Interview with Ronald Whitaker

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: This is Philip Pogue. We're in New Lenox, Illinois. It is April 30, 2013, and we're going to be talking to Ronald Whitaker regarding his involvement with the junior college in Joliet. At this time we want to welcome him to our community college project that we're doing here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Ron, could you give us some information about yourself, your education and family background?



Ronald Whitaker
Member of the First Board of Trustees
Joliet Junior College

Whitaker: Well, I've lived in New Lenox most of my life. My family came from Mokena [Illinois]. I was born in 1935. My dad was first in the grocery business in New Lenox and later was in the insurance and real estate business. My mother was a homemaker. I did go to school in New Lenox, the New Lenox grade school system. I went to high school in Joliet, Joliet Township High School. At that time, we had no high school in New Lenox.

My dad died suddenly in 1952, when I was seventeen years old, and I took over his insurance business at that time, which was kind of unique in its own right, and I was there for fifty years. I retired in 2002. I was a

student at Joliet Junior College for several years in the night school program. I would say that that was probably a turning point in both my career and also my public activities.

I would say that I did get involved in a lot of things over the years, but the one that I think probably was one of the most rewarding was my time with the junior college board of trustees.

Pogue: Now, you mentioned that you attended Joliet Township High School. What was the relationship with Joliet Township High School and the junior college at that time?

Whitaker: Well, the Joliet Junior College, then, was actually a part of the high school district, and as such, the junior college was governed by the Joliet Township High School Board of Education. All the classes for the junior college were held in the, at that time, the one Joliet High School building, which is now called Central High. It was the only building at that time. All of the classes were held there, with the exception of some extensions and some offsite classes. But for the most part, the center of the junior college was there, right in the high school.

Pogue: As a high school student, did you have any contact with the students who were involved with the college program?

Whitaker: Very little, very little at that time. We knew they were there, and we knew that they could be out in the halls between classes without any pass, (laughs) which we as high school students wouldn't be caught [doing]; we would have to be very careful that we weren't there. But other than that, we really didn't have much contact with the junior college students.

Pogue: How about such things as yearbooks and student activities?

Whitaker: Those were all completely separate.

Pogue: And did you ever attend any of the interscholastic activities of the college?

Whitaker: No. The high school and the college students were completely separate. We never did participate in any of their activities.

Pogue: How about the faculty members?

Whitaker: Faculty members, many of them did teach classes in both the high school and the college. As a matter of fact, I had at least two high school teachers who were teaching college classes later, when I was on the college board.

Pogue: Did they ever incorporate things that they were teaching the college students into your classes?

Whitaker: Not that I know of. They were pretty well separate.

Pogue: The administration of the college was also the administration of the township high school?

Whitaker: That's true. The junior college, though, did have its own dean and its own assistant dean. But otherwise, much of the administration was conducted by the high school.

Pogue: Were the classes taught at the same time, or were the college students taught at night?

Whitaker: No. There were many college classes taught during the day, but, of course, there were many night school classes too. The adult education program was pretty active at that time. There probably was as many night school students, I would say, probably, as there were in the day programs.

Pogue: Did the college then use the high school's facilities, such as the gymnasium and auditorium?

Whitaker: Yes, they did; they did. All the junior college physical education classes were all held in the same facilities as the high school.

Pogue: Then you said you went as a night student to the college.

Whitaker: Yes, I started probably around 1960, I started to take night school classes. Now, I had finished one year in the junior college, right out of high school. But I hadn't gone on beyond that first year. Then in about 1960, I think it was, was when I started taking night school classes.

Pogue: Why did you select Joliet Junior College as where to take your classes?

Whitaker: It was the closest, and it was the only one that I really knew and was convenient. Plus, they had a very good reputation.

Pogue: What type of classes did you take?

Whitaker: They were mostly business classes. I had accounting, which I found very beneficial for my insurance business, because I had had no accounting experience up to that time. I also had marketing, took marketing classes. I had business law. Those are the kind of classes I took in the night program.

