put in an application as a teacher deferment, but I didn't get it, yet, because I wasn't yet a teacher, kind of a Catch-22.[6]

Finally, in October my wife and I decided we're going to take a chance. So, I notified the draft board I was moving to Honolulu. They said, "Well you could be called." We went, and the school had an opening for me because someone had to leave. So, I was a fourth-grade school teacher for a while at Punahou. It was a honeymoon for my wife and me, though we had taken a honeymoon. It was a great life.

DePue: Tough job to have to move to paradise, huh?

Davis: Oh, god! Every weekend we would go to the beaches and drink a lot. We had all these friends and others at the school who were young, lively. It was really fun. I enjoyed the students, many of them Japanese-American, some Hawaiian-American, all sorts of ethnicities. It was a very pleasant environment. So, that was great.

DePue: I want to go back and ask you about the decision to get married, how that came about and then getting married.

Davis: It seemed destiny. We'd gone together since seventh/eighth grade; that's eight years. We were engaged before my senior year in college. It really seemed destiny. I never had any hesitation. My parents kept saying, "It's a mistake, Cullom. We love Marilyn, but it's a mistake to not date others." I did furtively have a couple of dates at Princeton, just catch-as-catch-can. I didn't do them; I just met girls at some of the parties, and we had some fun. But, I just thought the woman of my life was the woman I'd dated. So did Marilyn. It was all just foregone.

We arranged for the wedding to be on June 23, 1957, had a huge wedding party of my Princeton and Lawrenceville friends and some local friends and—

DePue: The wedding was where?

Davis: In a Methodist church in Peoria that my in-laws belonged to, big wedding, 400 people, I guess. My in-laws were wonderful people. He was a surgeon, a successful surgeon. She was a devoted mother. They could not have been nicer to me. They thought of me as a wonderful catch for their daughter because I had a little bit of social status, and I was fun and nice, all of which was a mistake, but—

DePue: You'd graduated from Princeton that year.

[6] A catch-22 is a paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catch-22_(logic)

Davis: And I'd graduated from Princeton.

DePue: Did she have any career aspirations? What had she majored in?

Davis: She majored…good question. When she transferred, her sophomore year, to a college in Troy, New York, I think she majored in Spanish. But we didn't talk about a career that I can remember. She could have gotten a job, of course, in department stores, not as a secretary; she didn't have secretarial skills. She could have gotten a good job [in] sales and women's wear and so forth. She could have done some Spanish, though she wasn't fluent. But career wasn't really on her mind as it was on mine. That's again a product of the fifties, in large measure, and our social standing. So, she didn't work.

She got pregnant when we were living in Honolulu, in the spring of 1958, after we'd been there for six months. We had our first child in December of 1958 in Honolulu, a daughter. It was not a silky-smooth marriage. I had some sexual function problems, challenges, that I think I overcame, but some, and some insecurities, which were very real. And she had some frustrations. But we were married, and we were devoted.

After two years…Shall I keep going? After two years at Punahou, which I loved, my second year there I took a graduate course in American policy in the Pacific, just for fun, and I liked it. It wasn't a great course, but I thought, Well, I could do graduate study.

But in the spring of 1959, my thoughts were that I…I wrote some letters to bank presidents in Peoria—I didn't write Caterpillar because I'd kind of left them in the lurch—and I applied to three graduate schools, Stanford, Illinois and Michigan. Right away Illinois accepted me and gave me a free ride fellowship. Stanford accepted me and offered me an assistantship, which would reduce my classes, and Michigan, I can't remember. Stanford was very expensive; I loved Stanford, but it was expensive.

DePue: Princeton was out of—

Davis: Yeah, I didn't even think of applying. I thought it was way too expensive and probably much more

Cullom Davis at a 1968 orientation in Illinois.

selective, maybe not, but…I guess I thought also, Gee, they don't want to take back a Princeton undergraduate. That's often the case, so I didn't even try.

DePue: I wonder what your parents' feelings were and Marilyn's parents' feelings were about your being a fourth-grade teacher out in Honolulu.

Davis: Right. Well the fourth grade was just for a few months, until an opening opened in what was called the senior school, where I taught tenth and eleventh and twelfth grade social studies. That was just a temporary to please me because they had a vacancy, and they could take me then, and I needed the money. By then I had a teaching deferment, and then I had a parent deferment. So the draft was no longer an issue.

They both…My parents visited us, and her parents visited us. I think they thought we were living the great life. I'm sure my parents said, "Are you going to stay here?" I already had decided that this was great but that it was a little too good, a little too comfortable. I saw some of the older teachers there, one of whom was a retired rear admiral. No disrespect toward him, he was a great guy, but he was an alcoholic, and some of the other older teachers were alcoholics. Not that you could blame that on their being in place too long, but it kind of scared me that, am I looking at a projection of myself?

I think I had a little more ambition. I didn't think I was going to be a college teacher, but I thought I might become a…I might get a master's degree, maybe a PhD I didn't know; no one in my family had ever gone on for graduate school.

DePue: You mentioned this—you don't have to answer this if you don't want to—but you said you had some insecurities at the time?

Davis: Yes, yes, sexual insecurities, yeah, and performance insecurity. We got over those by and large, but I think my wife remained restless. We'll get to that later, if we want to.

DePue: She was fine though with the decision to go to graduate school?

Davis: Yes, she was. We had a baby daughter. She wasn't going to work but she… When we decided to go to Urbana, I could afford, with the money I had saved—a magnificent salary at Punahou—to buy a little tiny English car for $1,000. We could rent a cheap apartment, a tiny little apartment, in a place where they did cooperative baby-sitting. So, Marilyn could…wouldn't have to pay a baby-sitter. If she had to get a part-time job, she could. But I don't think she ever had a part-time job.

I was on a fellowship, and her father also supported us, much like my father's father had supported him in the depression. I was on a peon fellowship stipend. He loved us and never second-guessed us and sent us a modest check every month. Our rent was $40, so we could make it alright.

And I worked; I did work in the university book store, part-time, just to make a little money. Then I started working, teaching night classes up at Rantoul at the Air Force base [Chanute Air Force Base] and correspondence courses.[7] Whenever I could pick up a little scratch in my graduate school time, I did.

DePue: Going to graduate school, you have to be much more explicit in what you're majoring in.

Davis: Yes. Of course, it was history. I was admitted to the History Department; that was clear. I expressed an interest in majoring in American history. At that point, I was pretty sure that it would be modern American political history because I'd written this thesis about Governor Cullom and Senator Cullom, which was basically post-civil-war history, and I had taken courses at Princeton on the whole period of regulating business in America because Senator Cullom had been the author of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1886, regulating the railroads. It didn't regulate them very well, but he was the founder of that.

So, I got interested in regulating, and I read several books, and I took a great course at Princeton by a political scientist, on regulating business with independent commissions. I decided that would be an interest, and I thought the natural dissertation, after my freshman year, was to study the Federal Trade Commission, founded in 1914.

DePue: Before we talk more about the academic side of things, can you reflect on the differences between the University of Illinois, as a graduate student, and Princeton, as an undergrad?

Davis: It will be to the disparagement of Illinois. The quality of the faculty, when I was there, I thought—maybe I was being a little snobbish—but I thought they were indifferent, with a few exceptions. They weren't particularly accomplished as teachers. I took a course on Illinois history, taught by an amiable man, who was just not much. I took a course in historical method by an ancient, ancient historian. He was really feeble, poor guy. Nice man, but he couldn't any more teach bright young graduate students than I think—

I had some really poor graduate courses, I thought. And I didn't find the place particularly genial. On the other hand, they treated me like a super-star; not a super-star, they thought I was big stuff because I had a Princeton degree.

I did like a few of the courses. I took a course in American constitutional history, really a tough course, by a man I admired. That was

[7] Chanute Air Force Base is a closed United States Air Force facility, located south of and adjacent to Rantoul, Illinois, south of Chicago. Its primary mission throughout its existence was Air Force technical training. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chanute_Air_Force_Base)

good. I took a course with the man who later became my PhD advisor on America from 1877 to 1929. His name was Bates. He was a wonderful southern man and not a great scholar himself, but he was supportive. And I took a seminar in modern American history with him my spring semester at Illinois, my first year.

I wrote an article about the Federal Trade Commission's early years. I worked hard on it. He said it was superb. I read the fine print in the *Journal of American History,* which announced that it had a prize for the best graduate student essay of the year in the field of American history. I got the impression that not many people applied for this. I sent this paper in, the spring of my first year in graduate school, and it won the Pelsley Award, which is now a well-known…P-e-l-s-l-e-y, something like that.

DePue: Was it the Pelzer Memorial Award?

Davis: Thank you; I'm sorry; I'm thinking of another name. Thank you, you know. Thank heavens I've got a knowledgeable interviewer.

DePue: Well, I had to look it up.

Davis: Pelzer Award [Louis Pelzer Memorial Award].[8] Yeah, it's in my resume. That was big stuff. Suddenly people like…Some of the hotshots in the department, like the diplomatic historian, Norman Graebner, they said, "My gosh, we've got another superstar here. In his first year, Cullom Davis has won the Pelzer Award, and he's getting straight A's, blah, blah, blah." So, I got great honors.

There were some downfalls after that. I don't know whether you want to go to that. Now, we haven't gotten to 1970 yet.

DePue: I definitely do want to develop this more. My question here—this might be a bit of an aside—but you mentioned you were a little bit disappointed perhaps with the quality of the instruction you got there?

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: Was that at all a function of this explosion of higher education that happened after World War II?

Davis: That's interesting. Well, Illinois had a good department. It had a great tradition of distinguished department. I felt, when I went there, that the brightest minds in the department were the younger ones, and they would often leave, and they did. I took a German history seminar by a brilliant

[8] The Pelzer Memorial Award Committee of the Organization of American Historians invites candidates for graduate degrees to submit essays for the Louis Pelzer Memorial Award competition. The winning essay is published in the *Journal of American History*. Essays may deal with any period or topic in the history of the United States. (https://www.oah.org/programs/awards/louis-pelzer-memorial-award/)

historian, and after three years he left, not for tenure reasons; he just was frustrated.

There was kind of a triumvirate of old-fashioned leaders in the department that really ran it. To me, they were all pompous and not that good, but they had the power. So younger historians kind of died on the vine there, I thought.

DePue: Would they also be looking for opportunities at somewhere more elite, perhaps the Ivy League schools, and move onto those?

Davis: Some. But it was clear there was a morale problem, too. This was a department that was run totally by the top. Maybe that's true at many universities, but I felt it was to their [the university's] detriment. It was not a particularly dynamic department. They weren't winning Pulitzer prizes or other awards, as a department.

DePue: Did you have anybody who served as a mentor to you there?

Davis: [Professor] Leonard Bates was a mentor. I've had people who taught there, who later became mentors for me, but not when I was in graduate school, like Bob Johannsen. I didn't take a course with him. Norman Graebner was something of a mentor. Do you know that name?

DePue: Yes.

Davis: G-r-a-e-b-n-e-r. He was chairman, which I thought was a breath of fresh air, and he made me his grading assistant for his huge American Diplomacy course. I got to know him pretty well. I liked him, and he liked me. There were some problems developing in my career there, though, at that time. I don't know whether I should go into that or not.

DePue: I was hoping you would.

Davis: Okay (laughs).

DePue: If you want to do that, yes, absolutely.

Davis: Oh, I want to do it; it's a question of just when. Sure, no, I'm not hesitating at all. Two problems, one was that the department insisted on two foreign languages, mastery of two foreign languages. I took the French test the first chance I had; I passed it fine. I chose German as the second language. Russian scared me, and you couldn't use Spanish, and I'd never studied any language besides French and Latin. So, I chose German.

I learned later that the History Department had a tense relationship with the German Department. They depended on the German Department to

offer instruction in German. Then the German Department would grade the German essays you had to answer to pass the proficiency test.

I promptly took a German basic course, studied it hard. It was hard to get excited about it because it was just a means to an end. But I studied it, took the proficiency test, didn't pass. Some of the comments on the test, I thought were trivial. It was a U-boat essay from some history, and the word was the noun for the act of "torpedoing" a boat. I said the torpedoing; they said it should have been the "torpedofication." Well, I thought, Who says that? Only a German would say that (both laugh).

That may not have been how I failed, but I thought, I'm caught here between two departments who are trying to prove to each other that they're superior. That's exactly what it was. Anyway, I took it again; I failed it. Then I was tutored in German. By that time, I was wasting a lot of time on this. It ended up taking me a whole extra year in graduate school, just to get this crazy thing behind me.

I went to the department chairman, Norman Graebner, who was very, very understanding and sympathetic. But he said, "I can't do anything about this. This is a classic requirement." I said, "Can't I satisfy it in some other way, quantitative history or something?" "No, no we don't do that." They did later. Actually, I didn't ask quantitative; there wasn't any; it didn't even exist then. Excuse me. Anyway, I had no choice, so I got depressed about that.

By that time my class work was over. I was studying for my prelims, which I passed with flying colors.

DePue: Your—

Davis: Prelims were the tests I had to write out and then be orally examined, [based] on what I'd taken, what I knew about American history and Latin American history.

DePue: This was a step toward getting the PhD and not the master's?

Davis: Oh, I'm sorry, yes. I backed up. I wrote my master's thesis in a year and passed that. There was a committee, I guess, but it wasn't much of a deal. Then it was the prelims, which is really formal entry into PhD study. I studied a year for that, reading all the books on American history I could. I did fine in that, but the language was all that was hanging me up.

I even started my dissertation research. I got a special dissertation fellowship and travel money to travel to New England and Washington, D.C. and Chicago to do research. But the language hang-up was in my way, which depressed me.

I was also depressed because my wife admitted to an affair in the second year we were in Urbana. It was an affair with a member of our extended family, which just devastated me. I never dreamed that people did that. I was really pretty naïve. It devastated me. She was apologetic, tearful, and she admitted it to me. I had no idea. That was to her credit. But it was a crisis in my stability as a functioning adult, and I think it also helps explain my dissertation problems because I had those.

Finally, I passed the German test. But then I—no one knew it on campus—but I was having trouble writing my dissertation. I had a year in Urbana when I had nothing to do but write my dissertation, fellowship, and I did everything but that.

DePue: You wouldn't be alone in that respect. This is the hurdle that lots of PhD candidates have.

Davis: Yes, you're right. You're right, absolutely right. But I think it was psychological in nature, which maybe it always is. I had a tendency to stall things but not to that extent. I just hadn't done anything. So, when it came time [for] interviewing for jobs, I prepared an outline of my dissertation, as if I was writing it. It was a pretty coherent outline. I knew what I was going to do; I just wasn't doing it, and they fortunately did ask. They said maybe "Do you have a chapter you could show?" I said, "Well no," I said, "I've been working on it, but…"

Then I got interviewed at two very good schools, Indiana University—great school, better than Illinois, I thought—and the University of Maryland. So, I went to both. I didn't like Maryland. I thought, for various reasons, it just didn't appeal to me. Indiana was a great university, huge; there were fifty-five members of the faculty. They were bright, productive, fun; it's a lovely area, so I accepted the job.

DePue: I want to take a couple of steps back.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: Because I want to hear your discussion about the decision, once you got to graduate school, to continue on to get a PhD and obviously to get a teaching position someplace.

Davis: I'm sorry. The decision for the PhD kind of occurred as a natural result of the stupendous success I had my first year and the compliments of all these people. I was hot stuff, and by my second year, I had a published article in the *Journal of American History*; that was the prize. I got $25 and a bronze medal, (DePue laughs) but it was publication. That got the attention of universities around the country. "Who is this kid who's a graduate student and has published an article in our leading journal?" That decision, then, plus the

encouragement with the PhD dissertation, which was a little more money, it just seemed like the thing to do.

DePue: Were you either a teaching or research assistant?

Davis: Yes. I did. I know the year because it was 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated. I was a teaching assistant because I was teaching a class when we got the news of his assassination. I was teaching American history, the survey course in American history, and I loved it. I was doing well in it. Of course, it was a danger to love that sort of thing too much because you were only paid a little bit to do it. What you were really being paid to do was to write your dissertation. Then I was teaching up at Rantoul, which took time. I was grading correspondence courses, which took time. I was hustling, in other words (laughs).

DePue: But was the teaching satisfying for you? Did you feel like this was your calling?

Davis: I think so, yes. You've got to realize teaching freshman college students and sophomores…But it had its high points; the Illinois students were pretty good. Yes, I enjoyed it, and I discovered I had a gift for making things interesting. I gave a few guest lectures in some of the advanced courses that people offered. I gave a guest lecture for Leonard Bates in his course on the progressive era. I gave a guest lecture, not for Graebner, but in Illinois history. I discovered I could put together a lecture pretty well. Whatever hesitation I'd had about public speaking had evaporated by then.

DePue: The next question deals with your decision to seek employment at a university, a quality university, while you're still working on the dissertation, rather than sticking through it and just getting that done. How do you assess that?

Davis: Unrealistic. I didn't know how long Illinois would let me be their hanger on. There were people like that at Illinois and every university, who'd been graduate students for fifteen years. It's kind of sad. Some of them would get a lowly administration job and just give up on the dissertation. I knew about those cases; friends were warning me about it.

The publication of my article had made me something of an appealing candidate at universities. So, I was conning people, okay? I was conning people. Stanford inquired about me, which I found ironic because I could have gone to Stanford, but they thought, "Gee, this guy is hot stuff." There was a professor of Scottish history at Illinois whom I had known when he taught English history at Princeton, wonderful man. He said, "I've gotten in touch with the history department at Princeton; do you think you'd be interested? They have this special program. It's only a three-year appointment. You're not on the tenure track; you're just there, and then you leave. Do you think

you'd be interested?" I said, "Well, no, because the pay is pretty lousy." And I wasn't [interested]. You've got to realize I was kind of a celebrity, a phony celebrity, a hollow celebrity, but a celebrity.

DePue: Is that how you viewed yourself at the time?

Davis: I guess so. When I looked at the deep, dark, soul of my life, I guess I felt that way.

DePue: I guess in another kind of a career we'd call this writer's block to a certain extent.

Davis: Sure, yes. Well—

DePue: Did you see this movement to a school someplace as another way to break out of that as well?

Davis: No, no. It was a great university, attractive, and I knew I would have to finish the dissertation but worry about that tomorrow.

DePue: But my impression, once you went to Indiana University, you really hadn't, in a serious way, started writing the dissertation.

Davis: Hadn't started the first paragraph; the first sentence, I hadn't written, period. I had not written anything. Research was finished; I'd gone over the research; I'd written an outline that impressed them when I visited Indiana. Then the chairman, who was a no-nonsense guy, kept saying, "How's it coming?" And others in the department said, "How's the dissertation coming?" I would make up some excuse and do nothing.

DePue: We're just about at two hours. The logical one or two things to do here is to talk about your experiences at Indiana University, which would take quite a bit longer.

Davis: Take about a half an hour at least, yeah.

DePue: Or decide that we've done a good job of dealing with your life and career up to this point, and let's pick it up next time.

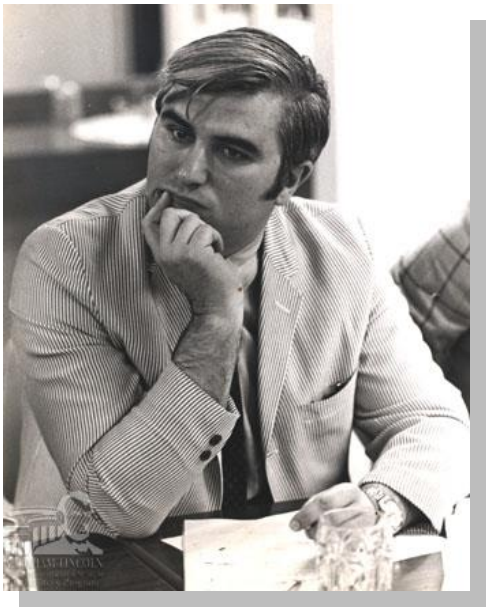
Davis: Well, I could try to—

DePue: I don't want to shorten that discussion.

Davis: I know that; I know that. But we are there; we've got us there. I think, let's do it. I can handle a half an hour.

DePue: You already talked basically about how you got there. What was the teaching load that you got starting out?

Davis: [It] was three courses. I taught two sections of the introductory American history course. Those all had sections, so I was the supervisor of five graduate students. I'd meet with them, and I loved that. I gave lectures; they were popular. I loved working with these young graduate students, kind of was their mentor. Then I taught one advanced course on the progressive era, and I loved that. I worked **so hard** to produce that course, which is a lot of effort. But I had them reading interesting stuff. These were bright graduate students. They'd never had a professor at Indiana who taught the progressive era.



Cullom Davis, Associate Professor of History, circa 1970.

In fact, I replaced the man who thought that American history ended in 1933. (DePue laughs) He really did. He was an arch-reactionary. He was a distinguished Pulitzer Prize winner, but he was their expert in modern American history that ended in 1933. They had a problem, and I was one of three solutions. When he retired, they hired three people in the department to teach modern American history.

DePue: When you first get to a position like this, it's kind of natural—because you've never taught these courses before perhaps in that form—that you're spending so much of your time developing these courses, it doesn't really leave much time for working on the dissertation anyway.

Davis: Well, guess what? That was an actual decision. Effectively, that was my preference. If I can keep tremendously busy by doing everything but what I'm supposed to do, I'm busy. I worked my tail off on preparing those courses, and I got rave comments. I thought, Maybe there's some way out of this dilemma. But I was fooling myself because [I] kept getting the question.

By the second year…I was so popular I was asked to oversee a summer institute, sponsored by the Lilly Foundation, teaching high school teachers how to learn more about American history, great idea. I had these students, and I did the same thing; I read every damn book there was on American history, so I would be their authority on this stuff. And it paid decent money, but it meant no summer off to work on my dissertation.

Our department chairman my second year was a different person, very nice. He was an English historian; he wasn't a hard head, but he…I respected him deeply. He did call me and say, "Cullom, I can't give you a raise this year. We are reaching the point where you're going to have to make progress." And he said, "Is there something I can do to help you?" I said, "Well, I feel I have writer's block, and I've had some marriage problems, and I just…" He said, "Why don't I get you an appointment with an acquaintance of mine at the medical school in the psychology department at the medical school in Indianapolis?" I said, "Well, okay."

So, I went to see this psychiatrist, a great guy. He began talking to me about my life, everything, childhood, mother, father (laughs). It was a, it was a wonderful experience for me to articulate things in my life, including my wife's affair. It was, in some ways, a liberating experience, but I didn't write a word.

Finally, after three months of this, my department chairman asked, and I said, "Well, here's where we are." He said, "Keep up with the psychiatrist, but ask him some advice." I asked him; he said, "I should probably refer you also to a man who is a laboratory researcher in behavioral psychology," worlds apart from psychiatry.

DePue: Was this psychiatrist a Freudian?

Davis: Psychologist, no. I mean, yes, the psychiatrist was a Freudian. This guy was a…What's the guy that did the behavior modification work, a famous psychologist? He worked with rats in a lab? [B.F. Skinner]

DePue: I'm thinking Mendel, but that's not it.

Davis: No, it was an…It doesn't matter. I was inadvertently seeing the two poles of psychology (laughs). I made an appointment with this guy. He was in his lab coat, literally in his lab, and he didn't have any time for me.

He said, "Alright, answer me right now. Do you want to finish your dissertation?" He was the first person to put it that coldly to me. I said, "Well, well yes." He said, "Alright," and he made a little schedule. He said, "How many pages do you **have** to write to write a dissertation?" I said, "At least 220." "Okay, 220 pages. How many pages can you write in a day?" I said, "Oh, heck, in a single day, I can write two or three pages easily." He said, "Okay. That means like fifteen a week?" He said, "Let's make it ten a week. Let's make it so that this bar is not hopeless."

He made out a schedule. He said "You can do this in three months. But, you're going to have to write me a series of checks, made out sequentially by week, for enough money that it would be a real loss to you to have that money cashed and a relief to you if it wasn't. And by midnight Sunday, every week, you have to have a post-marked copy of the number of

pages you've sent. The first week it's got to be ten pages, second week it'll be twelve pages, third week it'll be twelve pages, fourth week…it'll work its way up slowly." And he said, "Make them out to charities." I made them out to charities, the charities I believed in.

I sweated blood that first week, but I sat down Sunday afternoon and wrote three pages, [the] first I'd done, because I was under the gun. Finally, the bluff had been called. I had a check for, I think, $100 that I could lose, and we didn't have that much money. I made it that first week, but barely.

The next week I thought, This is terrible. So, I called this psychologist and I said "You know…" No, I met him by an appointment. I said "You know, the one problem I'm having here is that I have a guilty conscience about these charities because I don't contribute to them. Yet, if I were to fail, I would be contributing to them." He said, "You're right. There's a flaw in my plan." He tore up those checks, and he said, "I want you to write out a series of sequential checks to the three most despised organizations you can think of in the United States." I wrote American Nazi Party, and there were a couple of others. There was a guy named Smith…anyway, things that I just hated. I did that, and I finished the rough draft of the dissertation in three months, which was a great relief to the chairman, though it was a rough draft.

By the way, I'd told the psychologist, "Look, I've got to look up the citations for this. I can't, you know…" He said, "I don't want to see footnotes; that comes later. And I don't want it edited; just send me the crap." And I did. So, I finished in three months, which was amazing, but I did it. I have to credit him, even though I really liked my psychiatrist and was still seeing him. (both laugh). I had him to thank, though he could care less.

DePue: You didn't give me the names for either one of these gentlemen is that something you want to do?

Davis: I don't remember; I've forgotten the psychiatrist's name, truthfully. The psychologist was Zimmerman. I have the other name somewhere. Actually, they collaborated—though they couldn't have disagreed more on their work—they collaborated on an article about me in the psychological literature.

If you wanted to try hard enough, under the name Zimmerman, you could probably find that article. I won't give it to you; I happen to have a copy. It's just kind of an after note, but it's kind of interesting. They talked about the success I had in doing this, although it did take me another six months to footnote and re-write and pass my exams. By that time, I was tired of that subject; I was tired of the hoops I'd jumped through, but I at least saved my job at Indiana.

DePue: That's what they say when you're picking your PhD dissertation; it better be something that you really love.

Davis: And I did, but I got tired of it. You're right; I did love it.

DePue: Which is inevitable. Did you have any resentment that here you are; you're a very successful, classroom teacher; you're doing gang-busters there; everybody likes what you're doing, and yet you've got this silly dissertation to do? Did resentment come in?

Davis: Well, I moped about it. I wasn't resentful. Both at Illinois, when Graebner said there was no recourse for the German exam, and at Indiana, where there was no recourse for the dissertation, I knew the rules. They'd been very, very explicit to me. It would have been totally irrational for me to claim that I was an exception in that sense. I may have dreamed that I would be, but I knew otherwise. It's just that the bluff got called both times, and I mangled my way through it.

DePue: Again, these are a series of questions you don't have to necessarily answer, but the move to Indiana University, was that something of a fresh start for you and Marilyn?

Davis: Yes, in that we met some great friends at Indiana. We were very social, and she was very social. We had had a second child, about a year after this affair she had, another daughter, so we had two children. I was making a halfway decent salary, and the department was great people. So, yes. It was a beautiful city, much prettier than Champaign-Urbana, beautiful countryside. We did like southern Indiana.

As to our relationship, we had a sexual relationship, not a terribly active one, and at one point, by 1968, which was four years after our move to Indiana, she got pregnant…sixty-seven she got pregnant, three years after and had our third child, a son, in the middle of 1968.

But she also…Now she didn't talk about it, but I knew, I just knew, that she was having several affairs. I was not proud enough to call her on it. I just accepted it, which is kind of pathetic. I was a real milquetoast. I just said, "Well, this is my lot in life." I'm ashamed to say that, but it's true. We never talked about those affairs, but we knew we had problems. A few years later, when we were at Springfield, at her suggestion, we did a trial separation. The minute that happened, I knew that this had been a terrible mistake, so I was the one who then pushed hard for the divorce.

DePue: What year did you end up getting divorced?

Davis: Seventy-three or four, seventy-four, I think.

DePue: I don't know if we identified the year you actually got to Indiana University.

Davis: It's the fall of sixty-four.

DePue: What was the nature of the relationship that you had at the time with Marilyn; how much was she aware of your seeking some clinical help with this problem?

Davis: Oh, oh, totally, sure.

DePue: Was that something you were able to talk about?

Davis: Oh, yeah. I told her…I'm not sure I told her that I'd told them about the affair, and maybe I didn't. Now that I think about it, I may not have shared that with the psychologist, though I shared everything else. I can't remember that. But I do know that she knew totally about that, and she was very supportive. I mean, she's a good friend.

DePue: By the time you got to Indiana, was your relationship with Marilyn still an excuse for not finishing the dissertation, not writing the dissertation?

Davis: I don't think so; I don't think so. No, when I talked to the department chairman the second year, I don't think I mentioned troubles with Marilyn; I'm sure I didn't. But I did talk about the writer's block and how I…Oh, I know, I got hives. Hives, or what is it around your waist, terrible itching and red welts? It probably was a psychological reaction. Is it hives or something else? Well, I can't remember. But I was having other symptoms, sleeplessness, stress because the jig was up; I was facing the hypocrisy, not hypocrisy, the unreality of my situation.

DePue: When did you finish the dissertation?

Davis: I have to reconstruct this. You mean when was it approved?

DePue: Yeah.

Davis: Sixty-eight. It was approved in sixty-eight. In sixty-seven I was working to refine it. I submitted it in sixty-seven, and then they awarded it in sixty-eight; that's it.

DePue: I've got to assume that the biggest hurdle was getting it down in draft form to begin with, and after that the—

Davis: Well, it took some effort. But yeah, that was just mechanical. You had to look up footnotes and create footnotes.

DePue: Did you attend your PhD graduation?

Davis: No.

DePue: Why not?

Davis: By that time, I was kind of alienated from [the University of] Illinois, for no good reason. I just… [It was] my disrespect for the department, not that it was their fault that I didn't write my dissertation or pass my German test. I just…I didn't feel it was a great…and I still don't think it was a great department, though I've been a little generous in supporting the department. I had some baggage, emotional baggage from there.

DePue: Besides not going to the graduation, how did you feel about finally getting all this behind you?

Davis: Oh, just relief. Then people said, Are you going turn your dissertation into a book? By that time, I was tired of the subject, and there'd been a couple of other really good books on regulation that were very sophisticated. I said, "Done enough of this." So, I didn't have a book to write.

I could have stayed at Indiana because—I didn't tell you this—they asked me to be an associate dean in 1966, as well as teach. I still taught two courses, but I spent part-time as an associate dean.

DePue: So, you were on a tenure track at Indiana?

Davis: I had been, yes. But they never reached the point—that's the seven-year point—where that was to be tested. I was told that, if I liked work in administration, I probably could continue teaching part-time, even if I didn't publish a book. I had to finish the dissertation, but I was told that, with my dissertation finished, I would probably be welcome to teach the survey American history course because I was very good at it, and they always needed people for that. That could have been a life for me because Indiana I had liked a lot, though I grew restless there.

DePue: Was getting the dissertation done in sixty-eight?

Davis: Getting the degree in sixty-eight, finishing it in sixty-seven.

DePue: Was that enough to satisfy the "publish or perish" requirements of being on the tenure track?

Davis: No, no. But it wasn't coming up yet. I wouldn't have come up until seventy-one. So, it just hadn't come up. I had been reappointed, and, of course, I had this administrative appointment too. I had been reappointed for three years. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't made pretty rapid progress on my dissertation.

DePue: What were some of the advantages or the perks or the things you liked about being at Indiana, versus your experiences at Illinois?

Davis: A genial department, a nationally recognized department, a beautiful setting, very social friends—we got together a lot. That's probably it.

DePue: I want to finish up your time at Indiana this way.

Davis: All right.

DePue: These are some interesting years of American history (Davis laughs). You've got the civil rights movement in the early sixties, and then by the time you get around to the time you're finishing your dissertation, you've got the students' rights movement and the beginning of the Vietnam War—

Davis: Anti-war, exactly. All of them affected me. Do you want me to take up each one?

DePue: Yeah, please.

Davis: I was affected by the civil rights movement. I never marched on Selma. I had a very good friend who did, and I always felt guilty that I hadn't made that kind of gesture. But I followed it carefully; I did contribute to several civil rights causes financially, to the extent I could. I was invited to participate in helping shape a course on African American history at Indiana, and I was delighted to. I had a graduate student working with me on it. We put together visual materials for a very interesting course on African American history.

DePue: Called "black history" at the time?

Davis: I can't remember. It probably was called black history; [it] wasn't African American. It may have had something like "elements of," or "themes in," because we specialized in certain things that seemed interesting. That was fun, and it gave me a chance to specialize in that. For me, that was helping express my support for the civil rights movement.

DePue: Were there any blacks on the faculty?

Davis: Yes. At the time I taught there, in history there were only two. There were a fair number of black students; I had a fair number of black students. I had a few black graduate assistants helping teach classes. But it was by no means a fully integrated campus. It was very southern, just like…Well, it was very southern, probably not as integrated as Illinois was in those days.

DePue: You say it was very southern or sudden?

Davis: Well, southern Indiana. I did get black students in my summer workshop for teachers because a lot of them would come up from Mississippi, hoping to get a master's degree. I had…probably a fourth of my students in the summertime were school teachers from the south who found Bloomington, Indiana an approachable destination. But generally, Indiana was not in the vanguard of civil rights commitment or enrollment or faculty.

DePue: I probably should have asked this before I asked you about the civil rights movement. Where were you at politically at the time?

Davis: I'll try to make it fast. I became a Democrat. I was gradually becoming that. I had taken courses at Princeton, which convinced me that the New Deal was a great success, and most of my professors were Democrats. But I also thought they were right. I really was studying this stuff. So, I was leaning that way. But in 1956, I was still at Princeton. I voted for Eisenhower, but between then and 1960, when I'd been to Punahou and then was at Urbana as a graduate student, I became a Democrat, a Kennedy Democrat.

[John Fitzgerald] Kennedy visited Champaign-Urbana. We cheered and got excited, and it led to some very interesting…a couple of sharp arguments with my parents, who by this time were pretty dedicated Republicans. They couldn't understand how a son for whom they'd sacrificed so much to send to college (DePue laughs) could become a Democrat. Of course, my wiseacre response was, "The trouble is, I got a good education." (both laugh) To me that was a fat pitch.

We were civil about it, but we did disagree because also my mother didn't like Jackie Kennedy. She always viewed the spouses negatively, Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson's sister, Jackie Kennedy. So, I didn't take that too seriously, but they were pretty fervent Republicans, as were my in-laws.

DePue: Where was academia at the time, in terms of what your own personal, political views were, versus what you were teaching in the classroom?

Davis: I felt it was important for me to try very hard to be neutral in the class. I'm sure I wasn't. I'm sure that some of my jokes and some of my other things betrayed a certain political preference. But I really worked at it. I felt it was my job, certainly not to indoctrinate, or even give a hint of my political preferences, out of a fear that students would feel they were being indoctrinated. I worked at that pretty seriously.

I was also not a real activist, politically. Even though I supported the civil rights movement with contributions and with teaching this course on African American…I don't remember attending any rallies.

DePue: Was the students' rights movement going on at Indiana?

Davis: Yes, it was, very much so. In fact, it led to my one real, professional crisis of conscience. The students were so upset with the administration at Indiana, and I thought rightly so. The students were so upset with the administration at Indiana, and I thought their disappointment was well-deserved. There was a president of Indiana and some others who had taken those jobs, who were really bad. They weren't educators. They didn't care a bit about undergraduate education or campus life or anything.

I sympathized with the students, and I tailored my course demands, to some extent, according to their…I remember one student was so caught up in the student movement that he felt he couldn't write a short essay I had required. He said, "Could I use some other medium than text to express my views?" I said, "Look, it's got to be really good because I expect it in words."

So, he did; he produced a portfolio of pretty good drawings that encapsulated some of the events in student history. I felt, It won't get you a job if you have to write, but it was a respectable effort. So, I was doing some of that sort of adjustment.

The students called a strike on campus, against the administration. I taught a big lecture course in a big lecture hall, and I was in a dilemma. Have I told you this story?

DePue: Not on record, no. Before you do that, can I ask you what issues the students were upset about?

Davis: I don't remember. It wasn't the war; it was student rights. It was probably sixty-seven, maybe sixty-eight. It could have been…It wasn't the war. Well, I don't remember. You're putting me on…one of the two. Anyway, my dilemma was, do I cross the picket-lines? I wanted to support the students, but I also felt I had a professional obligation, not that the university had threatened to fire us if we didn't teach. There was some criticism, but it was a mixed reaction by the faculty. Some wouldn't cross; some would. Mostly, being a liberal arts university, most of the faculty wouldn't cross the picket line.

My decision was to type out, painstakingly, in a long marathon weekend, all of my remaining lectures, each one single-spaced, about four pages, and then mimeograph them on the purple ink and leave them on the tables in the lecture room. So, I wasn't crossing the…Well, I was, to take the things there, but…

I told my grad assistants they didn't have to meet classes either. If it was in their conscience that they would honor the picket line, they could. I felt, at least, that I was fulfilling my educational responsibilities of teaching them because I'd told the students, "You'll be responsible for what I said, either in writing or speaking, on the final exam."

DePue: In retrospect, do you still feel that way?

Davis: I feel pretty good about it. There's a little bit of hypocrisy in that, a slight bit. But it was my way of honoring two conflicting objectives. I took my professional responsibilities pretty seriously, but my heart was important too.

DePue: By the time you get to sixty-seven/sixty-eight, the protests are increasingly about Vietnam.

Davis: Right. Yes. As I say, I may have been mistaken. Maybe this was an anti-Vietnam protest, because if it was sixty-eight and Kent State and [Robert] Kennedy, it could have…No, Kent State was later.

DePue: In 1970.

Davis: Kennedy's assassination, Bobbie's, and the whole campaign of sixty-eight, it could have been that, but I don't remember. I was caught up in that, not as much as a few of my colleagues. My best friend on the faculty in history was really active in the anti-war movement. I don't know that he traveled anywhere, but he was active; he signed letters and so forth.

I was confused. I thought I was patriotic, but I was deeply troubled by the losses. I was really confused. If I'd had to vote, yes or no, on Johnson's escalation, I might have voted yes. I can't remember, to tell you the truth.

DePue: Were any of your colleagues conducting teach-ins or things like that?

Davis: Yes. I guess…That's right; my friend did a teach-in. Of course, there were a lot of them at Michigan, but there were a few in Indiana. He did—Jim, my friend—gave teach-ins, a few. I didn't. And I didn't teach a course on Vietnam until I moved to Springfield; I did then. But I didn't teach a course on that. I taught ROTC students. I told you, I taught American history to ROTC students. I don't think I taught the Vietnam conflict, unless the very beginnings of it because it was—

DePue: In the pre-interview you mentioned that you also taught military history at the time.

Davis: I'm sorry; didn't I say that just now?

DePue: You said American history.

Davis: Oh, I'm sorry, American **military** history. I taught that for the ROTC Department. They had agreed with the university that their American military history course would be taught by a member of the history department, which was a major concession. Whether it was smart or not is for them to decide. I taught it honestly and honorably. It wouldn't have been the typical ROTC officer's course.

I taught more the social history of warfare and some of the complications and controversies of warfare, but I also taught battles. I had them read a couple of really interesting books. I can't remember the major one that's well respected on the American military, not critical but just pointing out the complexities. I taught that course, I think, three times.

DePue: I wanted to drill in a little bit closer to 1968 because it was such a traumatic year. It starts with the Tet Offensive.

Davis: Right.

DePue: And then you've got Martin Luther King's assassination. I think that was April?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: And then July, you already mentioned Bobby Kennedy's assassination.

Davis: Or June, June, I think.

DePue: It was right after the California primary.

Davis: Yes, right.

DePue: Do you have any particular memories about that year?

Davis: Well yes, because it also is a special memory for me. I had a chance—and I accepted it—to take a free, three-week, educational tour of Europe. The university had bought this seat on a group of educators, and the person who was supposed to go couldn't, so they invited me to go.

My visits were to England, where we would spend time at Cambridge, talking with professors; in Berlin, where we would talk to the officials of the University of East Berlin; and Moscow. Excuse me, we were in Berlin, but the other official places were Prague, Czechoslovakia—that was the famous spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia—and Moscow, where we met with people at the University of Moscow. But we were in Berlin for a few days.

DePue: East Berlin?

Davis: East Berlin, you bet. We were educators, and we were harangued by a few of the professors, the communist professors at the East Berlin…We found the most tension for our group of thirty people in East Berlin. Moscow, sure they kept an eye on us, but we could argue freely and did. Prague, of course, it was inspiring but also pathetic because some of the people who spoke to us were later, I'm sure, put in prison.

DePue: That happened later in the year?

Davis: That happened in August that they were…But they were so excited. This was a new Dubrogn? [Alexander Dubcek] I forget the prime minister's name, something like that. Students and faculty were just overjoyed at the liberation of Prague, and of course, it's a beautiful city.

That was a great trip. But while it happened, we got the news of Johnson's decision to quit and of the primaries going on during March. But we got back before King's assassination and Kennedy's.

DePue: Especially in a place like Berlin—I would assume you're in West Berlin and then you go to East Berlin—can you share any impressions about that?

Davis: You know, I'm not sure we were because we flew from Moscow into East Berlin, where we visited the famous palace where Truman met with Stalin, Potsdam, which is a famous royal palace. I think we landed, not at Tempelhof [Airport], but we landed in East Germany; I'm pretty sure. We were in East Germany and didn't get to West Germany.

DePue: I'll put you on the spot here then. Your reflections on what you now are observing firsthand, in terms of the successes versus the failures of Communism, of Socialism.

Davis: Right.

DePue: And yet we've got this war in Vietnam about, theoretically at least, about this issue.

Davis: Yes, though…Yes, right. That's right. It was considered the chess pawn, what was it, the…What's the metaphor?

DePue: The domino?

Davis: Thank you, the domino effect. I had never been a Communist. I had never supported Communism. I have felt some socialist ideas were pretty good, but I've never voted Socialist. I'd say I've always been kind of a liberal progressive, certainly not an activist. That's kind of where I stood on all those issues. I wasn't an avid anti-war protestor in Vietnam, but I was troubled by the war and then angry by things that happened.

DePue: How lively a campus did Indiana University become in sixty-eight, sixty-nine and seventy, especially?

Davis: Yeah, there were marches and meetings, mass meetings. That's about all I remember.

DePue: How would you characterize the campus politics at the time? You've got the University of Wisconsin which was—

Davis: Very liberal.

DePue: Very liberal. Indiana is traditionally a more conservative state.

Davis: The state is conservative, but the campus is certainly more liberal than Illinois, chiefly because it has a law school and a very large arts and humanities department. No ag [agriculture] school, no business school; they're at Purdue. The ag and business schools tend to be more conservative. Education school's also a little conservative, and they had an education school.

But Indiana, because of the intellectual make-up of the departments, tended to be a little more liberal. Their previous president, who had just put Indiana on the map, was a master at playing the state legislature very effectively in supporting the Kinsey Institute—which you can imagine how a lot of Hoosiers felt (DePue laughs)—and then hiring a bunch of Russian historians because Indiana had the largest Russian history faculty in the country at that time (laughs).[9]

DePue: Why Indiana?

Davis: Because the president of the university was able to get Ford Foundation money to hire these people and then keep them on because he was convinced that these filled a major need and that Indiana University could become internationally celebrated as a center of East European studies. The legislators complained, so what he did, he calmed them down, and he said, "You're right; we need more American historians." I was part of the wave of additional American historians (both laugh).

So, this man, Herman Welles, was an absolute genius as a president, a beloved man. Through most of my years there he was not president. He had already retired, but he came back one year as acting president, a great man, and he built a great university.

DePue: The one event in 1968 that I haven't talked about, other than the election, is the [National] Democratic Convention in Chicago.

Davis: Yes, yes. I was deeply troubled by that. I thought Daley was a bigot. I supported the…the senator from Minnesota who was the nominee. Good grief!

DePue: Mondale?

Davis: No, no, before Mondale?

DePue: McGovern?

Davis: No, no, Minnesota.

DePue: Muskie?

Davis: No, he was from Maine…Humphrey!

[9] The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction (often shortened to The Kinsey Institute) was a nonprofit research institute at Indiana University until 2016, when it merged with Indiana University. The institute's mission is "to advance sexual health and knowledge worldwide." Research, graduate training, information services, and the collection and preservation of library, art, and archival materials are main activities carried out by The Kinsey Institute. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey_Institute)

DePue: [Hubert] Humphrey, oh, yeah. I'm sorry.

Davis: Well, no. I should know. I had flirted with Bobby Kennedy, and then I flirted with…the major anti-war opponent in sixty-eight…Isn't this terrible? [Senator Eugene McCarthy?]

DePue: Well I know McGovern won the nomination in seventy-two, but was he on the scene in sixty-eight?

Davis: No.

DePue: I should remember that too.

Davis: He was the first man who stood up in the senate and said…We both know the name, but it doesn't matter. I flirted with maybe supporting him, then maybe supporting Bobby; of course, Bobby was gone. I eventually accepted Humphrey as my choice of a nominee because I despised Nixon. I grew to dislike Johnson, though I kind of pitied him. He had built a domestic record and like some presidents, like Wilson, became ruined by his international record. Now, did I get to your question?

DePue: Yeah, absolutely. Now, we've been talking about your life at Indiana University, I'd like to hold off until the next session the decision to move on.

Davis: Yes, I think that's the logical thing because I can talk about that wrap-up quickly.

DePue: Any other final reflections of your years at Indiana?

Davis: Well, they were eventful years, got me back on track professionally. The marriage seemed okay. I loved teaching. My progressive, democratic politics were there but not as an activist. And the university was a great place.

DePue: That's a good way to finish for today. Thank you Cullom; it's been a lot of fun.

Davis: It has been.

(end of transcript #1)

Interview with Cullom Davis
Interview # HS-A-L-2011-037

Interview # 2: September 19, 2011
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, September 19, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We're here in the library this afternoon with Cullom Davis. Good afternoon.

Davis: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: This is our second session; the first one was fun.

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: We learned quite a bit. I really appreciate your candor as we went through that one. Now we get into some of the meat of your career, not that the first part wasn't. Here I am, an oral historian, trained by professor Cullom Davis, and now I get to interview the master on oral history. (Davis laughs)

Davis: Well, you are a master, no doubt about it.

DePue: I wasn't necessarily fishing for a compliment, but I'll take them when I get them, I guess. (Davis laughs) What I wanted to do is to finish off the last session. We had you at Indiana University, right?

Davis: Right.

DePue: I wanted to ask you, what was it at that point in your life that led you to look for something new, a new place to work?

Davis: Well, I had a good situation and a good department. I had an administrative job, which I found rewarding, by and large, loved the beautiful home we had, children. Everything was good, except that I became a little restless with what I perceived to be the lack of attention in the higher echelons of Indiana University for the importance of undergraduate education. I had become really interested in that and in various ways tried to modernize courses, teaching, and introduce new ideas. I was able to do that, but I never could get university support, if there was a budget attached. That was a little frustrating. Then the student strike that I mentioned occurred. There was a lot of unrest anyway.