Pogue: Having been a student at Joliet Township High School, and then a full-time student at Joliet Junior College—

Whitaker: Actually, I was a part-time student during that one year right after high school. I was a part-time student.

Pogue: Between the two, what did you notice that was different, things that you were able to do as a college student that you couldn't as a high school student?

Whitaker: Well, we could use the college library and the college lounge, the student lounge. For a college student that can be a pretty big thing. But we also noticed that we had older people in the college classes, and especially in the night school classes. Many of those people, of course, were people with full-time jobs.

Pogue: You then ended up being elected to the board of education. How did that come about?

Whitaker: Well, could we go back a little bit to about 1965, when the first movement started to establish a junior college district? There had been new legislation called the Junior College Act of 1965, which had made it much more feasible to create a junior college district. Joliet Township High School was having problems trying to keep the college going, because finances were getting difficult to handle both the high school and the junior college. It was just fortunate that now there was an opportunity to establish a whole new junior college district.

That movement started in 1965, [with] the formation of a committee to promote and hopefully create a new junior college district. That proposed district was covering three counties. That would be all of Will, Grundy and Kendall Counties and a little piece of LaSalle County and Kankakee County, and it would cover twelve different high school districts. This, of course, would broaden the district of a junior college well beyond that of Joliet Township.

I was a member of that committee that was working on that proposal. And the reason I was selected and asked to be on that committee was because, one, I had been on this night school program for five years at that point, and [two], they were looking for somebody who was familiar with the night school program of the college to kind of fit in with the whole program of the committee making this proposal. It was called the Central Committee or the Steering Committee at different times. Also, I was representative from the eastern end of the proposed district. That was considered something that they wanted to have, [a] representative on the district.

That was a long project and took about a year or more to kind of promote. It was promoted very strongly in these three counties. There was a lot of interest, and finally an election was held to establish this new junior college district in February of 1967. It carried by a four-to-one vote, overwhelming.

Of course, part of the reason for that was because, with this new legislation, the State was going to be providing a lot of financing to the new

district, and that would be the creation of what they called a Class I District. By meeting certain specifications, the college could become a Class I District and have this financing available from the State. It's interesting how that was available at that time. Today, I'm sure that there would be no such thing in the State of Illinois. (laughs)

Pogue: You talked about this role of the committee. What kind of topics did you study for a year?

Whitaker: Oh, there was all kinds of…the boundaries of the district and things like; what was the makeup of the counties? For instance, Grundy County was highly agricultural, and that was an important part of the program, to study the agricultural aspects of the area. We had, of course, manufacturing in Joliet, and that was important to look at.

What were the needs of the people for education in a junior college? So, we had to look at both what we called at that time the two year parallel studies, which would prepare people for going to a four-year college, and also those who were looking for just a two-year education, primarily in employment possibilities.

Pogue: Who helped to get this committee organized?

Whitaker: It was a group of people in Will County. They were mostly community leaders. The chairman of the committee was Kenneth Timm, who was a local attorney and somebody who had the vision to see what the advantages were to having a Class I junior college covering a large territory.

The original tax base was over $800 million in this district, this proposed district. That in itself was going [to result] in a pretty low proposed tax rate. The original tax rate was proposed at nine and a half cents for education and two cents for building. But then the State was going to provide additional funding, if we could make this thing work. Having that overwhelming vote in favor of creating the district went a long way to make sure that this was going to happen.

Pogue: You've said that Joliet Township High School was running into some financial issues. You had the Junior College Act of '65 that started to promote larger community college systems, and that all went well. Did this committee have to go out to the various school districts in these various counties to kind of do a selling job, or were all these districts eager to come into the new community college?

Whitaker: Well, the high school districts were very enthusiastic about the idea; there's no doubt about that. However, we still had to sell the people who were in these districts. So, yeah, I made many presentations myself in various communities throughout the three counties. Then we had people on this Central Committee, the Steering committee, from each one of these areas. Part

of their job was to promote the idea in their communities. They were very active in doing that too. It was a big operation, and we were fortunate to have people who were really willing to get out and work, get the story out.