I wouldn't say that I was…I wasn't looking, but I did have a colleague who was a colonial historian, American colonial history—I liked him, nice guy—speak to me. He said, "You know, I have a good friend who's been named president of a new university out in Illinois. He asked if I knew anyone who might be ripe for a senior position." And he said, "May I use your name?" I said, "Well, sure."

That led to my getting a long-distance phone call, in the fall of 1969, probably early November, from Robert Spencer, who was the new president of Sangamon State University.[10] We chatted for a while. I found him to be a charming conversationalist. He spoke some of his educational ideals a little bit over the phone, but he said he would like me to visit so I could get to know him and some others on the staff and get to know Springfield better. Well, of course, I grew up in Peoria. I knew Springfield but not well.

DePue: How long had Sangamon State University been in existence at that time?

Davis: It was, I think, chartered by the state the previous summer, I think.

DePue: Yeah, it was sixty-nine.

Davis: Yeah. It was very young, and he was maybe…He was the first employee, then there were a few others they had to have right away, like a director of personnel and so forth. There were probably four employees, and they inhabited the tenth floor of the Myers Department Store building, part of the tenth floor.[11]

DePue: Did the idea of starting from the ground up in a brand-new university excite you or intimidate you or both?

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[10] Sangamon State University was established in 1969 by the Illinois General Assembly and became a part of the University of Illinois system in 1995. The University of Illinois, Springfield [UIS] is part of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the American Council on Education. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Illinois_at_Springfield)

[11] Myers Brothers Department Store, which opened in Springfield, Illinois in 1886 added outlets throughout central Illinois. It regularly won national merchandising and advertising awards. The store, then located in a ten-story building at 5th and Washington Streets, on the northwest corner of the downtown square, was sold in 1976. (https://sangamoncountyhistory.org/wp/?p=1631)

Davis: It did; it really did. I had become something of an educational innovator; at least I fancied myself as one. I was struck with the notion of **refreshing** education. The idea of building something from the ground up was extremely pleasing to me, and I really like Robert Spenser. He was a visionary; I could see that right away.

DePue: You mentioned a couple of times that you had new ideas, that you were an innovator. Do you remember any of the specific things?

Davis: Sure, sure. I had introduced a film series in my Survey American History course, films that I thought weren't documentaries but which beautifully documented certain periods in American history. There's a great old Humphrey Bogart film called *The Roaring Twenties*, which simply mimics all of the clichés about what the twenties were like.

Cullom Davis interviewing Avinere Toigo about Ethnic Politics in the 1930's in Illinois, circa 1973.

There was an autobiography of the ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1930's, Joseph Davies, about his mission to Moscow. That was the name of the film [*Mission to Moscow*, 1943], which became a great propaganda film for our alliance with the Soviet Union in the 1940's (laughs). It then became Exhibit A in the anti-communist witch hunts of Hollywood in the 1950's (laughs). It's had a tortured life.

I showed some of these just because I thought they creatively reflected certain myths about American history. I started that, but I couldn't get money to rent the films, so I had to sell little syllabuses to cover the cost of renting the films. That's frustrating. This was $1 billion university, and all I needed was a couple hundred bucks a semester to rent films. That that bugged me.

Another idea I had that did have, not institutional support, but NDEA, National Defense Education Act, support, was dealing with African American history. I was able to work with a graduate student in history to develop a course in African American history, based in particular on the shallow, scientific premises of the late nineteenth century about racial differences, like the size of the brain.

DePue: Some of the eugenics studies?

Davis: Exactly, eugenics and brain size, brain capacity. I looked through a lot of old, old treatises, science treatises, with pictures and so forth. He and I put together, I think, a pretty interesting program about this. It seems silly now

that I would make a big deal about how phony all that was. It was phony, but now we take that for granted, that it was phony. I felt I was kind of on an edge on that. We developed that and introduced it in a course. That's the sort of thing I was doing.

I guess I had a restless mind. I'd read a lot of the literature about what's wrong in American higher education and agreed with much of it. Robert Spencer struck me as a man I would enjoy associating with.

DePue: You raised the issue, so what did you think was wrong with the way Princeton and the University of Illinois and Indiana University (Davis laughs) were doing in higher education?

Davis: They were hierarchical, whereas I had developed, in my innocence, notions that a university should be **a community** of peers, rather than a hierarchy. To an army guy this sounds like a pretty amusing point of view. I had felt that we were peers, and yet we had deans and presidents who treated us like the help.

DePue: On a rare divergence from what I should be doing, as an old army guy, I was always amused by the hierarchy of higher education.

Davis: Oh, yes, of course! Yeah, absolutely! That was one thing. I thought it was kind of moss-bound in its receptivity to new ideas and courses and subject matter. I thought that we over-specialized, that I was the department specialist on the 1920s in the United States. I love that; I was an expert in it, but I thought there were other things that interest me, so specialization, [also] the star system, which [Bob] Spencer talked about, where the big shots in the department would be the ones who had published the most books. They could be terrible teachers; it didn't really matter, [as long as] they were celebrated authors. Those were among my beefs.

I accepted his invitation to visit, which I did in December of 1979.

DePue: Sixty-nine.

Davis: Sixty-nine, excuse me. I took my older daughter over. She missed a few days of school, but it was her birthday. I remember taking her to a birthday dinner here. Then I was busy during the day, interviewing, meeting Bob Spencer and one or two other people in the Myers Building.

Then I got a tour of the road around Lake Springfield by a citizen who had agreed to kind of be a volunteer, helping the university introduce new faculty, or perspective faculty, to the community. She took me to lunch, and we drove around the lake, and that was it. It was a one-day visit.

I was offered a job before I left, to be assistant vice-president of the university. They didn't even have a vice-president yet. Bob Spencer didn't think he dared ask me to be a dean because we didn't have any deans either. I

thought, Well…I'd be on the planning staff. So, I thought assistant vice-president was fine. The salary was double what I'd been making at Indiana, about $16,000 a year.

DePue: That was the salary here?

Davis: Yes, yes. My biggest misgiving about taking the job was coming back to my home state of Illinois. Not that I had any objections to it, but I had, to some extent, consciously escaped from the background I had of growing up in Peoria, Illinois, in a somewhat privileged way, where a lot of my friends now were in the country clubs and worked for Caterpillar, and I was a poor college teacher. I was a little uneasy about returning to that whole environment.

It wasn't anything against my parents; I was glad I'd be closer to them. But it seemed like I was going home, which had an unpleasant touch to me. It was silly, but that was my one objection.

DePue: What did the title assistant vice president mean?

Davis: Anything and everything. We had everything to do—from the beginning, because we were innovative—couldn't accept anything off the shelf as a blueprint for what we did. We were imagining the ideal higher education. Bob Spencer had it in his mind. He put it to some degree in writing.

We had to write a college catalog; we had to hire people to teach courses; we had to develop some sense of what we wanted of teachers because teaching was to be the fundamental, most important priority of a professor's career. We had just immense tasks. We to help design buildings or sit in on architectural meetings about these temporary buildings out there and the permanent library that was to be built.

I found myself visiting other campuses, interviewing every day. There would be candidates here who would be visiting. We were going to fill fifty teaching positions that first year. We had six months to go when I joined them in January of seventy. Every day there were several candidates here, whom we had to interview and entertain. It was everything and anything.

DePue: Was there an assumption up front that one of your duties would eventually be a teacher in the history department?

Davis: Yes, in fact, I asked that I would also be associate professor of history, because I had served six years as an assistant professor. There was no tenure here; I would have to earn tenure all over again. But I thought, and he agreed, that that was an appropriate title, not that that would have saved me. If I had malperformed in my first few years at the university, Bob Spencer probably could have said, "Take a walk," because I wasn't tenured, although I was teaching an occasional course.

DePue: If you're going to start a brand-new university with a totally new—and maybe this is the wrong word, but—revolutionary concept of higher education, wouldn't the whole concept of tenure be one of the things you look at?

Davis: Absolutely, absolutely. And Bob Spencer felt that way. He said, "Now we have to think through whether we want tenure; what's good about it; what's bad about it; how we might tinker with it." He was in favor of maybe five-year contracts or something, after a period of probation. But there were **strong** societal and institutional pressures to do something a little more conventional. And that wasn't settled for several years. You're absolutely right; everything was up for grabs.

DePue: Where did you find the quality of professors and instructors you wanted, and what did it take to entice them to come to this brand-new university in the middle of nowhere?

Davis: We ran an ad, full page ad, in a higher education journal. It wasn't the newsprint, tabloid one. What's it called, *The Chronicle of Higher Education?* This was a *Magazine of Progressive Education* or something like that [*Journal of Progressive Education*]. Anyway, it was aimed at people like us. In it, Bob Spencer had written this wonderfully concise expression of our calling—which he had also put in the form of something known as the "blue memo" at the university—in which he said that this will be a university of no specialization, of inter…courses taught by professors in different fields.

DePue: Interdisciplinary?

Davis: Thank you, interdisciplinary, yeah (laughs). It would also be an education that's liberal arts at its core, absolutely liberal arts. So, the professional parts of education would be add-ons, maybe at the master's degree level. It would be a university that had a governance system, in which every group, like faculty, students, staff, would be of equal magnitude and also an equal number of citizens in the community in the internal governance of the campus.

Now, of course, there was a governing board that would make the big decisions. That was appointed by the governor of the state. But, Bob was talking here about how, on campus, like a campus senate, we would have an assembly. It would consist of equal number of faculty members, students, staff, administrators, and towns-people. That proved to be amusing. (laughs)

He also felt strongly that all students should not only get a lot of book education, but they should have some sort of experiential term, an internship, applied studies, something at an employer or at an institution somewhere, for a semester or less or a quarter, whatever. It was a good idea. It wasn't required…This was to be required of all students.

DePue: You talk about the relationship between the university—a brand new university—and the community. This community [Springfield] is very much

oriented around Illinois State government and politics (Davis laughs). Was that part of the equation early on?

Davis: I'm not sure that it was. That's a good question. There were plenty of political junkies who lived here and worked for the state. We did hire staff people, no faculty, but we did hire staff people who were part of that bureaucracy. But the new-comers were new to…I'd grown up in Illinois, but I wasn't particularly tied up in Illinois government.

The only thing Bob Spencer ever said was that he was constantly under pressure to hire people named by state senators or state reps. "I got a friend…" or even they'd say themselves, or if they lost an election, they'd say, "I've always wanted to teach…" (laughs) Bob was always having to fend off these people, or there'd be a carpenter for this staff position, who they would seek for a political appointment. Bob resisted that, but every time he resisted it, of course, he made enemies.

He also knew that it would be very difficult to fend off those big shots who would want to name our buildings for some distinguished public statesman. (laughs) He made the crack once, "We will have to build two buildings at a time because we'll have to have one named for a democrat and one named for a republican." We never got that, but he was whimsical, saying, "We've got to do that." We first started naming our buildings by the letters A, B, C, D and E, holding off as much as possible against that sort of thing.

DePue: One thing that's not going to change about this new institution is the politics behind it.

Davis: Absolutely not. We were viewed as an odd creature, tiny small; we were placed within something called the board of regents, which had the much more venerable institutions of Illinois State University, which had been a teachers' college for years but was growing rapidly, and Northern Illinois University, which had also been a teachers' college and which was growing prodigiously because of its location in the outer suburbs. They were prospering and aggressive young institutions on the make. And here was little Sangamon State. We were hopelessly outnumbered, so anything that Bob Spencer tried to do, or his faculty tried to do, met resistance.

Bob wanted a public radio station, and they thought, What's a university…What's a brand-new college need with a radio station? He said, "Public radio is an important institution, and we need to get in on the ground floor." Finally, he got it, but it was hard.

Oh, what is another example? The curriculum, which was extremely innovative, got the scrutiny of the staff of the board of regents, who tended to be educational bureaucrats. They measured credit hours and so forth, but they

didn't…When you had a course called, "Women's Lib," it would startle them. "What department is that?" (both laugh) And interdisciplinary study, they didn't understand the value of interdisciplinary study; they were very departmentally oriented. Everything we did ran up against an innate resistance on the part of the bureaucracy in the board of regents and then the regents themselves, who were generally politically appointed to the board.

DePue: I know that Dr. Spencer came from the University of Rhode Island. I wanted to run through some of the things that were going on in the 1960s with the young people in the United States, just to kind of throw it out there and ask you how much all of this turmoil that the youth were going through animated the creation of Sangamon State?

You've got Tom Hayden, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], and the Port Huron statement, which goes all the way back to 1962; it goes that far back.[12, 13, 14] You've got the civil rights movement; you've got Berkeley in 1964—

Davis: Free-speech movement.[15]

DePue: The free-speech movement. You've got this whole notion of a generation gap that was growing; you've got hippies, sex, drugs, rock and roll—

Davis: Yes. Students for a Democratic Society, which was a political group, anti-war.

DePue: Anti-war.

Davis: The beginning of women's rights—all those mixed together—and on campuses, the general sullen feeling toward the administration of those universities because they down-played education. There were huge courses, lecture classes; you never met a professor; you were a number, not a name.

Those were among the ills that Spencer was trying to address, and they were pretty commonplace. I felt the same way. I read some of the books; they're distant to me now. There were also books about how wrong American

[12] Thomas Emmet Hayden was an American social and political activist, author and politician. Hayden was best known for his major role as an anti-war, civil rights, and radical intellectual activist in the 1960s, authoring the Port Huron Statement. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Hayden)

[13] Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a national student activist organization in the United States that was one of the main representations of the New Left. Founded in 1960, the organization developed and expanded rapidly in the mid-1960s before dissolving at its last convention in 1969. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Students_for_a_Democratic_Society)

[14] The Port Huron Statement is a 1962 political manifesto of the North American student activist movement Students for a Democratic Society. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_Huron_Statement)

[15] The Free Speech Movement (FSM) was a massive, long-lasting student protest, which took place during the 1964–65 academic year on the campus of the University of California, Berkley. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Speech_Movement)

public secondary education was. There was just a lot of literature about how we needed to revolutionize education.

DePue: You mentioned one of the things, and this was—I used the word "huge"—emphasis on education, versus publication and research. What were some of the other innovative things that were being thought about when you first were organizing the university?

Davis: Okay. Interdisciplinary courses and even interdisciplinary professors, people who really had a foot in two different fields. A lot of people claimed they did, but, of course, it rarely was the case. We wanted faculty who thought of themselves, not only as teachers but also [as] citizens of the community. We didn't want a "town/gown" warfare in Springfield, the way it was in Urbana and Berkeley and other college towns.

DePue: Was there some expectation that university faculty and staff would join civic groups, get involved in the town?

Davis: Sure, sure, be involved, be good neighbors, sure. How much of that occurred, I don't know. I did; some of my friends did, but others, of course, became quickly notorious figures in Springfield because they were so unconventional that their behavior and their protests and all met real resistance. President Spencer said that he used to go to the main post office out on East—

DePue: Cook Street?

Davis: Cook—to pick up his personal mail. He always met the same postal clerk there who…probably a nice enough guy, but he was fed up with reading about beatniks.[16] He said, "Well, Dr. Spencer, what kind of radicals are you educating today?" (laughs) That was always his [Dr. Spencer's] face with reality, the postal clerk.

DePue: The name you heard a few years ago was Ward Churchill.[17]

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Ward Churchill had a connection with Sangamon State.

A beatnik was a person who participated in a social movement of the 1950s and early 1960s that stressed artistic self-expression and the rejection of the mores of conventional society broadly, usually young and artistic person who rejects the mores of conventional society. (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beatnik)

[17] Ward LeRoy Churchill is an author and political activist who was a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado Boulder from 1990 until 2007. The primary focus of his work is on the historical treatment of political dissenters and Native Americans by the United States government. His work features controversial and provocative views, written in a direct, often confrontational style. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_Churchill)

Davis: He went to Sangamon State. I don't remember him, and that isn't playing games with my memory. I probably did meet him; we were small enough. He was a student here; that's true, and he went on to great notoriety and a little bit of an academic stature, as an expert in Native American history. But yes; you're right; he was a troublemaker. I don't think he was [a troublemaker] here, to my knowledge.

We had other troublemakers. One colleague would protest in an Uncle Sam costume. He was a very tall guy, and he had an Uncle Sam costume. He would walk out in a busy street, like Wabash Avenue, and have a weapon, a fake weapon, as if he were a soldier. He was protesting the war or something like that. He got in trouble with the school.

DePue: How would you characterize the politics of Springfield as a community at the time?

Davis: Very conservative, very conservative, very traditional. The parties were fairly evenly split, more than they are today in our county. There was a healthy democratic party, a healthy republican party. But both parties were very moderate or even conservative in their beliefs, so that bringing African Americans to Springfield to teach at the university was a very delicate subject.

Bob Spencer, to his credit, initiated conversations with the board of realtors saying, "Look, this city is going to be changing, and I know there's red-lining now, in the way people are housed, but we're bringing in well-educated, middle-income, African Americans.[18] We support them, and we expect that they are treated fairly by the realtors' board and that you take initiatives to soften any neighborhood resistance there might be." How well that worked I don't know, but a good many of my African American colleagues at the university found housing pretty well where they wanted it and could afford it. So, I give our president credit for that too. He had the foresight.

DePue: I would think one of the challenges early on is that there's always competition for good, bright, young faculty members, especially so for emerging, African American and female stars of academia.

Davis: Sure, sure.

DePue: Was that tough, to land those stars?

Davis: Sure, sure. Well, in 1970 it wasn't that hard. There were plenty of disgruntled PhDs or pre-PhDs or junior professors who, like me, maybe were even more

[18]Redlining is a discriminatory practice in real estate and mortgage banking, typically involving lenders that refuse to lend money or extend credit to borrowers in certain areas of town or when realtors won't show properties to certain types of people in certain neighborhoods. (https://www.thebalance.com/definition-of-redlining-1798618)

fed up with their institutions. So actually, there was a market for people who were frustrated with American higher education. We recruited some very, very capable colleagues and also some scam operators, frankly.

But, you see, we weren't the only innovative school founded then. There was one out in the state of Washington called Evergreen State. There was one in Wisconsin at Green Bay, I guess it was, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, maybe elsewhere. In Massachusetts there was a private college… What's it called? Anyway, there were four or five,

DePue: I think there was another one in Florida, as well.

Davis: Yes, West Florida, I think, University of West Florida. We had compatriots in a way. We visited several of those campuses, and they visited ours.

Then there were a number also of new upper division universities because that's what we were at the outset—by the state, created by the state as juniors, seniors and graduate students only—on the grounds that Illinois had already invested heavily and successfully in community colleges and that we could take people who had graduated from community colleges into our institutions. It turned out to be a mistaken presumption, but we were, for the first twenty-five years of our history, strictly upper division.[19] But there were some other ones, in Minnesota, Texas that were also trying that.

DePue: You said that it turned out to be a mistake later on. Was it difficult to find that audience of students who were ready to step in at the junior level in a different kind of institution?

Davis: Two things, one, it was hard to convince community college graduates to come to a raw place that had no recreation center, no football team, no fraternities or sororities, against the larger existing campuses. **And**, the big universities, for years, had snubbed their noses at the community colleges because they could get their students as freshmen.

But there was a serious erosion of freshman enrollment at universities in the late sixties and early seventies, and suddenly the U of I and all the other four-year universities were welcoming transfer students from community colleges. That was real competition. Who would go to Sangamon State if they could go to the U of I in Urbana?

DePue: What was going on demographically that there was a decline, other than the Vietnam War maybe?

[19] An upper division college is a type of educational institution that traces its roots to educational ideas put forward in the late 19th and early 20th century. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_division_college)

Davis: Let's see, there was a…I forget the exact population data. Of course, after the war there was a huge increase, and that would be forty-five. So, people could be…You'd think—

DePue: I'm right in the middle of the baby boom, and that's right about my time frame.

Davis: That's right. But they had also over built a lot of schools. It is a fact that we found very early that what we had been told would be our natural market was not. Maybe community college students didn't want to have to go through hoops to do one and then go through hoops another two years at a different place. There was no magic in the upper division school idea. Structurally, it didn't make a lot of sense.

DePue: With Lincoln Land Community College only half a mile away—

Davis: It was a natural. And there was cooperation and transfer. Unfortunately, the two presidents were totally, diametrically opposite in their values and intellects. The successful president at Lincoln Land was himself a product of the state education systems. He was very conventional in his thinking.

DePue: Who was that?

Davis: His name was Robert Poorman. He was very successful as president, but he was extremely limited in his imagination, extremely so. Here's this Spencer guy, who went to the University of Chicago and got his PhD, was educated by some of the great minds at Chicago, and he came here with all these brand-new ideas. They just never got along. In fact, they met and that's about it, once. So, there was no real cooperation, other than at a lower level between the two campuses.

DePue: I wanted to read some statements that I think were probably in the initial catalog that you folks put out to entice students to come to this innovative new school.

Davis: Okay. All right (laughs).

DePue: Here's just some blurbs. I'd like to get your reaction to that and see if that was an accurate reflection.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: That this would be a "truly pioneering segment of public education, pathways to sound thinking and analysis." Another quote said, "Faculty and students to question the learning process and to experiment, testing new and old techniques of teaching and to encourage independent study whenever feasible…

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: …to emphasize liberal learning."

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: This is one I found very interesting, "The University asks that all members of the University community investigate the social, technological, environmental and moral questions of our time." (Davis laughs) So you're encouraging people to challenge.

Davis: Yes, question, explore and challenge. That sounds like a radical school, doesn't it? Now liberal learning shouldn't be associated with liberal politics; it means open-minded. But still it has that connotation.

DePue: Well, the other connotation would be the classic liberal arts approach.

Davis: Yes, right, exactly, exactly.

DePue: And that would be accurate?

Davis: Those are all readily apparent qualities that we were trying to instill. So, the author of that catalog was capturing the essence of what we naively, maybe, sought to accomplish.

DePue: What kind of student body, then, were the founding fathers, to use that phrase? What kind of students were you looking for?

Davis: Well we, of course, hoped that these would be students who shared our vision, who wanted to be intellectually liberated—not politically liberated, intellectually liberated—that they would enjoy a classroom where there's not a lecture but rather a conversation and who would want to explore ideas in the library on their own, without being required to do this or that and who would be themselves comfortable with novelty.

Well, we didn't get that at all (laughs). A few people, but by-and-large, there was a built-up demand within Sangamon County for students to get a college or graduate education. They came. What they wanted was a better job or a union card. Or a lot of women, in marriages, were seeking to finish a college education that they never finished because it wasn't important in their lives when they left college.

So, our students didn't really want to be liberated (laughs), most of them. There were exceptions, I guess, like Ward Churchill. He liked being liberated. But most of them were very conventional. I had students who had grown up on farms, still lived on a farm with their parents in west Sangamon County, had never been to Chicago. They just needed a meal ticket or a union

card, and the notion of sitting in a class without taking notes from a lecture was unthinkable to them.

DePue: Was that something of a mistake or maybe a misunderstanding, when this group of people first founded this but also made it a commuter college.

Davis: Right.

DePue: But if you're a commuter college, you've got to live within the general area.

Davis: You've seized on the dilemma perfectly. Yeah, we were to serve the local market. We would hope the market would expand geographically as we became better known. But our market, and it was a very healthy market, did not consist of the kind of ideal student we had envisioned. That was a mistake, and there were some students who were turned off by that.

Most of them found some compensation in that this faculty at least seems to want to help you learn. I mean, they were available, even though they were trying to make you think on your own feet. But I think it was a salutary effect because this was our reality check. For me it was. I wanted to liberate students, but when I found the students had no particular interest in liberation, and they wanted instructions and lectures and assignments, I adjusted to that, by-and-large, though I still would push; I insisted always on a lot of class discussion. So, by-and-large, I think we were the beneficiaries of the conventional aspirations of our local market.

DePue: Let's talk about your personal experiences in the classroom.

Davis: Sure.

DePue: What classes were you teaching?

Davis: First year, beginning in August of 1970, I was very busy. We were already recruiting a whole…doubling the faculty that winter and fall and a million other things. I was, in effect—because we now had a vice president, but he kind of sat in his office—I was, in effect, like the dean of the college. I was on the front line that first year, dealing with all kinds of issues that fifty faculty members had or students had and meetings of the departments and all. So, I was the de facto dean.

That was something that President Spencer supported and my vice-president supported, so I was very busy. But I insisted on teaching a class. It had to be a cooperative teaching because I knew there were times I would have to be out of town. So, I got a guy who taught mathematics and was Asian-American, and we offered a course on Vietnam.

DePue: A math teacher.

Davis: A math teacher [who] was Asian but had an interest…He had an interest in this, and I had read some of the books, critical books, about Vietnam.

DePue: Well, I hate to be…

Davis: Go ahead.

DePue: Let's put it this way, Asia's a big place. What part of Asia?

Davis: I know. He was Chinese. You're absolutely right. He had an interest in the Vietnam War, more than just casual, but he was not Vietnamese or Laotian or Thai.

DePue: Did he have a Chinese perspective on it? Were the Vietnamese anxious to get rid of the Chinese overlord even more than they were the French?

Davis: That's what I understand; I don't remember. He was a nice guy, kind of a shy teacher. I just don't remember. But it's a brilliant question, and you're absolutely right. It shows you how "hack" much of our operations were. It was all on the go. "We need a class." "What will be a good class?" "Oh, a course on Vietnam." "Who can teach it?" That was the way we kind of operated.

DePue: Well, mind you, this is 1970, seventy-one, isn't it?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: It's right in the middle of the war (both laugh). I'm sure it was a popular course.

Davis: It was moderately popular. But again…There were some students I should say, some of them afraid they'll be drafted, obviously (laughs). That's the only course I taught, though I think in the spring I taught an oral history class, because that fall I went to an oral history association convention in California.

The group was about four years old. I'll get to that later, except that one of the nice things about that first year was that we had money to support new ideas in classes, and an oral history class was a very new idea. It was very *au courant* in history to be interviewing people. So, I got money to go to California and attend this convention. That was a very important event in my professional life, obviously. That spring I taught an oral history course; I'm pretty certain. It might have been the following fall, but I think it was that spring.

DePue: What are some of the other innovative things, in terms of the style of learning that the university adopted early on?

Davis: Well, there was confrontation (laughs), a lot of confrontation between the faculty and the administration. Whenever we'd have meetings of the university assembly, with some city dwellers present or of departmental meetings, there would be complaints and really confrontations over, "But you promised this." and "You didn't promise that." It was the meeting of vision and reality that first semester.

Spencer was feeling reality. He had a board that was dead set against a lot of things he wanted to do. He had to keep them happy, try to keep the local legislators off his back, and he had a rambunctious faculty who felt they had a right, publicly, to say anything—and they did—they wanted. This was confrontation and a lot of shouting.

DePue: That was part of the charter (laughs) the university established to begin with.

Davis: Of course, it was, and it also shocked some of those well-meaning citizens of the community who had agreed to serve on the university assembly (both laugh), sit in these meetings.

DePue: Saying, "What did I get myself into?"

Davis: That's right. Yeah, one resigned in disgust. A few others liked it. They found "My god, this is innovative. We never had this when I was in college." (laughs) There were people who **loved** this, among them, a lot of these middle-aged, married mothers, who had a chance to go back to college and were fretful about it because they didn't think they were very smart—they hadn't been serious students previously—and who did brilliantly, absolutely brilliantly.

We probably are responsible, indirectly, for some divorces of middle-aged married couples, not for affairs, but just alienation of attention. A lot of women got caught up in education at the campus, stayed for all sorts of programs, and that was wonderful for them. It really was wonderful. I know some of them still, and they are forever grateful for the experience. It freed them from the Junior League and teas and subservience to their husbands that they were accustomed to. But there were others who were more tarnished by the experience (laughs).

DePue: Did this environment that you found yourself in meet your expectations, going in?

Davis: Oh yeah, yeah. I was totally caught up in it, totally caught up and energetic. For the first year, January to January seventy to seventy-one, I was busy six or seven days a week and most evenings. There'd be emergency faculty meetings, emergency departmental meetings (sighs), curriculum meetings, constant meetings and interviews with candidates, new faculty candidates. I had to write evaluations of the first year's faculty, which took a lot of time, fifty people I had to evaluate.

I was extremely busy, and I probably didn't do justice to my wife or to my children that year because I was so torn. And many of those meetings were high-charged, tense meetings. I tried to be something of a peacemaker, but I wasn't always successful. Sometimes I felt strongly enough about something to be part of the problem myself.

DePue: Were you in many of these meetings the facilitator or the guy who was running the meeting?

Davis: Sometimes, sometimes, though we always chose a facilitator by public vote (laughs). Yes, sometimes I was. I can't remember which, but yeah.

DePue: We talked about the faculty early on and whether or not the faculty should be tenured. I don't know if we talked much about the expectations for scholarship and research, publication.

Davis: Right.

DePue: That would be one thing and also whether or not this new faculty wanted to be unionized.

Davis: Ah. I've got to remember these. The expectations for scholarship were minimal. Bob Spencer, who himself had satisfied those credentials at several good universities, felt they had been overemphasized, to the disadvantage of education. His assumptions were that all of us, having earned a PhD, and the PhD was the expected terminal degree—not always the case but almost always the case—that we would naturally be curious about things. And if you're teaching new courses, you're going to investigate those with a lot of reading. You may want to write about some technique you've used. He expected that we would…but we would not be graded on scholarship. We would, however, be graded, not only on teaching through course evaluations and visits to classes, but also on service.

Service was another very important part of our obligations. That's on campus service, on committees, endless committees, and then community service, too. They used to always talk about a three-legged stool. Well, two of those legs, service and teaching, were high priorities at the university; publication was not. Some people came here with publication records and continued with them. Many of them did not, and some of them never did particularly. And some left because [it] eventually turned out they really weren't great intellectuals to begin with. (laughs)

DePue: Were the instructors evaluated by the students?

Davis: Yes. Absolutely.

DePue: And was that an innovative approach at the time?

Davis: At the time it was, absolutely innovative, and it was very rigorously administered. You could not administer this evaluation yourself. You had to leave your classroom, and a volunteer would go in and hand out the questionnaires and collect them and take them to the vice-president's office.

DePue: To your office.

Davis: No, I wasn't vice-president; I was assistant vice-president. My boss would have to use them, and then we would tabulate the results and publish them.

Now, you asked also about unionization. There was some talk of that. There were a few of the campuses in Chicago [that] were unionized with the IFT, Illinois Federation of Teachers, maybe NEA [National Education Association]; I can't remember. But there wasn't a lot of talk in the first few years. Although I must say, as these controversies developed and lingered, many of them involving disagreements with President Spencer, who was fronting for the board—in his defense, I'll say he had to front for the board—talk of unionization did occur. Finally, after about ten years, the campus faculty became a bargaining agent, until we merged with U of I. Then that ended because you have to vote system-wide.

DePue: That was 1995, I believe.

Davis: Yeah, right.

DePue: The discussion about unionization and the discussion about tenure, do those two things happen simultaneously?

Davis: They were happening simultaneously. We had a very elaborate personnel evaluation system for renewal of your contract, for a promotion, for salary, and for tenure. That was a laboriously-created system, which I spent enormous amounts of time on, because as in-effect campus dean, I sat in on all of those meetings. I had a vote, but I was not…I wasn't the dean who has the final say. I just was a vote. I took enormous amounts of time to go through that.

DePue: So, you came to this institution and found yourself as much more of an administrator than a teacher.

Davis: Right.

DePue: Did you feel comfortable in that role?

Davis: Well, I did, because I had been largely an administrator my final three years at Indiana. I'd been all but full-time, teaching an occasional course. So, this was comparable, and it's clearly where I was needed. I had some skills in morale

building, in recruiting, in evaluating and in conceptualizing. I had skills; I could put out fires pretty well; I was an affable guy. So, some of my strengths were well-placed in that.

But it was also exhausting, and after a year and a half, I was tired. I thought I'd either be fired—though there was no reason to believe I would be—or I'd collapse because I'd run out of steam. So, I announced in the spring of 1971 that I would resign as assistant vice president and return full-time to the faculty, also that I would take a two-month summer vacation that summer to take my family camping west. I needed a break, and I got it.

DePue: Did you retain the same salary after that?

Davis: No. Per month it was the same, but it was only a nine-month term, so it hurt some. But I was making enough.

DePue: Was your wife working at the time?

Davis: No, she wasn't. We had young children, and she…She was working on a master's degree in counseling and thought that she might become a counselor, and she eventually did much later.

DePue: I wanted to touch on some of the other innovative things I've just picked up in different literature and talking to people. How about the grading system, the way students were graded?

Davis: Sure. First of all, it was the evaluation system. We never took a name off the shelf because we did not offer grades the first several years.

DePue: You mean letter grades?

Davis: Letter grades, no grades. We offered written evaluations—talk about naïveté—because we had to write a paragraph about each student. Fair enough, but after a while you find yourself using the same introductory sentence on all of them, and you begin doing this as a rote procedure, obviously [with] some adjectives in each case that were different. It became a real pain. We also learned, through the grapevine, that employers wanted to see grades, because it was all pass/fail.

Excuse me, they were grades; it was pass/fail. But they [employers] wanted to see letter grades. You find some principal out in Nokomis, Illinois, who's going to hire a teacher. He sees these courses with strange names on them and then pass/fail grades, he would say, "How am I to know whether this person's any good?" So, we found ourselves over our heads in some of this stuff.

DePue: Well, I'm surprised the board of regents didn't push back on that, because a lot of these kids will want to go to University of Illinois or Northern or other places.

Davis: Right, right. Some did get in. I don't exactly understand how, but they were bright enough and they had done papers or things, because we had a lot of writing exercises for the students, more so than at the other campuses. So somehow, some of them did manage to get into respectable universities. But some of them were frustrated in not getting jobs. They got feedback about that, and after several years, we realized that this system was probably not in the students' best interest. We did still allow pass/fail, but we stopped written evaluations and gave grades, I think after two years.

DePue: Peer group counseling?

Davis: I don't know…You mean by your peers?

DePue: Yes.

Davis: It wasn't organized. There was, of course, a counseling office, and we were advisors of our students, academic advisors. But…Maybe that was an idea that was fresh in those days, wasn't it? Peer group counseling. It's kind of like a rap session, in effect.

DePue: Yeah, that certainly would have been part of the *lingua franca* of the day.[20]

Davis: Yes. Well, I don't think the university sponsored that. I'm sure that happened naturally, but it wasn't structured. Good question.

DePue: We haven't talked about the facilities. What were the buildings that the campus had to begin with?

Davis: Un-built, unfinished, by the time we were to start classes, so we had to meet the first few weeks in various churches in downtown Springfield. But that ended; that was just…because it was muddy out there and no sidewalks yet. But they built—what was it? —five metal buildings and then added a sixth a year later, while they were starting to build—and it took them five years to build it—the Brookens Library. There was a plaza, kind of a center courtyard of that temporary campus. The buildings themselves were not bad; they were better than plywood. In fact, some people say they've lasted too long because (both laugh) it's been hard to get rid of them. But that's where the library was. It occupied one of those five buildings, and we had faculty offices—mixed up, no departments, just all kind of interchangeable—and then some special classrooms, too, no lecture halls.

[20] Any language that is widely used as a means of communication among speakers of other languages. (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/lingua+franca)

There was one big meeting room because the university assembly had to have it, and you could lecture in it. But all the other classrooms were for twenty-five students, and there were several that were very unusual. One of them we called "the pit." It was like a cock fight structure, with risers around all four sides, one, two, three levels high. So, you could sit wherever you want. The professor wouldn't have to sit down in the center; he might be anywhere. (laughs) It was a very popular classroom, except for some middle-aged women who said, "I can't sit there and be comfortable," because the risers were pretty deep back there, so they complained. But it was a popular room.

DePue: If you were to walk into the classroom in 1970 or seventy-one, how might the Sangamon State class look different from your average university class?

Davis: Older. The average age, I think, that first year was twenty-nine or thirty, average age. We had our share of twenty-year-olds, because we did not have college freshmen or sophomores. We had our share of twenty-year-olds, but also, I had some students in their seventies and certainly sixties. So, it was a more mature community. Most of them had jobs or families so that taking a class during the day involved some sort of jockeying. Classes at night were more common.

They were busy people with careers and families so that they always complained about reading assignments(laughs)—not unusual in any college—but especially on reserve reading. I was used to having reserve assignments available in the library, but they complained that the library…they had to come out to the library to work, which of course was true, even though the library had **very** generous hours, recognizing that. It was open seven days a week, late hours. But they would complain about that. I'd say, "Well, you can go check out one of those and Xerox it and take it home.[21] They didn't Xerox that. They could duplicate it. They weren't used to working in a library, which wasn't that far away. It just wasn't something that would come…Now students are; you see a lot of students in there.

DePue: Part of what most universities, if you get in it at the first level in an English or some kind of course, you're going to be taken over to the library and basically taught how to use the—

Davis: Exactly, and that happens. That happened at Sangamon State too. It was a great library, not only in terms of its resources, which they built very rapidly. One of Bob Spencer's visions was that the library was the center of the university. He insisted—and this was against…not against, but independent of the board's feelings—he insisted that 20 percent of the total university budget in its first few years be devoted to library acquisitions. That was

[21] A Xerox is a copy of something written or printed on a piece of paper, which has been made using a Xerox brand photocopy machine. If you Xerox a document, you make a copy of it using a Xerox machine. (https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/xerox)

extraordinary. Typically, it gets around 8 to 10 percent. They had a very bright dean of the library school, a good staff, cheerful, eager to help, so that was a great success from the beginning.

DePue: One of the things I noticed though in reading about this was that there weren't any due dates assigned to books being checked out.

Davis: (laughs) Can you imagine? When the library cabinet met—and I sat in on those meetings often—we thought one of the handcuffs of an education is the obligation to return a book by a certain date. So, we'll just say, "Return it when you can," which was a **stupid** idea. I don't care how much you like to read, if you don't have to return a book, you'll delay reading it. So, they lost a good 20 percent of their library collection the first year (laughs).

DePue: Were you one of those thinking, yeah, this sounds like a good idea?

Davis: Of course, of course! It was liberating, but it was foolish. It defied common sense and human nature; it defied human nature.

DePue: Being a commuter college, being a college that has a lot of night courses, were there policies about things like eating in class or smoking in class?

Davis: No, I don't remember any of that. Dogs in class? No. Smoking was common then. A lot of students on their way from work would stop by the MacDonald's and bring a hamburger and a milkshake.[22] [It] didn't matter. Some of them had pet dogs that would come into the classroom. It was a very open environment (laughs).

DePue: Looking back at that, can you shake your head on that one as well?

Davis: Well, some of that I find healthy. Not the smoking part, that's very unhealthy, and that, of course, doesn't exist now. Dogs became a problem, apparently, in some way, except for seeing-eye dogs, which of course were permitted. For some reason, dogs could become excitable or threatening. So, I think they banned animals. But the eating? I don't think, no, you'll find any ban on eating in classes.

There's no bell starting or ending class, never has been, just a clock. That was, I thought, liberating too, in a psychological way. It didn't mean that classes started late, necessarily, or ended too early. It's just that you weren't at the beckon of a bell.

DePue: You mentioned that internships, finding some way to integrate your learning experience with the larger community, was important. How did that manifest itself?

[22] McDonald's is an American fast food company, founded in 1940 as a restaurant operated by Richard and Maurice McDonald in San Bernardino, CA. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McDonald%27s)

Davis: Well, it was a requirement. You could petition to get a…If you had been an employee of Franklin Life Insurance for twenty years and were getting a degree in finance to strengthen your promotion opportunities at Franklin Life, they wouldn't make you get (laughs) applied study at Franklin Life.[23] You could work there and hope that this degree would improve your chances.

But, for most students, the younger ones in particular and for housewives, this was serious, that you need to get your nose into some sort of job. It probably won't be paying, rarely were they paying jobs. They weren't full-time. You'd have to go, have to be busy half of a week, each week for a semester or quarter; it was quarters at first. And they would be with social service institutions, the Hope School up the road there, schools themselves, which always have student teachers, some of the industries in town and banks took some. It wasn't a bad idea. It didn't apply to everyone. The cookie-cutter part of it was silly, and gradually that eroded.

DePue: Was this something that there was is a department or staff on campus that helped people with it?

Davis: Absolutely, yes, administered it, made sure everyone got it, offered placement assistance. But within probably five years it became a voluntary, rather than a required, activity, just like another feature of the original curriculum, which were called "public affairs colloquia." A public affairs colloquium was a special class in some issue, some contemporary issue, like whether to build a third airport in Illinois or in Chicago, or drugs, "Is LSD harmful?" venereal disease, you name it. Any lively issue would become the focus of readings and visiting lectures and films that the students experienced with their professor, and then some sort of testing at the end, usually a long paper that you would have to write. That was a good idea. It was borrowed from several leading public affairs graduate institutions in this country, including Princeton. The Woodrow Wilson Institute had these public affairs. They didn't call them public affairs colloquia, but they were the same thing, issue oriented. It was a good idea, and they still offer them, but they're not required. I used to think they should be required. I thought it was a way of broadening the horizon of students.

DePue: Was this was a semester long thing?

Davis: Yes, a quarter long, then a semester long, um-hmm.

DePue: You mentioned also that early on, Doctor Spencer wanted to get a public radio station.

[23] Founded in 1884, the Franklin Life Insurance Co. remained an important force in Springfield's economy into the 21st century. Franklin Life was founded by a half-dozen central Illinois residents in 1884. The Franklin lost its independence when it was purchased by American Brands in 1979. Employment dropped from 1,300 in 1991 to about 400 in 2008, when the company moved out of its signature headquarters.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: I believe this is really early in the whole notion of National Public Radio.

Davis: Yes, it was. His model, because he was from the New England area at Rhode Island, was…What is it? WGBH in Boston, which is one of the nation's leading public radio stations. They were a pioneer, along with New York and maybe San Francisco, in public radio broadcasting. He loved that station, missed it out here (laughs). So, he became a great partisan for this, and he had to fight hard to get it. But he did get it, and it's been very successful. There's no doubt it's brought public affairs reporting and cultural programming to this area, which didn't particularly have it in the past…and western Illinois too.

DePue: Were the employees of the public radio station also students? Was there some—

Davis: Sometimes students were, yes. You could get an internship there. But there were three or four who were professional. There was, of course, the lead engineer, a news broadcaster, a guy who played jazz music, who was half-time—They had to have professional staff—and the director of the station. They were all paid with State money. Although in recent years more and more of that has come from fund-raising.

DePue: But that's an extension of the university's budget?

Davis: Yes, yes.

DePue: Is public television the same thing?

Davis: We don't offer public television. We have cooperated with the…What is it? WSEC. That was founded as a cooperative public television program, involving Peoria, Bradley University and Quincy and Springfield, kind of a patchwork idea. The university supported it in the early stages, but now WSEC has its own studio down at the Chatham High School, and I don't think the university has any institutional relationship with public television.

DePue: You mentioned no departments—did I hear you right? —when you first started? There was no such thing as a history or a political science or an English department?

Davis: We had programs, not departments. (both laugh) We were de-emphasizing…It sounds semantic, right? We were de-emphasizing (speaks boldly) "department" by having (speaks softly) "programs" (both laugh) and no chairman. We would have (speaks softly) "conveners." This is all part of the nomenclature of a university that wanted to shed barriers. So sure, there were six historians in the first faculty, and we had (speaks softly) "program meetings." (both laugh)

DePue: Well, you changed the inflection there.

Davis: I did, deliberately (both laugh). It's to stress that we were down-playing this. **Anyone** could come to our meetings. If you were a mathematician on the faculty, you could come to a history program meeting. You could teach a history course if you wanted to, as this one mathematician did with me. So, there was enormous kind of fluidity.

And as I say, the offices were almost randomly distributed, except the art classes had to be near the pottery (laughs) kiln and that sort of thing. But otherwise, the departments were pretty well randomly distributed, on the notion that you never know when your next-door neighbor may turn out to be the basis for some sort of cooperative teaching adventure.

DePue: How did that work?

Davis: Fair, it didn't last. Departmentalization, programization, is a natural way of centralizing administrative responsibility and intellectual activity. It's natural.

DePue: As a new institution, it's a new bureaucracy as well. Was that somewhat liberating but also somewhat frustrating, because the ground rules weren't known on these things?

Davis: Well, the ground rules were known, and they were state…For example, vouchers for buying things. That had to be governed by the State. And there were former State officials who were working in those offices, the same with the payroll department and that sort of thing. We had remarkably few rules under those circumstances and a lot of leeway, very little red tape within the university, where we could decide whether there was red tape. If a student needed to drop a class, they just dropped the class, anytime and without it appearing on their record. Later that changed. But it was a very permissive environment.

DePue: I've thrown all kinds of different things at you, but I'm sure there's things that you can think of today that were very different about the experience when you first got there.

Davis: I would say it was exhilarating. This was a fabulous roller-coaster ride of downs and ups, and it took its toll. It took a minor toll on me. Some other faculty just didn't work out here and hated this kind of permissive environment, needed more structure. They willingly left. Others loved it a lot, but they really weren't that capable. So, they left, once we had personnel reviews. There was a fair amount of dating between faculty and students—because these were adults, after all; the students were adults—and among faculty. The rate of divorce was alarmingly high after a couple of years. I later became a statistic in that divorce rate, though it didn't involve any sort of on-campus (laughs) alignments—

DePue: Did you say there weren't any policies about faculty not dating students?

Davis: None, none.

DePue: Would that have been something in place at Indiana University, University of Illinois?

Davis: If so, it was unwritten. In a department…Well, I don't know. There probably was a moral turpitude statement somewhere in the Indiana University faculty handbook. But it wasn't the sort of thing that was broadcast. And even there, I think there was hanky-panky. It was just easier here because the students were all adults. Now, some faculty waited until the student had left their class to date them (both laugh), but some didn't.

DePue: Pardon me for saying this, Cullom, but university professors are, if nothing else, a stubbornly independent group, and they can be rather… egotistical is probably much too—

Davis: No!

DePue: …much too strong a term—

Davis: Surely!

DePue: …but thought well of themselves oftentimes.

Davis: Yes, ego-driven and also resistant to rules and spoiled, maybe even spoiled, not by salary but by the freedom they have to date their students (both laugh) and to speak their mind or their lack of mind. I'm being facetious on that, but yeah, you're right; you're right.

DePue: So, looking back on this experience—you mentioned it was exhilarating—I wonder if you can think of perhaps the biggest surprise on both the positive side and the negative side of this experiment in education.

Davis: I think the biggest surprise is we really, in retrospect, were a much better university than anyone, even we, realized at that time. For all of our mistakes, for all of our stubbed toes, for all of our negligence, the enthusiasm for teaching here was contagious. And there were students who, today, still say, "I will never, ever, regret my early years at the university. They made me into who I am." So, we were better than any of us realized, even though we weren't attracting that many students in the later years.