Pogue: You talked about it passing, four-to-one. Were there areas where you were worried that it might not pass?

Whitaker: No, not really, because there was too many advantages for all areas, even Joliet itself. They were going to see a lower tax rate than they could ever have had as part of just a Joliet Township. And, of course, when it comes to taxes that's what people are very interested in. (laughs)

Pogue: For the outlying fringe areas, the school districts that were farthest away from the boundaries, were there any concerns about them going to another type of community college?

Whitaker: Yes, there was. At least in my knowledge, there was one high school district where some of the administration felt that they would want to think about going to a Cook County junior college district. There were, of course, districts being formed in places like Orland and Tinley and some of those in southern Cook County. It wasn't a very strong movement though, and for the most part, it didn't get off the ground. Most people were interested in being part of this new district, which would be all of Will County and all of Grundy and all of Kendall County.

Pogue: You got interested because of the Central Committee work; then the referendum passed four-to-one, and now there's going to be board elections?

Whitaker: That's right. Now this new district, with having been created, now it must have an election to select seven members for the new board of trustees. That election was held in April of '67, just shortly after the district was created. There were thirty-five candidates running for the seven seats on that board. It was a very heated election when you have that many people, naturally.

Now, the Steering Committee, the Central Committee, that had worked on creating the district, they endorsed seven candidates and promoted that. Those seven candidates did get publicity from local newspapers, and they did prevail. Those seven people that were endorsed by the Central Committee were the seven candidates that were elected to the first board of trustees.

They did represent the various parts of the district. We had three people from Joliet; we had one from Plainfield, one from Mazon in Grundy County; we had one, myself, from [the] eastern part of Will County. So we had pretty good representation in the whole. That was, of course, one of the things that the Central Committee wanted to do; they wanted to make sure that all areas had good representation.

Pogue: Was there a large participation of voters in this election?

Whitaker: Yeah, there was; there was a lot of interest. With that many candidates, you know, there was a lot of…I don't remember the exact number of votes that were cast, but it was a pretty good turnout. There was a lot of interest in this new college district. I don't think the people even realize today that it was very, very widespread interest in the creation of this new college.

Pogue: Now the election is over. What happens next?

Whitaker: Next comes all the real work. (laughs) As you can imagine, there were many, many decisions that had to be made. The first one, of course, was how to separate the Joliet Junior College itself from the Joliet High School District, to be now part of this new three-county junior college district. How was the faculty…because many of the teachers taught both high school and junior college courses, classes, and that had to be worked out.

Of course, the division of assets was another problem that had to be worked out. That was done primarily with the work of the business office people in both districts. One of the first people that we had to hire, first of all, was a president of the new junior college, because we had a situation. Yes, we had a new junior college, but we had an old junior college too that was definitely the basis of the college. As soon as we had the new president elected, then he found some administrators.

We did make a search for the new president. We had a couple of consultants that helped us with that. In the meantime, Elmer Rowley, who was the dean of the college, under the high school system, he retired. He did not apply for the job as president. Everybody [had] kind of expected that he would be the prime prospect for the position. Shortly after he retired, and we were about ready to take over the operation of the junior college from the high school, we prevailed upon Dean Rowley to take the job as president. That was Elmer W. Rowley, who had been a leader in the junior college movement and had not only been dean of the Joliet Junior College for so long, but he'd also twice been elected president of the Illinois Association of Junior Colleges. He was certainly well-equipped and was a good person to take over that job.

Now we were able to move to do two things, one, to bring more administrators on board—we would need some of these administrators to help with the transition—and then, of course, to actually make the movement to take over the college from the Joliet Township High School District. That was done in August of 1967. You can see we've been moving pretty fast, from February of '67, when the district was created.

Now we're in August, at six months. We've appointed a president; we have moved from the high school district to the new junior college district, and we're working on all these problems that have to do with the transition.

Pogue: Were there any problems with the division of staff or the division of assets?