Probably the worst thing for me was the confrontation between vision and reality. That hurt a little bit. But I just felt, well, I'm older and wiser, that to expect students to seek liberation in their education is a little presumptuous. So, I took students on their terms. I didn't coddle them, but I understood if they wanted to be lectured, I'll do some short lectures now and then.

The more disturbing thing for me, institutionally, was that we had a very weak board of regents that was terrible at lobbying on our behalf, which is part of its job. On the other hand, they were very good at regulating us. They could pick on us a lot more easily than they could pick on Northern or Illinois State, because they were big campuses with clout. We didn't have clout.

Our local legislators didn't know what to make of us, especially when Bob Spencer wouldn't hire their favorite carpenter and that sort of thing. So, we really lacked clout, and over and over again we were hurt by poor budget support [by] a board of regents that was largely, in my opinion, inept and didn't protect the president when it should and a board who were pretty backward thinking, conventional in their thinking. So, Spencer, bless his heart, he made tremendous mistakes as a president, in my opinion, but he also was dealing with that part of it and also a restive campus. He was caught in the middle of it.

DePue: Would you mind elaborating a little bit, when you say that he made some mistakes?

Davis: He had a temper. He would explode, and the veins on his forehead would get prominent. He was very undiplomatic in certain audiences. One of his first snafus was, he was invited, the very first months he was in Springfield, to address the Chatham School Teachers' Association. They wanted to know what opportunities there would be to get advanced education, advanced studies in education. He began by reciting a truism that nevertheless hurt them deeply. He said, "Well, you know, in my opinion, most of graduate education is tired teachers teaching tired teachers." You know, nighttime classes, some professor up there, the teachers have been working all day. He was right, in large part, but it offended them.

He had that capacity, unthinkingly…maybe it was his arrogance or own naïveté, but he had the capacity to burn bridges in the community and certainly in the faculty. I loved him, but I finally got tired of his problems and felt it was time for him to retire. I didn't want him to quit; I wanted him to teach. I valued him as a teacher, but I thought that his service as a president had eroded.

DePue: What was the year he retired?

Davis: About six years later, I think.

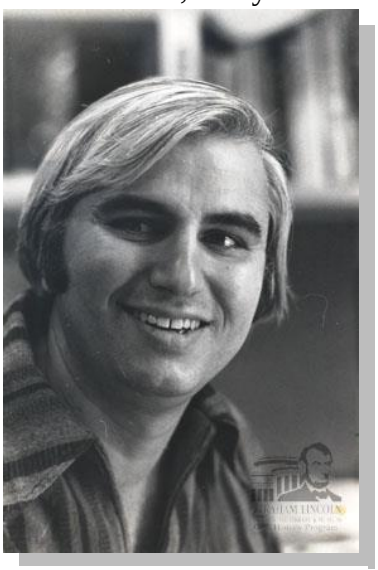
DePue: Can you imagine Sangamon State University being what it is today without him?

Davis: No, no, absolutely not. That's why any time I'm asked, and sometimes when I'm not, I give him credit. He was the inspiration, absolutely. He was able to articulate a coherent and sound vision of what was wrong with American

higher education, and he largely implemented it, at his own peril. In a way he was committing suicide because he was losing his faculty, and then he lost his board. But it was a great act, and I knew him many years following. I used to tell him that all the time; he still bore grudges against some of us on the faculty who had urged him to resign as president. But it would have been totally different. It would have been kind of like our sister campus, Lincoln Land. It would have been a glorified high school or at least a glorified community college. Let me put it that way.

DePue: Were there some ways in which Sangamon State and this incredible experience you guys went through was a trend setter for other institutions across the country?

Davis: I'd like to think we were. I don't think we made a big enough ripple in the pond. We kept thinking that we would get attention in the *Chronicle of Higher Education.* The only time we did, it would be a little blurb, and it would be about some protest on campus (laughs). I don't think we did. Those and our peers in the innovative world, some of them closed, others changed. We survived, with many of those innovations pretty well established, many others gone. I don't think we had any great influence on—



Professor Cullom Davis in the early days of Sangamon State University, circa 1973, when it was an incubator for education innovation. Davis's Oral History Office was a perfect fit for the school's mission.

DePue: The innovation that survived, perhaps, was the emphasis on teaching?

Davis: Teaching emphasis, not exclusively though. All of this is now balanced more. The liberal arts is still very strong, though again, we now have professional education at the undergraduate level, as well as liberal education. The inter-disciplinary emphasis is not as strong as it was, but it's still stronger than most campuses. The classroom experience has changed; a lot of the faculty no longer view [it] in terms of dialog, but there's still plenty who do. So, it's hard to say in that case.

We are on actually very good terms in the community. There are critics; but you compare the town/gown relations of this school with U of I or Princeton, and you'll see a remarkable difference. We have real loyal support, not among alumni—we do [have] a lot among alumni—but among citizens. They're proud of their campus, even though it doesn't have a football stadium, which is usually why a town it proud of its schools (laughs). So, what else? Some of the other minor earmarks of a conventional education, like changing classes with bells; it's silly, except it's just unnecessary also, and we avoided those mistakes.

DePue: How about getting your due from other university faculties and staff?

Davis: Oh, it took a long time. You mean, respect?

DePue: Respect, yeah.

Davis: No. I knew faculty members in history at Illinois, where I had gotten my PhD. They never said [it] in so many words, but their feelings toward our department were dismissive. But then they felt that way about the University of Illinois, Chicago department, which is very aggressive and high-powered. So that was just Urbana snobbery. But that was true of many faculties, "Sangamon State? What is that?"

I was offered other jobs, not many, and I never sought others, and other friends of mine have gone on to college presidencies from here and college executive positions and college teaching positions. So, by and large, the record isn't bad. But there's no doubt that we lacked any sort of sanction from our sister institutions in Illinois or beyond. Now, I think it's still true of Urbana. They know me and respected what I did and a few others of my colleagues. But in general, the department here, they would view as unproductive.

DePue: Is that getting back to they're not published enough?

Davis: Yeah, right.

DePue: They're not serious scholars?

Davis: No.

DePue: Well, Cullom, we've spent quite a bit of time talking about the early days.

Davis: We did, yeah; we did.

DePue: Which I think is very productive because you once gave me a quote that I think is a very applicable quote here for talking to people about their experiences doing oral history interviews and talking to folks who are "present at the creation," and you were present at the creation.

Davis: Yeah, though there's many creations. I wasn't present at the legislative creation or the gubernatorial creation, but I was present at the institutional creation.

DePue: Yeah, right. Let's talk a little bit about the maturation of the institution because you were there for much of those early years as well.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: Nineteen seventy-two, Paul Simon gets beat in the spring of 1972 because he didn't get the Democratic nod for the governorship. Dan Walker beat him out.

Davis: Right, right.

DePue: So, what's—

Davis: Well he [Paul Simon] was then lieutenant governor.

DePue: What's the old lieutenant governor to do but to start the public affairs reporting program?

Davis: Right, it wasn't called the Paul Simon one then, but it later was, in his honor. Well, that was a great coup to get him. He was a terrific gentleman and a colleague. He and I became good friends. I think for him it was a welcome interlude. It wasn't going to last long; no one was under any illusions. But that was a very propitious appointment.

The university, Bob Spencer also arranged the appointment of a leading Sears and Roebuck [Sears, Roebuck and Company] executive to head up the undergraduate management program, a wonderful guy named Jim Worthy, from Chicago, who had [just] a bachelor's degree but thirty years of executive experience. He was one of those rare creatures who understood this campus environment and adjusted to it. He developed a very innovative curriculum for the management students. He stayed about ten years, and Paul stayed about two or three, I guess. Those were two inspired appointments that helped us, I think, mature. Worthy didn't reject the—nor did Paul Simon—the innovation, but they refined it and made it more kind of acceptable, I think.

DePue: Well, both of these sound like programs that are geared towards service to the larger community.

Davis: That's right; they are indeed, yep. And the public affairs reporting program has enjoyed a bit of a stature, certainly in the state, and even beyond, through the quality of its graduates. That was a well-conceived program.

DePue: *Illinois Issues* magazine, this must be an extension of the public affairs reporting program, perhaps?

Davis: No, no. It was a—

DePue: It was launched in seventy-five.

Davis: Yes. It was designed to be…There was one other such magazine in the whole United States. I think Pennsylvania had a state politics journal. Several people on our campus had the idea of creating, in cooperation with the University of Illinois, which had the money, a non-partisan, public affairs journal of reporting and opinion on a monthly magazine basis. We got the U of I to be a

major supplier, but we also supplied money, and it was head-quartered here, to be in Springfield, which made sense.

It's been a success; it's still in operation thirty-some years later. I used to feel that it was a pretty…If it's non-partisan, it was pretty tame. It was always being careful in its non-partisanship. But it's got good news, and it's got a circulation of probably 6,000 or 7,000 which is enough to sustain it. That was good, just like the radio station was good.

DePue: Institute of Public Affairs is launched, December of 1989, quite a bit later.

Davis: Yes, though it had its forbearers, different names.

DePue: Well the public affairs reporting program, I was thinking…

Davis: It was not public affairs reporting. [The] public affairs unit is in research, applied research, getting grants from State and other entities to conduct training or research. It became known as the institute. Before that I think it was the Center for Public Affairs, and it dates back into the late seventies. Yes, it does, as an entity, as an administrative entity. It was a way to house people who were good at getting grants. Like you could get the Department of Corrections to sponsor teaching of prison employees. You could get the Department of Transportation to sponsor anti-alcohol training, lots of training like that and some research as well, on the courts. So that center became a focus of a lot of what's called "soft money," research, service and training.

DePue: Just going through some of the building projects because you were there for… got to move from building to building, I would suspect.

Davis: Um-hmm, I did. For the library?

DePue: Brookens Library was built in eighty-one?

Davis: That's right.

DePue: It sounds like it was up before that time.

Davis: No, it was up before that. It opened in 1976. When I became acting dean, that fall—when our founding dean resigned and took another job at Columbia, actually, University—that under me they would get a new library, and (laughs) they did. I oversaw the transfer, which for a library is a big deal, but there were experts on the staff who really did the work. I just watched. (laughs)

DePue: You mean moving the books from one library to another.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: That's no small operation.

Davis: No, it's special, special companies. You don't hire the local movers to do that; it's special companies, a lot of expense. It was an awkward building in some ways and had its shake-down problems. But, I told you I think, it's a remarkable building, designed to expand the library under its roof, as needed, because originally it didn't fill even half the library building. It was all classrooms, mostly classrooms. But by design, it has increased as a library, as it's decreased as a classroom building. How many libraries do you see like that?

DePue: And true to the mission of the university, it's kind of innovative in its design, isn't it?

Davis: Yes, not a rectangle (DePue laughs)

DePue: Much to the frustration of some people who—

Davis: Yes. You think a library building ought to be a reflection, in multiples, of a book. But the designer, a wonderful architect I knew well and saw just last summer—

DePue: His name?

Davis: Ted Wofferd. He was a St. Louis architect with the firm that did the master plan for the campus, and he was a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright. Not that this is a Wrightian building, but it has some of the horizontal lines that you'll see in a Wright building. He also felt that libraries should make a statement—what architect doesn't? —that a building should make a statement? But he had very good ideas. There's an inner atrium that's very attractive, brings in light. It really has worked well. It's needed rehab work, but it's, after all, it's thirty-five years old. So that has worked well.

DePue: Brookens. Now you said early on that—

Davis: Yes, no politicians. You don't know who Brookens is, do you?

DePue: No, I don't. I confess.

Davis: You don't know?

DePue: No.

Davis: Well, you shouldn't have to. Norris Brookens lived in Champaign-Urbana; he was an eminent doctor there. He was chairman of the Board of Regents when it took on Sangamon State University. But it wasn't just to honor him for having been chairman; he took a keen, personal interest in the university, and he personally saw to it that Bob Spencer was hired, and [he] worked with Bob.

So, he was kind of an angel, and we didn't have many that first year. Then he died suddenly. So, Spencer decided, and the board agreed that they would honor his memory.

DePue: I read my notes wrong. The next building was opened in 1981, the Public Affairs Center.

Davis: Right. That was the second one on the drawing boards, very controversial. It began as strictly classrooms and a **small** auditorium, **small** auditorium, with conference spaces too because, as a public affairs center, we were going to host conferences, and the university does.

Then people in the community, who had clout with Governor Walker, met with him because the city was also building a convention center downtown. But it was not going to be a real theater environment; it was just a wide-open exhibit environment. We had a symphony orchestra in Springfield, and those people [with the symphony] wanted a home for the symphony orchestra. So, these big shots in town went to Governor Walker and convinced him to expand by millions of dollars the plan for the public affairs center and to put the classrooms and conference facilities in a V-shaped thing, and then fill the middle with a huge lobby and then a theater and big backdrops, a formal 2,000 seat theater. We have those people to thank for creating a splendid performing arts venue, as well as a nice building for other purposes. But because of the delay, for a year that building sat unfinished because they had to get new plans for the expansion.

DePue: Was that part of the outreach to the community, because the community uses that Sangamon Auditorium all the time?

Davis: Of course, it was. They argued, this community needs that kind of a facility. I don't know how they talked Walker into that, but he went along. I have no idea how they talked Walker into it (laughs). What did he care about Springfield?

DePue: One of the accomplishments Walker can put into his legacy.

Davis: (laughs) That's right. That's right.

DePue: Some of the other buildings came after you were kind of moving on to new projects and away from the university, but the health and sciences building in 1992—

Davis: Yes.

DePue: …the University Hall, which was a major addition back in 2004, and then this recreation center in 2007.

Davis: Yes. And there was one other minor one. They built an athletic floor next to the Student Sciences Building. You don't even see it anymore, because we started volleyball or basketball and needed a…just [for] recreation purposes we needed that. That was a minor thing. That's the order in which they occurred. I had no role in those. I think that the only disappointment to me, ironically, is the University Hall. It's a fine building, but, our then chancellor, to save money to get other things, he insisted that it not be part of the underground concourse. The original design architects for the campus, knowing what January can be like on the prairie, thought a concourse would be a very appropriate linkage between the main buildings. And it was, even though the Health Building, Brookens, Health, Public Affairs Center. But he said, "That's expensive; we don't need it. And furthermore," he commented, "When I look out on campus, I often don't see students because they're all down in the concourse." Well, that would have told me that's good, but it told him, no, he wanted to see more students shivering in the cold (both laugh). So, it lacks that, and it will never have it because there's not the sub-basement to take that. That's minor, but I thought it was short-sighted myself.

DePue: That's something that I certainly wouldn't have ever realized, without doing the interview.

Davis: Yeah, that's news; isn't it?

DePue: Yeah. You mentioned already that Dr. Spencer departs in 1978? You've got Dr. Alex Lacy; was he a good fit for the university?

Davis: A terrible fit actually, though he seemed good. I was on the search committee, the board named me…In fact, I was vice-chairman of the search committee. We visited five finalists at their home campuses and then had some of them back. He looked like a winner. He had experience with the National Endowment for the Humanities; he was a political scientist; he had done fund-raising; he was very earnest, but he was a disaster as a president. He had his own mission; he had his own friends; he created very quickly his own in-house group; he decided to align himself with the campus faculty union and reward those leaders of the union with various appointments. He…well, it's the whole thing.

I became involved because I was a candidate for vice president while he was president, chiefly because friends of mine on campus felt that the president was running amok with the campus and destroying it. Our enrollment was dropping; we were in real trouble, and he was off on some far-fetched ideas about becoming a research center, nationally and so forth that just were ridiculous. There was an opening. One vice-president left in anger, and so they convinced me to be a candidate. I was an unwelcome candidate to Lacy—though I had been on the search committee that named him—because I wasn't part of the in-crowd. When they reached their final decision, the search committee, for this [vice president's] position and transmitted the

recommendation of me as it, he sat on that recommendation for six weeks. I should have just, at that point, quit. But he was obviously trying to think of some way to avoid this.

DePue: To quit, do you mean to quit to—

Davis: I should have withdrawn from the search because it's an insult to a candidate to have gone through all this and then sit for six weeks [waiting] for the president to make a decision. But I didn't. I thought I was serving the university. It turned out to be the most miserable year of my life. I was a failure, absolute failure. I couldn't get through to him. He had his palace guard. It was a terrible year financially in the State, and I had to lay off people, civil service staff and also discontinue some faculty appointments that were term appointments. It was a losing battle on my part. But I refused to quit. He finally called me into the office just before commencement, after ten months, and said that you're going to have to go, and I'll let you resign if you like. And I said, "No, you're going to have to fire me." I just thought he was playing games.

DePue: I lost something in here; were you serving in an interim position?

Davis: No, I was serving as **the** official, I'm sorry, vice-president for academic affairs, for ten months because the previous one had left; there was a search, and I was named, after a delay, and took office in whenever it was, the fall of eighty-one or something like that, and then served that academic year.

He told me we just couldn't get along and that he was going to have to replace me. I would not resign, so he had to fire me. And that was fine; it was taking a burden off my shoulders. I was a miserable person. I couldn't succeed with him, and I was therefore failing in other ways in the job. But, I had my integrity intact. The faculty was outraged by this and demonstrated against him a vote of no confidence. He was gone in four months after I left. So, I felt some vindication, at least bringing him…I didn't bring him down, but my fate brought him down.

DePue: Was that kind of a last straw or something that precipitated the faculty to—

Davis: Yeah. A lot of them had been at war. He had bought off some of the faculty, particularly the union. But a lot of faculty had been at war with him on all kinds of initiatives where he was spending money for hires of people who were unknown and unqualified. It was just bad. So, yes, this was the straw that broke the camel's back.

DePue: Did you manage to get beyond that, even though you had been technically fired, that your reputation was intact?

Davis: Oh, I don't know. I'm sure people thought, in the community that Davis, he got fired. I didn't worry much about that. I'm self-conscious about my stature,

but I didn't really worry about it, and of course I had my tenure (laughs). I had my faculty position. It took a while to heal my wounds, but they did heal.

DePue: Who replaced Lacy, then?

Davis: Somebody Long. Durward, Durward Long, who was a tough labor historian, rough edges, Durward Long, an amiable guy. He did some good things. He had better instincts than his predecessor. But he too made enemies. For one thing, he had a drinking problem, obviously. He made enemies on campus because of, again, an arbitrary nature. So, he lasted about five years, I'm guessing; I'm not sure.

DePue: I'm looking at a time-line here to see who we've got next.

Davis: Yeah. Then it was Naomi Lynn, probably in the early nineties?

DePue: July 1991.

Davis: Yeah, so he was there about five years. Naomi Lynn was the best president we've ever had. It was still a presidency then, it wasn't a chancellorship. She was a real intellectual, though not in the way that Bob Spencer was. But she knew what the good ideas were and preserved them. She saw terrible, terrible problems on campus with factions who were at each other's throats because of the previous two presidents. And she worked really hard to mend fences, which she succeeded in doing. She's very diplomatic; she's also very wily, very cagey, and she understood the politics of managing the university, in the best sense of the word. She didn't rule from the roost; she worked hard with people who could help build coalitions to get things done.

She was very gifted, and she was the ideal person when it came time to reorganize higher education in Illinois. The talk was of possibly putting Sangamon State under SIU [Southern Illinois University]. That was the initial idea of a study commission. She quietly worked with political leaders very effectively, but quietly. She couldn't betray anything to the campus because she had to be on the outside on this. But she quietly worked to turn that around. She thought that we should become part of a larger campus because we were hurting under a very weak board of governors' system. We had been for thirty years, twenty-five years.

So, she supported, secretly, quietly, the U of I merger but then negotiated with U of I to make it not a merger of equals by any means, but where our independence would prevail. She did a brilliant job of that. While some faculty were very, very unhappy or worried about becoming part of the U of I…Of course the faculty union, once that happened, disappeared, just literally didn't exist; by law, it didn't exist. That made some union people really unhappy, and I can see why. She pulled this all off brilliantly. She also was a terrific fundraiser, made many friends in the community, raised money

for the university, raised friends, raised its visibility, raised its stature nationally. So, she was a great success, terrific success.

DePue: What you've been talking about here is the reorganization that occurred in 1995.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: The board of regents was just abolished at that time?

Davis: It went out of business, finally. Northern and Illinois State University have their own separate boards of trustees, which makes sense. We're too small a campus to have our own board of trustees because it would be a weak board. We're part of the mighty U of I board and frankly, have been treated very, very respectfully with money and construction support.

DePue: One of the things that happens then is the university is re-branded; it's no longer Sangamon State University.

Davis: That's right. Students were given the choice. You could get a U of I degree or keep your old Sangamon State degree. A lot of them, of course, changed. It's much better in the market place to have a U of I degree. Some are still so proud of what they did earlier and maybe don't care about a job; they insist on the old. Yes, it was a profound change for the university. And yet, the actual behavior on campus hasn't changed much. They didn't insist that we start ringing bells. (DePue laughs) Really, it's a light touch, and our chancellor, Naomi Lynn, had a lot of independence.

Let me tell you, quickly—everything is supposed to be quick when I talk—one example of her astuteness in handling a delicate issue of our merger with the U of I. Faculty were very restive here that we would become swallowed up by the octopus in Urbana. So, at one meeting of the chancellors—three chancellors, Urbana, Chicago, Springfield—with the new president there, he announced that the board had decided that it wanted to standardize school colors. The school colors of Urbana are orange and blue, the school colors of Chicago are red and blue, and the school colors of Illinois [Sangamon State] were white and pale blue, okay? The other chancellors resisted this. They said, "You can't do this; this will provoke a revolution on campus." And that's true. It would have been an example of big daddy in Urbana. Finally, the president said, "Okay, we have to have one common color. Blue will be our common color, and then the others will represent the distinctive identity of the campus." That's a reasonable solution.

But Naomi still had a problem. Our uniforms were pale blue and white. She was going to, she thought, have to go to the university assembly and ask for changing the blue and the school colors. She finessed that. You know how she did? She told the athletic director, "For the next three years, change the color of the uniforms slightly, darker each year." (both laugh) And

no one **ever** noticed. You are the first person to…Well, I've told people, friends; I don't think I've ever tape-recorded this. It was, I think, a brilliant stroke. Why march up a hill when you don't have to? She was a practitioner of that. You can see I have a great deal of respect for her as a leader.

DePue: Well, we're pretty much up to the modern era with this, Cullom. We're at an hour and fifty-two minutes right now.

Davis: Well, what do you think?

DePue: I think to do due justice to oral history, we need to deal with that in a separate session.

Davis: Okay. Well, I will talk about her successor as chancellor, briefly. Richard Ringheisen, nice guy and brought us the University Hall building, without access to the concourse (laughs) and brought us the recreation center. He was good on buildings. The enrollment began to increase, but he was not really an educator. He has a PhD in mathematics, but he wasn't an educator. He didn't like to talk about classes or ideas. He was a bricks and mortar sort of guy. He made some very bad decisions, and they hurt us. So, his departure, his retirement, was not regretted; let's put it that way. Nice guy, he was terrible at fundraising. He would go to a reception and stand in the corner because he was very shy. If you're going to raise money, you've got to go glad-hand people and get to know them and get them to like you. He was a likeable guy; it's just that he was shy.

DePue: Well, let's talk a little more about that.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: President versus chancellor, is it just different terms because of—

Davis: U of I, there's only one president at the University of Illinois, and that's in Urbana. He's the overall executive of everything. Then each campus has a chancellor and vice-chancellor and so forth. That's the…I should have explained that; that's the distinction. Both Naomi Lynn, half-way through her executive-ship, and Richard Ringheisen were chancellors. We have a new chancellor; Susan Lock, I think, is her name.

DePue: Here's another significant change, and I think this is under Ringheisen's tenure. The Capital Scholars Program, going from this unique two-year, upper level institution to a traditional four-year program.

Davis: Um-hmm. That change began under Naomi Lynn. It took a long time. This was a huge battle because, of course, the community colleges in the state resisted it, particularly Lincoln Land. Also, Illinois State University objected to it because we would be recruiting freshmen and sophomores the way they do, and Benedictine, or Springfield College Benedictine, resisted it.

There was tremendous resistance to our becoming a four-year undergraduate institution, tremendous resistance. Naomi had to quietly work with legislators and other education officials in the Board of Higher Education (BHE), to convince them that we were throttled in the ability to recruit students by this truncated status. She laid the groundwork for that. In fact, I think it was even announced before Ringheisen…and the way they got it was the promise, "We're just going to recruit some very privileged, elite students for kind of an honors program." It was designed as an honors program, the Capital Scholars.

A lot of people saw through that (both laugh) and said, "Once you get your foot in the door, everyone's going to be a Capital Scholar." It wasn't exactly that brash, but they were right. She was able to get that idea approved after a bloody, bloody battle, and Ringheisen was able to oversee it. It's been good. There's no doubt about that, that it helped raise our enrollment and our visibility.

DePue: And it transitioned from a commuter college to a resident college.

Davis: Yes, that's right. We already had apartments on campus for graduate students, but largely undergraduates…There were some undergraduates there but not many. So, they built a whole set of dorms for students.

DePue: Looking now at what's going on with the university, what are the programs that really draw this wider population of students to Springfield, Illinois?

Davis: Interestingly, probably the biggest is the online education system. We apparently have more online students than Urbana does because we got early in that, and we have a particular faculty member who's been a genius at this. I'm not all that partial to online learning (laughs), but I understand it. It's here to stay. That's probably one of the major draws because students will start online, and then they'll want to finish up, and they may come here to do that.

Otherwise, I think it's the relative small size of the university, which people find attractive, compared to the 40,000 students in Urbana. They like that, and that's why we got a very high rating recently—you may have seen—among Illinois and even middle-western colleges.[24] So that's relatively small size, small classes, good faculty, all of them qualified faculty, no teaching assistants at all. It's all faculty teaching classes. That's unusual at a university, expensive, but unusual. Those are things I think that counselors in high schools now use to recommend that students come here.

[24] *U.S. News & World Report's* 2010 Edition of America's Best Colleges ranked the University of Illinois Springfield as the best public university – master's category – in the state of Illinois, and the fourth best public university in that category in the Midwest. The top rankings were also awarded in 2009 and 2010. The prestigious rankings placed UIS at 22 on a list of 142 top public and private colleges and universities in the 12-state Midwest region. (https://www.uis.edu/about/wp-content/uploads/sites/129/2013/06/IllinoisSpringfield-the-First-40-Years.pdf)

DePue: How about the Public Affairs Institute and the Public Affairs Reporting Program, things like that?

Davis: Public Affairs' Reporting has always been a pretty small program, about twenty, twenty-five students. It's doing fine. It's under a good director now, [Charlie] Wheeler. It hasn't grown, but it's doing fine. The Public Affairs Research Center, which is now called the center or institute? —I can never keep them straight—It still has a pretty good share of soft money funded research and training project. It still does that sort of work; it still is the umbrella for the public radio station [WUIS], the umbrella for *Illinois Issues* magazine, the umbrella for the Lincoln papers project, to the extent the university's involved in that; it's through that. It's successful. It's gone through a series of directorships, but, I think…and also money is a problem because the university is…That's its biggest problem now, has been budget.

DePue: But also, it just brings in a small number of students?

Davis: Oh, it does, yeah. Students are not directly drawn to the institute because it is not offering courses. Some of its faculty, who direct things on a reduced course basis, also teach classes, of course. But that alone doesn't draw people, I don't think, students to the university. It does draw attention to the university, and it gets us in close relationships with the State agencies. That helps later on in placing students.

DePue: Let's finish for today with this question for you.

Davis: Okay, alright.

DePue: Looking back on your long tenure here with Sangamon State and then the University of Illinois in Springfield, are you proud of that experience?

Davis: I'm immensely proud of it. It was the right decision for me, knowing my scholarly habits and shortcomings. It was wonderful to have an environment in which I didn't have to produce scholarship, but I could produce it when I wanted to. As a matter of fact, my scholarly record ultimately ended up being pretty respectable. I don't know why; I'm perverse enough that I resisted the order to publish, but I've flourished in the opportunity. So, I have a pretty decent publications record. I've enjoyed stature in a number of fields, oral history and in documentary editing. And at the university, I've had the freedom to do so much I wanted to do and very little of the punishment for doing what I wanted to do (laughs).

Aside from some bad experiences, this was a great adventure for me, absolutely my culminating experience. I took relatively early retirement fifteen years ago, but I didn't quit my Lincoln papers. I was still on the faculty payroll, paid by the State, actually by the agency. But I retired from teaching, I think fifteen years ago. I was sixty years old, 1995, sixteen years ago.

DePue: About the time it became UIS.

Davis: That's right. Actually, it was simultaneous, because I was asked to give a short talk when we had a big ceremony here about that. That's right, the very same time.

DePue: Well this has been a lot of fun for me, being a resident of Springfield only since 1989. I'm a newcomer in the city of Springfield.

Davis: I know you are.

DePue: Hearing the early history of Sangamon State has been fun.

Davis: I'm delighted. I've taken longer than we planned; that's just your problem (both laugh). Anyway, I've really enjoyed it. Thanks.

DePue: Thanks.

(end of transcript #2)

Interview with Cullom Davis
HS-A-L-2011-037
Interview # 3: September 22, 2011
Mark DePue

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Thursday, September 22, 2011. This is my third session this afternoon with Professor Cullom Davis. Last time we had a fascinating discussion about the early history and the development of—I'm going to correct the record, try to correct the record—Sangamon State University.

Davis: Right, good.

DePue: I've been saying it wrong all this time. I'm sure you were aggravated listening to me.

Davis: You're not the only person. No, no, no. it's an easy thing to mispronounce.

DePue: Okay, Sangamon State. The problem was that people like me drop the n. Today we wanted to talk about your experiences in oral history.

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: I should mention also that we're in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. That's very convenient for me, and it works for you as well. We appreciate that.

Davis: Of course, I love it.

DePue: You talked very briefly last time about how you got into oral history, but I wanted to have a more detailed discussion of that.

Davis: Um-hmm, okay. I must, in covering that, touch on a couple of minor things. One was, for my Ph.D. dissertation I interviewed some people, and I used—I think I told you—the collection at Columbia University for some of the figures from the 1920s and 30s who touched on the subject of regulating business. I used some transcripts at Columbia, which was far and away the leading, best known oral history collection, and I conducted a few interviews, but I didn't record them; I just made notes. These were fairly short, and these were very elderly people, talking about their years of service as a commissioner on the FTC [Federal Trade Commission]. To be honest, I didn't even record them. I just, like a reporter might do, made notes and didn't quote them. I simply described the experience they had described, petty shabby effort, but I had—

DePue: Did you read any material about how to conduct a good interview, beforehand?

Davis: No, no, not a thing. I guess I had read in the general literature about something called oral history, but I don't remember any particular letter. There was a story about the Kennedy oral history project that began a couple years after he was assassinated. I may have read a little bit in the newspaper about that. But I had not, in any serious way, read or practiced what this was all about.

By some interesting coincidence, I received or read about a notice of a meeting of an association of oral historians—I think it was its second or third meeting—to be at Lake Arrowhead, which is a wonderful resort in California, near the coast. I was able to get financial support to attend that. In fact, one of my colleagues at the university also attended. The meeting lasted three days.

Heck, we stayed four and (laughs) had a good time. It was a really intense weekend. There were workshops, so I could learn some of the smatterings of oral history. I met some of the really big figures in the movement because they had a tendency to always welcome newcomers. One of them was Charles Morressey, who had worked on the Ford project, on the Kennedy project. I mean for the Ford Foundation and the Kennedy project, also Louie Starr, who was in some eyes, the kind of patriarch of oral history practice, in that he was the director of the collection at Columbia.

DePue: Was Allen Nevins already passed away at that time?

Davis: He hadn't passed away, but he was quite elderly. He was given credit for giving Columbia the idea for this, and he had enough clout at Columbia to encourage them to start it. Nevins deserves that credit, no doubt about it. He spoke at one of our annual meetings, within a year or two. But he was older, and I didn't meet him at that particular meeting. I also met a wonderful guy who was a folklorist, Sandy Ives at one of the university campuses in Maine, who was a fun-loving guy and really nice. He was entertaining. That was an important relationship. I also met, in many ways the mother of oral history, Willa Baum, who was the director of a project at Berkeley. She was a hard worker, sense of humor.

I felt privileged to interact with these people, and they seemed to welcome any newcomers at that point. There may have been forty people at this meeting. I was inspired, and I had an awful good time. That's what prompted me to consider offering a course in oral history. I hope I've got the timing right, but I'm pretty sure, since the meeting occurred in October or November of 1970, that that spring, the spring quarter, I offered a course in oral history.

DePue: That prompts me to ask how many actual oral histories had you conducted by the time you started this course?

Davis: I was starting to do them. I started to do some right away, but under the auspices of the project, other than those without recording that I had done on my dissertation. That was the nature of this university, you know, find an interest and pursue it with your students (both laugh). Literally, that was the case. I worked hard at that, but in conceiving of the course, which would be definitely a course of oral history experiences, all of them, from interviewing to transcribing to editing, I was telling the students you had to do this.

I worked particularly hard on the processing part. I felt I had a pretty natural interviewing skill, though I certainly read the advice in some of the early books about that. But I needed good advice on transcription and editing. In doing so, I developed some of my own ideas. I was beginning to develop a series of ideas about how these things should be done, sufficiently that I could offer a course on it. Take it or leave it, that's the way it was.

DePue: I wanted to ask you, and you've articulated this a little bit, but what was it that so intrigued you about the concept of oral history, early on?

Davis: First of all, I considered myself, in effect, a modern American political historian. What better way to add to what we know about political leaders than what they themselves, or their associates, remember about what happened? It just seemed to be a natural extension of a researcher's technique.

Also, I'll have to admit, I kind of liked the notion of an historian interacting with some other eye-witness to the past. I had been taught in graduate school that history research involves holing yourself up in a library and getting no interference from anyone, no interaction with people and just working with the documents. I accepted that. But the notion that history research could entail a collaborative effort intrigued me. Being a fairly verbal and social person, I took to that. I also was sensitive to the first murmurings of protest within the historical profession that historians were overlooking the common people and demonstrating interest only in the generals and the presidents and the big-shots.

There was, in the early radical element of the historical profession, a feeling that we should pay attention to the people. That would include working people…I mean laboring people, women and minorities and ethnics who had been largely overlooked by white male historians. So, I had something of a professional, or if you want to call it a political professional, opinion that oral history might be a way to capture history from people who hadn't left records of their own.

DePue: What better place to start to practice it and to experiment with it than this experimental university?

Davis: Exactly, it just fit beautifully. I did that with other courses. I introduced the course on the future…the history of the future? (laughs). But it was that sort of place; it encouraged opening your mind. Oral history was definitely on the outer edges of the historical profession. Had I gone to Urbana or Princeton or University of Chicago and asked them what they had been doing in oral history, they would have laughed me out of the office and with good reason. It wasn't even considered an historical technique; it was just talk. This was a radical idea in many ways.

DePue: Let's examine that a little bit. Why was there disdain within the mainstream historical circles for it? Why was it just talk, not history?

Davis: The profession had, for a century, agreed with German philosophers and historians that the record of the past consists of documents; without documents you have nothing. If you look at some of the books in America about historical method, they talked about the "record." They meant the public record from that time, not subsequent materials about it, but original and

contemporary documents. That was the German philosophy of history; that was part of the graduate education of generations of American historians.

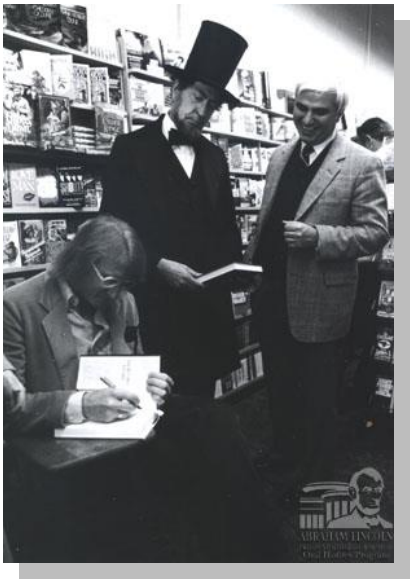
Now there'd been exceptions to that. During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration employed writers, not historians, but writers, poets, actors, to do various projects, including interviewing former slaves. There's been a lot of controversy about that effort because it failed in some serious ways. But they were influenced, I think, by the folks, folk music, folklore field, which had developed an interest in observing alien peoples in their settings. Really, folklore studies, which had revolutionized in the thirties and forties in this country, probably encouraged some historians to try this technique out.

Cullom Davis interviewing Avinere Toigo about Ethnic Politics in the 1930's in Illinois, circa 1973.

DePue: What was the difference seen between the folklorist and the historian?

Davis: Well, a folklorist is more generous in accepting sources. A folklorist simply is interested in what you think occurred in the past. An historian is going to presumably have somewhat stricter criteria and want to know, how is it you know what happened? A folklorist doesn't care whether what you tell them is true; a folklorist cares that what you tell them expresses some idea about the past.

DePue: This is something that we'll get into quite a bit later, but you've just touched on this whole notion of validating the information you're hearing. Was that one of the concerns that historians had…that these people, their memories fifty years after an event is not going to be accurate?



Cullom Davis with "Abraham Lincoln" at Charles Strogiers' book signing party for his new book, circa 1979.

Davis: Sure, sure. [Here's] a good example, from the Lincoln field. Back after Lincoln's assassination, his law partner went around the country, by correspondence and by personal visit and personally recording conversations with people who had known Lincoln.

DePue: Personal recording, as in writing them down?

Davis: I mean writing down, transcribing. Yeah, there was no recording equipment then. These were full of all kinds of information, but to any historian, any serious historian, a little susceptible to the possibility of exaggeration or forgotten memory or ego build-up, you name it. By the 1930s, the books that he had written and the interviews—if you can call them that—that he had conducted—

DePue: This is Herndon?

Davis: Yeah. I'm sorry; I didn't tell you, yes, William Herndon. The stuff that he had collected became, under a new generation of more seriously trained professional historians, highly suspect. In fact, no one better than James Randall, who was a leading professor and Lincoln scholar at the University of Illinois, argued that these kind of testimonies are just not worth considering as evidence. These have to be contemporary documents. It was a decidedly debatable endeavor.

It's only been in the last thirty years that Herndon's materials have enjoyed a new breath of life, partly because of the oral history movement, partly because historians have taken a look at what he discovered and compared with other original sources and found a lot of congruence, not entirely, but a lot. It was part of the gradual transition of the historical profession from exclusive reliance upon **the** documents to a broader array of sources: psychological insight, interviews, statistical, quantitative data. These all were part of a new wave of historiography.

DePue: How much did you know about the controversies, the suspicions that the mainstream historians had about oral history, when you first started to tinker with it?

Davis: Oh, I knew that these were suspect. I knew that on any other campus this "kid's" recommendation that we start a course would have been rejected, out-of-hand. I can't blame them; it's just that they were bound by the conventions that they knew and followed. In a way it was lucky that I tried this at a campus that was open to new ideas.

DePue: I wanted to ask you a few questions about what you were learning, as you became more skilled as an interviewer, about the art of interviewing. First of all, what's the relationship that a good interviewer wants to have with the interviewee, or with whom we sometimes call the narrator?

Davis: Right. Well, right away, because I read a few things on interviewing written for journalists, I knew that, more so than journalists, we had to have an open mind and not be offering leading questions, that we should be simply asking for their version of the past. It'll be up to us and people who use these materials to judge the veracity of what's told and the value of what's told. So, empathy, maintaining—as you do very well—a tendency to have the source

speak and the interviewer keep silent. Those were things I learned pretty quickly. Of course, I attended these workshops when some of the pros offered their advice, and this was exactly the sort of advice I got.

The big debate then was whether you needed to transcribe tapes or not. There were some projects that simply hadn't [been] transcribed. Others felt that…because they felt the tape was really **the document**. At Columbia it was God-given that the tape was simply a means to document it. There were big arguments over that.

DePue: The rationale for saying you did need a transcript versus you didn't?

Davis: That when you transcribed a tape, you were innocently, however innocently, changing it, and you weren't capturing the nuances of conversation. You were playing with it; you were tampering with the original source. That's a purist position, but it existed in the early 1970's.

DePue: What's the flip side of that argument, why transcribe?

Davis: The chief argument was, if you want people to use your materials, you're going to have to transcribe them. People tried to figure out a way of indexing tapes, and they did; they did a few, but it was a kind of primitive method. It's a usefulness argument, chiefly. Though some of them also insisted that, in fact, the transcription can fully represent all the nuances of a conversation, if you do it right, and you also give the source a chance to correct his or her record if they find errors in what they had said.

DePue: You mentioned the word empathy before, as establishing that kind of relationship in the interview, but does that preclude you asking the tough questions or attending to the tough issues?

Davis: No, not at all. It was just the relationship you set up was one of empathy and interest to encourage them to speak a lot. But you also should tell them, "I'm an historian, and I've read a little bit about this, and where you say something that puzzles me or is somewhat at odds with something else I've read, I'm going to ask you further about that."

DePue: I want to read you a quote from your own book, *Oral History from Tape to Type*. Here's what you said about interviewers, (reading) "Interviews conducted by qualified and responsible individuals who observe the cannons of our profession and who view their product as but one form of evidence in explaining the past."[25] That's the definition of a good interview.

Davis: Yes, um-hmm.

[25] Davis, Cullom, Kathryn Black, and Kay McLean. *Oral History: From Tape to Type*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1977. Library of Congress, American Folklife Center; Veterans History Project. http://www.loc.gov/vets/bib-oral.html (accessed August 1, 2014).

DePue: That wasn't the quote I was thinking of here. I might have to look later for that. Let's—

Davis: That one was just the fact that oral history is not the only source that you should use if you've got others. Sometimes it's all you have. But you ought to, obviously, look at newspapers and public documents, etc.

DePue: You caught where I headed down in the first place though. I appreciate that. How do you validate these stories that you're hearing, and what do you do when you find out that there's errors? What's the ethic of the good oral historian on that?

Davis: I think there are limits to an oral historian's responsibility to validate and verify what they've collected. There is a responsibility, but I think it is limited, because at its heart, this is an effort to capture what someone else believes they observed or learned. Therefore, it is worth it for that reason. Your job is to maybe test that a little bit with whatever you know or can imagine in the way of a contrary position.

But it is not your job to put on this the "good housekeeping seal" of validation, because that would take an enormous amount of research, and that's really the job of an historian using all kinds of sources when they decide to write a book. You are not the historian. You are a historian who's collecting evidence just the way an archivist processes records. I don't think the oral historian has a fundamental responsibility to validate what he or she collects. I think we owe it to them and the public that we test it wherever we can with straw man arguments or whatever you can think of.

DePue: Does that mean that an oral historian is more archivist than historian?

Davis: I don't know. That's, I think, splitting hairs to some extent. There's certainly more than just the processor because they have used their knowledge in asking the questions and framing the subject. They are historians, but to some extent what they're doing is helping their source remember as candidly and honestly and fully as possible what **they** remember experiencing.

DePue: What did you learn early on about how and where to find good people to interview?

Davis: That turned out to be relatively easy. It was funny…By the way, I was giving talks about oral history, too. I was a new faculty member in Springfield, so I was invited to give talks and quite often in those early years I gave a talk on oral history or a workshop. I spoke at the county Historical Society on this. I spoke at the Genealogical Society. I spoke in schools to encourage them to consider—at least at the eighth-grade level and higher—trying little oral history projects. I was promoting it a lot…Now I've lost the kernel of your question.

DePue: Finding those good interview subjects.

Davis: Oh. When I did that, thank you, people would come up and say, "You should meet my neighbor, my grandfather…" There were always more people recommended than we could possibly pursue, which I'm sure has been your experience. Once in a while, you'd pursue someone in good faith and find out really they're not that interesting or coherent. There was never a problem in that [finding interview subjects].

I also told my students, of course, that they had to do some oral histories. In addition to reading the instructional and theoretical literature about oral history, they had to actually conduct one or more oral histories, equaling about five hours, I guess, of interviews, and transcribe it and edit it as well, so that they all…They often had relatives themselves. I discouraged a little bit, the notion of them interviewing their own relatives, because I said, "There's a little bit of distance. You want empathy, but there's a little distance that's also useful." I occasionally approved it when I was convinced the student could handle it, but I generally suggested that they talk to someone who isn't akin.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that even though you can go back to Allen Nevins and his work, I think right after the Second World War, and people like S.L.A. Marshall during the war, that oral history was still a very new concept when you entered the scene?

Davis: It was very new, though I'm glad you mentioned those people who did military oral history, because they in many ways, in this age, were the founders. They had access to wire recording before tape was available, and they did some very important work. Some of them GIs, some of them brass. I mean some of the subjects [were] GIs and brass. At our early meetings, they were always pretty well represented.

DePue: Was Marshall himself ever part of the mix?

Davis: No, but who the guy who wrote about Marshall, another great historian. I'm forgetting. [Colonel David Hackworth]

DePue: We can get that in there later.

Davis: There was a Marine officer who was a spit and polish Marine. He did this sort of work out of Quantico, I think. He was kind of a character, but it was fun to have him there. Their experiences were a little different, of course. Their subjects were a little different. Sometimes it was battlefield experiences they were exploring, which can be traumatic. But they added a lot to our dialogue.

DePue: How about some of the issues of ownership of these interviews and copyright concerns and getting consent to do the interviews? Was that part of the discussion right from the beginning?

Davis: It really was, from the very beginning, because we were also guided somewhat by the experience of some of our colleagues who were active in the John F. Kennedy [JFK] oral history project. They had made many mistakes, but they had done other things properly. They knew they needed a legal consent, and they knew that they ought to give the source a chance to review their transcript. I can't think of all the peoples who were involved, other than Charlie Morressey, but there were some others. We were following their guidelines because they had spoken at our meetings and given advice. That was kind of the model we had for military ones and the JFK series.

DePue: In thinking about this yourself and getting into teaching very early, what were your own personal views about whether you talk to elites and interview them, or you do the bottom-up history?

Davis: I was caught up in the bottom-up. For one thing, I thought if Sangamon State was going to accomplish something in competition with Columbia and Berkeley and UCLA that it probably would have better luck dealing with the people it had in Springfield. Now there were elites in Springfield, of course, nothing like the elites represented at Columbia. But there were former governors, representatives, leading business officials. For the most part, the richest terrain seemed to be the stories of coal miners and ethnics and women. I did consciously choose to follow that course because I thought it had a better chance of producing a pretty rich crop of material. It wasn't a permanent commitment I made; I just thought we ought to get started, and this is a good way to do it.

DePue: You mentioned early on that you focused a lot of your energies, when you first got started, on the demands of processing. Maybe somebody on the outside doesn't even begin to comprehend what's involved, so talk about that discovery process you went through yourself that, "Oh, my god, this takes a little bit of time."

Davis: Right. I followed one simple booklet that Willa Baum produced that didn't have much to say about processing at all and another little booklet that was based on the work of the Kennedy project. They gave fundamental advice on processing, that you need to do, as close as possible, a literal transcription. Then the editor has a little more leeway in listening to the recording, comparing that with the transcript, to make some adjustments that seem to be in the spirit of what the person was saying. Now that's a tricky "if," but that was one of the arguments we used. If making a change is in the service of the authenticity of the original spoken interview, then it's good.