Whitaker: Nothing major. Now I'm going back, what, fifty-some years almost in memory. (laughs) As far as assets, my recollection is there were some problems as to the library and to some of the equipment. Did it belong to the college? Did it belong to the high school? Legally, it probably all belonged to the high school, but we were able to work those things out.

One of the first administrators we were able to hire after President Rowley was a director of business affairs and the number two assistant. The two of them worked with the business manager at the high school district on a lot of this division of assets. It really went pretty smoothly, and they did get things worked out fairly fast, as I recall.

I don't think there was really a lot of problems with the division of the faculty either; I think that worked out. That was done mostly, though, on a lower level and then brought to the board for final decision in many cases, but it wasn't a thing that the board really got involved with the nuts and bolts.

Pogue: How did you determine salaries for the new college?

Whitaker: My recollection is that the salaries were pretty much the same as they had been under the high school district for most of that faculty. Now, one of the things that we did, and I'm not sure just when this happened, but we did recognize the American Federation of Teachers as the bargaining agent. So in future times, all of that was decided by collective bargaining.

I really don't remember too much about the actual mechanics of that. I know that the first negotiations, they were like all labor negotiations, I guess; they were kind of spirited. But as far as recognizing the union, that was pretty well thought out and discussed with the union leaders. But we did recognize them eventually as the bargaining agent. That was the same union that had represented the teachers at the high school.

Pogue: Were there any tuition changes in the transition from the high school to the junior college?

Whitaker: Not that I recall.

Pogue: Did having a larger territory mean more students?

Whitaker: Well, the student body did start to grow. The college always had students from these areas, and there were some places where, like in Lockport, they had a tax, the Lockport High School District had a tax that they were levying for paying tuition to the junior college students from their district. They actually were paying a lot less now for the tax rate than they were paying for their so-called non-junior college district. The tuition was pretty much the same during those first three years that I was involved.

Pogue: Changing from Joliet Township High School, one of the big tasks would be site selection and the building issue.

Whitaker: Yes, and of all the decisions that we had to make during those early years, certainly the most lasting one was the selection of the site for the new college. A lot of things went into consideration on that. What was the geographical center of the district? What was the population center?

It turned out that the geographical center at that time was quite a bit west of Joliet. I say quite a bit, maybe like six, seven miles west of Joliet. The population center though was more up in the northwest end of Joliet. All those things had to be considered, and then, of course, also the suitability of whatever site we picked.

Were we going to buy an existing building or buildings? Were we going to buy vacant land and build new buildings? We looked at various locations. There was even some interest…They wanted to have us consider buying the Joliet Township High School building, because by this time, they were building two new high schools on the east and west side of Joliet. That, to me, didn't make much sense, because it wasn't really suitable for a real college. That's what we really wanted, to start new with a college.

We finally decided on a site just west of Joliet. We were able to purchase two adjacent farms, and it was just farmland, a total of 368 acres. We were able to purchase those two farms for a total of $2,000 an acre, which was pretty…probably a little high for farmland in those days. Matter of fact, there was some criticism from some people. However, the State was going to help with the financing of that purchase. So it made sense for us to be able to buy that much property. You know, there were also criticisms about, you don't need 368 acres for a college. Why do you want so much?

To our board, we felt, if we had this opportunity to do that, why not buy as much as we could, right? That maybe would be all the property the college would ever need in that location. But look at all the things that could be done with it, especially with the agricultural program that was so big in the college at that time. We really felt that this was the best move; it was a good location. And I'll tell you, today you look at that college, and there couldn't have been a better location or a better site for it.

Pogue: So the site was selected, what year, month?

Whitaker: It was announced on February of 1968 that the site had been selected.

Pogue: And when would be the first time that the students would attend something at that site?

Whitaker: I believe that was in 1969, I think the fall of 1969. You know, I have to say too that during that site selection, I remember so well, on a cold winter's day,

a bunch of us traipsing over this property, (laughs) which was just plain farmland, and talking amongst ourselves, "Is this the place?"

There was one thing that was a little different about the site; there was a lake on the site. At that time, the lake wasn't in very good shape. But when the architects that we had selected saw that lake, they immediately said, "That can be the center of the campus." They envisioned having parts of the campus on both sides of the lake, with a bridge, an enclosed bridge, across the lake that would serve as a student center. That's eventually what did happen.

Pogue: Were there other sites that were considered?

Whitaker: Oh, yeah, there were other sites, various places. I don't remember too much about their actual location and such. We had people, of course, that were promoting their sites. To be honest, I don't remember any of them even coming close to this site, when we saw that this was available and that we could do this, especially that we were able to get this much property for less than $1 million. To me, that was always a big plus. Yeah, we paid $2,000 an acre, but we got the whole thing, and the State was going to pay a portion of that purchase price.

Pogue: Now you said there were some concerns about the price per acre. What did the local media in this large district say about that selection?

Whitaker: We didn't have any criticism from the media. Of course, at that time we really only had two main places that we could count on for media coverage; one was the Joliet newspaper, the *Joliet Herald-News*, and then the other was the Joliet radio station, WJOL. Now, Morris (Illinois) also had a newspaper and a radio station, but none of them really made any critical remarks about the purchase of that property and the price.

Pogue: What were the challenges of creating this college out in the farm fields west of Joliet?

Whitaker: (laughs) Well, definitely transportation was a problem. The road that went past this site was a pretty bad piece of road, and it was going to have to have improvement; there's no doubt about that. But one of the benefits was that it was very close to the new Interstate Route 80 and also Interstate Route 55.

Pogue: How did your role as board secretary come about?

Whitaker: That was appointed by the other board members. I was recommended by the chairman of the board, who was Bill Glasscock, local farmer, and all the other board members concurred. That's how I got the job. (laughs)

Pogue: Going back to the question of the site, what were some other drawbacks with that?

Whitaker: By that time we had selected our architectural firm, which was a firm from Texas that had a lot of experience with junior college construction. But we had decided that we would go first with temporary buildings. That was very common on college campuses in those days. Also a lot of these new junior college districts that had been established were using temporary buildings. That, of course, in itself was a certain challenge. We even had problems with the county building inspector on some of these temporary buildings, but in the long run they all prevailed, so that by the fall of 1969, we were able to have buildings available for students to come to.

The location probably had some advantages in that there wasn't…It was mostly flat farmland, so there wasn't a lot of site preparation or any major problems. Of course, all construction has to have site preparation, and that was a big part of our early decisions, how to do that and who to have do that. But it wasn't as bad as it could have been if we'd something other than good old flat farmland. (laughs)

Pogue: In your role as secretary, you had an experience with bonds. Did you want to—

Whitaker: Yes. There was an election held to authorize the sale of bonds for both the purchase of the property and the construction of the buildings. First of all, that election—which I think was held sometime in early 1968; I don't remember for sure—it was successful, which in itself was kind of a…We were a little concerned about passing a bond issue, because even today…today it's even worse. Bond issues even then were tricky. But here, again, because we were able to convince people that there was going to be a lot of money coming from the State on all this, that the referendum was approved to authorize the selling of 10.5 million; that's $10.5 million in bonds.

Well, shortly after that was authorized, we decided to sell $3.5 million of that authorization, and that was done in $5,000 increments. We sold the bonds in $5,000 denominations. Those bonds had to be signed, personally signed, by the chairman and the secretary of the board of the junior college board of trustees.

The attorney who was handling all this, (laughs) he called me on the phone; he said, "Ron, have you got a fountain pen?" And I said, "No, why?" He said, "Because you'll find signing all these bonds with a fountain pen is much easier than the ballpoint pen." He said, "I know it sounds like it's kind of antiquated, but get yourself a good fountain pen," which I did. And it did; it took us all day. The chairman and I were there in the lawyer's office all day, signing these bonds. It was quite an experience.

During that time, we had two sheriff's deputies right in the room with us, because those bonds became negotiable the minute they were signed. (laughs) The attorney didn't want to have any problems with having that kind

of negotiable instruments there in that room. But it was interesting that we got the job done, did it in one day.