How would that be the case? Well, you remember examples from my book, the word "yeah," which could be interpreted in print either [as] affirmation or sarcasm, "Yeah." So. as an editor you would try to insert those stage directions that would convey what the speaker was saying and not to suggest something different from what was said.

DePue: Did you have a sense of the time demands involved with processing?

Davis: Not really, until I got into it deeply. But very quickly, as you were, we were flooded with a choked (laughs) pipeline because the interviewing takes time, and the preparation for interviewing takes time. But once you begin generating recordings, the backlog really occurs with transcription and editing. I discovered that quickly.

That's one reason I required my students to do not all, but some of their transcript…If they produced five hours of tape recording with one or maybe two people, I expected them to hand in as part of that the transcription for the first hour of one of those tapes. Then we would try to continue the work later. I didn't want to make them, in effect, stenographers because, for a lot of these people, they had no skills, particularly in doing this (both laugh). But I wanted them to experience it, to appreciate its importance, so that I could evaluate the way they handled it. The same with editing, they had to edit just, I don't know, fifty pages of a transcript. So, we had to finish the rest in some way.

I was right away in trouble, and I did exactly what you've done. I had students in my class—many of them were older; some were married women—who were always good prospects for volunteer service. I began encouraging that, and we formed a small band of people who were very loyal, as many of yours are. They did this work under my oversight, and that helped a lot. So, volunteers helped.

Then I did, as I was pretty good at doing, persuade the university that we needed a full-time secretary for this office and a half-time graduate assistant. Half-time because that's the kind of position graduate assistants get. So, I was able to deploy paid help, a real secretary who could do very fast transcription and oversee the rest of it and a graduate assistant who could do some interviews for experience and help with the projects in various ways.

DePue: Were there any challenges organizationally getting started? You conceptualize this, and now you have to translate it into execution.

Davis: I think I told you about the naming of the project.

DePue: Yeah, but we haven't talked about that on the record.

Davis: Okay, alright. The university was operating, after the first few kind of free flight years of "do what you want," under the increasing control of our governing board, the Board of Regents. They had such red tape and rules that I just had no patience for that sort of thing. You had to jump through hoops; you had to meet with these education bureaucrats, whom I liked as persons, but I didn't respect as being educators. So, I learned very quickly that to create a department, to create an institute, which meant a research institute, or a center by name, those required board of regents' approval.

I didn't want to go through that. Other people did, but they often were turned down. I simply called it the Office of Oral History or the Oral History Office. No, that didn't require approval; it just needed us to put a name on a door. No one complained about that.

We kind of grew subterranean in many ways, never getting the attention of the governing board or their staff members. I later appointed myself as director. It wasn't a due-process appointment (both laugh). It didn't carry any benefits. I already had the benefit of one less course to teach, in order to oversee this effort. It was just I needed a title when I wrote letters. (laughs) So, I was director of the Oral History Office.

We never really went through reviews. All the departments had to go through five-year reviews, where you had to write these voluminous reports. We always just kind of sailed right through. People knew about us, and we were getting very favorable attention. That may have helped. We got press and so forth, but we never had to go through a rigorous review.

DePue: Do you recall the year that you created the Oral History Office?

Davis: I think it was seventy-two or three.

DePue: Very early into this whole process.

Davis: Yeah, because right away I knew I had to do something. Yeah, I think it was seventy-two or three.

DePue: Somebody's got to make the decision. You want an assistant, you want a secretary? Okay, we'll pay for a secretary. Is that Spencer?

Davis: The dean, I think, approved it. Maybe it went all the way up to Spencer. Those were not easy things to do. But, one other thing, fairly early—well not until 1975—I got a grant. That was from the Illinois Bicentennial Commission for the American Revolution. I got the grant and—maybe it was seventy-three or four because it was well before the bicentennial itself, in seventy-six—and it was to interview people, particularly the un-represented, African-Americans and workers.

It was ironic; this was the…Well, the American Revolution was supposed to be a ground-up process. We got some money, not enough, but enough to hire a couple of part-time interviewers. That always impressed the university. If you can get a grant, it showed that you were entrepreneurial, and I was. I was, even worse, kind of a hustler, I think. And I had a lot of friends there because I'd been there from the beginning. I don't know how I did it, but at some point…maybe it was a condition of this grant. I might have said that the university would provide some secretarial service. I can't remember.

DePue: You've talked about the processing steps and specifically about transcribing and editing.

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: But what happens after that? What do you do with these after they've been finished?

Davis: After they've been reviewed by the source, as well? Then we would write a preface. I made my students write those prefaces, subject to a format that I had laid out, with some common language in it about the reliability of oral histories and that sort of thing and then even a card catalog description—I thought, You ought to know what librarians have to do with these things—and no index, but a table of contents, rough table of contents. They had to do all of that.

Then we just had our volunteer typists or my secretary type them up. We didn't have even a word processor at the time, but we got one of the first ones at the university (laughs), a huge IBM 660 or something; it was a monster.[26] It was just a word processor, but it had a huge storage capacity. I don't know how I pulled that off, but probably around 1977, I was able…I think it was one of those end-of-the-year things, when we had equipment money left over. I always checked with the dean about that. That's how I bought tape-recorders. One year they had an extra $4,000, or whatever it was, for this word processor. I got about the third word processor on the campus, which was a good feeling.

DePue: The equipment that you're using, were these off-the-shelf tape recorders that you're purchasing that way?

Davis: We certainly weren't of the quality of your tape-recorder, but they weren't the ones you'd buy at a drugstore. We tended to buy Sonys and Panasonics, not great. We also bought microphones. It was not high quality, the way you've developed high quality here, couldn't afford it. I made the students…Well, I had an inventory of four or five tape recorders that they could borrow, but a lot of them bought their own. In those days, they could buy a decent Panasonic for fifty dollars.

DePue: Were you strictly using cassette tapes?

Davis: We started with cassette tapes—even though you saw that picture of me supposedly interviewing someone on a reel-to-reel—we, from the very

[26] A word processor is a program or machine for storing, manipulating, and formatting text entered from a keyboard and providing a printout. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_processor)

beginning, used cassette tapes, though we did for a while do a back-up reel-to-reel, a great big reel-to-reel back-up.

DePue: So, at the end of this process, you've got transcripts, finished transcripts, and you've also got a stack of cassette tapes.

Davis: Yes.

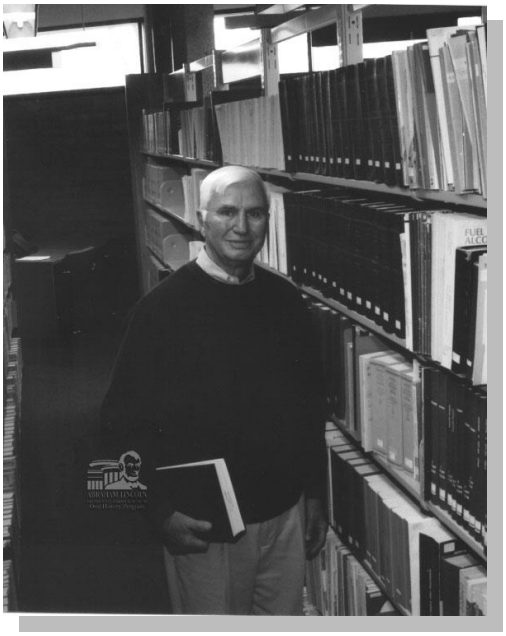
DePue: Did you deposit them in the library?

Davis: The university library?

DePue: Yeah.

Davis: Not yet. We were operating out of an office of—a rather large office, to be honest—in the building Brookens, but outside the library. I would have been able to…willing to turn over the tapes, certainly, to the archives, but it just never happened. We did invest in a very large metal cabinet, designed for cassette tapes. I felt they were secure there and the same with the transcripts.

They were rather crudely printed, or duplicated, and with…I guess, stapled. Well, it was called perfect binding, which wasn't perfect by any means (both laugh), but it was the state of the art at that time. We kept those in our own office, partly because I was using them in my courses. I was having students read them, listen to tapes. It was convenient to me to have them under security, but there. It was only later, when I realized that we had something that needed to be cataloged and in the archives, and when my position as director was possibly going to end, that I thought of that.



Cullom Davis in the University of Illinois at Springfield's Brookens Library, circa 2008 (age 73).

DePue: What were your thoughts initially about how these might be used?

Davis: We thought about that; I thought about it a lot. We held at least a couple of open-houses on weekends in Springfield and tried to advertise them when interested people could come. And I continued giving talks. I was always encouraging people to make use of them. I developed several tapes, consisting of excerpts from some of the more interesting, important or amusing interview segments, and I would play those whenever I had the chance.

We, for about three years, held a half-hour radio program on what was then WSSU, I guess, called, "Voices of the Past." It was pretty primitively put together, but there was a theme; just like you do, every program had a theme. We had some wonderful excerpts from coal-mining interviews and political interviews, women's interviews and that, we hoped, would bring attention.

But it came down to having scholars become interested in these things. I spoke to some of the historians in the department, and they weren't doing modern history that would use this. Then I talked to some of the political scientists, and they seemed interested, but their use of the material was very limited.

One guy wrote a history of Illinois, and by that time—this was ten years later—we were doing the General Assembly and eyewitness projects. We had, I thought, some really good stuff. But he was one of these by the numbers, quantitative, political scientist. It wasn't his kind of stuff. I said "Well, you can even use it if it's just to illustrate a point you've made from the quantitative evidence; you'll find some great quotes in there." But he didn't bother.

It took a while. Then, just by chance, people began using them. Several local historians did them. I'm trying to think who else. We arranged to have our early oral histories microfilmed, at the expense of the *New York Times* because they offered that service to any oral history program in addition to Columbia's. They were building a collection of microfilmed transcripts. It was a for-money offshoot of the *New York Times*. It didn't make much money (laughs). But we did get a complimentary set of the microfilm, microfiche, excuse me, not film. So that was another way to do it, and we occasionally got correspondence about this. I can't recall all of that, but gradually interest developed.

Now, if I thought about it, I could point to a dozen books that have based their work in part on these. And a couple of the people who've done local history for the [*State*] *Journal-Register* have heavily used the oral histories. What's her name now, who does local history, and the guy before her? I can't think [of them]. So, it was a slow process of getting people to use these, but we tried.

DePue: Were they cataloged into the library system?

Davis: Into the archives system.

DePue: Right from the beginning?

Davis: Yes. Yes, they were, cataloged in the archives, card catalog system. That didn't transfer to the university catalog. But the fact that there was an oral history collection that was accessible became known. Yes, we did catalog.

DePue: From what you've described, the program kind of grew and developed in ways that maybe initially you hadn't envisioned.

Davis: Never even considered.

DePue: But after you got two or three years into this, what would you say your goals for the Oral History Office were?

Davis: Okay. One of them was quantitative, the more interviews, the better, because we were reaching a point—several hundred interviews—that made us worth mention, but we weren't in the upper, the major leagues. The other is quality. I began to realize that some of my students, as well-meaning as they were, had really done pretty poor interviewing. While I had overseen that and monitored that work, I hadn't been sufficiently critical in monitoring it. I tried hard to instigate tougher standards and more guidelines in doing oral history. I think that the later oral histories are much better than the earlier ones.

Then I wanted a little bit of national attention. So, I was always giving talks at the Oral History Association or elsewhere in the country, where I was invited to speak at a library or a university. And we were in that *New York Times* microfilm; that put us in kind of an elite group. I wanted size, higher quality, some national attention, and then I wanted to spread the holdings into the elites, to some extent, namely legislators and State officials and elected officials. That's when I got involved, six years later, if I have the date here.

DePue: I did want to talk about that, but I've got a few more questions before we get there.

Davis: Of course, okay.

DePue: Was part of the goal wanting scholars, students, journalists to use the collection?

Davis: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: Was there any way that you could quantify that?

Davis: It was all word of mouth and happenstance. No, I couldn't. There was a time when I could. I could rattle off—fifteen years ago— "The following books or articles have been based in whole or in part on our oral histories, among others." But, that's disappeared in the cavern of my memory.

DePue: You could do that because they had to come to you personally to gain access to them?

Davis: No, I was just around the office a lot. I'd hear this; someone would spot it; I'd learn about it at a meeting. That was important to me, so I kept a record of that sort of thing.

DePue: I want to talk a little bit about the experience of teaching oral history.

Davis: Um-hum.

DePue: I guess I'm surprised that when you first started teaching, you really hadn't done many of your own.

Davis: (laughs.) Sorry. That's true; that's true.

DePue: What was you thought, in terms of how to design this from the beginning?

Davis: I had been to these workshops that talked about the different stages: research, selecting people to interview and so forth. I had that, and I had produced a small brochure—you probably haven't seen it; it's out of print. Yeah, there, okay—that was very primitive. It was really promotional, as much as anything. It was intended…If I spoke to an historical society or in Cook county or [whatever] county, I would take these along and hand them out because it was better than nothing; yet it wasn't really a manual.

So, I had developed, through workshops at the oral history meetings within a couple of years, a pretty strong sense of what needed to be taught, and then it was just up to me to put a syllabus together, representing that and then whatever my own, individual ideas [were]. I was rare among my colleagues who taught oral history elsewhere to be teaching it at the graduate as well as undergraduate level at a university and to teach it as a skill that they must acquire and demonstrate, rather than the theoretical stuff of oral history.

At Columbia they were offering a course, not for credit, but it was much more involved in the theoretical aspects of memory, and it didn't involve doing interviews; it involved reading ones they had. The same was true elsewhere, with some exceptions. I was one of those, along with Ron Greeley at North Texas University and Terry Birdwhistell at the University of Kentucky and Donald Ritchie at the U.S. Senate Historical Office…excuse me, he wasn't teaching oral history, but Birdwhistell and [Salvador] Marcello and some others spent a little bit of their time teaching, as well as running a project.

DePue: What did you find when you got into teaching the students; what was the value for them of going through this and practicing this?

Davis: Well, I warned them. I said, "This is the kind of course whose rewards will not be readily observable at the outset. What you're going to discover is a lot of tedious work." But I would say, "If you stay with it"—the old bromide—"If you will stay with it, the rewards will be immense, in terms of your pride in having produced a piece of historical evidence." I would remind them of that all the time. This is deferred rewards, but very important rewards. And some people dropped out. That happened in all of our courses. But a lot of them stayed. It was an interesting course; they found it intrinsically interesting

to be exploring the life of a neighbor or a relative or somebody. So, they tended to hang in there. Some of them were very gifted interviewers.

One of my first was Bobbe Herndon. She was a society wife, here in Springfield, a very glamorous family, but she discovered this as a tremendous interest on her part. She had great skill, great skill, as an interviewer, just a natural. She was a conversationalist, so she took off with this and ran with it and became my graduate assistant and gave talks at the oral history meetings. I had some students like that, who just were naturally made for this. Others never did develop a really comfortable skill but tried hard and at least went by the rules. I had to live with all those varieties of ability. But, by and large, the training and experience and practice helped these people, I concluded.

DePue: Did you find that the natural extrovert, the social person, made the better interviewer?

Davis: Yes, with one caveat, that if they were too much the extrovert, they might make this a conversation rather than an interview. There was some danger, and I had to tell some people, "Look, you're not the source here. You are the conduit." That was a risk, and I had a couple of people who were really bad because of that.

DePue: Did you find that doing oral history was a way to enhance some of their other skills as historians?

Davis: That's a good question. I'm sure it made them more sensitive to the importance of weighing historical evidence. They confronted that issue directly in this course. You would ordinarily, in a graduate methods course in history, you'd get exercises in weighing evidence. But this was a live version of that, where you had to read other sources for background information and then weigh the interviewer against those sources. That helped. I know it improved their, their…I hate to say literary skills, but their writing and editing skills. They hadn't ever practiced editing, and they hadn't done much writing. And while what they were writing here was what they'd said, I know that this enhanced that skill and the editing skill, which is something you don't learn in college, generally, unless you're taking a journalism course. Some of them may have developed more comfort dealing with strangers; I don't know. That's a psychological issue that I can't explore.

But it was a popular course; let's put it that way. I never had more than twenty-five students, but that was plenty. I made a lot of friends in that course, who just loved doing the work and continued doing it. I had two co-authors of this textbook, which began, by the way, as a workshop, *Oral History from Tape to Type.* They were both my students. I invited them to be my co-authors with full, equal billing because they had things to contribute that I admired. I thought, What better experience for really good students than to be a co-author?

DePue: And that's Kathryn Back and Kay Maclean?

Davis: Kathryn Back was here only for five years. She was a graduate assistant for me. Then she moved to New York and got a full-time job with the Columbia project on our recommendation. I always thought, Well, that's nice. She had great skills. She was doing editing work, but she had real gifts. I don't credit us, except my entrée helped her get in the door, obviously. And Kay Maclean was a very good oral historian; she loved doing the work. They both collaborated with me on a very intensive work. In fact, we wrote the textbook for that workshop. It took us four months to write it and mimeograph it to use as the text of this workshop.

DePue: And to end up with a very straightforward approach, how to conduct oral history from—

Davis: Yes. It was definitely a manual with examples; we had work examples. It was, yes, it was a typical manual, nothing flowery in it. But it was also systematic in that we made clear what the different steps were, a little clearer than previous works had done. It was very…What's the right word? Didactic, this is what you do. Where we couldn't be didactic, we would say, "Empathy's important, but you have to balance that with other things," and so on. Yeah.

DePue: Was it well received?

Davis: Yes. The workshop, which was sponsored by the Illinois State Library…They invited any of their public librarians throughout the state to come for an expenses paid week in Springfield, with an intensive series of five, all day sessions on oral history. They stayed in a motel here, and we set up shop in one of the rooms of the motel. We were there all day for five days, using this book as their assignment and then giving them various exercises. They were a great group; these were middle-aged, mature people, who were librarians already, and they loved the world of ideas. They just took to this, and a lot of them started oral history programs in their cities. It was popular enough that I was recommended to have it published professionally by the American Library Association, which is headquartered in Chicago. We submitted it, and it was accepted and published in, I guess 1977.

DePue: Right.

Davis: But our workshop was in 1975. That put me on the Oral History Association map. Suddenly I had the best new manual. And for about ten years it remained the standard. It went through three or four printings.

DePue: Did that mean you made a little bit of money in process?

Davis: Yeah, a little bit.

DePue: These kinds of things, the expectations going in are always—

Davis: We had no illusions, but every quarter I would get a check from the ALA—that's the American Library Association, ALA—of maybe $400, and I divided it into three and sent my partners their share (both laugh).

DePue: You can take the family out to dinner with that.

Davis: We even ran…I forgot; for two years it was so good—and we had it in a spiral form—we sold it to students in my class and others. I was running, out of our house, a mail order firm (laughs). We charged, I don't know, seven dollars for it. We kept the profits, except for printing, which were little. We shared those proceeds, too.

DePue: It's dated now, as the title would suggest, [*Oral History*] *From Tape to Type* (laughs).

Davis: Yes, right away. But at that time, that was considered a **marvelous** title because it encompassed oral history. Now it's, of course, hopelessly—

DePue: I certainly found it very useful when I first got started to conceptualize all the different processing steps, that as much as anything.

Davis: Yeah. The section on interviewing technique is pretty shallow. The sections on processing, I think, were pretty good. I give my partners credit for that. But as soon as Don Ritchie's book entered the market, it far out-shone this.

DePue: Don Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: But that didn't come about until ninety-one, was it?

Davis: I think you're right. But there were some others. Willa Baum wrote a book [*Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, 1991], and there were a few other efforts at local historical societies that…but this book continued selling, at least for ten years, but it dropped off.

DePue: Here's kind of a different line of questions. You're teaching; you've got other demands on your time at the university—we talked about that last time, all of the administrative demands—and then, even when you get done teaching, this is not all you're teaching.

Davis: That's right; that's right.

DePue: Was there frustration on your part that, I'm teaching oral history, but I have very little time to do it myself?

Davis: Good question. I sometimes wanted to do an oral history project. I really wanted to interview this great character down in Collinsville, Illinois, great

American. I knew him well, and I just never could get to it. So yes, I was frustrated, though I also was starting to do some piecemeal work myself for pay. That made money so…(laughs). But when I got involved in the legislative oral history project and the eyewitness, I did some of the interviews. I wasn't paid extra for them, but my expenses were paid. So that began in 1980—

DePue: Nineteen seventy-nine, 1978-79.

Davis: Yes, thank you, yes. That wasn't too much later that I was doing some interviews. I did some, but not as many as I might have liked. But I loved teaching the course; I'll have to admit. It was always an evening class because it lent itself easily to evening teaching for three and half hours. You could do a little bit of discussion, a little lecture, a little demonstration, a little practice. It was an easy course to break into pieces for students who get tired in night classes. I got a great kick out of that course.

DePue: Here's the quote I was thinking I was going to read last time. (Davis laughs) This also, I believe, is *From Tape to Type*.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: [reads] "As a fashionable and fast-growing enterprise, (Davis laughs) it has…" You already know what this is?

Davis: No, no (laughs).

DePue: "As a fashionable and fast-growing enterprise, it has its share of incompetents and charlatans, as well as conscientious practitioners."

Davis: Oh, that's a different—

DePue: "It is an activity that draws upon the most sophisticated skills of professional historians but also can be undertaken productively by weekend amateurs."

Davis: That must be from my jeremiad.[27]

DePue: Well, perhaps it is.

Davis: Bitter, I can tell. Oh, that's not…You just wrote it down?

DePue: Yeah, and I've got that here. I've got your jeremiad here.

[27] A jeremiad is a long literary work, usually in prose, but sometimes in verse, in which the author bitterly laments the state of society and its morals in a serious tone of sustained invective, and always contains a prophecy of society's imminent downfall. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiad)

Davis: It's probably from that. I don't think I was quite so bald-faced in that. I was trying to be more encouraging, and this was more critical.

DePue: I'm sure you're right, now that I reflect on it. But it reflects maybe some frustration you had with the students that you kind of peaked at before?

Davis: Could be. Though I didn't judge them as harshly as I did some of the other things I saw happening in oral history. The want ads in literary magazines for people who knew so-and-so and "get in touch with me" I found really to be a shallow approach toward oral history, or popularizing. Then the business, somewhat spurred by genealogies, of writing your own family history. Some of those were really schlock, I thought. The instructions weren't critical or substantive at all. That was the sort of thing I was being critical of later. I don't think I took that tone there. I had disappointments in some of my students, but that was not the chief source of my frustration.

DePue: Follow-through?

Davis: Oh, some of them continued doing this work; you mean some of my students?

DePue: Yes, that they didn't do the follow-through, the due diligence of doing the research, conducting the interview, doing the transcript, doing the edit.

Davis: It was follow-through; some of it was just basic ability, particularly in interviewing. Some of them just proved to be spectacularly unimaginative in thinking of follow-up, not follow-through but follow-up questions. I had a few people like that, and it really disappointed me, one who interviewed a State legislator. She, the student, was a nice person, but she was seemingly incompetent to think of good questions, rather than just talk herself. I had a few of those, and I did my best, gently, to steer them, but that particular interview I was later embarrassed by.

DePue: I'm assuming that you didn't arm the students with an outline or insist that they develop some kind of a list of questions going in?

Davis: Absolutely, absolutely, of course. And I said, "You need to be well-enough prepared to ask intelligent questions, but don't load your questions with what you've read about the person. Ask open mindedly." I developed that kind of list of keys to a good oral history interview. It's the sort of thing you can use in a class. I'd go over that, with a dos and don'ts of interviewing. And I had them read several essays, one from a book called *The Craft of Interviewing,* which is a journalist's handbook. It had some good stuff in it, and I had them read a couple of the British oral historians who had done really important theoretical work, Thompson—

DePue: Paul Thompson?

Davis: Paul Thompson, yes. In fact, I had them read his whole book, which I thought was provocative.

DePue: Something about the past.

Davis: Yeah, I think…*Out of the Past* or *The Voice of the Past*.[28]

DePue: *Voice of the Past* I think sounds right. You mentioned when we talked last time about this new university, that one of the focuses of the university was on the inter-disciplinary nature of education.

Davis: Um-hmm, um-hmm. Ah, thank you for asking this. Okay, yeah.

DePue: And oral history seems to be an ideal way of exploring that.

Davis: It is; it is. I made a habit of giving talks on that subject and introducing it into my course. You may have seen some of the handouts I had, which argue that this was a hybrid discipline. In fact, it's really not a discipline itself. I talked and have written about the extent to which we already depend upon the work of anthropologists and sociologists and what participant observation contributes to oral history.

Then I got into the gerontology subject matter, where we have as much to give to them as they have to give to us, but it's nice to see we're on convergent tracks. Political scientists sometimes got into interviewing, but it was usually more a questionnaire service interview because they wanted to be able to quantify. Folklore clearly a **strong** overlap in our approaches. They call it field work, so do anthropologists; we call it interviewing. I made a point of mentioning all of these disciplines and what distinguishes them, but also where we represent kind of a taking the best of those practices. I also got into psychology and the study of memory, and I developed a couple of lectures based on what little we really understand about the nature of memory and how you tickle memory.

DePue: Journalism was one that sometimes gets left out of the mix?

Davis: Yes, well I found…No, I shouldn't have left it out. I know, I don't know why—

DePue: I'm not just saying that about you, but other things that I've read and seen.

Davis: That's right; that's right. I did use a journalism book, and I told people that journalists quite often operate on a somewhat different set of assumptions than an oral historian do. They have a deadline, so they are fairly abrupt, typically, in their questions, unless they are doing some in-depth interview. They just

[28] Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978

want answers to questions. The empathy may be there, but it doesn't have to be. I just pointed out some distinctions between what reporters typically do and what oral historians do. But certainly, their advice on getting someone to speak, it's good stuff. I used a lot of it.

DePue: This is one of the things that oral historians have to deal with; sometimes you go in and do a project or do a series of interviews because you have a specific purpose for it, that you want to do something with it. But early on, I'm sure you encountered some conflicting views about whether that's a good approach or not. I'll just read a couple things here. This one is from the first Oral History Association meeting. You weren't there, it doesn't sound like, but Phillip C. Brooks of the Truman Library? Recognize the name?

Davis: Right. Yes, um-hmm.

DePue: "The person who is collecting a stock of evidence for other researchers to use is almost by definition to be doing a more objective job than the one who is writing his own book, especially one who has a case to prove." It gets to this whole issue of how to keep objectivity when you're going into this.

Davis: I'm not sure that statement is correct. I know what he's driving at, but interviewers can be non-objective. The author of a book about someone, yes, their objectivity is more crucial and more at risk, I think, probably. But even an interviewer isn't so detached; they're not detached from the subject matter; they're interacting with the person. I'm not sure I buy that. But he was thinking in terms of the professional librarian, which is what he was, and how the professional librarian is going to be detached, but I don't think more so than others.

DePue: The next one I wanted…I don't have a direct quote here. When I was learning how to do this job and was certainly coming to you and asking you lots of questions, one of the questions asked was, who else can I go and sit down with and learn from them. You sent me off to the Louie B. Nunn Center in Kentucky, and I sat down with Terry Birdwhistell. One of the things that he mentioned has really stuck with me, maybe because it was so surprising to hear it at the time. His basic statement was, "I really don't care how quickly people discover these interviews and start to use this material. That is not my concern. My concern is to collect the information and that somewhere down the road I know that people will find this useful."

Davis: He was drunk when he said that (both laugh). I'm sorry. No, he is right. He's taking the high road. He does care a little bit. We all…because he depends on university money, and you always want to be able to point to achievements.

DePue: Well, it's an exercise in ego, if nothing else, to be able to do that.

Davis: Yes, yes. He's giving you the lofty answer, and it's true. I feel that way, and I've always comforted myself that, Well, we haven't gotten much attention,

but I'm not going to worry about that. But we all do want to get our stuff used. I won't tease him about that because he spoke to you on the record, but we all care about that, I think. He was giving a good professional and honest, in its context, answer.

DePue: That would be part of the ethics of the profession of oral history?

Davis: I think so. Yes.

DePue: I wanted to go through and ask you about some of the specific projects. You've already mentioned quite a few of these.

Davis: Yes, right.

DePue: Early on it looks like you turned to coal mining. Why coal mining?

Davis: Well, because this student of mine, Bobbe Herndon…I knew a little bit about the labor violence and union competition in the 1930s and later, in the greater Illinois area, including even southern Illinois. I knew about that, and I was interested. But the very first interview was done by my grad assistant, Bobbe Herndon. She interviewed this absolute character. Here she was, a high society dame, and he was a guy with most of his teeth missing and spoke in a broken Italian dialect, lived down in somewhere. She got him to tell some wonderful stories, just about mules, mules in the mines and all those things and his immigrant experience. They were rich, rich portraits.

She started that, and then we discovered we had, not a coal mine but a gold mine in these, because most of them felt emotionally irate about the treatment of their mine union, The Progressive Miners, by the UMW [United Mine Workers], the big daddy mine under John L. Lewis. They had been living forty years with the knowledge that they had been done in by their own union brethren. So, they couldn't wait to tell their story, couldn't wait. We got Joe Orsaneck [?], and I'm forgetting some others. They were great sources, and we made use of that. We played the tapes over and over again. One book was written, based on those interviews and other oral coal mine interviews.

DePue: It sounds like you used this excerpt from this coal miner that she interviewed as one of the examples in your book?

Davis: Yeah, I think I did. Yes, I sure did.

DePue: As an example of interviewing done well.

Davis: (laughs) Talk about patting ourselves on the back. Well, it struck me that Bobbe had done a very gifted job in this. We'd already received, as a gift from the people at the John F. Kennedy Library, some of the bad interviews (laughs), so I cited those as well because they were public knowledge.

DePue: Coal mining actually shows up twice in the…I'm looking at the archives here, a print-out of the archives. It is organized alphabetically by projects that you had over many years. There are two times that I see coal mining: Coal Mining and Union Activities Project, 1972-73. That sounds like this would have been Bobbe Herndon.

Davis: Bobbe Herndon, she was hired by the bicentennial project to do that. Right.

DePue: And then, Illinois Coal, a Legacy of an Industrial Society from eighty-five and eighty-six. It

picked up again. That one is even a longer list of interviews that were being conducted.

Davis: I wonder if that's the ones that Carl—

DePue: Oblinger?

Davis: Oblinger.

DePue: It was, yes.

Davis: Right. He worked for the agency for a while, nice guy, an old friend. One of my students—

DePue: The agency?

Davis: The [Illinois] Historic Preservation Agency. Kevin Corley was one of my students, and he was really enthusiastic, lived down in Taylorville. He and Carl and somebody named Brenda Griffin—maybe another student—did a series of them on this. You're right; I'd forgotten. They were pretty good. Carl Oblinger is a good interviewer. He had done this work at Pennsylvania [Historical and Museum Commission] before coming back to town. Yes, it's a pretty rich collection. I had forgotten.

DePue: Another one—you've already alluded to this as well—the power of oral history and addressing communities that have otherwise been overlooked. Obviously, the black community is one.

Davis: Yes, right.

DePue: You've got the black community project, I think.

Davis: Yes, Negil McPherson was a Baptist minister here in town, and I worried about hiring him—He's black…I said he's black—because he would be talking to some of his parishioners, and the role of a black preacher to his flock is an authoritarian role, quite often. I talked to him about this, and he said that he understood that. But I also told him, "Don't just interview your

parishioners; interview others." He did, and they're pretty good, not nearly as good as Bobbe Herndon's. But for various reasons it was important for me to have someone who had credibility in the black community, and Negil did.

DePue: Jumping way into the present time, I know you were involved a few years back when the Springfield African American Historical Commission got organized, with the intent of interviewing people who had grown up in the community.

Davis: Right, right. That was a volunteer effort that involved blacks and also Barbra Dickerman, Babs Dickerman, a wonderful woman. I taught them oral history techniques in about three sessions, and I did some of the interviews. I was busy, but I just…I liked the people I was interviewing; I cared about this project, so I did some. I think they're pretty good.

DePue: In terms of helping to flesh out the historical record, maybe some of the most valuable ones that you did early on were just a couple that dealt with the Springfield riots in 1908.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: Did you do those yourself? Do you recall that?

Davis: I don't think so. Was it [the] Springfield Race Riot?

DePue: Yeah, I think that might be where it was listed. We're flipping through the record here.

Davis: Race Riot. I did interview Brittan Mcconney. There were some others, I thought; that's funny. Oh, see also Black Community Project. I did interview Brittan, although he didn't have much to say about it, and Cunningham did.

DePue: Well looking at the dates, 1971-72.

Davis: We must have done them early.

DePue: Yeah, very early.

Davis: I think they were referred to me because I was giving talks about the race riot too. I just discovered this event through a graduate assistant named Jim Krohe. In fact, he was my first graduate assistant in the Oral History Office, James Krohe, a great guy, now writes a weekly column for *Illinois Times* magazine. I think they were referred to me because I was giving talks, and so I did them. Later on…That's Negil, yeah.

DePue: That would certainly be one of the success stories, where you can look and say people have used this material in writing books and articles—

Davis: I mentioned that, right, because the author of a wonderful book about the race riot quotes them, and the exhibit upstairs used some of those excerpts in the panels.

DePue: The centennial three years ago.

Davis: Yes. But there were more than just those two, maybe some of Negil's were also on the race riot—yeah, race riot—because there were about eight or nine interviews that were, in one way or the other, cited in those exhibits.

DePue: I had looked through some of those myself and don't want to make too many value judgments here, but they always made very passing references to the race riots in those interviews, which I found to be frustrating.

Davis: Right. Yeah, I agree. Negil is a wonderful guy, and I don't altogether blame him, but it could have been the fact, again, that he was their minister, maybe. I was troubled over that, but by and large, I felt this was a good way to make an entrée into the community.

DePue: You're working with students. I would imagine that a popular subject for the students to pursue is interviewing war veterans as well. Is that the case?

Davis: Yes, yes. There were about a fair number of those. Is that World War II or—

DePue: I've got three that I listed here.

Davis: Those are two conscientious objectors (laughs).

DePue: Yeah, that was one especially, World War II conscientious objectors.

Davis: That's because a mature man, retired, was very interested in this. He lived here, and he got interested in it. He went…I think he traveled on some of these. That was his great interest. I thought, Well, sure, if that's your interest. He did a nice job on them. But what other ones do we have?

DePue: There's one that dealt with the Sangamon Ordnance Plant in Illiopolis.

Davis: Yes. Sure, sure, by one of my students.

DePue: You mentioned already, the POW experiences of World War II.

Davis: Yes, right, yeah. I don't know; I may have interviewed one of the persons there; he was a nice guy. Is that under POW? Prisoners of War. Yeah, Glenn…Oh he entered…No, he was my student, a guy; he was in his seventies then. Glenn Kniss was himself a POW, so he knew these people. They tended to gather. He was just a sweet guy, and he took this very seriously and interviewed a fair number, more people than he needed to. I'm glad he did because they're pretty…Have you looked at some of those?

DePue: I have not.

Davis: Again, I don't want to judge their quality, but he worked very hard on that, long after the credit…He didn't care about the credit; he just wanted to do it.

DePue: One reason I bring this up… I know you're aware that I do a lot of veterans' interviews myself, but there's no group of citizens in the United States who have been interviewed more than World War II veterans. You can say the same thing to a lesser extent about the following war. What's the value of adding more interviews with veterans?

Davis: I guess it's a value judgment. I know there've been a lot of interviews. How many of them have been done according to really rigorous standards? A lot of these were encouraged as volunteer efforts through the State. The State's got some money to encourage this sort of thing. It was wonderful, and communities got involved, but I've never had a chance to really appraise the actual quality of these interviews because I don't think there was training for this; it was just kind of "do it." I believe I'm right about that.

DePue: You're talking about the 1,100 some that were done in the 1990s under the auspices of the Illinois State Library, I believe.

Davis: Oh, it was the state library, not the historical—

DePue: No, you're right.

Davis: I think it was the [Illinois] Historical Library; it still was. I haven't judged those. I thought it was a nice idea; it was overdue in many ways because we didn't do a lot of World War II stuff. In the seventies it was an important thing. We touched on it when it came up in an interview, but we didn't focus much, in particular, except that there was evidence, resistance (laughs). I welcomed that, but I never bothered finding out whether, in fact, these turned out to be terribly useful.

DePue: What do you think of the timing for doing interviews. Veterans are a good example of that. Politicians present their own challenges in that respect, but in veterans, is it better to get this veteran's recollections of the war five years after, or is it still okay to do it sixty years after?

Davis: I don't know. I have heard veterans tell me or their families tell me—World War II veterans and Vietnam—that they weren't prepared to talk about their experiences for a long, long time. It was only when there were national attention paid, like the World War II memorial in Washington and other army veterans' groups, that they kind of came out of hiding. I don't know if that's true, but I've heard them say that.

I guess they were traumatized, or it was an ugly experience for a lot of GIs in World War II. They fought like hell; some of them died; many were

injured, but their focus was on rebuilding their lives after the war and starting a family and getting a house. These were young GIs and they were…Also, they may have been through some really, really psychologically bruising subjects, and there wasn't the kind of assistance available that is today for such people. That would be an argument against doing the interviews too soon.

On the other hand, there's the argument that the closer someone is to the object of the event that happened, the likelier it is they will have a clear memory of it. I don't know how you deal with that. We didn't face it because we only inadvertently found some World War II survivors who talked about it and then had a couple of people—one of them a POW himself, the other a pacifist himself—who wanted to do those particular themes.

We certainly didn't discourage students from doing it, and some of them got references to their war time experience in the process. When I interviewed Wally Henderson recently…you remember we talked about that and the university's handling it. I don't whether it's better or as good as the one that your volunteer did. He talked a lot about his war time experience, and he seemed to enjoy it.

DePue: He enjoyed his war time experience?

Davis: He enjoyed talking about it. Rarely do people say (laughs)…But almost invariably, they say it did them a lot of good—that's my experience—and their comrades, they're emotionally attached to.

DePue: Now I'm kind of leading towards the end here and picking up a couple of these important projects that you dealt with politics. Besides those, are there others that stick with you?

Davis: I was involved for three or four years in something called the National Extension Homemakers Council, which sounds like a bureaucratic—

DePue: I'm glad you mentioned that because I don't think that's part of this collection here.

Davis: No, it isn't, but it is in the library here.

DePue: National—

Davis: Extension Homemakers Council. They got a big NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] grant, and a woman in southern Indiana was the promoter of this and the director. She asked me and Charles Morressey and one other oral historian to be paid consultants on the project. So, she went about doing it the right way. She had a fair amount of money, and she did that.

Our job was not to do the interviews themselves, but to train interviewers all over the country. We didn't travel to every state, but at national meetings…These National Extension Homemakers meetings could have 10,000 homemakers there. These are women in the home who were learning how to do their work and raise their children. It was kind of homemaking education. They would come to these meetings, and then we had time to train them, not adequately, but train them. Then they went out, all over the country. I had my doubts that this could really work from a one location hall, but it turns out some of these women took this **extremely** seriously.

My friend—whose name I've forgotten, in southern Indiana—worked tirelessly on it. They published about a dozen books, paperback books, about the harvesting season in northern Indiana, one-room schools in Ohio and things like that.[29] They're pretty interesting; they're basically extracts from memoirs. They produced a huge library of these, and they printed fifty-some copies of them and sent a complimentary set to every state library. I think in this state, it's held by the historical library.

DePue: It's held right here.

Davis: Right. You know that?

DePue: Yeah, it's upstairs.

Davis: Yeah, yeah. Hense, it's pretty extensive, as I recall.

DePue: In general, what you know about the project…First of all, when was the project conducted? Was it in the eighties?

Davis: I don't know. I abbreviated my resume years ago on when I did talks.

DePue: I think regardless, if it's seventies or eighties—

Davis: Eighties. It wasn't the seventies; it was the late eighties, I'm thinking, yes.

DePue: I think I just kind of need to say this, but to frame a question—

Davis: Sure, of course.

DePue: This is at a time in American history when women are experiencing a lot of changes themselves. The equal rights amendment was finally defeated in 1982, but it certainly didn't diminish the desire to see fundamental change in American society, and there was an element of the women's movement that demeaned the experiences of homemakers.

[29] Eleanor Arnold, ed., *Voices of American Homemakers (an oral history project of the National Extension Homemakers Council)* National Extension Homemakers Council; 1St Edition (1985)

Davis: Yes.

DePue: So, my question is, what was the presentation of this project?

Davis: Right. That's a great question. My recollection is, these were women who had been married to a farmer, grown up on a farm, loved being a farm mother and homemaker, and they were largely insulated from feminist influences. They were homemakers and proud of it because they worked hard to support their husbands and raise their kids. I don't recall this surfacing at their national meetings, particularly. This was just another part of America. This was urban America and high education America. These women were dedicated, interested and they conducted these…

Now that doesn't mean there may not have been some subjects that arose in that huge set of [interviews], where the woman said, "I got tired of doing this, and so I got a job in the city." That's quite possible. But, it was not an issue that arose to us. We would have sensed it because I was certainly a feminist, and Charlie Morressey was a feminist. If that feeling had arisen in any manifestation, we would have addressed it directly and said, "Look, this is fair game, and you ought to encourage it." But it didn't. They were…what do you call it? They just weren't part of that movement.

DePue: You think this was more of a celebration of being homemakers and that aspect of the culture of society?

Davis: I think so. By and large, there's a lot of complaint…There's a lot of bad stuff, tragedies, in this. But by and large, I think they felt very good about it. This may be a form of self-selection. If they belong to National Extension Homemakers and they go to their annual meetings, they're a part of the system. So, I think probably a lot of these interviews are favorably disposed towards their subjects.

In fact, we instructors talked about that. We didn't want to counter it; we thought that it was a limitation. But this, after all, was sponsored by the Extension Homemakers Council. Not that they were against getting candor, in fact they wanted candor, but the whole thing, invariably…The people who were interviewed and interviewed were part of the system. They went to their meetings, and they believed in it.

DePue: Let's get into the politics then.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: I think, before you got to Sangamon State and before you got into oral history, Adlai Stevenson was interviewed. That was sixty-seven to seventy-one. It might have been that it ended up in Columbia [University], maybe that you guys were the benefactors that Columbia was to pass them on.

Davis: Could be.

DePue: Nineteen seventy-five, Adlai Stevenson II—

Davis: The third.

DePue: …the third—you're right—would have been interviewed. Were you involved with that?

Davis: No. Someone in the library was. Wait a minute now; let me see. Don't we have an Adlai Stevenson project? [looking through records] No, yeah. Interviews by Kenneth Davis, he was a famous journalist. I'm a little surprised…and Walter Johnson. This was all part of the microfiche set we got from Columbia. I think we requested it of Columbia because Stevenson had worked here, and they were happy to send us that microfiche.

Then there's some others…wait a minute. I think [Richard] Graebel was…Well, these are not our interviews, though here's my student, Stephen Bean. [He] interviewed several people about Governor Adlai Stevenson, the second; that was Governor Stevenson. He was a Stevenson fan, and he interviewed three people.

DePue: So, that was Adlai Stevenson II that was interviewed in seventy-five.[30]

Davis: Governor and defeated presidential candidate.

DePue: Right. That gets us then to the point of what I think are some of the things you're most proud of in your collection, the political interviews. I shouldn't have said it that way.

Davis: No, that's true. I think it's fair.

DePue: How did it come to pass that you started to get into the political interviews because it's a bit of a movement away from doing history from the ground up?

Davis: Right. I was always anxious to grow the project. I don't know that politics was my decision, but I got to know a wonderful guy named Bill Day, who had worked for the State in the legislative research council [Illinois Legislative Council]—it was then called—for some years. Then in retirement, here in Springfield, he was named publisher of *Illinois Issues* magazine. I saw him frequently; he was a nice guy. Somehow, one day we got talking, and he said, "You know, there ought to…" I think it was his idea, not mine; I don't think I

[30] The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library has an extensive interview conducted with Adlai Stevenson III, covering his entire political career that was conducted in 2000. Both the audio cassette tapes and a transcript are available in the Library's AV Department. In 2014 Dr. Mark DePue interviewed Adlai Stevenson III about his gubernatorial races in 1982 and 1986, where he lost both races to Governor Jim Thompson. Those interviews are available at the Oral History website, under the *Governor Jim Thompson* project.

hustled him. He said, “There ought to be an oral history project about some of these fascinating senators and reps [representatives] who served.” Some people thought that was the golden age of the legislature. It certainly isn’t the golden age today (laughs), who knows? But there were certain figures who were considered great heroes. And he had contacts at the legislative research council because he’d formerly been its director.

He and I talked to one of the assistant directors, Gerry Gherardini. We floated this idea before him, and he thought it was kind of interesting. I remember him saying, “But Cullom, we work for the legislature; we can’t lobby for things. We can tell legislators that we would embrace doing this work, if they ask us, but we can’t initiate it.” Basically, they said, “You’ve got to do this, because Bill Day isn’t.”

So, I went to see my state reps. From there I learned who the chair was of the Senate Finance Committee, and I discovered there was a new state rep in the House who had been a social studies teacher. He was on the legislative research council advisory board. I met with him. He was a young guy, very nice, and he was excited about this. He thought it was great, but he had no clout. He was a freshman rep, but he was excited. So, gradually I got a toe-hold, but I met really difficult obstacles.

The chairman of the Senate Finance Committee never wanted to talk to me. I waited and waited and waited in his office many days, until I finally… He agreed to walk with me to the men’s room, where he had to urinate. (DePue laughs) That was when I made my pitch. So, it had to be four minutes.

Also, in the Senate, of course, the head of the legislative research council was your and my friend, Dawn Clarke Netsch, who was always so busy that, while she was a nice person, she really couldn’t focus on my mundane need. I liked her, admired her politically very much, but I didn’t think she was able to do much because she didn’t carry weight the way this Chicago guy did.

DePue: Would that be Howard Carroll?

Davis: Yes, thank you, Howard Carroll. She may have quietly put in a good word to him, I don’t know, but this plus the guy in the House, managed to talk to the legislative research council into submitting a bill for…I think the first year was $27,000, $25,000 to launch the Legislative Oral History Project. Lo and behold, in the midnight hours of the end of the session, it passed. I told you the story about how I was in the gallery, and this jerk down on the floor, who was a state rep said, “Oral history, oral history” and they all chortled; to them that was a dirty joke.

If I can continue, we got this modest grant. I had to hire a person or a person and a half, a typist and an interviewer. I'd had a graduate assistant named Horace Waggoner, who was a retired lieutenant colonel the air force, nice guy, but gruff voice, a chain smoker, lived down in Waggoner, Illinois, actually, (both laugh) same name. He was devoted. I had hired him to do this Shawneetown bank project that the Department of Conservation funded. He had done a fair job, though I learned that he was a pretty wooden interviewer. He had his outline, and unlike you, he wasn't able to do follow-up questions. But he worked his head off. He just was extremely conscientious, as you are.

So, I hired him for this project. Banks were one thing; politicians were another. But he did his best. I'm not proud of all of the interviews, but he did a respectable job, and he did the lion's share of the interviews.

DePue: I'm curious about this. I guess I've got my own motive; I would love to be able to convince the legislature to help us out by doing their own interviews. They have egos. Why wouldn't they be excited about having the opportunity to preserve their likeness?

Davis: I think that nowadays the attitude would be a little more receptive, except they're broke. Even though the expenditure here was tiny, it would be four times that now, at least. I just don't know; they don't seem to be particularly receptive to new ideas, though you know they're occurring, under the table or below the spotlight. It may be a great time, but you'd need to have a real friend in the museum, who says…I don't know who it would be—or on the board, on the agency's board—who would say, "Yes, go ahead and do it."

DePue: Well, I need to keep the focus on what was happening then.

Davis: I understand, of course, but that's just a little—

DePue: Was there some discussion going in, when you're trying to convince them to do it in the first place? What kind of legislature? What kind of stature you were looking for?

Davis: I was smart enough because I knew a little bit about what had happened in other states—not much, but a little bit. Not much had happened, but I had known about it—that we wanted it to be bi-partisan and that we wanted older people—preferably retired from the state house, I thought—that they might have a little more reflective quality, because when the legislature's in session…First of all, they hate Springfield. If they have to be here, they're busy constantly. I knew that, if they were legislators, I'd have to interview them in their hometowns anyway, and even then, they're pretty busy. So, I thought retired legislators would make sense.

DePue: Was that the main reason, just the timing?

Illinois General Assembly Oral History Program Advisory Committee, May 1980. Notation on reverse of photo states: Standing L-R: Bob Howard, Gerry Sherandion, Sam Gove, Don Holt, Dave Everson, Bill Day.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: How about their willingness to speak candidly?

Davis: I thought, out of office, they would be willing to speak candidly, more so, because in this system, the speaker has immense power. I thought the candor would be better. I also thought we needed to have as much geographic representation as we could, and of course, I put together a carefully selected advisory board, some retired journalists and Bill Day, the guy I mentioned, and a political scientist on the campus at the university. That may be it; I can't remember.

DePue: We talked about this before. How valuable is it to talk about things right after an event versus many years later? It just so happens that, in 1984, Bill Day interviewed you on this very subject. Do you not recall?

Davis: You're kidding. No. I interviewed him, or he interviewed me?

DePue: He interviewed you, and you talked at length about the establishment of this program.

Davis: That'll be more accurate.

DePue: Part of what was discussed was the importance of your being involved with the internship program going into this, as well.

Davis: I'd forgotten that. I had gotten to know people down at the legislative research council because I was a one-year director of the internship program. I had to meet with some of the chief legislative assistants, high employees, in the Republican and Democratic House and Senate staffs. That was a real advantage. I was known to those people, and I think liked. I'd forgotten totally about that, but that made a real difference.

DePue: Reading this and hearing you talk about it now…You mentioned the word hustler before; it sounds as though you really had to hustle for this.

Davis: Yeah, I did. It was demeaning in many ways, waiting in offices, yeah. I don't want to exaggerate it, but it was demeaning. It was hard to find a legislator who was really willing to talk to me about this. And the ones I knew I needed, the chairmen of the finance committees…I don't even remember who the head of the House Finance Committee was, but for some reason it was the Senate that was the more critical. I got it, but he got his pound of flesh.

DePue: What specifically did you use the money for?

Davis: I think I probably hired Horace Waggoner for about $12,000.

DePue: Was that for the yearly salary?

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: That was essentially it?

Davis: And then we got a half-time secretary for $5,000. I'm including whatever benefits there were. Well, it had to equal $25,000 or $20,000. It was very little, but in those days, it was…Horace was thrilled to get that money.

DePue: Were some travel expenses included in that?

Davis: Yes, we had to have a couple thousand dollars because he would drive his truck to these interviews, or occasionally both of us went to Chicago. There we had some hotel expenses but not a lot.

DePue: Another one—I don't want to confuse these—but the Illinois State Craft project?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Is that something distinct from the Illinois General Assembly Oral History project?

Davis: Yes, it is. It was a better label that I later thought of, but I think that was in connection with the executive branch.

DePue: This one's seventy-eight to eighty-five.

Davis: Yes, right. That was the executive branch, people who had worked for, or in a few cases been, state executives, right.[31]

DePue: I know one of them because I intend to interview him very soon; that's Ron Michaelson.[32]

Davis: Michaelson, right.

DePue: So, there are several in here in the Ogilvie administration. Are there others that you can recall?

Davis: Ogilvie in general; Degrassi was…No, it was Walker.

DePue: Howard Degrassi?

Davis: Yeah, Howard was a newspaper reporter, covering a lot of administrations. Emil, I think, was for [Gov. William] Stratton. [John] Kolbe was Ogilvie, [John W., Jr.] McCarter was Ogilvie, [Jeremiah] Marsh was Ogilvie, [Josephine] Oblinger actually was a state…She was also a director of the State Department of Aging, and I don't know which—

DePue: That would be Carl Oblinger's mother?

Davis: Right, exactly. I can't remember him. Ed Pree goes all the way back to Stratton, I think. Morris Scott was head of a tax payers federation, so he knew all these people. [Fred] Selcke, I think, goes back to Stratton. [George] Tagge was a crook (both laugh). He was a reporter, but he lobbied for the McCormick Convention Center. Reporters aren't supposed to lobby. He worked for the *Tribune*; the *Tribune* wanted it, and they, of course, wanted it named for Robert R. McCormick, publisher of the *Tribune*. Put two and two together…and Dan Walker, yeah.

DePue: Getting a former governor to sit down and talk, I would assume that's quite a coup?

Davis: He was more than willing, just as I think he still is. Ogilvie was impossible. I had all kinds of entrées to Ogilvie through the people I interviewed and some

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[31] *Guide to the Oral History Collection of the University of Illinois at Springfield*, Archives Special Collections. http://library.uis.edu/archives/collections/oral/contents.html (accessed August 22, 2014)

[32] Dr. Ronald Michaelson began his career in State government as an assistant to then Illinois Governor Richard Ogilvie. He spent the following several years teaching at Sangamon State University. In 1974 he returned the arena of State government to head the State Board of Elections, newly created to interpret election laws and coordinate procedures for holding elections. Dr. Michaelson became the board's first executive director, serving in that position for 29 years. (https://votesmart.org/public-statement/12719/ron-michaelson-29-years-at-the-illinois-state-board-of-elections#.XG3IT2eWzcs)

personal friends, particularly John McCarter, who was his budget bureau chief. All of them either called or wrote, encouraging Ogilvie to talk to me. I could never get past his gate-keepers; he had a formidable secretary. I never even could talk to him on the phone. [It] broke my heart because I admired him, but he just wasn't interested.

DePue: Do you know why?

Davis: It was a bitter defeat for him. I think…He **was** busy; he was running the Burlington Railroad or something like that.

DePue: The defeat in this case was 1972 when Dan Walker beat him.

Davis: Dan Walker, right. He may not have trusted academics; I don't know. But I did have all kinds of entrées that just didn't do any good. Now the trouble is, the entrées may have spoken to him but not his secretary. The word may not have gotten through to his secretary because she was the only person I could reach. I wrote letters to him too, but—

DePue: Were you **personally** intending to interview Ogilvie?

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: In retrospect, do you think that's one of the more valuable— of all of these political interviews—more valuable than some of the other parts of the collection? It was obviously prior to the coal mining series.

Davis: Yes, the coal mining ranks there because it's from people who, otherwise, their lives would not have been covered. So that is unique and colorful and important. And they had strong feelings about what they did. To be fair, I'd have to look at all these, but I think, probably yes. I would say the Illinois State Craft and the Legislative Oral History were the major…close to the major projects of the office.

This one has some interesting things; Inter-American Affairs, it's a little dry. But this is a student of mine who then, as I say, went all over the country getting those. The others are kind of hum-drum really.

DePue: By the time you're doing all these political interviews and others that you're sponsoring and doing these interviews, you're ten to fifteen years into the experience of being an oral historian.

Davis: Right.

DePue: That's about the timeframe that you are president of the Oral History Association. That happened in 1983 and eighty-four.

Davis: Yes, that's right. That's right.

DePue: How did that come to pass?

Davis: Well, it was a natural progression. I'd been on the council, which is an elective position; I'd been chairman of one of these colloquiums, which is a program. So, I'd been working my way up the ranks.

DePue: Is that something you aspired to?

Davis: Yeah, sure. But also, I found out I was very popular, so it was gratifying. I was vice president, which then made me next year's president. So, it came, and I worked very hard on that that year. My two allies on the program were Anne Ritchie and Don Ritchie, then not married. No, no, excuse me; Ann Ritchie and Terry Birdwhistell, excuse me again, because the meeting was in Lexington, Kentucky, and both of them lived there.

DePue: I assume Anne Ritchie was not Ritchie at the time.

Davis: No, her name was Anne Campbell. I'm sorry. I worked really hard, and there's no such thing as fax or…I wrote these long, laborious letters, typewritten on my old-fashioned manual office typewriter. They used to laugh about them. They'd get about three missives a week from me, saying, can we get this speaker? Can you get that speaker? I want to do this. I want to do that. They liked it because I was giving a lot of attention, but I was really…I wanted this to be special.

We changed the whole format of the annual meeting, which had always been called a workshop for two days, followed by a colloquium. I said, "We should integrate these. They shouldn't be separate things." So, we just did the annual meeting and integrated workshops throughout the whole period, and the same with subject choices. We really worked hard. We produced a program for that that was ten times better than the previous programs, more information in it. It was an extremely successful meeting. We had a lot of attendance, and we had sponsored events; we got sponsors to host nice receptions and all.

DePue: Do you remember the number of attendees roughly?

Davis: I think it was close to 500.

DePue: So, it had grown exponentially since when you first got on board.

Davis: Yes, yes, exactly. We knew it would be a high number because oral history was big stuff in Kentucky. There was an official state commission, and the universities were active. It was lucky for me we met in Lexington that year.

DePue: I know that today, much of it is oriented around the presentation of papers. Was that going on at the time?

Davis: Yes. Yes, it was.

DePue: But you mentioned workshops.

Davis: Oral workshops. Well they still do a lot of…there will be a Legal Issues Workshop and so forth, yeah.

DePue: Especially the first couple of days, they offer some workshops.

Davis: Yes. They still have some of those. If it's fund-raising, they may have that one later.

DePue: Any issues that were hot at the time?

Davis: Methodological issues or organizational issues?

DePue: Both.

Davis: One **fierce** organizational issue was conducting the vote for president at the annual meeting, which always occurred on Sunday. Some people who had to catch planes couldn't attend the meeting. Other people, who couldn't afford to go to the meeting but were members, couldn't vote. So, one pipsqueak, named Donald Ritchie, argued that this wasn't the right way to conduct an election for an organization, that it ought to be by mail vote. There were old-timers in the association—not I—who said, "That's sacrilege. Only people who show up should get to vote." Well, that's because they got their institutions to pay their way. A lot of people didn't.

DePue: I'm smiling here because you refer to somebody I know as "an old and dear friend" in an endearing term.

Davis: Yes, because that's the way they regarded him, an upstart. He was dead right, and fortunately that logic prevailed, but it was a big fight. It took a year for the association to agree to have mail ballots. [There were] issues like that. The issues between tape cassette and reel-to-reel, when I first joined it, those were big issues. The issues between transcription and some alternative to transcription were…These were all methodological issues.

DePue: What's an alternative to transcription?

Davis: One of the activists in the association developed a system where he could use the counter on a tape recorder to identify places in a tape where the subject is generally introduced. He would then produce a pretty fairly detailed index… not an index, a table of contents. It could be ten pages long for a tape recording, and you could fast-forward to where the meter said you should be for that to begin.

DePue: So, you wouldn't have to read the transcript; you could go right to the audio.

Davis: That's right. But it still was awkward, and it never really caught hold. Now, with CDs, there would be ways to index directly. It was an argument though. Some programs just didn't feel they could afford transcription. I understand that; it was hard for **us** to afford it. But that was settled. There were always issues.

DePue: Was there any discussion during your tenure as president or vice president about best practices?

Davis: We met at a series of meetings, the first one being at Wingspread, which is a conference center in southern Wisconsin, owned by the Johnson Company Foundation. They exist expressly to host small conferences of maybe twenty-five people for an organization to deal with an issue. We got the bid one year, expenses paid, to meet to talk about best practices or what we called rules & regulations…There's a publication.

DePue: They're referred to now as "best practices."

Davis: Yes. It previously had some other name; it doesn't matter. We met for three days or so and hammered out these details. I was very interested in that but not to the point that some people were. I didn't always argue over dotting an I, but there were serious arguments over ethical and procedural matters. I participated in those, and there have been subsequent changes to that, with the advent of video interviewing and so forth.

DePue: Was there concern at that time about the longevity of the tapes? You're talking about tapes versus reel-to-reel.

Davis: There always has been; there's always been a concern about that. We would try to get expert advice on that from archivists and even occasionally from some representative at one of the tape manufacturers, though they're, of course, going to give you reassuring comments. Even the national archives, I think, at one point advised us. We were given all sorts of advice that, if you keep reel-to-reel tapes, they're going to get brittle and difficult and hard to splice. Cassette tapes, little better shelf life, but you've got to rewind them every year, or there'll be bleed-through.

DePue: By the time you get to 1984, you're the owner of a lot of cassette tapes that go back fourteen years or more.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Was there concern that these things were slowly degrading?

Davis: Yes. We tested them. We dutifully rewound them every year. My secretary kept the stuff right by her then; she did other work, and she just rewound them.

DePue: Fast-forward or fast-rewind?

Davis: Yeah, yeah. That may have helped, but I've listened some in recent years where there has been bleed through of the signal on both sides. I think now they've all been converted to CDs.

DePue: Digitized in some sense.

Davis: Digitized, right, excuse me.

DePue: We've covered a lot of territory, but now we're getting to the really fun part, to talk about some of your contributions to the literature as well.

Davis: Oh, yeah (laughs), okay.

DePue: You were able to find some time to reflect on your professional experience?

Davis: Sure. Either because I was invited to give a talk, as I was at Baylor University, at a kind of prestigious panel. That meant expenses paid and even an honorarium.

Then the other one was because I had a colleague at the university here who was a professional gerontologist. She was hosting national conferences here on gerontology and asked me to give a talk. I had already begun reading some of the literature in gerontology about what they called "life review therapy." That was their term for it, life review therapy. I gave some thought to it, just as an oral historian. In my talk, I noted some interesting parallels and differences, which is the way you often do things like that.

That prompted my colleague to say, "Write this up, and we'll publish it," and so they did. I thought it had…For me, in my oral history field, I think I had one of the fresher, more original commentaries on life review therapy, among oral historians. It certainly was news to psychologists because they never thought about a field called history that was pertinent to them. It never got a lot of attention that I can remember, but I think it was fairly original.

DePue: The name of the book that this appeared in is *Values, Ethics and Aging (Frontiers in Aging Series)*, which was published in eighty-five, and your article is "Oral History: Accounts of Lives and Times." What were the similarities and differences you saw between what gerontologists are trying to do and what historians are trying to do?

Davis: Okay. One obvious similarity, both practices involve a professional interviewing an older person about their life experiences. The professional might be a case worker, might even be a nursing home administrator, but these are professionals, in one way or the other. So, the past is a focus of these—I don't really remember what was said, so I'll miss a few things

because I padded the similarities to some extent (laughs)—and that both of them find that older people like to reminisce.

Both oral historians and life review therapists—who do it for that reason—discover that older people enjoy, generally, the exercise of memory of their life experiences. It's positive; it's even maybe therapeutic, though oral historians rarely talked about that because it wasn't our business. But we did often note… I used to say…I think I said in my book that older people tend to respond positively to being interviewed.

DePue: Yeah, you certainly did.

Davis: And what other common causes? They don't have in common the preservation of the interview because there'd be no reason really for—in the nursing home—for life review therapy to be taped because it's not a psychiatrist trying to analyze a person. In fact, it's probably considered a privacy argument there, especially since they didn't have legal releases.

DePue: You used the terms in the article, "informant versus client."

Davis: (laughs) I'm always changing these. "Informant?" Yeah, that's technical jargon, I guess.

DePue: For what an oral historian is collecting?

Davis: Yes. Well, from the person being interviewed. And what did I call the other?

DePue: "Clients," that these people were clients of the gerontologist.

Davis: Oh. No, no, the informant is the person being interviewed. Did I talk about client as the—

DePue: That was the term you used for the relationship between the gerontologist and the person that's being interviewed.

Davis: Well that was a mis-, a misnomer. It's the—

DePue: I might have misstated what you have in here.

Davis: No, no. I'm sure you didn't.

DePue: One of the things that struck me in reading the article, that's so obvious that you don't necessarily think about it, gerontologists or sociologists, you're doing the interview, perhaps, to help them get beyond some of the issues.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: And in many cases, oral historians, by the nature of the craft, steer clear of some of those taboo issues.

Davis: Yes, exactly. I didn't think of doing that, but I did acknowledge that there was no doubt that, for the gerontologist, it was a therapeutic experience. I think I mentioned that oral historians have often discovered the joy that people take in reminiscing about their lives. But we weren't doing it for that reason; we were doing it for history's sake. They were doing it for welfare's sake or well-being's sake. Therefore, we were interested in the product; they were interested in the process. That meant, in our case, the product had to be something that could survive.

DePue: I wanted to share on record, what I think is a wonderful quote. You are quoting Ronald Blythe from his [*The View in Winter*,] *Reflections on Old Age.* You've already touched on this a couple of times. (reading) "It is the nature of old men and women to become their own confessors, poets, philosophers, apologists and story tellers."

Davis: That's wonderful; I didn't remember I had found that. That's great.

DePue: Yeah, I think that really encapsulates it.

Davis: Yes, it is; it is.

DePue: Now I'm going to read a rather lengthy quote that I thought represented well what you are stating in the article.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: (reading) "Our informants understand that our interest and inquisitiveness about them is genuine, not patronizing."

Davis: Ahh.

DePue: "We want to use them, and that is a gratifying discovery for them."

Davis: Yes. I think I said that, didn't I?

DePue: I'm reading this. I'm reading you directly.

Davis: Yes. Okay, right.

DePue: And this is…. If I can continue here, "Moreover, their memory is one possession they can generously share and yet still retain. Third, informants discover that their life experience has meaning, not only for themselves, but for countless others who may study and learn from it. The recognition that one's life story has meaning for untold generations to come can be a very rewarding sensation." And finally, "Informants perceive their oral history as a tangible legacy or a gift to their families and to posterity. In short, oral history imparts dignity, stature, self-respect, and significance to older persons."

Davis: Thank you. Yeah, I thought about all this, conceptually, and I'm pretty good about that sort of thing. I've thought of all these ways in which, really, our work is not condescending. We're actually asking them, as I put it, to do something for us, not "How can I do something for you?" The psychologist would take issue, but they are thinking that they're helping that person. So, I feel that's true, but I don't know that it's been picked up by others, particularly.

DePue: The way you've framed this, and I could be wrong here, I got the impression that this was a wonderful, serendipitous discovery on your part. You hadn't expected to stumble across this fact.

Davis: As I thought about it systematically, yeah, I guess I, at the time, felt that's a good a set of ideas. I haven't bothered reading what Donald Ritchie says about older people in his book.[33] He may parrot that or ignore it; I don't know. I haven't looked for the shelf life of those ideas (laughs) or if there is one. It doesn't matter. But I was proud of that; it's true. I didn't get a single letter about the article, no message from anyone saying, "Ouu, what a breakthrough." (both laugh)

DePue: I certainly appreciated it; I found it enjoyable.

Davis: Well good. Thank you; thank you.

DePue: I have to admit here, when we get to the next thing that I'm holding in my hands now, I really enjoyed reading **this** a few years ago, when I stumbled across it when I was searching the internet and, I think, looking for your name. I'm referring to what is known as—let me get the right name for this because it has a formal name and an informal name—*Success and Excess: Oral History at High Tide* [published 1988 by Baylor University]. It's also known as "Davis's Jeremiad."

Davis: That's right. The reviewer said that, and I think the reviewer was correct.

DePue: How did you come to write this?

Davis: Again, I'd been offered a stipend and travel money to attend a conference at which other speakers were among the respected leaders of our field. So, this was flattering. I knew the host would be very gracious because Baylor [University] always does that.

Then I decided what's important to me. I had been—I do this sort of thing—I had been cutting out clippings or other things kind of in a file of miscellanea. I got in the habit of looking at these literary magazines, and in the want ad section, I kept finding—in *New York Times* and others—these

[33] Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* Oxford University Press, 2d Ed. 2003. http://www.amazon.com/Doing-Oral-History-Donald-Ritchie/dp/0195154347 (accessed August 29, 2014)

inquiries, "For anyone who knew the author Tobias Wolff, please get in touch. I'm writing a book on Tobias Wolff."

I thought, Well, that's interesting. They're fishing for oral history about a particular thing. I collected these, and then it struck me as kind of amusing because they're not going to care about the methods of oral history or the good practices of oral history; they're just out to find a quote for their book, which is very different from creating an archive. That's when I got a little critical.

There were some other examples I guess—I can't remember—some other things that…Oh, I know, "We'll write your autobiography for you. Fill in the blanks, and we'll produce a nice leather-bound book." I made fun because some of these ads were, I thought, over the top for this sort of thing.

So, I was noting that oral history had become very popular in the popular mind, and therefore, as one would expect, I suppose, there were people who are trying to exploit it for their own commercial purposes.

DePue: This is kind of an aside here, but perhaps the most popular, most well-known oral historian at that time was Studs Terkel.[34]

Davis: Yes Alex Haley.[35]

DePue: Let's take Studs first. What did you think of Studs Terkel's work?

Davis: Oh, I enjoyed it, very much. I thought it didn't satisfy oral history standards of editing and authenticity because he simply was both author and collector. And the author combined with the collector has the liberty to do pretty much what they want with their tapes. They may even take liberty with a few words, but certainly they can extract something and use it in a way that serves their purpose. I have no quarrel with that; that's being an author. I haven't been an author…Well, I have used my own oral histories for books, but they haven't been the only source. In Studs' case, he knew these characters and, basically, he used, apparently, his interviews to write about them in their own words. I'd take him at his word. I think he was an ethical man, but who knows?

[34] Louis "Studs" Terkel was an American author, historian, actor, and broadcaster. He received the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1985 for *The Good War* and is best remembered for his oral histories of common Americans and for hosting a long-running radio show in Chicago. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Studs_Terkel)

[35] Alexander Murray Palmer Haley, a journalist, began thinking about the significance of this family lore when he started using tape recordings to prepare a biographical sketch of jazz trumpeter, Miles Davis and working on his book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. These strengthened his interest in oral history and turned his attention to the African heritage of American blacks. On a trip to Gambia he learned of very old men living in the back-country who were walking encyclopedias of local history. From interviews with such a man, Haley ultimately wrote his widely acclaimed book, *Roots,* an account of seven generations of his family. (https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/roots-by-alex-haley/)

DePue: He's not necessarily universally well-regarded in oral history circles, though.

Davis: No, I know that. There are—

DePue: Can you explain why?

Davis: Because of that, because he's combining the writing of history with the collecting of history. There's two very disparate roles.

DePue: Is that to say that he's not objective in his uses?

Davis: Of course not. He's not objective, right. He should be, but I don't expect him to be. He wants to write a good, popular book. He's not an…He wasn't an historian; he was a great entertainer, a great interviewer on air and entertainer. But I have no illusions about his stretching things for a good yarn.

DePue: I wonder if part of the dislike, or perhaps disdain—that might be too strong a word—that some oral historians had towards popular historians, like Studs Terkel, was that diminished them in the eyes of their fellow academicians?

Davis: No, I think it's envy. That's, maybe, the same argument. I think they probably are envious of someone who gets such attention and makes so much money from plying a craft, which they ply with more consistent attention to norms and good practices. Therefore, their, not resentment, but their distaste for this, as being just popular literature and not serious literature. That's snobbery, but also there's something to it. They're right; he took liberty with his material, I'm sure.

DePue: The other name that I hadn't even thought of, Alex Haley.

Davis: I just mentioned that.

DePue: Yeah.

Davis: Oh, yeah, yeah. Of course, it was partly autobiography, but a lot of oral history in it, sure. And he wrote a biography of Malcolm X, of course, which was based heavily on interviews. Listen, both Terkel and Alex Haley addressed meetings of the Oral History Association and were received with great fanfare, particularly Haley, just the year after his book came out, which was a sensation.

DePue: After *Roots* came out?

Davis: Yes. It was almost an…It was a subject that academics could really relate to, racial discrimination and racial anonymity. Studs also did subjects that appealed to historians, but none of them was a blockbuster like *Roots.* But he was a great success when he spoke. So, part of us is envious or snobbish

towards them; part of us loves to read them but doesn't necessarily take seriously what they say about the past.

DePue: Let's get back to "Davis's Jeremiad."

Davis: Yes.

DePue: I'm going to read a quote that you had early in this, under the headline, "Perils of Popularity" (Davis laughs). "Memory is not history. It can only be a source of history if it's examined, compared and interpreted." I think that's, in essence, is—at least that's what I take away—the essential issue you had with some of the faults in the way oral history was being practiced.

Davis: Yes, right.

DePue: You divided it up into three different abuses. The first one, you called "Instant History: Writing history that's overwhelmingly based on a collection of interviews, with little other source material."

Davis: I'm not sure instant history is the way we'd describe it, but it is; it's a sole source fault, yeah, I continue, though there are fascinating books of interviews, no doubt about it.

DePue: Studs Terkel would be a good example of that.

Davis: Yeah, of course. And there are others that are fascinating. But it doesn't mean you've got a judicious, balanced, comprehensive view of the subject.

DePue: The example you used was *Voices from Cooperstown*. Here you've got a—

Davis: Okay, right. There was a dreadful book on baseball.

DePue: Which you called, "It's not history but a scrapbook."

Davis: Yeah (laughs). It is.

DePue: The next category was what you labeled "Vanity History: Oral history done for a family or individual to preserve their immortality."

Davis: Yes. Those were the offers you'd get to produce an autobiography by a company, based on a shallow, usually a shallow, interview. These were not trained interviewers; these were hacks working for some company.

DePue: But you were getting offers yourself to do such things.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: What was your response in those cases.

Davis: I wasn't asked, but I had a response. I was doing it because I was a trained historian, and I asked hard questions, and I included everything that was in there. I didn't exclude things that were unfavorable to the person. I thought I did it honestly. I can't say the same for the people who were selling vanity history because you don't stroke vanity by including critical material.

DePue: Yeah, your criticism that you wrote from the article, "It represents a perversion of oral history's purpose. It surely compromises our commitment to honesty and candor."

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: And the last category you described as "Sensory History."

Davis: Oh god, did I throw that in too? (laughs)

DePue: I'll read the quote here, and kind of set you up—

Davis: It's a clever name I gave; it's Living History.

DePue: "Modern America's love affair with experiencing, re-enacting, and sensing the past, rather than carefully sifting and studying it, the seductive array of places and programs, goods and services that invite us to explore the past with our senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, rather than our minds."

Davis: That is kind of a snobbish view, a conservative view. But I don't have any illusions when I go through the [Abraham Lincoln] Presidential Museum that I'm living history. It's a superb museum, and it does a great job in verisimilitude. But it is a museum, and the people who created it had things they wanted to say, which may or may not be what you want to know about Lincoln. All these living history sites are fun—heck, I go to a lot of them—but I don't think they comprise history of enduring value.

DePue: Does this get us to the tension between public history and academic history? You didn't necessarily address it in this article, but I think the "Sensory History" does.

Davis: A lot of public historians are involved in institutions that do living history; that's true. But they do other things too; they do legal research; they do historical research for law firms; they write company histories, maybe favorably but maybe accurately. Public historians, many of them work for the government, and their job is to do a thorough job, if they're with the national park service or anything or with the armed forces.

They do the most professional job they can; they're supposed to. I don't think it's something I'd want to tar the entire public history field with, but it is true that a lot of public history consists of living history.

DePue: Is one of the challenges or problems of oral history, as a profession, that so many people think they can just dive in and do it, without much training or forethought into it?

Davis: I guess that was the point I was making. It seems denigrating toward enthusiasts, but I've tried in my work and career, even when I was trying to inspire people to do oral history, to urge them to read a textbook, to practice, that sort of thing. But it's a fine line. I've done some interviews, early in my career, which are pretty good, which were based on very little experience, some reading and some classes at workshops. I think my technique has improved, but…I have lost my track here now. I just feel that…The trouble is my mouth outpaces my mind.

DePue: That's because we've been at this for two and a half hours, and that's usually my limit for how long these things should be.

Davis: I was trying…Maybe I made the point in answering you. I hope so.

DePue: Absolutely. Would you still be proud to stand by what you had laid out here in "Davis's Jeremiad?"

Davis: I smile because I think the critic had a point. But actually, I was glad to do that. It seems to me it was kind of a clarion call that I thought was well suited because we were enjoying this relatively vast popularity. But we also were seeing—not in our own midst but—instances of abuse and manipulations that were inappropriate. So, yeah, I stand by it.

DePue: This got much more of a response than your article on gerontology.

Davis: Yes, it got a response, period. I don't remember any response from the gerontology (laughs). It was a jeremiad, and jeremiads will get responses. I also got a lot of very favorable remarks. I didn't save those, though I probably have them somewhere, but they weren't published as a review.

DePue: What was the feedback that you were getting then?

Davis: Somebody ought to do it; somebody had to do it, and you're on point. Not a lot of such comments, but some people wrote me, and the response at the meeting was very favorable.

DePue: Any criticism?

Davis: At the meeting, the moderator said, "Well, gee Davis, you're kind of picking on all these people." I said, "Well…" I forget the exact dialogue, but yeah, there was some questioning of whether I was over-reacting.

DePue: Would you agree that oral history is a form or a subset of public history?

Davis: I think it's a reasonable…Yes, for example, you can teach it in a public history program, sure, because it is a form of public history, even when it's taught in a university. You're reaching the public. Sure.

DePue: Can you discuss a little bit then about the tensions that exist between public history and academic history because you kind of straddled that fence as well?

Davis: Yeah, well they're pretty familiar, but much of the argument is focused on public history as a discipline to be recognized in the academy. It's always hard for any discipline that's new to be recognized. Oral history still isn't fully recognized. You won't find it taught at all the universities, like colonial history is taught, and public history even less so, except in public history programs.

In fact, public history consists of elements and skills. It's simply the broad description of those. It includes archives work; it includes genealogical research; it includes historical editing; it includes oral history and others. It is just a rubric or an umbrella for a number of practices that, together, have in common their public orientation or service. It hasn't gotten much attention in the academy, but there are plenty of universities where it's taught, but it's not universal by any means.

DePue: I've heard complaints among my own colleagues here that when they go back to their alma mater and the alma mater is trumpeting the successes of their graduates, those who have gone into the world of public history rather than academic history are not even listed.

Davis: I think their complaints are understandable.

DePue: What is it that the academicians…Why do they disrespect or ignore, perhaps—

Davis: They don't bother really looking into the kind of work that prominent public historians have done, which is creditable work. And they're a little snobbish about how the university ought to be the beginning and end of all research, and this acts as if it's somehow the cornerstone or sidewalk activity. You know, it's snobbery, I think. They don't have some sense that they have an obligation to the public. They have an obligation to historical truth, so they just don't buy the premise.

DePue: Have you experienced some of that yourself? Do you have any anecdotes to tell me?

Davis: Oh, sure, sure. I remember arguments with a few friends I subsequently made at the University of Illinois about why they don't have any public history courses. The two that I spoke to said, "Well, you know, that's for other places to do. That's for places like Sangamon State and Eastern Illinois University to do," in other words, inferior institutions. Why argue it? They just have a

narrower sense and a strictly academic sense and the monk sense. Public history is kind of going public, just like oral history involves conversation. And the monk view of historical research is pretty deeply engraved.

DePue: The next thing, the next controversy or issue that I think oral history is wrestling with right now—I tried to distill it into the fewest words—let's call it academic versus activist oral history.

Davis: Oh, yeah, yeah. I tend toward the conservative end of that question.

DePue: Can you kind of lay out the parameters of that discussion?

Davis: Well, yes. It's whether there is the possibility of some absolute truths in history or all history is relative and, therefore, whatever you want to say that suits your political agenda…There are people who believe that all history is the reflection of the author's biases, whether they recognize it or not. I will admit that that's true in many cases, but I still hold to an ideal of bias-free history. I don't think history should be an instrument in some larger social campaign. I don't think you should use history as a weapon or an instrument for action. I never accepted that; it was argued in the sixties very widely. I just have a somewhat more conservative view of history's uses. I think it's for illumination, discovery, but not to motivate action.

DePue: Where is the oral history community today on this issue?

Davis: I think it's divided deeply. The lion's share may be on the activist's side. If you go to the meetings, many of the sessions are activist related, whether it has to do with gender history, women's history, ethnic history, social history, economic history. There's an agenda in most of those. I have an agenda too, I guess, but I'm not conscious of it, and I try to refrain from pushing it when I'm speaking to a general audience. That's where I draw the line.

DePue: Is that one of your, uh, well, never mind. (Davis laughs) How strongly do you hold your concerns about that trend?

Davis: Oh, it's troubled me. It has weakened somewhat my interest in attending oral history meetings. But the same is true of the Organization of American Historians, and most of their sessions are agenda-based. Yeah, it troubles me, but I still love doing history. Going to meetings is just one thing to do; you don't have to do that.

DePue: Are there any other issues or controversies that are animating oral history discussions today?

Davis: There are methodological ones over video history. There's not a controversy over digitalization, but there was for a while. I don't know why; it was an obvious step.

DePue: There is a school that insists that you want to preserve the voice, but they're reluctant to embrace the visual aspects as well. Part of that is a logistical question.

Davis: Yes, and a mood question too.

DePue: A mood question?

Davis: Mood. I worry, even with people who have been familiar with television technology for years, the intrusion of a camera operator and their self-consciousness of being interviewed on tape can inhibit, to some extent. I may be mistaken; I haven't said they do inhibit, but I think they can.

DePue: We have been at this for a while. Do you have any conclusions, in terms of your experiences as an oral historian?

Davis: Let me just say [something] about both aspects of my career that you've covered, Sangamon State/UIS and oral history. I look back on those two adventures as adventures and two that were never part of my destiny (laughs). It was just timing and luck, but I have immensely enjoyed both of them. They have rewarded me far beyond anything that I've contributed to them.

I have been very happy in retirement because I've felt that I had done honest work in an institution and in a field which I had the right aptitude for. So, I flourished in those environments. It was total chance; I can't explain it. I had the kind of personality that would perhaps have been susceptible to oral history. But the actual occurrence need never had appeared, if I'd stayed at Indiana University. Who knows? But I'm grateful for those opportunities. Is that fate? It's a little hard to believe it's fate.

DePue: Fate along with a lot of perseverance, some skill applied?

Davis: Energy. I don't know how much I persevered, but I did get enthusiastic. I certainly was energized by what I enjoyed about them.

DePue: This has been a very enjoyable and very useful conversation to me as a practicing oral historian. I thank you very much. In the next chapter, we're going to deal with Abraham Lincoln.

Davis: (laughs) Well, thank you very much, Mark. I think enough… I won't say enough has been said about Abraham Lincoln. But this covered my career, and I really enjoyed doing it very much. Thank you.

(end of transcript #3)

Interview with Cullom Davis
HS-A-L-2011-037
Interview # 4: October 12, 2011
Interviewer: Mark DePue

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Wednesday, October 12, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I have my fourth and, we think, final session with Professor Cullom Davis. Good afternoon.

Davis: It'll be a tragedy to see the end of this, but thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

DePue: Today's subject is the Lincoln Legal Papers and your experience with Abraham Lincoln. For this subject, it's kind of like "inside baseball."

Davis: Okay.

DePue: It's inside IHPA. IHPA being the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, which is where I work. The library and the museum are a part of that. So, it's going to be fun for me. I know that you've been candid all the way through, so I'm looking forward to this discussion as well.

Davis: Yes. I hope not to be libelous, but I want to be candid.

DePue: (laughs) Yeah, that's something that we have to worry about sometimes in oral history, but I'm sure that's not a concern for us today.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: What I want to start with, is how did you first get interested in Illinois history and then Abraham Lincoln?

Davis: When I accepted the job offer to come, toward the end of 1969, the furthest thing from my mind was being close to doing local history, which wasn't really on my general professional radar screen and/or Abraham Lincoln, also. It didn't register. There were other issues; I've talked about them, but I didn't come here thinking that this would be a chance to do local history or oral history or Lincoln.

But, like all newcomers, I and my family visited the Lincoln sites. I hadn't read much of the literature on Lincoln, except a little bit in college, but a friend arranged an NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] grant to the university in about 1974, I'm guessing, called the Lincoln Sites Project. He got a fair chunk of money. His name was Kendall…the last name, Kendall. He got a fair chunk of money—I don't remember the amount, but it was probably in the high hundred thousands—to examine, research, and then rehab or create visitors' literature for certain Lincoln sites and also several audio-visual programs.

Studio portrait of Cullom Davis, circa 1990 (age 55). This picture was taken to be the representative photo for the Lincoln Legal Papers project.

The sites chosen were New Salem; the Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices, a private site then; the Lincoln Depot, then and still a private site; the Old State Capitol, a newly restored, historic site; and the Lincoln home, which then was still a State historic site. I think I'm right about those. Kendall asked me to direct the project. I had just stopped being assistant vice president or something, and I wasn't, to be honest, that interested in Lincoln, as a preoccupation for the next three or four years.

DePue: Then why did he ask you?

Davis: Because he…There weren't a lot of us in the university then (laughs). He had seen me as an administrator and thought I was good at that, and he had seen me in the oral history job, raising soft money. That may also have been a factor. And I had some—no, I didn't have national stature—but I had some reputation. There were others in my department, but they didn't, according to Kendall, have the moxie that I had.

I turned him down, I think wisely because it just didn't appeal to me. As good as the idea was, and how willing I was to participate, I didn't want to lead the effort. So, a good friend, Charles Strozier, much younger, new to the field, and really a specialist in psychological history—

DePue: What they call psycho-history?

Davis: Psycho-history, right, and Polish history. (DePue laughs) …took the job. But he had already decided that he was interested in Lincoln from a historical and psychiatric perspective. So, he was thinking about a biography of Lincoln. He took the job and had a lot of energy that, at that point, I lacked. So, he ran it.

But I did agree to host some of the visiting scholars, who were part of the program. I then agreed, when the whole program ended with new audio-visual programs in three of those five sites and a shelf of six pamphlets on all of them, actually a slip-case with pamphlets on each of the sites, well-written and, I thought, pretty attractive, more than just a simple handout brochure. I did agree to oversee some papers that had been delivered by visiting scholars, at our invitation, on aspects of Lincoln's life, public as well as marital and private and legal. There were probably fifteen such papers.

So, it was my job, after the conference was over, to sort through those, with a few co-editors, decide on which ones we would select for a book. We had a tentative contract with the Southern Illinois University Press. It was a little ticklish because all of the scholars who visited were people of high stature and yet we knew we couldn't include all of them. So, it was a little awkward, delicate, I should say, because they had egos, naturally. So, I was the fall-guy, and I made recommendations to narrow the list down to six plus my introduction. Because we developed a theme called, "The Public and The Private Lincoln." Three of the articles or essays, chapters were about Lincoln's public policies; the others were about his private life. So, I shepherded that effort. I wrote a preface, or rather an introduction, and copy-edited it and saw that through the publication.

So, I was among three people listed as co-editors. But publishers, of course, don't want to have a lot of co-editors names; they always chose the one, alphabetically, that comes first, unless there's some other pecking order. So, it ended up being Davis, et al., (laughs) editors, which infuriated my colleagues. I don't blame them; it wasn't deliberate. I just had the good fortune of having the first surname in the alphabet.

DePue: I thought I had this thing printed out. That's what you saw me looking for. I think you've got the book in here.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: I wanted you to read the first paragraph.

Davis: All right, of my essay?

DePue: Yeah. I think I've got this right. I hope I didn't mess it up. I've got it tagged there, okay.

Davis: Yes. Let me make sure. Yes, there were three articles on politics and war and three on Lincoln and then also two more on economic matters. Okay, the first paragraph.

DePue: Yes.

Davis: [reading] "Each generation of Americans must come to terms with the commanding figure of Abraham Lincoln. Not only has Lincoln become a man for all seasons, parties and causes, but his life and example seem to speak with pointed clarity to the needs and issues of each era. The Lincoln ideal offers national unity in times of discord, political acumen in periods of stalemate, compassion and justice in an age of oppression, and vision in times of doubt."

DePue: That was written in 1979, at least that's when it was published.

Davis: [When] it was published; it was probably written in seventy-eight.

DePue: Is that any less true today about Abraham Lincoln?

Davis: No, and I don't claim that…I didn't plagiarize it, but these ideas have floated around for some time. I simply put them in pretty good English. But it's every bit as accurate today as it was then.

DePue: There's something else that you wrote a little bit farther down. I'll read this part.

Davis: All right.

DePue: This is your quote [reading], "Lincoln's private and family life and his personal relations with other people are a subject that has been the victim of both neglect and mythology." And then you offer that you had mentioned already that psycho-history is this, women's history, minorities group "offer a healthy antidote." Is that still true, the neglect that these areas have had on this?

Davis: No. No, although scholars will say there's more to do, but that gap in his private and family life has been **largely** filled with some excellent and some not so good books. Not that we instigated that, far from it, but that has been corrected.

DePue: I'll just make an aside here, but I've been fascinated over the last several years that it seems like every president or presidential candidate has to get his measure against Abraham Lincoln, as well.

Davis: I think at some time or other, in some way or other, that's true. It's a tough comparison.

DePue: And I suppose it's no accident that Barack Obama decides to have a couple of his important events right here, on the steps of the Old State Capitol.

Davis: None at all. And I can't claim to have been his consultant on that (both laugh). But he was canny enough to know that every generation and every presidential candidate has to come to terms with Lincoln. Now, [there's] one interesting observation I would make about this; I was dividing—and the book title suggested it—the public and the private Lincoln.

Ironically, when I got involved seriously in Lincoln work, I began talking about the **three** sides of Lincoln, the private, the public and the professional, talking about his law practice. That hadn't occurred to me in 1978. I would have agreed maybe, but I didn't know anything about his law practice at the time. It's funny because then I used that same sort of trip type [types of trips] later.

DePue: We'll have plenty of opportunity to talk about that a little bit farther into this. I know that also in 1979, you co-authored the book, *Bench and Bar on Illinois Frontier*.

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: How much did that have to do with Abraham Lincoln in particular?

Davis: Not a lot. It was essentially a reader's guide and a study and a packet of documents for students in a new course I had introduced called "The History of American Law." I got interested, intellectually, in American legal history. At the university, which was always encouraging new initiatives, that appealed to me, plus there was a new legal studies program. They really wanted some humanists, like historians and philosophers and English scholars, to offer courses that pertained in some way to law.

Well, my history of American law became a staple of that legal studies program, as well as in history. In preparing that, I realized that there was a goldmine of sources on early-American law in our own archives at the university, in the form of the Illinois Regional Archives Depository program or IRAD because Sangamon State, now UIS, is the depository for the county and municipal records of some, maybe fifteen or sixteen surrounding counties. There were records there, including some stuff on Lincoln, but also other legal cases. I thought this would be great fodder for students to mess around with original documents. That's why I put it together.

DePue: We are talking about things that you're writing or editing ten years before you moved to this new project. In the interim, those ten years, were there other things that you're doing that were Lincoln related?

Davis: In a negative way, yes. I remember editing a series of local history publications that had, as its mission statement, something I wrote, which was that there's more to Springfield history than Abraham Lincoln. I pointed out there are minorities; there are women; there's ethnics; there's working history, and we've been too obsessed with Abraham Lincoln (laughs).

DePue: Well, this fits perfectly into your task of doing oral histories, because you're filling those gaps.

Davis: Yes, exactly. That was part of my shtick then. I didn't mean to be unkind to Lincoln, but I just felt there's other stuff here. I was not the anti-Lincoln, but I was in addition to Lincoln.

DePue: There's one other thing here, and this comes right about the time you're going to make this move. The "Illinois Crossroads and Cross-section," which you wrote for *Heart Land*: *Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States,* came out in 1988. I'm assuming eighty-six or eighty-seven, you started working on this?

Davis: Yes, right, um-hmm.

DePue: How did you come to be involved with that?

Davis: An old acquaintance of…former acquaintance, nice guy, Jim Madison, was the editor of this intended series. I had been teaching a course on the American middle west, loved teaching it. I had people read some poetry by Illinois authors and fiction. It was just a fun, kind of American studies kind of course here. Somehow, he must have heard about that, and he wrote me, inviting me to write the Illinois chapter for this book. I liked him a lot, and while I had never thought of doing that, because I really didn't consider myself a specialist in Illinois history, I accepted it. It turned out to be a grueling job for me because I don't easily adapt to a writing regimen. But I had ideas, and those were ones that I felt comfortable exploring in what was, after all, an impressionistic essay.

DePue: That was what really struck me. This is by no means your typical, chronological approach to Illinois history.

Davis: Right.

DePue: Was that—

Davis: That was deliberate, and I had the sanction to do that. These, obviously, were interpretive essays. Some of them took a strictly chronological approach. Jim Madison never told me that, but I think he was intrigued by my approach and found my ideas original. I felt pretty good about them too. Also, he was not allowed by the publisher to have all these essays end-noted or footnoted. We

could only mention a few sources, at the end. So, I knew this was impressionistic because I wasn't going to be able to cite everything.

DePue: I wonder if you can give just a little flavor of the impressionistic style by talking about your comments on Illinois architecture and Illinois landscape.

Davis: Yes. I had read enough books about Illinois in teaching this course on the middle-west, and I knew enough about the history of the middle-west and all about the northwest ordinance and the grid system of land measurement that I began to see a parallel between some of the building concepts that originated in the middle-west, like the courthouse square and log cabins, and what are the… balloon frame, Chicago construction homes, and even Frank Lloyd Wright's designs, which were low profile but very linear, rectilinear.[36]

I began seeing that correlation. It's probably fantasy on my part, but I used a couple of sources that gave it a little bit of oomph. One was Governor Adlai Stevenson's welcome to the Chicago national convention, the 1952 convention in Chicago [The 1952 Democratic National Convention], which turned out, later, to nominate him for the presidency. But his welcoming speech as governor was a wonderful phrase about, here in the middle-west, we can see far in all directions and of the open horizons. It was a typically Stevenson idea statement, but I seized on it as another example. Then I found poetry that supported this, and I probably stretched things a little bit. A literalist would probably take some issue with my views. But since they were, after all, exploratory, I felt I had that sanction.

DePue: What I can tell you, Cullom, is it spoke to me—

Davis: Well good.

DePue: …The discussion about the surveying of the land, and it's all linear, rectilinear—

Davis: Absolutely.

DePue: …Frank Lloyd Wright, the Chicago skyscrapers that are going straight up in the sky—

Davis: Yep.

DePue: It all spoke in that respect.

[36] Balloon framing makes use of many lightweight wall members called studs rather than fewer, heavier supports called posts; balloon framing components are nailed together rather than fitted using joinery. The studs in a balloon frame extend two stories from sill to plate.
(https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Framing_(construction))

Davis: Well, thank you. Yeah, I still think there's something there. It's not the sort of thing, I don't think, you can demonstrate conclusively. But impressionistically and even logically, I think there's a basis for it.

DePue: It certainly would fit into the themes and the concept that Frank Lloyd Wright personally would be pursuing.

Davis: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, good. It's nice to know I have one convert. (DePue laughs) or agree-er. Actually, the chapter got some favorable attention, but not a lot. My correspondence was probably ten letters or something (laughs).

DePue: Let's go back to this course on law, the history of law. You said you were drawn to that. How much legal training did you have?

Davis: None, none. But I was interested in intellectual history, and I quickly learned that the history of American law is highly abstract. It deals with common law concepts, which are pretty tough to understand and explain. But it had a certain fascination to me because several books I read pointed out that American law is a reflection of American values. I thought, Well, as an American studies specialist, I like when things like our education system or our legal system reflect our values.

So, I decided I would tackle that, plus friends who encouraged me because they were starting a new legal studies program, which, by the way, had some of our best students at the university. These were legal studies students; a lot of them hoped to become lawyers; some did, most of them became…what do you call it? Legal assistants, but they did it, or they just used it as the basis for some other professional degree.

DePue: Did some of them get into State politics as well?

Davis: Yes. I can't cite names…Well, yes. Who's the guy who's the head of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce? Doug Whitley, he was a legal studies student of mine, for example. He went on to become a lobbyist, and now he's the president of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, which is a high-profile job.

DePue: For the next couple of questions I'll ask you, you have to kind of remove yourself personally, but I wanted you to lay out the background for the Lincoln Legal Papers project.

Davis: Okay. I'm not out of it altogether because I, at that time, was a very active member of the Abraham Lincoln Association.

DePue: That that was created in 1908, I believe.

Davis: Yes. But it died a few times and then was reincarnated in the seventies, and I quickly was asked to join the board. Among the things that some of our board

members felt was Lincoln unfinished business were the legal papers. Jim Hickey, in particular, who at the time was the curator of the Lincoln collection, here at the library…Jim Hickey, you've heard the name?

DePue: He would have been at the Illinois State Historical Library at the time?

Davis: Yes, excuse me, yes, but curator of the Lincoln collection, that's right. He was not Illinois State Historian, of course, that would become a later title for Tom Schwartz. But Hickey knew enough about Lincoln to feel that this was unfinished business, and he had made a habit, in his job as curator, to collect random legal papers that crossed his desk. So, he had a file of things. He promoted it, and the Abraham Lincoln Association promoted it. They had been a sponsor of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, published in 1953 in some nine volumes.

But as good as that collection was, the chief editor and his associates, I think, lost energy and money and decided, at the last moment, to leave out the legal papers, except for a few that were of strikingly major importance.

DePue: This was Roy Basler?

Davis: Roy Basler, right.

DePue: A lot of this is going to be, for people like myself who are looking from the outside in, trying to figure out the difference between the collected works and the Lincoln Legal Papers and what we're doing now, the Papers—

Davis: The Papers of Abraham Lincoln. The collected works was writings by Lincoln, writings **by** him, not **to** him, or answers to **his** letters, but **his** writings and speeches, to the extent that reliable copies survived. But they excluded—and they explain that in the preface—the legal documents because, I think, their judgment was it's a **huge** addition. We don't have the time or money to really do a thorough job, and so, since those documents don't necessarily reflect the flavor of Lincoln—because he was having to write according to certain professional legal rules of writing—I think they decided it just was beyond their scope. They were desperate to finish, after many years, and they said, "We'll leave it for future generations to embark."

Jim Hickey and others—and I became one of them—began arguing that the Abraham Lincoln Association should encourage this effort. We did, but not with particular effect. But, Governor James Thompson, himself a lawyer and a Lincoln collector, somehow, maybe through Jim Hickey, who had a way of ingratiating himself—and I mean that generously—with Illinois governors, maybe because of Hickey, Thompson embraced the idea and said, "Yes, this is something the State should sponsor."

So, in 1985, to some fanfare, Thompson announced, not the Lincoln Legal Papers, the Lincoln Legals, they called it then, the Lincoln Legals,

which always kind of grated on me, but it was a shorthand way of starting this. The State appropriated the munificent sum of something like $85,000 to do this, which gave him enough money to try to find a full-time director.

DePue: Eighty-five thousand, at that time that's a lot more money than today—

Davis: But still—

DePue: Did they envision a multi-year project or something that was much more significant?

Davis: They didn't really think about it, except the assumption, as with any State appropriation, you'll keep getting it. I assume. You never say that bluntly, but that was probably the assumption. But it still was a very small…It did not provide for clerical help; it provided for a salary, not a particularly huge one, and benefits.

They also, though, assigned to the project one of their own patronage employees, Bill Beard, because he had a master's in history and was working on a Ph.D. at Louisiana State University. Bill had gotten a job through his uncle, Senator [John] Davidson. He got the job with the agency, so someone with the agency—probably the then director, Michael Devine—to assign Bill Beard to that project, not as director. They wanted someone of more seasoning and stature than Bill. But, he was an enthusiast, and he took it and worked as best he could, alone. (laughs) They hired an outside director.

DePue: Who's they?

Davis: The agency, really…trustees of the agency, under the then director, who was Michael Devine.

DePue: Are we talking about Illinois Historic Preservation Agency?

Davis: No, the State Historical Library; I'm sorry. They weren't merged. I forget the year they were merged, but—

DePue: This is very much going to become an institutional history as well.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: You clench your teeth when I say that.

Davis: Well, no, no because I can't remember. I was party to some of the discussions. I can't remember exactly when this merger, if you want to call it, occurred.

DePue: I think that was in eighty-five when IHPA was created; that's what I've been told.

Davis: Okay, that figures because that same year…and there were talks and meetings. I attended a few, not at a high level but just as an interested person. Out of that, at that point, Michael Devine inherited the job of director of the agency, though he had already crossed swords, to some extent, with the chairwoman of the board of trustees.

DePue: Now, director of the agency. The agency now would be—

Davis: The Historic Preservation Agency. He was the director, but he got in trouble with Julie Cellini and also with Frank Mason because he—you'll have to decide whether to include this stuff or not—because he was uncomfortable with patronage appointments. He went along to some extent, but he felt, for critical work, it should be merit.

DePue: I did want to ask you…Bill Beard, you mentioned that was a patronage appointment, Republican or Democrat?

Davis: Yeah. Republican, Doc Davidson was a Republican state senator here. Bill is a bright guy, and he had a master's in history, so, believe me, he was a godsend to me, but I'm jumping ahead. He was my only colleague (laughs) and a good one.

They hired this one person; I can't think of his name. He was a prominent historian, had taught at…what is it, Hanover College in Indiana or something? Curtis, Jim Curtis, great personality, had social friends in Springfield, came from a pretty high-ranking Illinois family socially. He was recruited and selected and hired, but he then stated his terms, which were that he would not spend summers here. He had a summer home in Michigan, and he would spend summers in Michigan.

They said, "Well, okay." From then on, it was kind of downhill. I liked him; I knew him. But he was pretty demanding of things, and he and Michael Devine quickly were at war, finally to the point that Devine locked him out of the office and notified him—with the cooperation of an advisory board and the trustees—that he had been terminated. He was spending a lot of time away from Springfield, for one thing, not only summers but otherwise. Am I jumping ahead too much here?

DePue: No, no, go right ahead.

Davis: This was after one year. So, in 1986, in a hurry, Mike Devine needed a director because this thing had been announced with some ballyhoo. They had a little bit of money, and they needed somebody to supervise Bill Beard. So, Mike Devine asked Roger Bridges, who then was director of the historical library or the chief librarian—I forget the title, but, you know what I mean—to act as the acting director.

DePue: He had both titles then?

Davis: Yes, I don't know to what extent he was allowed to transfer some of his library duties, but he was probably a reluctant director. Though he believed in the project, this was not his strength, building bridges and building credibility and raising money; these were not strong suits of his.

DePue: Let's take a short digression and talk about geography. Where was IHPA [Illinois Historic Preservation Agency]? Where were the initial locations of the legal papers?

Davis: The IHPA was headquartered in the Old State Capitol, lower level, though there was some space, at some point, over in the old Journal Register [J-R] building, for the business and the historic sites personnel who'd been transferred from the department of…No, Division of Historic Sites of the Conservation Department.

DePue: So, the J-R building's down Sixth Street from the Old State Capitol?

Davis: Yes, it is.

DePue: For somebody who is listening fifty years from now, Cullom, you might want to elaborate a little bit more, when you say, "In the Old State Capitol."

Davis: Okay. The lower levels of the Old State Capitol consisted of several banks of low ceiling stacks and then some office space or work space. What had happened in there previous to 1985…Well, the historical library had a reference room down there and also the director, the director of the agency, had an office there and some of the other personnel of the agency did. So, it was filled.

DePue: And that's another project, the renovation of the Old State Capitol…I just wanted to get this in here.

Davis: Sure.

DePue: That was one of the projects of the Abraham Lincoln Association, wasn't it?

Davis: That was in the…not the reno…Well, maybe a little bit to the…It was mostly furnishing, I think.

DePue: But what I'm talking about is that, obviously, when they took the building apart, piece by piece, they dug the huge hole. That was going on in the sixties, I believe.

Davis: Yes. The Abraham Lincoln Association didn't exist at the beginning of that, but it was reformed, after a dormant period, in order to raise money to help equip or really furnish the restored Old State Capitol. Some of the wood furniture there is…I don't think they paid the capital, any of the capital. They didn't have that kind of money.

DePue: Sorry for the digression there.

Davis: No, that's okay; that's good. In fact, it was a blessing because that was a spur to reconceive and to reform the Abraham Lincoln Association [ALA], which since then has been prospering pretty well. I think they were exhausted after the collected works came out. Their funds were depleted, and there was some bad leadership, I guess. So, in the sixties, at some point, the ALA just folded its tent and gave up.

Davis: All right. We're talking space, and I think we've covered that.

There probably was some other rented space downtown, but, of course, not in the Union Station; that was far to the future. I think maybe they rented a little bit of space over on South Sixth Street, close to Maldaner's [Restaurant], but I'm not sure.

DePue: I have been told that they also, at one time, had some space in the Lincoln-Herndon law office?

Davis: Yes. I'm sorry, yes. Other than the historic facilities, there was some office space. There was an attic office on the third floor, which became, for me, the office of the Lincoln Legal Papers, reached only by a long, direct stairway.

DePue: Before you got there, what was the objective of the project? What was the goal?

Davis: I don't remember a lot of founding documents. Basically, it was to publish Lincoln's legal papers. It wasn't necessarily going to be a search because the assumption widely [held] was that Basler and all had found, or Hickey, had found all of the traces of Lincoln's work in the courthouses.

DePue: I was talking to somebody else, who has a few years on me. Her memory was that about this time, there was this large cache of Lincoln documents that were discovered in the basement of the courthouse someplace. Do you recall that?

Davis: I don't. We found the legal papers, large quantities, but…You mean here in Sangamon County maybe?

DePue: No, it was someplace else in a courthouse. Well, you're answering the question; if you're not remembering it, then it didn't have a lot to do with the initial launching of the project in the first place.

Davis: No, no. That was really a gubernatorial initiative, probably Jim Hickey and the ALA.

DePue: So, when you say that this was about collecting and publishing the Lincoln legal papers, what does that mean?

Davis: Not collecting, publishing.

DePue: Publishing.

Davis: The question of collecting was one that was left open, whether it's worth it to retrace the steps of Basler, a man we all admired for a great job. Even Roger, I think—I don't want to misquote—I think even Roger felt that it should not be necessary to revisit the counties. This could have been like a four- or five-year project.

DePue: I guess my question then is, what falls under the rubric of Lincoln's legal papers?

Davis: That, again, was definitional. Basler and his colleagues had felt a Lincoln legal document is only a legal document, signed by Lincoln, which is logical enough; that's true for other papers collections. But it totally ignores the nature of law practice. If Lincoln is involved in a case and writes a plea or other things, you can't understand that plea, standing alone; you have to understand the clerk's notes and the docket books, the opposing counsel's arguments, the jury instructions. You've got to know all of the case file for a given case. And if there is no such thing as a case file, you've got to recreate it somehow.

Not many people appreciated that, but lawyers did. We had some lawyers here in town who were active in the Abraham Lincoln Association, who readily understood that you can't talk about Lincoln the lawyer without seeing him operate in the context of cases. The defining measurement is the case, not Lincoln's handwriting. That was a fateful decision that I believe came under my oversight, though possibly Roger had also reached that same conclusion. I know that Bill Beard felt that way.

DePue: Obviously, in fifty-three, people were intimidated by trying to go out and collect that because this is a mammoth amount of documentation. Again, the question is the objective. Was this going to be a bound collection, once it's done? Is that what the initial goal was?

Davis: The assumption, sure. It'd be, yes, a print collection, much like the collected works, maybe one volume, because the known "Lincoln Legals," as they were called, were pretty well already documented or available within the Hickey files and with the Basler files.

DePue: What I'd like to do next then is get you into the role.

Davis: Okay. Well, after a year or so, when Roger was really trying hard to get something going, nothing really had happened. There'd been no grant requests from national funding agencies; our appropriation had not increased. This project was becoming, I believe in retrospect, a dubious enterprise. Roger was there; his love was the library; he was doing this because he'd been asked to

by the director, but it was not his forte. I've known Roger and liked him for years, but this was not among the things he was best at.

They needed a schmoozer, a hustler, an entrepreneur, and Roger was none of those, as gifted as he is. I forget how it happened, but finally Mike Devine realized he had a problem. He had a restive Abraham Lincoln Association. He had a paralyzed Bill Beard. He had an uncomfortable Roger Bridges, **and** there had been created an advisory board to the Lincoln Legal Papers, much of it local in nature, a lot of lawyers, and they were impatient.

They thought this whole thing was at a standstill, and, for all practical purposes, it was. So, Michael helped Roger. The two didn't get along all that well, as far as I could tell, though I never heard either one of them say that. Michael was able to find Roger a very nice job offer in Ohio, with the Rutherford Hayes Presidential Library. I think Roger viewed this as a very comfortable escape, with some prestige. So, he took it.

Once again, there was a vacancy as head of the Lincoln Legal Papers, except at this point, it had a certain urgency to it. Now, I knew Michael Devine from the moment he came here in eighty-four, eighty-five, whenever, maybe eighty-three, eighty-four. We became very good friends socially and professionally. He approached me, after consulting his board, where there was some reservations, I'm sure. He never told me that, but consulting the board, saying, "Look, I've got to find someone who can do this job."

He had confidence in me, not because I was a Lincoln scholar—I wasn't by any stretch—but I taught legal history, which was a plus because I knew, and they were about to know, that it was more important to know American legal history than it was to know Abraham Lincoln for that job. You could learn Lincoln, but legal history is something, and he knew that I had been successful—in oral history, at least—in getting publicity and funding, soft funding, and even hard funding for projects. He thought I was the kind of entrepreneur he needed, and he liked me.

I responded very positively. I liked him, admired him. I didn't realize it at the time, particularly, but I realized this would make me a twelve-month a year employee, not nine-month as a faculty member is. While I wasn't looking ahead to retirement, I knew that this would improve my salary somewhat, by about a third, for three more months of work, and I could still teach. I think the appointment was something like 60 percent Lincoln Legals, 40 percent university, something like that; I can't remember. I still had to teach, but I would teach in the evenings. Most of my salary was derived, not as an employee of the Historic Preservation Agency, but from the university, in contract, in a contract with the agency. That was something I felt and Mike felt made sense. The trustees went along with it, though it was clear I was answering to them. But it was also clear, my employment was the university.

DePue: It was clear that you were answering to them, them being Devine or the trustees or both?

Davis: I knew that I was going to report on a regular basis to Michael Devine and ask him for help because I did a lot of that. I hadn't thought a lot about the trustees, though I knew Julie [Cellini] pretty well, socially. I didn't know Frank Mason at the time, and I knew one other, Sam somebody, up in the Chicago area. I knew a few trustees, and at some point, fairly soon after I took the job, I had to meet with the trustees, kind of a progress report. (laughs) That scared me a little bit, but I tend to be comfortable in group things like that, and I think I favorably impressed them.

DePue: You mentioned that one of the things they were looking for was somebody who had some moxie and then also entrepreneurial skills.

Davis: Um-hmm (laughs).

DePue: Listening to your whole life story up to this point, you were on the ground level of getting Sangamon State this totally new concept of a university organized and then basically invented the concept of an oral history office, all of these organizational skills. Is that the entrepreneurial work? I guess that's how you describe it?

Davis: Yes, and there's a little bit of money raising and credibility. I knew that there would be a point when the State legislators would begin saying, "What the heck is this item on the agency's budget doing? We haven't heard a word. Where's their product?" I knew that would happen. In fact, several trustees told me that, that there is a limit to the patience of the trustees and the legislators (laughs).

DePue: I wonder if you can speculate on how common or how unusual it is for true historians to also have those kinds of attributes.

Davis: Oh. I don't know; it's kind of you to ask it. It's kind of a fat pitch.[37] I don't think it's all that common. I don't remember anything in my training, as an historian, that taught entrepreneurialism, collegiality, credibility, public relations, fund raising, none of those. I'm kind of an odd bird, I think, probably.

DePue: When you took this job, does that mean you really stepped away from the oral history?

Davis: I had to; I had to. I realized that, and I arranged with the university to name my assistant as the acting director, nice woman named Marilyn Immel. But I knew that that put it somewhat in peril because I was the hustler, and I was on the faculty. Eventually, actually the project died as a university-funded

[37] In baseball, a fat pitch is a hittable ball. (http://fat-pitch.blogspot.com/2013/01/what-is-fat-pitch.html).

activity. But, anyway, that's a long…Maybe I've talked about that, how I decided that really the collection belonged in the archives anyway and so forth. So, slowly it dissipated and waned. I forget exactly when the funding [ended]; even the secretary was reassigned to some other office. [That] probably took three or four years. I knew that was one of the costs of this, but this really was irresistible.

I've talked about my skills as an administrator. Some of the skills I don't have are detail management, long range planning and paperwork. My human relations skills are very strong. My "management skills" are very weak. I knew that about me, so I didn't know how long this legal papers job would last, but I thought, at some point, probably, it would no longer have the appeal to me that it did, and I probably would have the appeal that I did (laughs). But at the time, I was the right person for the job.

DePue: At that time, you'd been in the role of the university professor, doing oral history, what, about eighteen years, sixteen, eighteen years?

Davis: Eighty-eight, yes. Yes.

DePue: I know you're going to stay with the Lincoln Legal Papers through 2000, and I know you still have some involvement with it. That's another big chunk of time.

Davis: Oh yes, yes.

DePue: You have more longevity than you're giving yourself credit for.

Davis: Thank you. I will come to it, maybe, but I got into some hot water with the legal papers.

DePue: We'll get to that. Let's talk about then stepping in. You've already kind of laid out the basic foundation or the framework for this project, but what were some of the initial decisions you had to make, in terms of where this thing is going?

Davis: I would call them challenges. I had no illusions, when I walked up that long straight, three story stairway, into this dusty, one-room. It's a pretty good-sized room, but it was not even partitioned into offices. There was one Selectric typewriter there, and there was Bill Beard.[38] I knew that, first of all, I had to develop a relationship with Bill Beard and see if he was worth working for because I knew about his political background. But much more awesome to me were the credibility of the project. I had an advisory board that I had to

[38] A Selectric typewriter was a highly successful model line of electric typewriters produced by IBM in 1961. Instead of the "basket" of individual typebars that swung up to strike the ribbon and page in a typical typewriter of the period, the Selectric had a "typing element" that rotated and pivoted to the correct position before striking. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBM_Selectric_typewriter)

be accountable to, not that they made the decisions, but their support was very important, their goodwill and support. And I had a funding crisis; $85,000 was pitifully inadequate. I didn't even have a secretary; I had to borrow the agency director's secretary when she could afford a little bit of time to do some letters for me.

DePue: How much of that $85,000 had already been burned through?

Davis: In effect, it was used…My portion of the budget, including benefits, was probably $40,000-50,000. Maybe it was more; I don't think. I didn't make that kind of money then. Some of it had already been spent on Roger Bridges, the assignment of Roger Bridges' time. I don't remember, but I know the budget was—

DePue: That was $85,000 each year that you were given?

Davis: Oh yes, right. Well, yes. But it was no longer automatic that it would happen. There were legislators who were saying, "Why do we need this? What's it done?" I was reminded of that a lot, and it was true.

DePue: Show me results.

Davis: (laughs) Yeah, that's right! Those were my major…and then a work plan. I needed, with Bill Beard's help, a work plan, as to what the scope of our work would be, how we would lay it out. It was, with his help, fairly easy to make some fundamental decisions that considerably expanded the whole scope of the project. We quickly agreed—because to me it was self-evident—that the Lincoln Legal Papers would include all documents of any kind, relating to any document in which Lincoln or one of his partners participated, even one of his partners, because you can't tell that Lincoln wasn't involved just because he didn't sign a document on a case.

That expanded the definition significantly. That way, we hoped to be able to recreate case files because that was the defining…In order to have anything valuable, we had to have case files of every surviving document for a particular case. That meant visiting, for sure, many—it turned out most—of the counties of Illinois and spending some time there.

We didn't know how much time, but we knew we had to do that. And since we were looking for Lincoln's handwriting, not just his signature, or we were looking for Logan's or Herndon's handwriting, not just their signatures, we had to painstakingly go through hundreds of thousands, probably, ultimately, a million documents, folded up in these metal case files.

DePue: That sounds like more than just a two-guy job.

Davis: Of course, of course it was. I began meeting with Devine, saying, "We need help and a lot of it." On faith, he did the best he could. They got one lucky

break in the next fiscal year, a couple of freebie employees; I think they were hired for political reasons. He had nothing else for them to do, so one of them joined our staff. He was a pretty nice guy and did pretty good work. He came from Beardstown. That helped.

I was able to get money the next year through Jim Hickey. He approached Governor Thompson, on my urging. I said "Jim, we've got to have a lot more money than this." He said, "Let me talk to the governor." He said, "Come to the governor's annual antique sale on the executive house grounds the next Sunday." I went there. I just went, and my wife was with me, and we just went…Well, pretty soon he came up to me and said, "I've talked to the governor; go talk to him." (laughs)

I went up to Governor Thompson, introduced myself, and I said, "I understand that Jim Hickey has spoken to you about the Lincoln Legal Papers." He was very nice. He said, "Yes, and I think he and you are right. I know a little bit about you, and it sounds like they're off on the right track. You can count on it." What did we get the next year? I can't remember exactly, but it was over $150,000, so it was about 100 percent increase. That paid for a secretary, a little bit of travel money and so forth. That was a break-through, but it was all on faith. Thompson could make that kind of a pledge; he knew law and knew the burden of the job. Thanks to him and Jim Hickey, we got off rolling.

DePue: If I've got the time-line right, this would've been about 1989.

Davis: Yes. It would have been the…actually the fiscal year 1990. Yes, it was the winter and spring of 1989.

DePue: So, you're getting close to another gubernatorial election, where Thompson's going to be out of the picture. Then, of course, the economy went the opposite direction; it went down.

Davis: Actually, his successor was Jim Edgar, who was a much tighter fisted governor than Thompson was. But he also loved history because I would see him at state historical society meetings, sitting patiently through boring talks. I got to know him, not well, but it's true that the State went through a critical financial crisis within a year. Edgar had to oversee that. The agency took hits, and I knew we had to take our share of them, but it wasn't that bad.

By then, I'd hustled up some grant money and gifts. I started a giving program; we raised about $20,000 a year, just in gifts. I got a couple of grants from small foundations—I think the Illinois Bar Association Foundation for one—and we had pending—I forget when they kicked in—we had pending requests to two federal agencies, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities, both of them highly competitive, though at least the NHPRC existed to support

projects like ours, though we had never been listed. Roger had failed to seek their imprimatur and then their funding. Most of their funding those days went to the so-called Founding Fathers projects, Washington, Jefferson, etc.

But it turns out that, once we identified ourselves with them, Lincoln became a popular name in the capitol. We developed a very good working relationship, with annual grants from them. And the National Endowment for the Humanities came through, with a major three-year grant, probably it was around 1990. That provided another $100,000, so that added…By the time we were going full steam, with search crews out in the county seats, we had a budget—I'm guessing here—of about $300,000-350,000, counting everything.

Bill Beard was my freebie (laughs). That is to say, he was on the agency payroll but not on the project payroll. And, of course, we paid no rent or overhead for our space, as sparse as it was. So, we were doing pretty well.

DePue: Did you have a model of another legal papers project to follow?

Davis: Quickly I started going to the meetings of the Association for Documentary Editing. I knew that I had to establish some sort of identity with these professionals, like John Simon from Carbondale, who was a good supporter. He was kind of a sarcastic son of a bitch in many ways (laughs) and in some ways unreliable, but he was a real supporter of the project in its infancy and was very gracious in complimenting me for getting us started, after so many false starts.

DePue: Was he also a Lincoln scholar?

Davis: Yes, well really a Grant scholar. He was **the** preeminent scholar on Ulysses Grant, but he also wrote on Lincoln, one path-breaking article on Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, a real breakthrough article. He was my ally.

Then I met some of the directors of other presidential paper projects, particularly because we realized quickly…We thought we would go into some sort of strong commitment to digitization. The other ones, the Washington papers and all, had existed for so long, they had card files. It was unthinkable to retroactively digitize. But we were just starting. We didn't have document files yet or case files.

My great luck in hiring our first secretary—but quickly making her more than just a secretary—was Marty Benner, who was deeply involved in computer studies, having taken graduate courses at the university and had that kind of a mind, a very technically-oriented mind. She was no historian, didn't pretend to be, but she understood digitization, and she worked constantly—weekends and everything—to master the intricacies of some sort of a word processing section within our project and then even a digital DVD-ROM

version of a publication.[39] She was a **vitally** important resource I had, Bill Beard on the one hand and Marty Benner on the other.

DePue: In talking to some, I understood that the initial plan, or maybe somewhere in this planning process, was the concept of doing this on microfiche, not digitally.

Davis: Yes, absolutely. That was the prevailing assumption. Yeah, sure, I was talking about that in 1989. I can't remember exactly when, but partly through Marty's encouragement, we did decide otherwise. But we began photocopying documents, not digitizing them on location. We photocopied and then digitized back here (laughs) because we didn't know, at that time. We just went out and photocopied. Plus, at that time, taking digitizing equipment on the road was risky because it's very delicate equipment. Yes, microfiche or maybe microfilm, but I think we talked about microfiche. The most important thing was the scope. We expanded—under my leadership, but others agreed—we expanded considerably the scope of the project and what we would include.

DePue: I wonder if you could take a little bit of time of fleshing out what an archival editor does.

Davis: Documentary editor.

DePue: Documentary editor, I'm sorry.

Davis: A documentary edit is sometimes confused with motion picture documentaries, but, of course, it has to do with documents, paper. A documentary editor, overall, other things being absent, has to go find documents for a particular subject, has to access them somehow, probably Xeroxing [photocopying], has to organize them, has to transcribe them, then edit them and then annotate them. If it's a letters collection, you simply do the letters. You transcribe a letter; you determine whether it was a known answer to the recipient's letter or the beginning of a known response to that letter. You have to know a little bit about the other people corresponding, but you don't necessarily include their letters.

Then you determine…and there's a lot of definitions in that; there are a lot of picky definitions: How do you edit? Do you edit for proper form today, or do you edit with—you know the same thing in oral history—or do you edit with absolute fidelity to the original source, or do you use "sic," whenever there is a misspelling, or a grammatical error? All these decisions have to be made by editors.

[39] Digital versatile disc-read only memory (DVD-ROM) is a read-only digital versatile disc (DVD) commonly used for storing large software applications. (https://www.techopedia.com/definition/24480/digital-versatile-disc-read-only-memory--dvd-rom)

What I learned in going to these annual meetings was what most of my colleagues believed, and I learned a lot from them. Several of them I invited to Springfield, including John Simon and others from Madison, Wisconsin and from Washington, D.C., who were experts in this and had great reputations. They consulted with us on setting up a filing system. But in all cases, they had to say, "Well now, of course, we have a card file system," because they were so used to it. We were lucky. The timing was lucky that we could do this from the get-go.

DePue: What was the decision, as far as the style of editing you would do?

Davis: Fidelity to the source. Now, there's a lot more aspects to that, but, in short, it is fidelity. You don't worry about misspellings, you don't worry about ungrammatical or missing commas, you simply do it the way it's done. If there's an illegible word or two in a hand-written document, you indicate there's a word or two words there, but you don't try to guess what it is; you just indicate the absence. You might need to footnote that, about a possible insertion, but [it's] all those things. If there are insertions by the hand writer, you have to show the carets and how that goes. There's a lot of technical stuff. I'm not a whiz at the technical stuff, but I certainly knew it had to be learned and used.

DePue: And the annotation side of the project?

Davis: Um-hum. We were told that we definitely should annotate as needed. But the shining example of over-annotation was the longest-living, still living, documentary project in world history, the Thomas Jefferson Papers [the Papers of Thomas Jefferson], begun during World War II and by no means finished because the original—

DePue: Even today?

Davis: Even today. The original editor was a brilliant man, but he went annotation nuts. Pretty soon, the annotations far exceeded the documents themselves. It just wore the whole process down, sixty years and still unfinished. We were warned, "Don't fall into the trap of over-annotating." After all, researchers will use this, and you can't feed everything to them on a silver spoon. Give them what they need, and make sure they can rely upon it as an original source, and leave it at that.

DePue: Isn't that what researchers are supposed to do anyway? You end up taking this material and you—

Davis: Yeah, yeah. The original editor of the Jefferson [papers] was a wonderful scholar, but he loved to write little parenthetical essays, and he did, a lot of them.

DePue: We're going to digress here or take a different direction. Then we'll get back to the institutional history. But let's take you to the point where you're just getting into this, and you're learning a lot about Lincoln and his legal practice from the very beginning. I want to take you back to some of your early writings, when you're first getting into this.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: "Lincoln the Lawyer" published in the papers from the 4th Annual Lincoln Colloquium, October of 1989. Let me just read a quote here.

Davis: Okay.

DePue: (reading) "Only one important topic still lacks (Davis laughs) adequate detailed analysis as a formative influence on the mature Lincoln."—You know where this is going— "That is the law practice that occupied his principle attention and provided a comfortable livelihood for the quarter century between his fitful years in New Salem and his election as president." Now you chuckle; why did you chuckle when I read this?

Davis: It was part of my standard shtick. I gave that talk, in various forms, countlessly and actually in a lot of writings too.

DePue: How strongly did you believe those words?

Davis: Oh, I believed, yeah, I did; I believed it seriously, and I had believed that, even going back to when I was just on the board of the Abraham Lincoln Association. It always seemed odd that the legal part of his life had been left undocumented, though it didn't seem like the criminal omission that I later began to describe it as (both laugh). Then, of course, it was my bread and butter. But I believe I was right; it was unthinkable.

DePue: I want you to flush out for us three reasons, and put them in broad categories. The first, interpretive. What did you mean when you said there were interpretive reasons for why Lincoln's legal practice was overlooked? Maybe I'm putting you on the spot here.

Davis: That's okay. I can make it up. I mean, I can tell you now what I think. I don't remember what I said then. Interpretive is, to understand Lincoln the man, you've got to understand Lincoln the politician, Lincoln the husband and father, and Lincoln the professional. It's true that Lincoln…Legal documents will not be as revealing as an intimate letter to Mary Todd, okay, or as the Gettysburg Address, but his correspondence about cases and the way he handled cases in court and in his writings adds a lot to one's appreciation or analysis of Lincoln. That's the interpretive argument.

DePue: The second reason you cited was methodological.

Davis: (laughs). I don't remember what I said.

DePue: I apologize here.

Davis: That's okay. No, go ahead.

DePue: Well here's the third one; I think you'll have a good answer for the third one, Archival.

Davis: Yes, that these documents—those that we can find that haven't already been robbed or burned or discarded—pertaining to Abraham Lincoln, even if they're not in his handwriting, need to be preserved. So, we had an understanding with the State Archives that we would share with them legal matters, legal records in Lincoln's handwriting because they properly belong to the State Archives, as official public records, but, of course, we would have copies for this historical library as well. We had a good relationship with the State Archives on that. They even helped us in a lot of ways.

That's the archive argument, that this stuff had been allowed just to sit there. It's true that people had ransacked these collections for 100 years, so a lot was missing. But the one advantage we had, out of our own experience, was the ability to sufficiently and very perceptively identify Lincoln's handwriting, when it was added to somebody else's document, for example, without his signature at all. We found unquestionable examples of his adding his own writing to maybe a document that Herndon had written. That was valuable, and we found it over and over and over again. Or there would be instances when he didn't sign a document because he didn't have to, but he wrote it.

DePue: This is almost the forensics of documentation.

Davis: Yeah. I didn't have that skill, but I hired people who did, who developed it. They became authorities on Lincoln. Our ultimate authority always, in order to verify their decisions, was Tom Schwartz. We always took these to Tom Schwartz, and he always agreed, every time. Pretty soon I knew that what they judged was invariably correct, even phonies, even fraudulent Lincoln signatures.

DePue: We haven't mentioned Tom's name before, how did he work into the project?

Davis: He was very important, although he wasn't part of a chain of command. I reported directly to Michael Devine, while he was still director. There came a time when he was involved because Michael's successor, Susan—

DePue: Susan Mogerman?

Davis: …Mogerman, wanted to make sure that Tom was involved, as was appropriate.

DePue: What was his position?

Davis: He was the Lincoln curator, following Jim Hickey, and then also the Illinois State historian. He was a valuable ally because he understood, and he also was an important officer of the Abraham Lincoln Association. He and I got along fine, and he understood the value of this and the expanded scope and the need for money. So, he became an ally, sometimes disagreeing with me on something, but always reasonably.

DePue: When you're going out and searching for all these documents, did you every encounter, resistance from some of the county courthouses that you were working with or the private collections?

Davis: County courthouses, eventually, not only accepted us but impatiently called for us to visit (laughs). There's a simple explanation to that. The first few times we discovered a genuine Lincoln document, within the holdings of some county courthouse, once we had verified it with Tom Schwartz, we immediately notified the circuit clerk.

This was big news in county seat towns. The county clerk would get the local newspaper to take a picture of them, holding this document. We would promise them that, while the state archives would take the original, because it's that, we would provide perfect copies for them to display and, in other ways, give them credit for this discovery. So, pretty soon we were having…because the circuit clerks meet at least once a year, they correspond; they talk, and pretty soon we became popular. (laughs)

It's hard to tell you but…what was it? Iroquois County, I remember—maybe the only one—the county clerk called and said, "I read about what you're doing. When are you going to come visit us?" (laughs) It may have been just before an election; I don't know (laughs) but…Of course, we couldn't succeed with that every time. But it proved to be immensely valuable and, probably more than anything, solidified my stature with the trustees because they were always sensitive to publicity, favorable publicity and unfavorable publicity; I gave them some of that too. But they loved getting that kind of publicity for the agency.

DePue: How about from private collectors?

Davis: It depended. It was often very difficult because they were afraid that the publication, in print or even a facsimile, would diminish the value of their document. We argued, successfully in many cases, that, in fact, it doesn't diminish it; it verifies it. It officially endorses that as a genuine, because there are a lot of fake ones out there. So, most people agreed.

Some libraries even hesitated because they didn't want the trouble of making this stuff available to us. We had to deal with some pretty snotty libraries. I won't name them, but they're among the best-known repositories

in the country; they balked at letting us get to this stuff, and they still do balk. Daniel Stowell has this problem all the time. It's hard to believe, but on the other hand, somebody in their hierarchy is anal oriented, I think, anal oriented. They just aren't in the habit of letting strangers copy their stuff.

DePue: You mean to say that librarians can be just as parochial as other institutions?

Davis: I'm afraid so. Most of them aren't. Most of them have a wonderful public service mission, but some of them are…It's not the director always; it's often some associate who's been there for forty years and doesn't like to make waves or have waves made.

DePue: From looking at your resume, your vitae, it looks like you also became the public face of this project and hit the speaking circuit pretty quickly.

Davis: I did, I knew…First of all, I knew I could give a pretty good talk, and I knew I had to get out because it would help raise money, raise credibility, all the usual things. I accepted every and all requests, and I wouldn't take a speaking fee. I said, "No, this is part of my job." Even if it's on a weekend or something; it's part of my job. So, I did this regularly.

I talked my colleagues into doing it, as they seemed qualified, because I felt they also should get out there. Pretty soon, Bill Beard was doing some talks and then John Lupton and Susan Krause and others, for that matter. I just felt strongly that they were also part of the public face. I welcomed the job myself, but I wasn't jealous about it. Some project directors have always been jealous, that they're the only public name associated with the effort. I didn't have that sense of property right.

DePue: Were there any high-profile opportunities that you got?

Davis: One was 10,000 miles away; that was in the Republic of China.

DePue: What would take you, who's heading up this Lincoln Legal Papers project, to the Republic of China in the 1990s?

Davis: Extraordinary luck. There was a gentleman, an elderly gentleman, who was one of the original nationalist Chinese with Chiang Kai-shek, who had developed a fascination with Abraham Lincoln. I've forgotten his name, but it's probably…I can't remember. He was a wonderful man, and he visited Springfield in 1988, by chance. We met, and he became fascinated. Before I knew it, six months later, I had an all-expenses paid invitation to speak at his international Lincoln colloquium (DePue laughs), in…What was it, Tai Pei? What's the capital?

DePue: Yeah, Tai Pei, Taiwan.

Davis: Yeah. Sorry. All expenses, plane, even for my wife, it was kind of embarrassing. They were extraordinarily generous, and I just gave a canned talk. But to them it was revolutionary because no one had really talked about Lincoln the lawyer before. So, it got printed in their journal. That was one of about three or four that got published fairly quickly. I don't remember seeking an audience; they came to me. I don't mean to say that snobbishly.

International Conference on Abraham Lincoln in 1989 located in Paipai, Taiwan. Herb Mitgang on the left of the New York Times.

Who was the original director for the Lincoln Home series? He died of cancer. Oh gosh…George Painter. I knew George well and helped him often on developing speakers for his series. Maybe I said, Well, I'd be happy…" but I think he even approached me on that and so did others. It became fashionable for historical societies, civil war roundtables, the various professional societies I belonged to, to want a presentation on Lincoln, the lawyer. Oh, and law…bar groups, all sorts of bar groups, in Chicago, elsewhere and here, Madison, Wisconsin and others.

DePue: Did you have a travel budget that would get you out of the state, as well?

Davis: When necessary. Certainly, within the state, I could use a state car, and they'd treat me to dinner. That wasn't a problem. Out-of-state, one or two that were really important, I did, certainly professional meetings. I felt it was crucial for me to become involved in the A…What is it? Association for Documentary Editing, ADE, absolutely crucial and the Organization of American Historians too.

Those were legitimate travel expenses, and we had a budget for that. The others I can't remember. [It] seems to me I doubled up in some things. I did a little bit of research in Delaware, at an historical library that happened to have a couple of Lincoln items, when I was speaking to some University of Illinois alumni group in Delaware; I doubled that sort of thing. The University of Illinois paid for that. Same thing in Greencastle, Indiana, where I was speaking, and there were some documents in the DePauw College library. I did a little bit of doubling up.

DePue: How much was this about fundraising, as well? You're talking about bar groups, you're talking about alumni groups; sometimes they have deep pockets.

Davis: It was always a subliminal message. I wasn't literally passing the hat. But with bar association groups, I would say that we appreciated some help that the Illinois Bar Association had provided, and we had sought help from some of the big Chicago law firms, unsuccessfully. They all nodded knowingly. I tried using those matters to raise money. And, of course, I always handed out a name and address sheet. We put them on our newsletter [mailing list].

That was the other thing that I invented, was the newsletter. Excuse me; Ralph Bridges had invented it, as a mimeographed newsletter. I expanded it because I wanted to thank people for gifts and report on substantive news, not just make it a newsletter but something in it. We called it the…I forget (laughs), not the Lincoln the Lawyer, Lincoln—

DePue: I think I've got a bunch of them somewhere here.

Davis: I'm sorry.

DePue: *Lincoln Legal Briefs*?

Davis: Yes! Thank you, *Lincoln Legal Briefs*.

DePue: You mentioned Ralph Bridges; do you mean Roger?

Davis: Roger, I'm sorry.

DePue: I just wanted to make sure this was the right person.

Davis: No, you're right. He started it, and I thought, It's a great idea; let's expand it because it tended to just report on speeches he had given and so forth. I wanted that, but I also wanted…Each issue ought to have some interesting story from our research.

DePue: The audience there is the ALA?

Davis: ALA, but, of course, every talk I gave I could add another fifty or more names to the reading list. Pretty soon we were mailing it out to thousands of people. Then we would conduct a fundraising campaign, once a year. As I said, ALA members contributed, but also a lot of others who just had signed up for the newsletter, particularly lawyers. They were intrigued, and so we'd get fifty bucks, $100. It got up to over $20,000 a year, which was worth the postage (laughs).

DePue: That can get you a staff member or at least a portion of a staff member, I would think.

Davis: That's right. The one other thing, also; the newsletter also was helpful in credibility among our peer documentary editions. One or two of them had an occasional letter that went out to people. We really started with the newsletter, and we included all the ADE members on our mailing list. Pretty soon, we were celebrities, at the meetings or by correspondence.

My fellow editor said, "What a great idea that is." Heck, they'd been in the business for twenty years, but they always had been supported by a university and not much money but enough money. We were hustling. We were supported by the State, but we always needed more money. So, the hustler in me, I think, did that because the newsletter wasn't a big chore. Once every three months, we had to write a few articles.

DePue: What was the size of the staff that you had by the time you get to the ninety-three, ninety-four timeframe?

Davis: It varied from year to year on funding and vacancies, but we ended up, at our peak, when we had two or three different search teams going out around the Illinois counties. They would spend up to four weeks in any single county. It was enormously labor-intensive work, three people in one county for a month, going through everything available. At one point, we had ten employees because we had to hire someone to do nothing more than Xeroxing and then digitizing our documents.

We hired a young man, whom I'd known at the university and was a nice guy. He patiently did this every day. He was just thrilled to be part of some bigger thing, and he was reliable, a break for five years.

We began kind of a pecking order of professional appointments. Bill Beard had a masters' degree; he became, I think, an associate editor on the virtue of his prior experience. Then others worked through the ranks; they'd begin as maybe a research associate and then become an assistant editor. A few of them, John Lupton, became an associate editor. We had all sorts of people, including Sean Brown, who was a university graduate, a very capable, nice guy. Like some of the early ones, he was badly underpaid; I must confess. I think we paid him almost by the hour; he was part-time. He was good enough that we sent him with others on search sites because he was very good at finding Lincoln's handwriting. But he wasn't...That's right; he wasn't full-time.

There were some days he wasn't working. But we did know, on some of those days, he went back to the same county courthouses where he had already been and was a familiar figure, to say they had to check on something else. He turned out to have stolen, not Lincoln signatures or documents, but Herndon ones.

He was smart enough to know that finding a Lincoln item would make the press, papers, and there would be suspicions aroused in our office. So, he did Herndon's, which had pretty limited value. But he managed to sell some of them at about fifty bucks a pop. I can't remember the details. He was working for us when he did this, so it was a terrible betrayal of the trust people had in us when he proved to have done this; it was very embarrassing. Also, no one else in the world would have found out about it but us because, whenever we did searching, we always made notes of records found, and we found out that we had seen some of these records. They were over in Jacksonville, almost all of them, these Herndon papers. One of our associates, in double-checking things, thought "Well, that's odd." I can't remember how it happened, but we uncovered this crime and so, called the authorities. He was arrested and tried and convicted and sent, for a limited time, to a minimum-security prison.

It's a sad story. He was always broke; he had high ambitions; he had an expensive girlfriend…I don't mean to put it crassly, but he wanted to live better than he could afford to live. But he was being paid not much better than minimum wage, when we hired him. I'm responsible for that. But at the time, that was pretty decent money for an unemployed historian.

DePue: There have always been a lot more historians than positions for them to work.

Davis: Yes, right, right. He took the job willingly and was a nice guy, but he obviously was tempted to make a little more money and—

DePue: With the staff that you had, that you essentially had to cobble together, especially the money you had to cobble together, were there any union challenges or some raised eyebrows in that respect?

Davis: No, that's interesting that you would ask, no. Of course, all of these employees, except for Bill Beard, were university employees. Part of my deal, in accepting the job from Michael Devine, was that we would employ our own people, through the university personnel process, which is frustrating and a lot of red tape, just like the State. But at least it's free of even the possibility of patronage. I had the deal, and some of my friends on the board of trustees, did not like that. But it was a deal that I had cut before they were involved. It meant that I could do merit hiring. I must say, my young colleagues were superb, with that one exception. And he was good at his job; it's just that…They were superb in what they did. They grew into real professionals, writing articles for publication, giving papers at meetings, giving public talks and did a fabulous job. All of them [held] no more than a masters' degree. But one of them, Stacy McDermont, who still works for Daniel, went on and got her Ph.D., later. But they're a terrific crew.

I have to say that I was uncommonly fond of them and proud of them because they were such hardworking, loyal, dedicated professionals. I used to

look around me—I won't say more than that—and their peers, their agency peers, didn't tend to have those kind of virtues. These people would go to a professional meeting on the weekend, and they wouldn't take time off for it; they would just do it because it's part of their professional…

I had them believe…I encouraged them to believe that your professional life exceeds working hours, and it's for your own professional growth. They agreed, and it worked fine. We never had to…Maybe that was exploitation, but **I** did that. I worked a lot of weekends, giving talks, and I never considered that I would take time off for that. I'm not…I don't mean to be critical of people who do, it's just that my associates really cared about the project. I will take some credit for finding them, hiring them, promoting them, never paying them enough, but trying to pay them enough.

DePue: Because they were going through the university system, did they have some benefits?

Davis: Yes. Yes, they had, I think it's probably a pretty good retirement benefit. I think maybe the vacation benefits are superior to the agencies.

DePue: Health insurance?

Davis: Yes, State health insurance. Yes, the benefits—of course we paid for those—benefits were pretty good. It was a different calendar. We always had complications at Christmas time because the university would have a week's holiday between Christmas and New Year's, but the agency didn't. (both laugh) On the other hand, the university was working on like Columbus Day, and the state wasn't. So, it kind of worked out. I don't think my colleagues ever played arrogant with their agency peers, never. They all got along very well. We were working in close quarters because, by that time, we had moved out of that attic office into space on the second and third floors of the Old State Capitol.

DePue: You say second and third floors; that sounds like you're above ground.

Davis: Some of us were barely above ground; others were in the dungeon. We took over all the space available, and even that…We shared space.

DePue: So, the second floor would be a couple floors down, but you've got some kind of a window well to look out of?

Davis: Yes, exactly, window well.

DePue: And the third floor is, you're even farther down in the ground.

Davis: Yes, yeah. We took what space we could get. We never had enough, and we'd worry about losing it; it was a constant battle. As I say, most of my colleagues shared, two to an office, or even three.

DePue: I'm still working about the ninety-four timeframe on this. At that time, what's the end state, and when is the end state, as you envisioned it?

Davis: (laughs) When I was first asked to predict that, I said, "I can't say for sure, but our plan is to finish in eight years." Two years later, I could say the same thing, "We'll finish in eight years." (laughs)

DePue: The goal post kept moving, huh?

Davis: The goal post kept moving, and they have a tendency to do so in documentary projects because you can't precisely estimate. But we knew we were on a short leash with the National Historical Publications and Records Commission because they were tired of these languishing projects, like the Jefferson Papers. And we know there was a limit to the patience of the agency. But we finished, actually, pretty well, fifteen years for the DVD-ROM edition.

DePue: We're talking 2000, then.

Davis: Yeah, it was published in 2000, and it's huge. The print edition took another, what? Seven years, I guess. I can't remember, eight. That's four volumes; it's big.

DePue: I want to take you back to some of your writings. In nineteen ninety-four, "Abraham Lincoln and the Golden Age of American Law." I guess the venue is Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin.

Davis: Yes. That's a venerable group that used to meet annually in Wisconsin, usually Madison, but not always. They would essentially meet to have either a luncheon or a dinner banquet and then a talk. I was invited to give the talk that year. Of course, the assumption was I'd speak on Lincoln the lawyer. I often gave the same talk, but I found a different rubric, in this case the phrase that called this period in American law "the golden age of American law." I used that, but you can see much the same descriptive language as I used in other publications.

DePue: How come this is called the golden age of American law?

Davis: Because it was a convenient phrase, and it had a certain air to it. The notion was that it was the golden age of American law because it was when the profession bloomed, prospered. I'm not sure it's an accurate description, but it was a handy one.

DePue: This goes back to the days that you were teaching that History of American Law course.

Davis: Yeah, yeah. I had read some of those books, but I had run across this one in getting ready to give that paper.

DePue: Ninety-four, now you're into the project six years or so?

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: How had your assessment of Lincoln's legal career evolved over those years?

Davis: I began with an uneducated appreciation, and by that time, I became a zealous plaintiff (both laugh). I could be counted on, whether it was a newspaper reporter's interview—which we had a lot of those—or an article or a talk to give a pep talk on Lincoln, how this was an immensely important part of his life that has been underappreciated. It's a stale subject or stale argument, but it still worked because people would read about a law practice, and their eyes would glaze over, understandably. When you read those documents, they're pretty dull. I'm seeing you're nodding yes (both laugh).

DePue: It's because it's dense language, and it's a foreign language.

Davis: It's obfuscatory; it's everything about it. Yeah, you're right.

DePue: There are a couple cases that you used to illustrate Lincoln's story. And, again, I'm going to put you on the spot, to a certain extent, but maybe they're illustrative, I think. One of them is Lincoln's association with George Harding and Edwin Stanton. These are a couple of the giants of the legal community at the time.

Davis: Right, right.

DePue: Can you reflect on that?

Davis: That's in the McCormick reaper case?

DePue: I believe so, the one that took him to Ohio.

Davis: Yes, right. Well, this was a…Wait a minute; I don't want to confuse you. Yeah, that is right. The Alton bridge one was one that was argued in Chicago. This was the McCormick reaper patent case. Lincoln was invited to be State of Illinois counsel for a case that ended up in the Federal Circuit Court of Ohio. His assumption had been it would be argued in Chicago. So, he went to visit this company called Manny because, I think, they were sued by McCormick reaper for a patent infringement. Am I right? I think I'm right about that.

DePue: Yeah, we can check the article when we get to the transcript.

Davis: Well, it's been awhile.

DePue: That's a cop-out on my part.

Davis: I know. Anyway, the hot-shot lawyers in Ohio needed an Illinois counsel because the presiding judge for that Ohio venue was the judge of the district court in Illinois. They knew they needed, at their table, an Illinois lawyer. So, they just hired Lincoln; they didn't know him from Adam and had no respect for him and didn't intend to use him in the slightest. But they asked him to do it, and they offered a pretty nice retainer. Of course, Lincoln naively was thrilled to have a case in the big time, a circuit court case in Ohio. It should have been argued in Illinois. That's why he went up and inspected the invention and studied a lot about the inventions and the patents and so forth, which was a bent of his. He had a technical bent, as you know, in his writings and interests.

He went to Cincinnati or Columbus, whichever it was, ready to help. And he did get basically snubbed. Some of that is apocryphal, because it's third person, but there's no doubt that Lincoln was personally hurt by not being used. They basically said, "Mr. Lincoln, we got you because we need an Illinois counsel. We have the case firmly in hand. We will not be needing your services, but you've got to be here, to be at the table, and we'll pay you for it." They assumed that would suffice.

Well, Lincoln had looked upon this as a professional achievement, so it hurt him, but not enough to later be patient with Edwin Stanton, as his secretary of war (both laugh). Really, that's true; it's one of the signs of his magnanimity, that he never held Stanton—

DePue: I was talking to Bryan Andreasen about this particular case. Of course, Bryan is one of the legal scholars here, very knowledgeable and also a lawyer by trade.

Davis: I remember hearing that, right.

DePue: He mentioned that…Here is his perception of it, that Lincoln did feel out of his league, that these people, Stanton and Harding, were just that much more sophisticated as lawyers perhaps?

Davis: He admired them, by stature and reputation, of course. I don't think we know from his own writings that he felt inferior to them, but it isn't surprising that he felt that he was the kid. But he certainly worked hard, here in Illinois, to prepare to be helpful to his senior partners.

DePue: The other story that really struck me, reading this particular article, was your laying out what happened after Lincoln gave this very famous Cooper Institute speech in New York City.

Davis: Oh, oh, okay. I'd forgotten I'd done that.

DePue: And then to getting an offer to join a major law firm in New York State.

Davis: Oh. It's been mentioned. We can't confirm that with a second source, but, who was it, the famous lawyer in upstate New York? I can't think. But, yes, it was reported, reliably but not definitively, that he was offered a job with a New York law firm.

DePue: Is it Erastus-Corning

Davis: Yes, thank you. I was thinking of the glassworks, exactly Erastus-Corning. I probably took a little bit of liberty with that. I don't know how I hedged it. I may have said, probably or something.

DePue: The part of the article that you explained is that there are these three tiers of lawyers, and this would have elevated Lincoln to be among the very top, elite lawyers in the country.

Davis: Yeah. That's a bit of a stretch. It could have led to that. I don't know that, by that stroke, that it would have. But if he had practiced in New York City, that alone would have been a major step. I think, to have become a very top elite, like Reverdy Johnson of Baltimore and others, would require a New York case record, as well. If that's exactly what I said, I think I overstated it. It certainly would have put him in a position to achieve national status.

DePue: But the speech gave him national status in the political realm.

Davis: That's right, exactly.

DePue: And you did make the point that, if he had accepted that position, he would have stepped away from his political place.

Davis: Yes, right, and it wasn't even an issue. By then he could taste it, as he said (laughs).

DePue: Now I want to go back to the history of the Lincoln Legal Papers project. You've talked about this quite a bit already, but I don't know if there's anything more we need to say about the relationship with the Lincoln Legal Papers, Abraham Lincoln Association, IHPA, (Davis laughs) the whole process, the board of trustees—

Davis: Right. It was an interesting relationship because the board of trustees had had **very** bad experiences dealing with a powerful organization that was independent of the trustees' control, namely, the Illinois State Historical Society, which used to act as if it kind of owned the State Historical Library (laughs). There were some interpretations of the understandings that lent some credibility to that. They had a royal fight—that is, the trustees of the agency and the president and directors of the state historical site—that led to war and this absolute division, which still exists today, though I think the society has been relatively cordial and cooperating. But it left a bad taste in everyone's mouth.

Then also, they learned that the Abraham Lincoln Association, which also claimed to have kind of something of an ownership of Lincoln, was vying with the agency because agency trustees were very jealous, and understandably so, of their position as the official state agency. There were problems with the Abraham Lincoln Association, as well.

Here was the Lincoln Legal Papers [project], headed by a person whose job depended upon the University of Illinois (laughs) and not the trustees, who hired people who were employees of the university, not the agency, and who was a little suspect among a couple of the trustees because I didn't share their sense of the way to run things. I won't go beyond that; I'll just say that. It was a delicate relationship. I think we all tried to get along.

I remember, for example, I qualified to get a sabbatical from the university one year, and I wanted [to take it] because I had been offered a Fulbright lectureship, overseas…well, in the Caribbean, in the winter time (DePue laughs). So, I needed to be away for four months. Of course, I needed to get the permission of the trustees to do that. I vividly recall they were extremely—two of them were—extremely skeptical of this. They had never heard about a sabbatical for an agency employee. I explained that I was not an agency employee, but I had obligations to the agency that I was fully aware of and that I assured them that I would double my efforts in the summer preceding this because I had the time not teaching to do that, and I would fulfill all of my responsibilities and that I had as an able associate, Marty Benner and also Bill Beard and that it would work out. And I wouldn't be…How did I…Was I getting agency…? I guess I was getting agency money. Anyway, somehow they approved it.

They didn't like the idea. But I was qualified, and I was a university employee, but I had obligations to the agency. It was kind of a tricky thing. They eventually…I would say grudgingly…but they agreed. There was always that sense of suspicion in me and my motives and maybe my party affiliations, not that I was an active Democrat, but I voted in the primary, so there was no doubt I was a Democrat (laughs).

DePue: Does that mean that, at the time, it was one of the prerequisites; if you're in the Abraham Lincoln Association or on the board of trustees, that you're Republican?

Davis: Under the leadership it had, that was a very important factor. I know there was the ruling, the Rutan ruling, but there was no secret that a lot of appointments fell between the cracks.[40]

[40] Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois, 497 U.S. 62 (1990), was a United States Supreme Court decision that held that the First Amendment forbids a government entity from basing its decision to promote, transfer, recall, or hire low-level public employees based upon their party affiliation. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rutan_v._Republican_Party_of_Illinois)

DePue: The board of trustees, how does one become a member of the board of trustees?

Davis: Appointed by the governor.

DePue: I would imagine though that that's among the exemptions, that they are not covered by the Rutan decision.

Davis: At a certain level. I don't, but at a certain level of political—

DePue: The board of trustees is not a full-time position; it's—

Davis: No, no. In fact, I don't think they're paid for it; they're reimbursed. No, they can be…Maybe they're bipartisan…Sometimes there's a bipartisan obligation or level of split that's required. I don't even know with agency trustees.

DePue: I would also think that there's a lot of crosspollination between ALA and the board of trustees and people like Tom [Schwartz, IL State Historian], certainly, who's working for the agency, would certainly be in ALA, as you were yourself.

Davis: Sure, of course. I don't mean to say there was war between them. But Julie [Cellini] had learned, to her dismay, from the incidents with the Illinois State Historical Society, that these cooperative relationships, where the trustees could not act absolutely with full power, were tricky and problematic. She was suspicious of them. She was suspicious of me, for reasons I can fully understand, though I know that I worked very hard to have that project be a success, and I think she agreed.

DePue: Why do you say you can fully understand?

Davis: She and I had crossed swords, and she…Susan [Mogerman] and I had crossed swords over some issues of time monitoring, work sheet, even though these were not State employees. But Susan and Julie wanted me to record my time on the job, and the same she wanted that of the other university employees. I argued with Susan about that; I said, "I'm not sure you can do that with those employees. I will submit my time reports," and I did, but there was an edge to our relationship.

I can't remember all of the things. One of them was the credit that the agency got on our letterhead. Once, by a stupid mistake, the printer, not me, left the co-sponsor line for the preservation agency off our letterhead. I wrote Susan, naively, assuming it was on there, saying "You know, we always give you credit." (both laugh) She sent me back a letter (laughing) that had gone out that said, "Sorry, Cullom." She was dead right; it had been an oversight, and Marty Benner admitted that she had just neglected that. There were always issues of credit and issues like that, that I didn't handle as sensitively as I might have.

DePue: But these kind of things are inevitable in any kind of institution, especially if something is as complex as—

Davis: I think so, but they were used to the complexities of a documentary edition or the longevity of it or its idiosyncrasies. They did come to admire my staff, although they wanted them to be employees of the agency. They came to feel that John Lupton and Susan Krause and all were great. Are we out of time?

DePue: No, we need to pause because your mike has kind of slipped.

Davis: Oh, I'm sorry.

DePue: We took a very brief break. We've been talking with Cullom about the history of the Lincoln Legal Papers project and how it fit into the rest of the rubric of this agency, the Illinois State Historical Library.

Davis: It's a sensitive and complex subject. I think I've covered the high and low lights of it. I will say that the Sean Brown affair…Susan Mogerman was very understanding about that, and she attended the press conference where I had to answer questions. Neither she nor the trustees went out of their way to compliment us for all the good things we did, but that's alright; they supported us, which was important.

DePue: Let's finish off today because I know you've got places you need to go. Let's get the embarrassment behind us here. If you're willing to talk a little bit about the alcoholic staff that you ended up having.

Davis: Ah, thank you, right. Well, I've talked about my reliance upon Bill Beard, who was very bright and loyal and hardworking and very useful to me, very useful in the critical first years and even after that. He was our veteran researcher and a funny guy, sense of humor, but…I'm trying to think of one episode before all this happened. He was my right hand.

Oh, I know. I kept trying to talk him into finishing his dissertation, which he had started and planned to do. I said, "Bill, it's going to haunt you if you don't. I know from personal experience, and if I can help you, fine. I can't give you time off, but if you want to work out something, I will support you. It's important for you professionally and even within the project." I said, "You're being paid more than any of my other employees, and you should be paid more." Well, it just never worked. I can't recall the onset of this, except I always saw him…

My wife and I entertained the staff occasionally. Bill had a tendency to drink more than he should, but I've done that before, at parties. I just assumed that all was well. The tragedy was that he was our chief; he was the supervisor of younger researchers when we were on these long travels. And, over in Danville, Illinois, he had Sean Brown and maybe John Lupton with him or maybe…Well, I don't know. It turns out that Bill hadn't even been going to

the courthouse those days. He just would see them at breakfast, say, "I've got some catching up to do" and not show up. They were—bless their hearts—they were too scared to report this to me. So, it went on for a while. Finally—I don't remember exactly how—

I finally learned about it and confronted Bill. I'm telescoping this a lot. We had some emotional conversations. He knew that he had a problem. I said, "You need help, and we will help you get help, but it's got to be reliable. I can't jeopardize our precious staff in working for someone who can't function." So, this became a whole project crisis. Of course, I reported all of this to Susan, and she understood. Of course, Bill had this appointment with the agency, not with the project, and his appointment had some political clout behind it. So, I told Susan, "I don't know how this is going to end up, but we have a personnel discipline problem here, evaluation problem."

I talked Bill into signing up for a recovery program at a suburban Chicago place, and I drove him there, which I was happy to do. I just took the day off and drove him up there, dropped him off. He got back a month later. He took unpaid leave, got back a month later, said everything was fine. Well, it wasn't. This dragged on. I can't remember the other incidents, but obviously, he was in trouble.

I began, if I hadn't already started, documenting every conversation with him about it, every situation, because I was afraid, at some point, this could become a personnel issue for the State. I worked closely with Marty Benner to document things, and we did everything quietly but thoroughly. I met one-on-one with other colleagues to say that they should feel absolutely free to share any concerns they had because this was a serious problem, and I understood them not doing it earlier, but they had to.

I can't remember exactly what the upshot was, except I remember one last chance to Bill, and that didn't work. He would call in sick or come to work for a while and then disappear for a while, so I had to tell him to check in with the secretary every time he left the office. He was sneaking off, obviously. So, I finally told him that…Oh, I guess he brought a lawyer, a personnel lawyer, I guess they're called, with him to a meeting. I then got official, and Marty sat in as a witness. I said, you have broken this, this, this and this understanding, and we've given you all the slack possible. I'm going to institute termination proceedings.

The lawyer said some double-talk about this and this and this, but we felt pretty strong about it. We were worried that it could drag on because it was eating up State money, and he was a definite danger to our success, I thought, because of his behavior. It turns out, he finally decided it wasn't worth it, and he quit pretty quickly. I've never seen him since. I feel badly because we were friends.

But I had been warned by people at the agency, terminate it and just walk away from it. So, I did, against my instincts. Others have seen him, and he lives on the family property, over near Beardstown, actually. The town wasn't named for that Beard family but…He's done a little bit of work for the local, Beardstown newspaper. I don't know what else. I feel badly. He had a great personality; he was intelligent, sociable, good judgment, when he was sober, but it was very awkward. Fortunately, in that case, we did everything we could. I even spoke to Senator Davidson, who by then was a retired State senator, and said, "Doc, we have a real problem here. I don't know about your reaction, but you must…You need to realize…" He said, "I know about it, I'm in the family; whatever you decide, I understand." That was a relief to me. So, we terminated him.

DePue: Do you know if he's ever overcome his demons?

Davis: I don't know. I don't know.

DePue: You certainly got some embarrassment. You talked about having a press conference when you had the stolen documents incident.

Davis: Yes, right.

DePue: Was there any public embarrassment over this?

Davis: No. I kept the advisory board notified about this. We said a nice thing about him in the newsletter when he left. We didn't have a party for him (laughs). It didn't become a local news item, fortunately. It actually went fairly quietly. And everyone on the advisory board had liked him. But by that time, they knew that there were problems. Some of them had had trouble with alcohol themselves (both laugh) in their careers and stuff. It did not become an acute problem, except as long as he stayed there, it was an acute problem.

DePue: This has been a fun conversation today.

Davis: It has been. I don't know the end of it, but that's up to you. So, we'll have one more session?

DePue: One more session.

Davis: We said that last time. (laughs)

DePue: I'm afraid we did, but there will be a little bit more opportunity for you to reflect on things about Lincoln's career and about your own, personal career on the next time around.

Davis: Okay. Good.

DePue: Thank you, Cullom.

(end of transcript #4)

Interview with
Cullom Davis
Interview # HS-A-L-2011-037

Interview # 5: October 24, 2011
Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, October 24, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We started session four with Cullom Davis by my bold prediction that that would be our last session. (Davis laughs) It was not.

Davis: It was not.

DePue: I think perhaps, Cullom, this might be our last session.

Davis: Well, we'll try.

DePue: Let's keep our fingers crossed. Good afternoon, by the way.

Davis: Thank you.

DePue: We are here once again in the library. Last time, when we left off, we were talking about the Lincoln Legal Papers and some of the personnel challenges you had. What I wanted to start with today was some of the personnel additions that you made, especially towards the latter part of your tenure there in the mid-nineteen-nineties and afterwards.

Davis: There were some vitally significant appointments. I didn't know it at the time, but I had confidence in them. One of my relatively early appointments was of Dennis—

DePue: Do you mean Daniel?

Davis: No, Dennis Suttles. He worked for us for several years.

DePue: He did?

Davis: Yes, he did. I know, with the family, it was hard for him to go on the trips, but everyone had to go on the field trips. He resigned after four years or so, but he did good work.

One of my most productive appointments was of Susan Krause, who had been…She had been a graduate student in history at our campus, previously had a bachelor's degree in anthropology. She was married; they had no children, and she was very bright. I had been her master's thesis advisor. We employed her as kind of a research assistant, initially, on kind of a monthly basis because we didn't have a lot of money. But as we developed resources, I was able to quickly appoint her to a full-time position, and she was a superb colleague. She was bright. She rarely made mistakes, technically, at all. She also had a wonderfully benign influence on our deliberations.

We met a lot because we had to agree on a whole, complex range of editorial standards and transcription standards, and she had a great gift for sitting back, and then, when people would argue about something, finding some way to resolve that, constructively. That's an invaluable person in any group. She played that role magnificently. She retired a few years after I retired. Bless her heart, she stayed at least while I was there. She made great contributions. And herself, as a result of that, became a recognized professional historian, with publications and papers, delivered at meetings.

DePue: Does that mean that she started with you, and she was already not your typical graduate student but a little bit more mature?

Davis: She was more mature, no doubt about it. That may have had something to do with it, but it was more…seasoning, at least, and also just a temperament that made her always seek a mutually comfortable resolution of something.

DePue: The reason I asked that is because you said she retired, and I would assume that somebody just starting their career would move on.

Davis: I think she resigned. I don't know her age, but she and her husband liked to travel and had some of his grandchildren. Or maybe she just got a little tired of it; it can be an exhausting job. But, at any rate, I want to start with her because she was first-rate. So was John Lupton, who was a much younger

guy, very ambitious. He had been a student in history, undergraduate history, at SIU, Carbondale and had to come to the attention of John Simon there. I think John recommended him to me. I was always receiving recommendations from people, though John was not given to typically recommending someone, so I took it seriously. He [Lupton] then was pursuing a master's degree in history at our campus. He took two courses with me and did extremely well. That was another early appointment. By early, I mean probably by nineteen ninety-three, something like that.

He, of course, did splendidly in that work, on all facets of it. He was a newly-wed, with no children for awhile, so he could travel with the group as needed. He was a great leader of a research group. He was painstakingly careful and accurate, amiable. He did so well that, when I left and my colleague Daniel Stowell took directorship of the program—and I'll get to Daniel—John was named assistant director because he had administrative skills as well, handled the budget and a lot of that, personnel matters. Then, of course, he spent ten or fifteen years with the project and then was invited to head up the Supreme Court history project. I regretted his leaving, but he deserved that responsibility, and we remain very good friends.

DePue: That was only a couple of years ago that he made the move over to the Supreme Court.

Davis: Yes, that's right. I'm guessing that he was with us about fifteen years. Yeah, wonderful family and so forth. Then another fairly early recruit…I'm calling all of them early because, as I told you, we got a slug of money within two years of my taking the position, because of the State and because of our first of annual NHPRC grants, National Historical Publications and Records Commission. [That's] because, once we got on their red line, unless we did things wrong or stretched things out too far, we could expect money. I'll just parenthetically say here, at the very outset, our grants from NHPRC were relatively modest, maybe $70,000 or so, but they grew because, when we finished the legal papers fairly promptly with great critical success and got involved in the Lincoln papers, they were able, because they had gotten rid of some of the founding fathers (laughs) projects that we, in recent years, have been getting well over $100,000 a year from them. Then we got a three-year NEH grant that I wrote. Those are really difficult, challenges. There's an awful lot of work that goes into a 120-page grant proposal. But we got it, and that also…So, suddenly we weren't awash in money, but we could hire and did.

We also employed a young man from UIS or what was then SSU, named Christopher Schnell. He was in Springfield, having, I think, attended Northern Illinois University as an undergraduate. He too received a master's degree. I had quickly declared, and we'd agreed, that for a certain position, I guess, assistant editor, a person had to have a master's degree. We hired a few others with bachelor's degrees, who had special skills, but that was kind of a

promotion track that we had. Chris did a very nice job. He also was a student; he became a specialist on Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, as lawyers, as well as political foes. He gave a number of papers on that and wrote several articles. He left a few years ago. He wanted to pursue a Ph.D. degree in history. I'm not sure what's happened to him; I've kind of lost track. Enough on that.

Then Stacy McDermott was a very bright, journalism student. She'd gotten a journalism degree as an undergraduate and then came to Sangamon State in the Public Affairs Reporting program. Her husband was a reporter for the local *Journal-Register*.

DePue: Kevin McDermott.

Davis: Kevin McDermott, right, and then took a very important job with the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. Stacy has a sense of humor, she works hard, and she too became an invaluable colleague, with ideas and energy and some impatience. She had an impatient side that didn't bother me at all, but we always knew at a meeting that, after forty minutes, she probably would begin to edge around in the chair a little bit, which I did too. She's there still. And in the process, on her own, with two children, traveled once or twice a week to Urbana to get a Ph.D. in history, which she earned in record time and I think is to her immense credit. She didn't need it for the job here, though it certainly added to her pedigree. But I think she felt…One, intellectually she wanted it; two, in case Kevin ever moved or they decided to move, it would give her an easier opportunity for a professional position of some kind. She's become a great friend.

Then, I've mentioned Sean Brown, who was another UIS or SSU master's degree, engaging young guy and worked hard but had another side to him that got him, and us, in trouble.

Then I'm also overlooking Daniel, not Stowell…I can't think of his last name. He lives in Auburn, Illinois, and he had earned, kind of with his fingernails, a master's degree in history. He was a very nice, quiet-spoken, hardworking person. But he wasn't as suitable for going on the road and searching documents. He lacked that kind of skill; I and others agreed. But he didn't mind tedious work. In fact, he was delightedly part of this whole project. We called him, "Dan the digital man," or something like that. He did all of the copying and digitization of our copies. He did it always very, very carefully. Some of these were massive documents that had to be worked in sections. He did that for five years for us, and he did a superb job. Unfortunately, that work ended with the completion of the digitization, so he left us. But he was utterly loyal and hardworking. It was fun to be able to get him to have a professional position with us.

Then another woman, Erin Bishop. **She** was a student of mine—talk about patronage (both laugh)—very bright. She took my graduate colloquium, and she stood out from the moment. At first, we hired her as a part-time clerk because we didn't have enough money then, and she was working in some insurance job part-time. That continued for about six months, and then we were able to get her a position as…She didn't have a master's degree yet, though she earned it at some point. She eventually became another assistant editor, went on the trips. There had been some concern in our office about men and women traveling to these distant towns together and spending weeks on end. It was probably silly, but there was some concern about that. Nothing ever happened, as far as I know, to mar that, but she was a very attractive young lady and spirited, as well as intelligent. Within the office, among some people, that was a kind of a dicey matter. But it proved to be, as far as I know, unwarranted.

DePue: Was she married at that time?

Davis: No, she wasn't. But she left us to accept a Rotary [Club] scholarship in Ireland at the University of Dublin, and she stayed and got a Ph.D., maybe an Ed.D., but a doctorate; let's put it that way. We corresponded about this; I said, "You've got a job if you want to come back." But she really wanted to get that doctorate, and she enjoyed Ireland; she is of Irish descent. So, she was gone for three years, I guess. I wrote her when she was finishing, that she had a job with us if she wanted it. I think she had decided by then that she wanted to do something a little less cloistered (laughs) and a little more interactive with the public. So, she took a job with the education division of the museum [ALPLM] and did a very nice job.

DePue: I would guess that she was the very first education director for the museum.

Davis: I think so. I'm not sure she was director at the outset; she may have been; I can't recall. But she did a great job. She organized several conferences in which I participated and was just great company. She did fall in love then with someone here and got married, and I believe has a child or children. She then resigned from the museum. I have fond memories of her. She was a teaser. On April first one year, when she and others were out in Danville, researching collections. According to our script, if they found a possible Lincoln document, they were to call us and fax a copy, so we could look at it ourselves and also ask Tom Schwartz [Illinois State Historian] to look at it, before they notified the authorities there. So, she wanted to speak to me personally. She said, "Cullom, I think we have a Lincoln document, though it's a little unusual because it's Abraham G. Lincoln." (laughs) I was so busy with other things I didn't pick it up and didn't think about the date. It was an April Fool's joke, and it was beautifully played with a straight face. (both laugh) That's the kind of person she was, a tease.

When Bill Beard left, I was looking for a possible successor because I knew, within three or four years, I would want to retire. We conducted a national search, and far and away the best candidate was a man we had already gotten to know because he was doing research on a dissertation regarding Lincoln the lawyer. So, we hired him. His name is Mark…oh, god that's awful…Steiner, Mark Steiner. He was married, and it wasn't easy for them to move from Texas, which they both loved, to central Illinois. That was an issue from the outset, though I tried to help them. He was a wonderful colleague. He didn't have the patience for long deliberations in our editorial group, but he participated. But sometimes he would be impatient with that and say, "Well, you're all crazy," but never to the point of being a problem.

He also was early in telling us that we were foolish not to have bought the software to have Windows. Back in those days, Windows was pretty new. This was in the mid- to late nineties. And Marty Denner, our long-time assistant, who then became our digital expert, thought that it was imprudent. But he [Steiner] argued for it, and he was right. So, we converted to Windows. He was a great friend, and everyone liked him a lot. But he and his lovely wife, who had twins, by the way, twin children, became tired of living in Illinois. He told me, after just, I guess one, or was it two years—I can't remember—they decided to move back to Texas, where he got a job with the law school, teaching law but also legal history. So, he could work on his manuscript too. But he gave papers for us; he published a wonderful article about libel cases, wonderful article that everyone reads, and we've remained close. But they were happier in Texas. So, that particular effort on my part worked for a few years, but then I was back at square one.

By 1997, maybe, I was once again looking for an associate director. It would have to be someone with a Ph.D. and some experience. That's when Daniel applied. Right away, I liked him; he struck me as very broad-thinking and intelligent and acute. He had a way of sizing up situations.

DePue: Where did he come from?

Davis: He was from the University of Florida. He had had a couple of part-time jobs. He was a Ph.D. from Florida, or is it Georgia, one of the two. He picked up jobs; he worked at an historic site for a year, part-time, and he did some other things, but he published some things as well. So, he was on the market, one of those classic cases in the 1990's of someone who had a Ph.D. but couldn't get a job. He enjoyed teaching; he had taught, but he also really enjoyed research. He had managed to work on his dissertation, beyond its passage, to produce a book-length version, a potential book version, very quickly. He had the drive; no doubt about it, a wonderful family. After considering other candidates, he was our first choice. He fit in beautifully in the final years, before we published the DVD-ROM edition. He was very important to that. I gradually was kind of letting go of things. I no longer taught; I was winding down to some extent. And I knew he would be a good replacement. He lacked, and to

some extent still lacks, the diplomatic schmooze skills that I have in raising money and kind of interacting with people. He knows that, and it's just part of his nature. Though he's improved, but he just doesn't have the patience for fools, the way I do. (DePue laughs) I've counseled him; I continue to be an intimate advisor to him and the project, unofficially. I'm proud to do that, and I think he has done a superb job. In fact, he's so much better organized than I was that he had the staff producing remarkable work in a beautifully arranged, systematic fashion, on the book edition.

I had conceived the contents and format of that book edition, but he tweaked it in many ways and got everyone working together in harness so that it was published within a remarkably short period of time, seven years, I guess, something like that. I had agreed, argued all along, that this ought to be a book, a volume of representative cases, but also important ones. So, there'd be representativeness, but also diversity, and that we would have a chapter on Lincoln's law practice, even though it didn't involve cases, but it was important…his law education, and then cases. And we would have a sample Sangamon County Circuit, a circuit year in there, as an example of how he spent most of his time, just picked a year and intensely explored the cases of that year, as a relatively representative circuit riding year for him. Excuse me; go ahead.

DePue: I wanted to take a step back because I think we're getting into another topic I wanted to discuss. I'm a bit confused, or I'm not clear on…You've got the DVD, and now you're talking about a book. Is the book just a portion of what would be on the DVD?

Davis: No. We all along had agreed they were two absolutely separate editions. One was the complete edition, in manuscript form, except for our introductory material and this amazing index we produced, amazing index, it's all photocopies of records, organized by case.

DePue: This is what's on the DVD?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Can you talk a little bit about getting from "Well, we think we want to do it on a microfiche" to "Let's do it on a DVD"?

Davis: I'm trying to reconstruct that. It's a little hazy for me, but as I recall—and I credit Marty Denner with this, and then Mark Steiner reinforced it—that microfilm or microfiche were rapidly becoming passé and that we could break new ground, not only with the organization of our files digitally, which we were lucky enough to be able to do, but also to produce a digital version, publish a digital version. There was some question whether we would just put it on the Internet, but the Internet then was still a little murky. We could have

done it on CD, but it would have been a big bunch of CDs. So, DVD arrived just in time for us to use as the medium of publication.

DePue: Prior to this, you'd go into a library some place, and there would be this set of seventeen volumes of Jefferson's papers or Adams or whoever. Why did you elect not to do that?

Davis: Very simply, the age of those massive book editions was ending. They had become dinosaurs in the business because each successive edition would sell fewer and fewer copies. The university presses that were involved in publishing began to say, "We can't do this to sell 400 copies of the new book." It was only libraries that were buying them. They needed subventions [grants] from either the project or from the NHPRC to even publish them. The market for those big, thick volumes was diminishing rapidly. Furthermore, because of the definition we had of Lincoln's legal career, there were many, many, many, many documents in our file that didn't have Lincoln's handwriting in them, but they pertained to his cases. So, we knew that would be, for print purposes, a lot of wasted paper and effort. We didn't transcribe those documents for the DVD-ROM edition. We simply photocopied them or digitized them; that was by Dan, not Stowell. So, there were two very distinct editions, a complete edition, but in digital form, exclusively, with some wonderful finding aids and introduction, an essay about Lincoln's legal career—

DePue: Written by?

Davis: John Lupton. I had taken a stab at it because I had agreed to do that, but my colleagues and I disagreed over the nature of that essay. I thought it should be a reflection of what we had learned from looking at the papers. They thought it should be just a standard, garden variety, Lincoln legal essay. I did a version, and it met with the universal distaste of my colleagues. I could have been arbitrary and said, "Well, this is the way it's going to be." But by that time, we were a mutually respecting organization. So, I said, "Look, if you think we need that, okay, but I can't write that essay because to me it's just old material. There are a lot of thirty-page essays about Lincoln the lawyer, and we won't be adding anything new to it. We'd just be providing a background for people to use it."

They may have been right about that, but John Lupton, typical of his statesmanship, stepped in, dropped everything and wrote that essay in about two months. And it was a sore point; it was a real sore point in our group.

Some of my colleagues felt that I had simply not cooperated, and the head of it aught to cooperate. Well, I cooperated in the sense of accepting their version, but I didn't feel that I could or would write it myself because it seemed to me stale. We got along fine, but several people said, "Well, Cullom, you let us down when we needed you." I understand that. It helped

me decide that maybe my usefulness to the project was coming to an end. I had been fabulous in its early years, in recruiting, raising visibility, making friends and raising money, fabulous, and in bringing credibility to the project. But on these matters, I was of less direct value. They'd been doing the searches in the counties; they'd been doing the transcribing and the editing, and they knew more about the subject than I did, and I knew that.

DePue: Was that a function in part because you were still tied to the university and had, for most of these years, been teaching and—

Davis: Yes, though I was about ready to retire from teaching, too. I had built up my pension by twelve-month employment. For years I had been nine-month employed. That basically increased my pension by one-third. I was reaching the point where I thought I could retire, in stages.

DePue: The people you mentioned that were raising concerns, were those people within your staff—

Davis: Yes, absolutely.

DePue: …or outside the program?

Davis: I don't remember that being an issue outside, not that some didn't have an opinion. I don't remember talking to Tom Schwartz about it. But my colleagues were free to talk to others about it, and maybe they complained about me; I don't know. But I was facing pretty much a unanimous point of view on this, and I didn't want to fight it. So, I surrendered to it. Stacy, in particular—and I respected her for it—was really disappointed in me, although we were and are good friends. She felt that I had let them down. I felt a little differently, but I understood.

DePue: Was part of that because you had the name recognition, and it would have looked better if you had written it, and it was your name on there?

Davis: I don't know. I don't think these essays that we gave bylines to. Maybe John has a byline for his essay on Lincoln, but by and large, we were an editorial team. There was also a section of maps; there was a chronology; there was a glossary of terms. We all contributed to those various component parts. I don't think, separately, our names were on it; we were a collective editorship.

DePue: We've talked about the DVD. I know I kind of interrupted your thought process—

Davis: That's okay. No, I'm glad to straighten that out.

DePue: …getting on to the book.

Davis: All along, we knew there had to be some sort of book edition. But given the nature of the Lincoln papers, it had to be a relatively focused and narrow portion of that mass of over 100,000 documents. So, we developed various criteria. One of the general points that I asserted—and publishers agreed—was that, if you publish a series of three or four volumes, in order, the sales of the fourth volume will never approach the sales of the first. So, we thought, we're going to do all of this in one fell-swoop.

Four volumes, published simultaneously, in a cardboard slip-box is much more attractive to publishers, even though the price was heavy, than the other is. That was an early decision, that we had the advantage over all of our predecessor founding fathers' papers. (both laugh) We said, we will just patiently wait, and get it done. We got it done in seven years, eight years, so it really was okay. We were working on it before we even got the DVD-ROM published, because as soon as we could, we shifted people to transcription and editing of the selected papers.

Daniel conducted a series of staff meetings, considering the criteria for selecting a case and the diversity in time and location and subject matter, just myriads of ways of looking at this mass of material. I sat in on those, though I was…I retired in 2000, after the DVD-ROM edition, though I remained as a part-time consultant. I sat in on those meetings, but I wasn't essential to them; it was their baby. But they were well conducted and systematically organized by Daniel. That was one of the great accomplishments.

They managed to whittle down 5,000 cases to about fifty, and they decided to do not one, but two tours of the eighth judicial circuit, one of them fairly early, one of them fairly late. That was a whole different kind of material you don't usually see in a documentary edition, early cases, late cases, federal cases, state cases, appellate cases, litigant cases, you name it. Some of the obvious ones were like the Almanac Case, the most famous in Lincoln's work, and a few other murder cases. We had to pick debt cases because they were the most numerous, and we picked some that we thought were particularly interesting or representative, contract cases, libel, slander, you name it. They conducted that work, and I observed it and occasionally answered questions or contributed my point of view. But I was, for all practical purposes, just another colleague, without doing all that much work.

DePue: Do you know at what point in time the ALA [Abraham Lincoln Association] or some higher, maybe it was the trustees, said "Yes, we like your vision of doing both the DVD and this book?" Was that something known from the early days?

Davis: They approved it; the board approved it. Tom agreed; he understood it better than most.

DePue: Tom Schwartz.

Davis: Tom Schwartz. The ALA, I don't remember; it came up. We met once a year with my advisory board, which was a very active group, lot of lawyers locally, some scholars and others, and we tested these ideas on them. As I recall, by and large, for most of them this was over their head, technically anyway, but they approved it. Our editorial board…We had a small board of excellent, documentary editors who advised us, some five people, and they approved this idea, which was very important; it gave it kind of the sanction of the profession.

DePue: Was this, again, several years prior to the time the DVD was actually published?

Davis: Yes. We had an editorial board and the advisory board from the very beginning, in 1988. Well, it actually pre-existed when I came. I improved it. We got some very good appointments to it, and I turned those meetings into very informative and popular events. We were well-attended because locally, at least, people enjoyed finding out…and I always had my colleagues—I didn't dominate them—I had my colleagues present a particular question or a sample case that we had come up with, that was always interesting to these people. So, we had them, forgive me, in the palm of our hands, and they helped us raise money.

We had a fundraising effort that I initiated through our newsletter mailing list and from the ALA, that at its peak, raised over $20,000 a year. It didn't stay at that peak terribly long, but it was a very welcome additional form of support. All these were underway. The Editorial Advisory Board came a little later in the nineties, but we had it to review some of the cases in our DVD-ROM edition, some of the material that we wrote in it, but they really played an important role in reviewing sample chapters from the book edition.

DePue: So, the book edition was something that was pretty early in this whole cycle, as well, knowing that you wanted the DVD—

Davis: We knew we were going to do it. We talked about the form it should take and made important decisions about what documents we would include. It had to be by case and very limited number of cases; we measured that fifty was about all we could expect to get out of this. But the actual selection of cases occurred under Daniel's leadership.

DePue: The next series of questions…Maybe this is about the transition period, where you're stepping away, and Daniel's taking the lead, but it's the whole discussion, the evolution from the Lincoln Legal Papers to the Papers of Abraham Lincoln.

Davis: Yes. I didn't think of it because I didn't have a job to worry about losing. (DePue laughs) I'm being cynical there, but—

DePue: But the cynic does take that as approach; just invent something else to—

Davis: Right. I used to tell people, "Look, this is an expensive project, but it's going to end." And my colleagues probably took a dim view of that. No, there was a need for it. No question about it. I credit Daniel and Stacy and John figuring out that it was long past due for there to be a new edition of Lincoln's works. The collected works of the 1950s lacked an awful lot of stuff that had later come to the surface.

Of course, it totally lacked the legal papers, and it did not include any incoming mail. If Lincoln got an important letter from a politician, all it included was Lincoln's answer and maybe a footnote that says, "letter from so-and-so." To really understand what's going on there, you need important incoming mail as well.

DePue: I can't imagine the researchers'…What would be the right word? Disgust, dismay, when they find out there's only half of the material there?

Davis: I'm not sure that they thought of it that way. Lincoln was the focus, and the footnotes were enough to say at least who wrote this and maybe the subject, in a few words. But if you're really, in details, interested, say in Lincoln's policy towards the Native Americans, particularly in Minnesota, they're going to want to know all this. And instead of having to look up all these other letters, wherever they may be, they will have the opportunity, in this edition, to see all of that correspondence. That was an important decision.

Then it took Daniel's and his colleagues' imagination to structure this overall architecture, on top of the Lincoln Legal Papers. The way they did it was a tri-partite assemblage, the legal papers, probably 1830 to 1861, and then the Illinois papers; that's his general assembly service, his congressional service, and his politics in Illinois.

DePue: Would it also include his personal papers?

Davis: Yes, of course. *The Illinois Years* is well underway, and it will be released as a separate entity. They're not going to wait until the others are done, I believe, [to] release the Illinois papers. I don't know what that will be, probably two or three volumes, at least, and then the presidential papers.

That's been the **huge** challenge that's meant we have a staff of three people or so in Washington working full-time, as well as an enlarged staff here. It's become a **big** operation. I think they're right about it. There was a fight with the funding agencies, not with the historic preservation agency. They were fully in favor of Daniel's idea because they would be its sponsor. But there was a rival plan by some respected historians to do a quickie edition as part of the [Lincoln] Bicentennial in 2009.

DePue: Are you willing to discuss the names here?

Davis: Sure, sure. Michael Burlingame, who then was living in Washington; Doug Wilson in Galesburg.[41] He and his partner, Rodney Davis, had already started a very interesting and productive research and writing program at Knox College, with support from grants.[42] They thought they could oversee this.

So, they developed a rival plan, and it was attractive to many members of the Abraham Lincoln Association Board because it would be a bicentennial project. It would be through…It would be finished in six years. That was attractive because people had trouble understanding how Daniel's plan, with color digitization and incoming as well as outgoing mail and everything else there, and that massive search of the Library of Congress and the archives, which they [Wilson and Davis] didn't plan to do; they were just going to use things that had been discovered since the collective work came out. So, theirs was a much less ambitious plan.

DePue: How far along were they in the execution stage?

Davis: They were making good progress. They had a friend in the Library of Congress who was very supportive of them. They didn't get federal grants, and we didn't either for a few years, because the NEH and the NHPRC said, "Look, you people (laughs) resolve your differences, and either merge or do something because we won't support competing efforts," which is understandable.

They had limited financial resources, though Michael Burlingame was able to get a grant from the foundation that puts on the annual Lincoln Prize [Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize]. I can't think of the name of it; it's based in New York City, a couple of wealthy Wall Street investors. He got a nice grant from them.

They began to do some work, and because of the cooperation of the Library of Congress, they were working on that. There were several very tense meetings of the Abraham Lincoln Association Board, where the spokesmen offered their different versions. And I—although I was no longer an active member of the board because I had retired from it—I was an emeritus member, so I could attend.

I'll never forget one very tense meeting, where several board members said, "Listen…" Oh, I didn't mention the other people, Michael Burlingame;

[41]Douglas L. Wilson is a professor and co-director of Lincoln Studies Center and the George A. Lawrence Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of English at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. He co-directs the Lincoln Studies Center along with his colleague Rodney O. Davis. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_L._Wilson)

[42] Rodney O. Davis was a professor and the Szold Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of History at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. He was co-director, Lincoln Studies Center. (https://www.knox.edu/academics/majors-and-minors/history/faculty/davis-rodney-o)

Doug Wilson; Chuck Stroger, Charles Stroger, sorry.[43] They were represented, I think at that meeting, by Doug Wilson and his friend Rod Davis. Chuck couldn't be there, but he had enlisted several good friends on the Lincoln board, who really championed his cause. They liked me too, but they didn't know Daniel particularly well. A few of them had met him and found him a little abrasive, maybe. I'm not sure, but they, at least, didn't react to him the way they had to me.

It was a stalemate. They really wanted…They kept saying, "Why can't you merge?" I don't remember how Doug and the others viewed that; they may have been favorably disposed toward it. It would have been a division of the work into two different groups. Daniel said, "That can't work. You can't have uniformity in practice when two different heads are splitting the work." I think, fundamentally, Daniel was right. Now you can say also, he was determined to have it all himself, which is what he got.

DePue: What was the division; do you recall? Was it the early years versus the presidential years? Was it something like that?

Davis: I don't know what it would have been, maybe that. It was just they thought… I think somebody thought that, since Doug and Rod had worked hard on the debates, they could do the debates.

DePue: Because that was the area of their scholarship previously to this?

Davis: They had a special interest in that, and they could work on that. It's not hard; the documents, in newspaper form, are available.

DePue: That's a natural connection since one of the debates, obviously, was at Knox College.

Davis: Exactly, exactly. They had a plausible case, and I think they said, "We're willing to share this." But Daniel argued—and I think he's absolutely right, having been an editor—it's hard enough to get uniformity under your own roof, but if you have four people, scattered around the country, representing one side and an office here representing the other, there never will be a uniformity of processing and action.

We just bickered for a couple of years, and finally they ran out of money. But I don't think Doug has ever forgiven Daniel for that, maybe not me, though we've been pleasant. But I later felt, when 2009 came, for them to feel that they could have had a decent replacement for the collected works was absolutely absurd. It would have been a waste of paper and money because it wouldn't add incrementally to what is needed. I thought it was important, if

[43] Michael Burlingame is an American historian, noted for his works on Abraham Lincoln. He is a Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Chair in Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois, Springfield. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Burlingame_(historian)

we're going to do this, to do it absolutely right, the best we can, as a bicentennial monument, but not produced in that…just like the Lincoln Memorial was never finished by the time of the Lincoln Centennial. But no one complains about that; it takes time.

I think Daniel was right, and I pushed hard for that. I made a few enemies, but I think, now, people with the Abraham Lincoln Association are proud of their association with this. But for a few years, there was kind of enmity between the board, its officers, and Daniel and his staff.

DePue: The people that you mentioned were coming up with the alternate proposal, Wilson and Davis and Stroger and others, did they have the editorial experience that your staff had?

Davis: Doug certainly does, and Rod has a lot; Chuck had no editorial experience. Burlingame has edited books, but he hasn't edited documents. Burlingame has edited about ten books related to Lincoln, and there are diaries, but they're not editing documents. He could have done it, but he was busy writing his massive biography. Chuck Stroger was busy writing a couple of psycho-history books, not related to Lincoln. Rod and Doug had their own agenda, so it wasn't really very realistic. They assumed they would coalesce on this, but Michael was not going to divert an iota of attention [from] finishing his books by 2009, and he barely made it as it is. I thought they were unrealistic; they were too satisfied with a half-effort, and I think time has proved them wrong. But I still am good friends with all of them, I think.

DePue: It's kind of like going to a family reunion; it's got all this history, and then people have their own views; they have their own personalities. It's not always going to be smooth.

Davis: That's right. It wasn't pleasant. Eventually, when we survived and NHPRC and NEH supported us fairly handsomely actually, I think they were relieved, though they knew it would take longer. I think, by that time, they had great confidence in Daniel and his staff. They even got us a nice, modest grant from the Abraham Lincoln Association last year, as a peace gesture of sorts.

DePue: Going back a little bit—

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Whatever happened with the preface that **you** wrote for the DVD version?

Davis: (laughs) It's been deep-sixed, as far as I know, the thumbnail sketch of Lincoln as a lawyer. It may surprise you, I had felt that at the very least, this essay should use some of the statistics we had about the nature of Lincoln's law practice, how many were debt cases; how many were criminal cases, this and that; how many were appellate; how many not?

Not that it would be totally statistical, but I thought, This is what we've learned. People won't know it by looking through all this. We should tell them what we've learned about Lincoln's law practice from the data that we have collected and amassed. I thought it was a sound argument. It wouldn't make for the most exciting essay, and I knew that, and I like to write interestingly. I tried to make it interesting, but it was a flat bust with my colleagues.

DePue: Never any thought of publishing it separately as an article someplace?

Davis: No, no.

DePue: Why not?

Davis: There was kind of a sour taste in my mouth, and I did have some other book projects then. This one. it wouldn't have been a book; it would have been an article. I just treated it as a lost cause. I had done what I thought ought to be done; they had disagreed; I deferred to them, and that was it.

DePue: I would like to turn now…Maybe this is a good segue, talking about this article and taking a different approach to what we have learned, to ask you some more reflective questions about Abraham Lincoln and his legal career and what you personally learned about it.

How about this? Let's start with an overview, if you can—I don't mean to put you on the spot too much—something of Lincoln's legal practice and the Eighth Judicial Circuit.

Davis: I learned—and some other earlier biographers had hinted at this—I should say, **we** learned that Lincoln was far and away the most assiduous participant in the eighth circuit, twice a year for a long time. The circuit boundaries changed; the county seats changed, but essentially it remained a band of counties, stretching across Illinois in the midsection. He was, we discovered, much more active in that practice than any other lawyer, although Judge David Davis was there also all the time. So, that was one thing. This was a bigger deal than anyone realized.

Most scholars, with all due respects, had taken a poke in looking at a couple of documents that existed here in the library and decided, this stuff is all insignificant, legal stuff; I'm not going to bother with it. So, they would typically write about the eighth circuit in terms of its social life, the lawyers gathering together in some distant inn, sitting nose-to-toe…or sleeping nose-to-toe in an attic and telling stories and all. That's true, but it's very familiar. You won't see much else in what they said about Lincoln's eighth circuit law practice.

They, when they talked about other cases, it was about the ones that were already well-known, the so-called Chicken Bone Case, the Rock Island

Bridge Company Case, the Matson Slave Case, and the Manny - McCormack Patent Case. Those were ones that were already well-known from a couple of books that had been written about Lincoln's law practice, years and years and years ago. If a biographer decided to a least touch on his law practice, it was always minimally and from those familiar secondary sources.

I learned there was a lot more there than they had ever dreamed, in volume and also in importance. We discovered documents of Lincoln's that were previously unknown, that told us a lot about his practice, particularly in a few murder cases and other fraudulent work. Even the debt work had a certain interest to it, and we thought it deserved attention, though it was penny-ante stuff. The slander cases never had been talked about before, and the libel cases had never been; the divorce cases, ignored; bestiality, ignored; post office fraud; a lot of cases that got his attention. Some he lost; some he won. His appellate cases, we studied much more thoroughly than anyone else did. It was/is a revelation, I think. I still am not satisfied with what biographers are doing about the law practice.

Our publication, publications, the two big ones, the DVD-ROM and the books, had a major influence on two very good, recent monographs about Lincoln the lawyer, one by Mark Steiner, I mentioned, and the other by Bryan Derks, [who] teaches in Indiana. They both have been through the papers here, and they're the first scholars of this modern age to have made use of this collection in a way that contributes to what we know about Lincoln.

The only other one who could be remotely considered is David [Herbert] Donald, who wrote, of course, a major biography of Lincoln, published in the 1990's. He took the trouble, as only he could because he was an indefatigable researcher, to spend weeks out here one summer, going through just the files we had. We didn't have the DVD-ROM edition or anything yet. He went through files, so that he could write a very good chapter, a whole chapter (both laugh) in a thirty-chapter book about Lincoln the lawyer and then refer to Lincoln's law practice in other chapters. It was a decent job for a full-scale biography.

DePue: Much of what you've talked about today and written in articles, the historians now are rediscovering an aspect of Lincoln that has been overlooked. So, how good a lawyer was Lincoln, for his day and age?

Davis: For his day and age and place and education, he was very good. He had a stature in Central Illinois, and concentrically in Illinois, that was very high among his peers because he was a gifted courtroom advocate; he studied hard; he carefully presented his cases and was respected for his judgment. And he has enough successful cases, or even a good job in unsuccessful cases, to prove that.

Some of the myths about Lincoln the lawyer, we managed to blow out of the water. One of them was that he would never take a client with whom he did not philosophically and morally sympathize. Lincoln was a lawyer. He knew…For one thing it was his bread and butter, so he shouldn't turn down clients. Secondly, he knew that the nature of the American legal system depended upon adversarial justice. Somebody has to represent each side. He accepted defending murderers or alleged murderers; some of them were. He defended a slave owner. He defended railroads and plaintiffs against railroads. He took clients if he thought he could make some money and do a respectable job for it. That's very different from the standard, syrupy notion, the kind of Carl Sandburg notion, that he would only represent clients whom he admired.[44]

DePue: How about some of the other myths that you managed to debunk?

Davis: One myth was that this was not a very important part of his life. I'm not sure a lot of historians still don't think it's not that important. I'll have to live with that, but I think time will tell about that. They…what are some of the other myths?

DePue: Well, I read in one of your articles—maybe the number has increased now, but—a total of something like 5,000 cases, at roughly 200 per year?

Davis: Um-hmm.

DePue: I'm totally unfamiliar with how many cases a lawyer today would take on, but that seems to me to be excessive.

Davis: It's very high, but you have to footnote that by saying, these cases, most of them, were **very** routine, consisting of the filing of a plea, a continuance and a couple of witnesses maybe. So, the paper record of these cases, without a trial transcript, which only rarely existed, is pretty modest. So, he could represent ten clients in two days in the Champaign County Courthouse on the tour, one week to two days, so the case numbers piled up.

DePue: What's your sense of Lincoln…about which aspect of the law practice do you think he felt most at home, most astute? Was it doing the research, or was it the office appointments? Was it when he was in a courtroom and trying cases or—

Davis: That's a tough one to answer. He did enjoy trying cases. He did the research he needed to do, though he had a junior attorney, William Herndon, who did a lot of research for him. One of his highest joys, I think, was success. This was the first career or job, in which he fairly quickly began to enjoy recognition

[44] Carl August Sandburg was an American poet, writer, and editor. He won three Pulitzer Prizes: two for his poetry and one for his biography of Abraham Lincoln. During his lifetime, Sandburg was widely regarded as "a major figure in contemporary literature." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Sandburg)

and success. That was inestimably important to him. He said so on numerous occasions, that "I want to be admired by people, and I want to be successful." This was a career that gave him those. I think pride in success—I don't say it's inappropriate pride, either—was part of it.

A healthy income, by those standards, enabled him to support a fairly expense-minded wife, frills-minded wife, and to support his children, so he could basically dote on his children. I think also, it made him really feel good to enjoy the friendship, colleague-ship, rivalry, of other lawyers, in Chicago and around the circuit. That was a crowd of people whose association he enjoyed a great deal.

DePue: Did he enjoy the adversarial nature of the courtroom itself, taking on other lawyers?

Davis: I think he did. He rarely shouted, but he was very good at pulling one on the opposition. I think he proved to be a very tough adversary in court, over and over again. I'm sure he took satisfaction in that. He didn't want to…I've never seen evidence that he wanted to totally embarrass someone or smother them, but he loved to win a point. He would do so often very quietly, without bombast, but he would do it, through logic and some evidence that he managed to focus on.

One of the things he enjoyed…this was the perfect handmaiden to his political ambitions, which never really ended, never really abandoned him. He had political ambitions, except for that short period of time after he left congress. He returned to law practice and wasn't involved in politics because there was no issue, with the Whigs being kind of discombobulated, that really grabbed his attention, until the Kansas-Nebraska crisis. The rest of the time, he always was a politician, as well as a lawyer, and he did both of those on the circuit. There's no doubt that he engaged in politicking and speechmaking on the circuit, as well as practice in the courts. It was a beautiful companion to his political instincts also.

DePue: How did he see himself? Did he see himself as a politician who also practiced law or as a lawyer who loved politics?

Davis: I couldn't begin to answer that. It's a decent, important question; I just don't have sufficient insight into his personal motives to know that. He certainly didn't shirk energy in practicing law **or** in practicing politics. He devoted enormous effort to both of them. I can't differentiate those, other than to say he did decide by 1860 that, if possible, he would enter public office. That would mean dropping his law career. Though, as you know, he allegedly told Herndon, the day before he left town, "Keep the sign up, and I'll be back in four years or whenever."

DePue: From your perspective then, he wasn't just a lawyer because it was a good avenue to being a politician?

Davis: No, he did it for the income as much as anything. He needed stature and middle-class status. I think that was a chief component of his work. That's why he labored on the circuit. It wasn't terribly remunerative, but it earned him enough to make the trip worthwhile.

DePue: One of his very good friends on the circuit was David Davis?

Davis: Yes.

DePue: Who became a judge and very well known. Did Lincoln ever pursue that one?

Davis: No.

DePue: Did he have the temperament for it?

Davis: It's hard to say. I'm not sure he would have had the patience for it, but I can't say for certain. But he did agree. Occasionally Davis would want to return home to Bloomington, maybe his wife was ill; maybe he was bored or whatever, and he would, by an understanding the two had, he would turn the management of the court on the circuit over to Lincoln, as an acting judge, and Lincoln did that. He didn't want to because it meant that he couldn't argue the cases (both laugh) that he was going to make some money from. He didn't get any money for this; it was a gesture of respect and support for David Davis, which was amply returned in many ways.

All he did, really, was preside, instruct the clerk and usually continue cases. He didn't hear very many cases, unless they were so obvious and routine that he could do so. If there was an agreement among the sides, he could approve the agreement, but he deferred everything. So, it was just a pro forma sort of service, but he did it, I think at least six times in the course of his circuit work.

DePue: You've probably already answered this. What was the one thing that especially surprised you about Lincoln's legal career, that you just did not expect to find going in?

Davis: I have to think about that for a moment. A lot of things, as I think about it, surprised me. But probably the biggest surprise, given his family life and how unpleasant it was to be on the circuit for four months twice a year, three to four months twice a year, he did it. It was partly for money, partly for political contacts, partly for camaraderie. Some people think it was to escape Mary (laughs). I'm not sure it was to escape Mary because he loved his children, and he loved her, but she was an emotional challenge to him. He loved his children. I think he just did find the company of fellow lawyers to be enjoyable. So, he went through that. But when you think about it, half to two-

thirds of a year, horseback or stage coach riding, in miserable, as well as pleasant weather, was not a great…Well, he was like a salesman, a traveling salesman.

DePue: My guess is he didn't have many of the comforts of home in all these places he was overnighting.

Davis: Never, never, greasy food and then sleeping six to an attic, a tiny attic. This was not comfortable at all. He couldn't carry much in the way of law books with him, so he would usually…When he got a client who just approached him outside the court, he would say, "I'll plead your case—I know enough to do that—and then seek a continuance." He would then do the work, back in Springfield, and be prepared to represent him later.

DePue: In spite of the massive efforts you've been involved with over the last twenty-some years, I've learned from some people, that there's an awful lot you didn't find, because it was destroyed; it was lost somewhere in the process.

Davis: Stolen, destroyed by fire or actually removed as unimportant. They didn't know they had some Lincolns in there. We found out, even those that kept their records, didn't realize there were Lincoln documents there. Yes, a lot. We don't know the percentage, but I think most of the Bloomington courthouse records were destroyed by fire.

DePue: Which would have been a very active place where he was practicing.

Davis: Oh, absolutely. Not all of them, but a good portion. Some of the Sangamon County records were thrown away years ago for some reason, probably space. Somebody said, "We're running out of space." And then a lot of people lifted these things; Herndon himself did. When a friend would ask him for a Lincoln signature, quite often Herndon would go down to the Sangamon County Courthouse, find a Lincoln document, and with a razor, cut the signature, just the signature, which was unfortunate. At least it didn't keep us from identifying his handwriting. We also knew, if a signature had been removed, it was a pretty good likelihood that it had been Lincoln's signature. (both laugh)

DePue: When I talked to Daniel Stowell, in preparation for this, he also mentioned a fire in Chicago?

Davis: Well, **the** fire, the Chicago fire, I guess, is the one he's talking about.

DePue: Well it must be, but he's got a date of 1855.

Dais: Oh.

DePue: Were there cases that he was working on in Chicago at that time?

Davis: Federal cases, yes. The federal district and circuit court, both had Lincoln documents, and they were probably the ones that were burned in the Chicago fire.

DePue: That's a good segue here, I think, because maybe from…I'm not a Lincoln scholar by any stretch. I'm probably the guy who believes all these Lincoln myths about his practice. I knew about the circuit, but when reading a couple of your articles, I was struck that there was so much of his work that was appellate cases, that was state and federal court system. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Davis: Yes. And I was right about that; I wasn't exaggerating. There were several hundred Illinois Supreme Court cases, absolutely. Most of them, in one form or another, have survived at least on the docket pages. We've done a fair job of retrieving that material and the same in federal cases. Again, it's several hundred cases. A lot of those have been lost to history, except for dual entries in some of these court records that are now in the national archives.

I have to say that it is important to remember that, while that's a lot of Supreme Court cases and a lot of lawyers would be thrilled to be involved in one or two Supreme Court cases for their whole career, a lot of these were really modest in quantity. There was no monetary limit. You could sue for thirty dollars and have the case go before the Illinois Supreme Court. At that time, if you appealed a county court, there was no intermediate court system that they have now. They have appellate districts around the state. It went straight to the Illinois Supreme Court. So, a lot of stuff of pretty modest significance is among those cases. But it's a fact that there are that many Supreme Court cases.

For the federal cases, some of them became truly noteworthy. There's a least a dozen that, if they didn't set precedent, they helped strengthen precedent. That's an important matter for any lawyer. But a lot of those 200 cases, the biggest single number is bankruptcy cases. In the early 1840's a national bankruptcy law went into effect briefly, so the bankruptcy business flourished. Lincoln's new partner, Stephen T. Logan, was an experienced lawyer, could practice in the Federal District Court here. Lincoln received approval to practice in the district court here, and he handled a fair number of bankruptcy cases, which are not insignificant, but they weren't exactly setting legal paths, okay? (laughs)

Bankruptcy, it's an interesting subject for a dissertation, and we give it a fair amount of attention in our various publications. But those weren't the truly, most important cases. In both instances, I'm hedging the statistical definition slightly, but I'm not backing off on the numbers.

DePue: How about corporate law? There would be another thing that I guess anyone who has read enough about Lincoln knows he did, especially later in career, get into corporate law.

Davis: He did. I don't know if you could call it corporate; they didn't call it corporate law then. He did represent an increasing number of corporations, though they never reached a point of out-numbering his individual cases. He represented a number of different railroads, and he also sued a number of different railroads. He represented a bridge company. He represented a couple of steamship companies. He represented a corporation of owning land on the north shore of the Chicago River on Lake Michigan. It was a trust, actually. And he represented an agricultural implement manufacturer, who was being sued by McCormack. Yes, he had a fair number of corporate clients. He was on the verge—let's put it this way—he was on the verge of establishing a corporate practice, but he was in Springfield.

If he had really wanted that corporate practice to blossom, he wouldn't have run for president, and he would have probably moved to Chicago or even New York. He could have, I think, established a comfortable practice in the federal courts had he moved and not been elected president. I'm not regretting his decision; it's just that he was what, fifty-two when he was elected president and healthy. It's conceivable he would have practiced for another fifteen to twenty years.

DePue: I assume the money was in those kinds of cases.

Davis: Oh sure, much better money. I knew the one case that he made the most on was the Illinois Central Railroad Tax Case. His fee was $5,000, which is about three years worth of ordinary income for him.

DePue: A couple of questions linked to his time as president. Can you see, now that you have this more intimate knowledge of Lincoln as a lawyer, how that manifested itself when he became president?

Davis: I think so. I don't claim to be a Lincoln scholar in Lincoln's life. I am a scholar of his law practice. But to me, there are some pretty obvious manifestations of his legal habits and practices and skills in his presidential career. One, he had a methodical, logical way of addressing policy issues, a way that is very familiar to a lawyer, basically noting the pros and cons and thinking them through. He had demonstrated that a lot as a political candidate, when he addressed the New York City audience in the spring of 1860.

He also demonstrated them as president. Probably the best example of that is the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which, as one famous American historian noted, "It has all the eloquence of a bill of lading." (both laugh) That's true. If you read that, it's pretty dull stuff.

DePue: Which practically nobody every does.

Davis: That's right, exactly (both laugh). It's very legalistic, but that was his point. He was making, essentially, a constitutional and legal point, that he had the authority, not because the Constitution gave him directly that authority, but as commander in chief in a war [had] the authority. That was his argument, which he couldn't use until we were at war and had been at war long enough for him to dare it. So, that is a legal document, basically.

Certainly, his debates with Stephen A. Douglas and his oratory were profoundly affected by his law practice. Law, court arguments, take the form of a debate, by-and-large, not quite as stylized as a debate, but it's very much the same. His skills in the debates were reflected in his law experience. In fact, his first debate at Ottawa, he probably depended on his law skills too much. Much of that was delivered like a legal brief, and it was a little dry. He talked as if he were addressing a courtroom, using some legal terminology that he didn't use again in the debates. I'm guessing, I'm speculating, others have too, that he realized or was told that you can argue with the logic of a lawyer, but use common, everyday language when you do. He did well in the debates; he got better as they proceeded. But there's no doubt that his ability to puncture Douglas's arguments was born, in part, from his experience arguing in court.

DePue: We're in the season of political debates right now, and everybody looks back at Lincoln and Douglas as the classic example of the debates. I wonder if they realize we've got one-and-a-half minutes to respond today and how long did they have?

Davis: It's sound bite time now, which is kind of too bad, though they had two hours, dividing their time according to a pre-arranged calendar. That's a long time to talk to an audience, most of whom were standing and barely within earshot. It's amazing when you think about it. There was no amplification and a lot of murmuring in the audience. It's odd to contemplate that crowd interest, but he and Douglas somehow generated it. These were hot topics of the day, no doubt about it.

DePue: I wonder if you could also take a look at his legislative experience. He's got experience as a lawyer. Then he becomes an executive. Where does somebody learn how to be an executive of one of the most vibrant countries in the midst of a terrible war?

Davis: Yeah. That's a book best written by someone other than I. There has been a recent book about that by a man very capable, James McPherson, who wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning history of the Civil War and has been a Lincoln scholar for years.

DePue: Is that *Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*?

Davis: Yes, right. Though, of course, he focuses on the war part of his leadership. Frankly it's a very derivative book; there's nothing particularly new in it. Though I admire McPherson a lot, like a lot of Lincoln scholars, he had to get a book out for the bicentennial, I believe.

As far as the rest of it is concerned, to me it remains a mystery. He stumbled a lot at the outset. He stumbled in creating his cabinet, in the sense that he angered a few people and ignored others and appointed a few who were incompetent. He was not a perfect administrator at that point. He kind of stumbled during the…He did stumble during the Fort Sumter crisis, partly because some of his orders were ignored. He had to deal with intramural jealousies within the cabinet. He learned how to deal with those, and he learned how to deal with a secretary of state who thought that he was the de facto president, William Seward. He gently made it clear to Seward that he was the president, but he always appreciated Seward's advice. And within a few years, Seward idolized Lincoln. But at the time of 1860-61, Seward thought Lincoln was **way** in over his head, and he offered to be, in effect, a prime minister, the de facto prime minister to Lincoln, and Lincoln flatly turned him down.

The same with some of the other cabinet members, Stanton had ridiculed him as a lawyer and came to admire him. Interpersonally he very good. He developed skills at handling the cabinet, giving them a lot of voice but maintaining the rudder himself. He insisted on that; he was not there to take straw votes.

So, he developed a leadership style with the cabinet and with the Union soldiers. I'm just reading a book about that, called *Lincoln's Men*. It's about Lincoln's relationship with the armies and the troops. It's a remarkable story. I've read it in patches, but he puts it all together, the amount of time that Lincoln devoted to meeting and welcoming and thanking and succoring the soldiers. It's extraordinary. Hardly a day went by when he didn't review some troops or greet them in some way. By the time the war ended, he was almost, to a person, Father Abraham. He was their surrogate father, and that was thanks to the efforts he made.

One other thing he did—and how he did it I don't know—he had an uncanny sense of public communication and what kind of communication to engage in and with whom, in order to try to get your ideas across. He systematically thought about what he could reveal to the public at different times and how he could prepare the public for future surprises, like emancipation. He worked at that. It seemed like he was temporizing, and he was temporizing, but he was thinking all that time about how he could set up a situation in which emancipation could be welcomed or at least accepted.

He also wrote editors of newspapers. He didn't write personal letters that were to be re-published, but he wrote the editors and carried on something

of a constant running debate with them on issues. And he was trying hard to build public support, in the age when that was a hard thing to do; handwriting and personal conversations was it. Those are elements of his leadership. How he happened to have those native skills, I can't begin to tell you.

He had been a skilled politician in Illinois; we know that. But reaching the public as he did, slowly but surely, systematically thinking through how he had to prepare the public for new challenges that would come, those are a mystery to me. The book's yet to be written, I think, that will adequately explore that. I'm not sure it ever can be.

DePue: Part of the Lincoln legend, of course, is that he had practically no formal schooling and that he essentially educated himself.

Davis: Yes.

DePue: He educated himself in law. What you've been describing here, if I can make a stretch, each and every case, you have to go and do your research and educate yourself.

Davis: And in general, experience. All of his experience contributed to his education. He just absorbed both the good and the bad experiences. He took lessons from the bad and some measure of confidence from the good. He's doing that throughout his life. You don't see a lot of direct references to that, except that he would often talk about his disappointments in life and how he had struggled hard to overcome them. There was a man who was very conscious of his experiences and tried to put it to good use and, in fact, did.

DePue: Is that one of his geniuses, once he gets to the presidency, that he can learn from his mistakes?

Davis: Yes, yes. I think so, absolutely. He learned from his mistakes with the cabinet, with Fort Sumter, with Congress, all of them became—

DePue: With generals.

Davis: With generals, right. He stubbed his toes a lot with his appointments of generals, realizing, of course, that many of them were political appointments that he felt he had to make and even vice-presidential appointments that he had to make…or nominations. I think he did learn from them, and by 1864 and 1865, he was pretty sure-footed, even though he was not at all confident in sixty-four that he would be re-elected.

DePue: I think that's a point that's often-times overlooked by the public, how much that issue was up in the air.

Davis: It was. And his famous unopened letter to the cabinet, to be opened upon his defeat, telling them that they should obey the law and follow the new leader

but do their best, while he remained president, to enforce the laws as he had seen fit to enforce them. It's a remarkable letter of prescience.

DePue: You spent a big part of your professional life working to preserve and present Lincoln's legal papers to the general public and being involved with his personal papers as well. Do you have a sense of how much that material is being used now, how much that will change the terrain of Lincoln scholarship?

Davis: It hasn't had much effect. Just like the oral histories I produced, beginning in the 1970's, it took a while for them to be put to use, and they still could get more use, in my opinion. You'll discover the same thing. I'm disappointed in the relatively modest use of the legal papers in what I've seen published so far, though these things take time. I mentioned the Derks' and Steiner books, which are very good starts. There haven't been major new biographies yet that should benefit from this, not major new ones that I can think…some popular ones, but I don't know…I haven't bothered reading those.

But I would think new biographies…Well I will mention one, Michael Burlingame, my very, very, good friend refers to the law practice periodically throughout his two volumes. But it's, to me, not a satisfactory treatment of the law practice. It's incomplete; it's kind of fractured, I think, although he was a great fan of the project and eagerly read our stuff as we completed it. It, to me, is a disappointing biography in a number of ways, including its unsophisticated treatment of his law practice. That's not his forte; he has other fortes, but that's not.

Before our work was published, but when it still was accessible in our files, Douglas Wilson wrote a big book, *Honor's Voice* [*The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*], about Lincoln's Illinois years. He doesn't even mention the law practice; he may mention in passing; it's not even included. Doug Wilson is a very fine biographer, a good scholar; I like him personally. I never took this up with him directly, but I was stunned in his book that he just decided not to pay attention to the law practice. Maybe he felt, until the stuff's out, I can't. But we had made it clear to people all along that you're welcome to come and inspect our files. Those were open to the public. That is also a disappointment to me. We'll just have to see.

I think another generation of legal historians and legal scholars will take up some of these topics, like the federal practice, like the Supreme Court practice, like the libel practice, criminal practice, and write good articles or books about them and that you'll begin to see, within fifteen years, general biographies that give the law practice more intelligent and more generous attention.

DePue: Despite the fact that there've been more books written about Abraham Lincoln than maybe any other American, living or dead, there are still plenty more to be written.

Davis: There are going to be more, brace yourself (both laugh).

DePue: I think you had a presidency of the Abraham Lincoln Association, ninety-five to 1996?

Davis: Yes, I did.

DePue: Anything worthy of mentioning about this role?

Davis: It was an uproar. We had had the same president, Frank Williams, for I think ten or eleven years. He loved the job; he worked very hard at it. He was very popular as a public speaker, as an enthusiast, as a companion, and as president of the Abraham Lincoln Association, and he loved being that. It was a big deal to him.

DePue: What was that name again?

Davis: Frank Williams. The Abraham Lincoln Association, among its many weaknesses, never had a very serious nominations process. They automatically renominated members of the board who'd been on the board for thirty years and might not even have attended meetings. They would just not bother to say, "Thanks, goodbye." They would just renominate them. So, there was a lot of dead wood on the board. And that same nominating committee routinely nominated Frank Williams for president because he sought it. But, by nineteen…whatever year I was president—

DePue: Ninety-five and ninety-six.

Davis: But by 1994, the board of the association was in real difficulties with Williams, who had directly supported some projects with Lincoln association money that had nothing really to do with Lincoln. There was one conference on Franklin Roosevelt, down in Louisiana, that he had them support. It just didn't have any connection to Lincoln. And he had done some other things, which they thought were inappropriate for the president.

He had tried to get direct help from me and some of my colleagues on the Lincoln Legal Papers to do research for him so that he could write a book about Lincoln the lawyer. That is to say, he really wanted us to do his research, he and Harold—

DePue: Holzer?

Davis: Holzer, were going to co-write a book on Lincoln the lawyer because suddenly it was fashionable, with the papers project. They wanted Bill Beard,

whom they knew, and me to see to it that we pulled the important cases from the files and did other things. I made the mistake of telling them, if we got a grant to support this work, we could afford to have Bill spend a little time on it. So, they promised the grant. We never got it. Then they began complaining because we hadn't begun to help them. Somehow one of their complaints reached one of the board members, and they were furious. They thought it was unethical for Frank Williams to use a project to further his own personal ambitions.

So, there was a crisis board meeting before the annual board meeting—a crisis executive committee meeting before the annual board meeting—and they decided, late at night, before our morning board meeting, that they wanted to elect someone other than Frank Williams as president. This was a total surprise to the other board members and to me. I knew nothing of it.

We got together that morning. No, excuse me; I got a call early in the morning, 7:00 AM; from a woman I admired a great deal, Sally Schaumbacher, who'd been a great friend, saying, "Cullom, we have to ask a huge request of you. We cannot re-elect Frank Williams, but in order to not re-elect him, since we elect a president tomorrow, we need to ask you to be willing to be nominated." I argued with her saying, "That's the last thing I want or need. I'm busy working on the legal papers, and this will be a distraction. I've never wanted to be president of the Abraham Lincoln Association because it has a lot of weaknesses"—I reminded her of them—"that I don't want to have to deal with." She said, "Cullom, we need your help." A few other executive committee members also called me, including Dick Hart, a very close friend. So, reluctantly I agreed, walking into the meeting knowing that they had talked to some of the other board members, trying to get a majority to support me.

Then, when the nominating committee chair put Frank's name into nomination, there was a counter-motion to nominate me, as well, which startled some people there and produced a terrific argument. I was a Judas Iscariot, and they were Judas Iscariots, and this was a Springfield cabal that didn't like having a Rhode Islander president of the association, that it was an anti-Semitic effort, because Frank and Harold were both Jewish, that it was rural hicks out here. The language was really vicious, and they were convinced that I'd been part of this plot for a long time. It was a miserable experience for me.

I was elected by about, I don't know, fifteen to seven maybe. But I incurred some life-long enemies as a result. Richard Current, who was a man I admired as a Lincoln scholar, never would speak to me again. Harold Holzer and Frank Williams, until recent years, wouldn't speak to me. They issued a press release a month later, signed by leading Lincoln scholars around the

country, damning the Abraham Lincoln Association for being anti-Semitic, rural yokels, and anti-intellectual.

Some esteemed Lincoln scholars refused to sign it. A few others later recanted because they had been called on the phone by Harold Holzer, who talked a good line and said, "You've got to do this." They later realized what Frank had done, and they recanted. But it was a miserable experience for me. These were people I admired and knew and liked. A few of them called me to say, "I'm sorry to…" before this all came out, "I'm sorry, but I've been asked, and I'm going to agree with this vote we're going to take." I appreciated them telling me, though I thought they were using poor judgment to do that.

So, to my self-esteem it was a terrible blow, and to my work schedule it was a terrible blow. The association was in crisis; I had to plan the next annual meeting; there were some people who quit the association because they were furious to learn that their friend, Frank Williams, had been fired. He wasn't fired; he was just not re-elected. There's a lot of misstatements there, and I spent part of the spring trying to write members of the association to assure them that we were true to our principles. I didn't blame Harold and Frank, but I said the executive committee and the board had acted under difficult circumstances, and I was serving reluctantly.

Well, of course, Frank and Harold said I was eager to serve, I couldn't wait to. They were wrong; I hated doing it. I did just enough to keep the ship afloat, presided over a pretty good, next banquet and was happy to say, "I will not serve again." (DePue laughs) It was one of the painful, painful experiences of my professional life. That was it.

DePue: Who took the reins after you were done?

Davis: Dan Bannister, I talked into agreeing to serve. We also recruited some more scholars to the Abraham Lincoln book. I had also pushed hard [that] we've got to get rid of people who've been on the board just because their families, their ancestors, knew Lincoln. There were about eight people, locally, who never came to the meetings, didn't do a thing. So, I talked a new nominating committee into asking some people if they're not going to attend, to please leave the board, announce that they did.

We got about five openings on the board, and we appointed some very good, young people from out of town, including some in town, to revitalize the association. I also told the nominating committee, "Never again can we be in the business of automatically nominating an existing president for re-election." In fact, we established some bylaws about term limits, which were badly needed. That's my only success that year.

DePue: Do you have any understanding of why the anti-Semitic charges came about?

Davis: Well, Harold and Frank were two Jews on a board that had maybe one or two other Jews. We weren't east-coasters; I'm not Jewish, and it was a convenient argument. It was a **nasty** argument.

DePue: Did they have any other evidence, other than the circumstances?

Davis: No.

DePue: How about the anti-intellectual argument?

Davis: That I was from a two-bit university here. Of course, Frank wasn't a university professor. But Richard Current was, and he resigned from the board. We still had scholars on the board, but listen, these were a public relations effort. They weren't a thoughtful response to a situation. They were determined to line up votes among prominent historians, and they did.

DePue: This next question goes back to our discussions a couple of sessions ago about public history versus academic history. What did your colleagues at the university, and those with whom you interacted throughout the country think about your role with the Lincoln Legal Papers versus spending more time in academia?

Davis: I don't know. I served as an officer of the Organization of American Historians for ten years. Now, that's not the most important office to hold there, but I did a good job. I met a lot of well-known historians. They sat on the executive board of the OAH, and I got to be good friends with them. I think…I don't know what people said behind my back, but I think I've always enjoyed pretty cordial relations with my peers, several of whom are distinguished historians, who always complimented me on the work I did with the Lincoln papers.

Stanley Katz, who's a distinguished professor—by the way Jewish—Stanley Katz at Princeton University, a legal historian, just couldn't say enough about our success with the Lincoln Legal Papers and wrote rave letters to the NEH and all. Others have, too. I won't go into the names. People who are outstanding in the profession know me, knew me, liked me, and they may have talked about the embarrassment or the awkwardness of this situation. But I don't think I lost their friendship.

DePue: This next question is much more light-hearted. (Davis laughs) Talking about the esteem that you get from your fellow colleagues, I understand that you had a cameo shot in *Legally Blonde 2*.

Davis: It was the highlight of my life, actually. (DePue laughs) Cameo is being a little too flirtatious; it was a glance. When they announced that they would be filming major portions of *Legally Blonde 2*, the sequel to a miserable *Legally Blonde*, people told me, and my wife told me, "Cullom, you look like a

congressman or a senator. You've got a blue suit. Why don't you…"—and they were having a casting call—"Why don't you try?"

I went to this huge mass meeting, before it was being filmed. I was told to show up over at the State Capitol that day, and they'd see; I wasn't given any promises. That day, I was just lucky enough to walk into this room they had at the capitol, where they were letting you have pizza and donuts and coffee. I was having some coffee, around 10:00 in the morning, and this casting person—I didn't know her—said, "You, come over here." She noticed me, with my white hair and dark suit. She said, "Go upstairs, and tell them that we want you to sit up front for the climactic scene in the Congress," which was really the Hall of Representatives here. Before I knew it, I was literally on a folding chair in front of the regular chairs in the front of that. That's because they wanted to make it look more crowded. I was just a white head. I thought, Wow, this is pretty good.

Pretty soon, Reese Witherspoon arrived, because she was delivering the speech before Congress.[45] While she was waiting and rehearsing her lines, she sat down in the one vacant seat, which was next to me. I didn't want to interrupt her, but at some point, I did introduce myself, and she introduced herself. We had a polite, pleasant conversation—totally meaningless—but, we did. And then, after that, the other lead actress in the film…Ooh, what's her name? She was in some Paul Newman movies; she's very short. She played the angel in a TV series thirty years ago. What is her name…well-known actress, believe me [Sally Field]. She sat next to me because she was going to be…She was Reese's political advisor or something, congressperson. And we did visit some. She too was thinking about her lines, but she was very nice; we chatted. It was a thrill to me just to do that.

I knew, because I was standing there, that, as Reese walked down the front aisle to mount the podium, there would be cameras focusing on that. Depending on the angle of the lens, I was bound to be included. So, you will, if you watch really, really carefully, see my white head in one shot, following her to the podium. And then, even if you recognize my head but didn't know what kind of shirt I had on that day, you would see, in one of the cams of her, looking up, the cuff of my suit, (DePue laughs) twice, twice, not once. They also did a funny thing, filming, that they added to the DVD-ROM version, which was dancing in the aisles. It was a stupid sort of thing. After she wins over Congress, then all the congressmen get up and start dancing a jig, kind of. This is not in the film that was shown in the theaters, but it is in the DVD-ROM version. There's a lot of me dancing around and cavorting. So, that was it.

[45] Laura Jeanne Reese Witherspoon is an American actress, producer, and entrepreneur. She is the recipient of several accolades, including an Academy Award, a Primetime Emmy Award, a BAFTA Award, a Screen Actors Guild Award, two Golden Globe Awards and two Critics' Choice Awards. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reese_Witherspoon)

DePue: When you started this whole conversation, you didn't have kind things to say about *Legally Blonde*; what was your assessment of *Legally Blonde* 2?

Davis: Worse! Even worse! (DePue laughs)

Davis: A lot of my friends have really teased me about my film career. But I said, "You're just envious, obviously." I said, "This is an epic." (DePue laughs)

Davis: Thank you for asking, funny story.

DePue: Well, let's get to finally wrapping this up a little bit. We'll finish up with giving you an opportunity to say a few things as well. But, let's start with this one. How would you explain Americans' continuing fascination with Abraham Lincoln?

Davis: Of course, that isn't universal. (laughs) It's a little more in the northern parts of the country than the southern, but there are exceptions. I think a lot of it has to do with some points made by Merrill Peterson in a wonderful book about Lincoln, after he died. That is to say, the story of Lincoln, following his death.

Lincoln in American Memory is the book—maybe I've already told you about it—by Merrill Peterson, distinguished historian, Jefferson, but he got to Lincoln on this one. He summarized about five or six attributes of Lincoln, most of which I think help explain his enduring fascination to the public. He was a self-made man, no question about it. He believed in the right to rise, as he put it, and he demonstrated the right to rise. That's always appealing to people. It's part of the American myth, the right to rise.

Secondly, he was an autodidact; he was self-taught. I tease high school students sometimes by saying, "You could be getting a better education than high school if you were as ambitious as Lincoln had been." But I make the point often, that this is an extraordinary intellect, housed in a body that was scantily, at most scantily, educated in a formal sense. It was all his own work, which was prodigious, of course.

Third, I think that he clearly showed empathy for his rivals and even his foes, or sympathy. He had a forgiving nature toward people who criticized him, who worked against him, and even eventually, once the war had been won, toward his former enemies. That's a quality that some Americans don't admire that much, because they think you ought to be firm. They admire his magnanimity; it's a good quality, and we could all agree that it's a virtue that he demonstrated to great effect.

He, not single-handedly, but as Father Abraham, he saved the nation. I don't mean to say that singularly, but another president could easily have failed in that effort. He was resilient, determined; he learned on the job, and he aroused public support and military support, soldier support, in a way that made him a key figure in saving our nation and its unity.

Finally, he of course, instigated the emancipation of slaves, which is still not universally popular, but it is widely popular and recognized by most people as something that already was overdue and hasn't been fully achieved yet. Those qualities make him a hero by any standard.

It's easy for people, through the childhood books, through the and films, through the visits, to develop this sense that this man was…Oh, and finally, he was a martyr too, in fact, Christ-like in his martyrdom. That makes him an unquestionably admired figure.

DePue: You've had a long and very successful career, by anybody's measure, as a historian. Here's a phrase that you taught me, "present at the creation." Cullom, you were present at the creation for Sangamon State University, which is now UIS, present at the creation for the Oral History program at UIS, and obviously, for the Lincoln Legal Papers, pretty close to present at the creation. Those are three. Anybody would be proud to have any one of those on there.

Cullom Davis in 2006, accepting a receipt of a University of Illinois at Springfield's Distinguished Service Award alongside the UI President Joe White and UIS Chancellor Rich Ringheisen.

Davis: Thank you.

DePue: Which one do you look at most fondly?

Davis: Oh, boy. I can't differentiate them. I am immodestly proud of all of them. They were richly rewarding to me, so pride is part of it. Gratitude for the opportunity is another. I think probably, ultimately…within Springfield, it's being part of the founding of the university, though a lot of people don't know that or don't really care.

Oral history, it wasn't just our office but also, really, I was close to the founding of the…I went to the second, third meeting of the association, which wasn't present at the creation, but it was early. I'll always be proud of that role, which was kind of novel. Just circumstance enabled me to be open-minded of that, and so it happened.

The Lincoln business may end up being my most notable, professional achievement in the wider world. That again was timing and good fortune. I've always been one who liked new challenges. I can't explain that. It wasn't part of my graduate education, for sure. I just always relished doing something new. And I was lucky enough to be present, literally present, with an institution and with trends in history—and in Lincoln—that gave me a chance

to make contributions. I can't explain it beyond that. I guess, maybe to some extent, I'm an academic hustler of sorts.

DePue: I think you just answered this, but was this the most endearing, scholarly legacy that you'll be leaving?

Davis: I think so. Because that is a—

DePue: Lincoln.

Davis: Yes. That's a bit of documentary editing that will stand the test of time. Sure, I wrote a textbook about oral history, and I wrote other articles about it, and I was an active professional and practitioner. But those aren't going to survive the way I think the Lincoln Legal Papers [will]. As small a product as it is in the whole world of knowledge, that was a distinctive and enduring contribution.

DePue: Looking back at a long career—we've talked in detail about some of the bumps along the way—but is there anything that really sticks with you, in terms of a disappointment?

Davis: Did I talk about the plagiarism crisis that I—

DePue: No. I don't think so.

Davis: Not my plagiarism. I'll try to make it quick because it's already getting late. In about 1988 or nine, there was a Conference on Illinois History that the nation invited people to attend. I had some acquaintances up at Illinois Wesleyan University and at the Connecticut College and elsewhere, who had become suspicious of one Lincoln biographer, Stephen Oates. He taught at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and he had written a very popular biography of Lincoln, the title I'm forgetting for a moment [*With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*] and had also written other biographies, I think, of John Brown, Martin Luther King, Thomas, the famous novelist, Thomas… They'd all been popular biographies.

A good friend of mine, who's a real nitpicker—I say that in a flattering sense—had discovered some odd parallels in Oates' biography of Lincoln, with a much earlier biography, much praised biography, published in the 1940s, by…I'm sorry; it's escaping me. And he showed me these because, by coincidence, I was scheduled to moderate a panel discussion on Lincoln authors, and Stephen Oates had accepted an invitation to speak. My friend at Illinois Wesleyan, Robert Bray, who'd done some research along this, had also accepted an invitation to speak. I quickly learned that this would be an occasion when the fur could fly. I didn't really know Oates. I think we had met once at a conference, and he was pleasant enough. He tended to grind out a book every two years, which is fine if you can do it.

When I saw the parallels that Robert Bray had developed in language and phrasing, they were, to me, extraordinary. It wasn't as if he copied a whole chapter or a whole page, but there were passages with the very same, very distinctive words, not many, but throughout the book there were a dozen or so such passages, which indicated that he'd either been very sloppy or that he had just taken shortcuts and used language that his forbearer had used. I was convinced it was a case.

Though looking forward to the conference, I thought, This will be a nice occasion for Stephen Oates to answer his critics. It turns out Oates decided not to come. He was forewarned that there would be an attack upon him. I don't blame him; he decided he didn't need that. He didn't show, but he wrote a very angry letter to me and to some others, saying this is outrageous to be accused of plagiarism.

My role, then, at the conference was to oversee the reading of Bob Bray's paper, which made chapter and verse of the allegations, to hear comments, and to issue kind of a wishy-washy summation, saying there's been some serious charges leveled, to the point that I think I had the responsibility to refer this to the Academic Honesty Committee of the American Historical Association. They had a committee, Academic Integrity Committee. They had a committee that hated to meet, but they had a committee. I thought that was the fair thing to do, to put it to our peers. So, I did.

To make this long story somewhat shorter, a lot of my good friends were aghast that I would make that referral. I wasn't making the referral because I knew the charges to be true. I thought the charges could well be true, and I thought we couldn't just let them be buried. But some good friends, including Robert Johannsen at the University of Illinois—we were very close friends—he said, "Cullom, don't do that. You're opening a hornet's nest."

He was, to some extent, right because, once again, some people in the Lincoln profession, who liked Stephen Oates and who themselves had played fast and loose sometimes with failing to attribute sources, wrote a round-robin letter among Lincoln scholars, telling them to stand up for Stephen Oates. Some did; others read the charges and said, "No, this needs attention." But they issued a press release—Holzer and Williams again—denouncing me and others for making charges against a superb scholar.

Well, the AHA committee secretly appointed three experts, who didn't have any sort of card in this game. They took six months and decided…They said, "We will not use the word 'plagiarism,'" partly because that's a libelous word. They said, "It's a matter of degree, but there is no doubt whatever that Professor Oates took directly language from a book that he did not even cite in his notes."

That's what I thought. So, I felt vindicated. Though the deliberations of the AHA Committee on Integrity don't exactly make the *New York Times.* So, it kind of ended. But I made some enemies with that. I thought it was the morally proper thing to do, and against the advice of some people, I did it. I took some hits, but I think I was right. Other people subsequently pointed out that Oates had done the same things with some of the other books. So, his career as a professional historian was badly, badly undermined. I never heard from him again, I never saw him. I don't know how he retired or what, but I think he got his just desserts, frankly.

DePue: Listening to some of these stories, it has the distinct feel of religious theology arguments. (Davis laughs) I mean, people invest with a passion on this subject of Abraham Lincoln.

Davis: Right, or maybe I was too morally upright. A lot of people said, "Don't mess with that. It's not worth fighting over, and it'll be a big fight." I just tend to be a little stubborn along that. It may be kind of a righteous element to me that isn't particularly deserved, but I displayed it there.

DePue: Let's turn to the future.

Davis: Yeah.

DePue: Do you have any concerns or thoughts about the future of academic scholarship, of Lincoln scholarship in particular, of oral history in particular?

Davis: Oral history is enjoying its spread and its academic respectability. It's hardly something taught at Harvard yet, but it is taught at many distinguished universities and is practiced and has many practitioners, some of them very good, like the present company, others not as good. So, I don't worry about its popularity. It has adopted video technology for good purposes, and it shows no sign of slackening to me because there are signs all around of the use of interviews for historical purposes.

Lincoln scholarship seems stale in many ways, but there's always an excuse for new books, and once in awhile there's an actual reason for a new book. I think the excuses outnumber the reasons. But I think there's always a place for something, and I welcome that. I think the tendency to publish about Lincoln will diminish somewhat, once the Civil War observance has ended, and will be back to somewhat normal. But as an historian, I think it's perfectly legitimate to revisit subjects, if you can do so with fresh ideas and data. If you're just rehashing, there's not as good an argument.

As far as the university campus here is concerned, it seems to be doing well. It has a wonderful new chancellor. I think, although the financial times are still very difficult, it has a very good future. It has established itself in this community and in this region as a very respectable university, so that's good too.

DePue: Obviously, you've spent a lot more time as an oral historian than I have, but you won't be surprised by this question. Why did you decide to do the interview?

Davis: This interview?

DePue: Yeah.

Davis: I love to talk (laughs), and I guess I have enough self-esteem to think, Well, there's an interesting story here. So that's why. Whether it's interesting enough to occupy 200 pages, that's for somebody else to judge (laughs).

DePue: It certainly has been fascinating for me to listen to the stories and to hear your reflections on things. I guess my surprise is how much this has been an institutional history as well, of this institution.

Davis: Yeah, and I'm glad you did that. I hadn't thought of that, and I hope I've spoken respectfully, but I did happen to be on the outside and inside of some interesting chapters in the agency's history.

DePue: Any final comments, Cullom?

Davis: No, except to tell you that you're one of the most gifted interviewers I have ever met.

DePue: Thank you.

Davis: Good job.

DePue: Well, I think I'll finish with that! (both laugh)

Davis: Okay! Good!

(end of transcript #5)