Pogue: Did all of this mean that then Joliet became a Class I school?

Whitaker: That's right. There were certain requirements that had to be met, under the Junior College Act of 1965, one of which, of course, was the establishment of a junior college district. Then there were other certain feasibility studies and things that had to be done. All that was done and presented to the State junior college board, who approved everything. We did accomplish and receive the designation as a Class I junior college. That, in itself, made available to us the State funding, which was much a part of this whole thing.

Pogue: Now you've got the site; you've got the new district, and now comes the decision, what are we going to name the college? Are we keeping the original name, or are we changing it? Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Whitaker: Yeah, there was two areas of thought on that. One was that because this was the oldest junior college in the U.S., having been established in 1901, that there was a heritage there and that the name Joliet Junior College should be retained. The other feeling, by the other people, was that this was a whole new junior college district. This was serving a much bigger area than just Joliet, and that, therefore, it ought to have a new name more representative of that. Also, along with that, we were noticing that many of the other new junior college districts that were absorbing existing junior colleges were getting all new names.

This went on for about a year, the discussion. We talked about it at board meetings and one thing. Finally Chairman Glasscock said, "We've got to decide this. We just can't let this go on anymore." So he made a motion, right at the board meeting, to establish Joliet Junior College as the name for the school, that being the legacy of having the oldest junior college in the nation. So that motion was passed, and it had two votes in opposition, (laughs) one of the few votes that we took on our board that wasn't unanimous. I was one of those votes, and I've been criticized for it since that time. (laughs) But I had kind of favored the name Louis Joliet Community College, sort of a compromise, but in that way the school would be named after the explorer who did explore a good deal of our area, rather than being named after the city of Joliet.

However, it wasn't a big thing, even for the two of us who did vote…I mean, it was no big controversy, and I had no problem with the original name being kept. As we look back on it today, it obviously was a good thing, and it's Joliet Junior College. Everybody knows that's it's been here since 1901.

Pogue: One of the programs that Joliet is noted for is their culinary arts program.

Whitaker: Yeah, that was started just after we were well underway with the operation of the college. It became very popular, right off the bat. I remember, (laughs) there was some criticism for that. I remember one story; a fella from my area, he said, "What in the world are you guys at the college doing, starting a culinary program? What's that got to do with a college of education?" And he said, "You going to train people to be chefs in fancy restaurants? Is that the whole idea?"

I knew he was a factory worker, so I said, "Well, you've been working at your place for a long time. Didn't you originally carry a lunch bucket?" "Yeah," he said, "I carried a lunch bucket. For years I did." I said, "But you don't anymore?" He said, "No, no, not anymore; we've got a cafeteria now." And I said, "That's my answer to your criticism. Where are the people that run those cafeterias in school districts, in factories and all these offices, all these places? That's what we're hoping to train people for, as well as fancy restaurants."

Pogue: As you look back to that experience, being one of the school trustees, are there any other highlights that you remember? You talked about the site construction, the bond referendum, the hiring of the president, the division of staff and assets, anything else?

Whitaker: Well, we did do a lot of traveling in those first couple of years. We wanted to see how other junior colleges were operating. We went to places in Ohio, Pennsylvania. We went to an agricultural junior college in New York. It was very enlightening to be able to see what was going on in some of those places. We got a lot of good ideas, because we…when I say we, not only our board, but we had administrators and faculty people go on these trips. That helped all of us to be able to get some ideas on what we wanted to have in our college.

One thing I do have to say, and I would say that we had seven people on that original board that were all on the same page. There was no major controversy. Yeah, there was differences of opinion on things, but no major controversies. We were able to really all work together, and that was important. That was very important in a situation like this where we were starting from scratch and taking over an established junior college that was operating and had been for a long time.

Pogue: Our final question would be…Being in New Lenox, you're still part of the community college district; how do you stay in touch with what's happening at Joliet Junior College?

Whitaker: I haven't been able to do that as much as I would like to, as much as I should have. The alumni association does have an annual alumni brunch every June, and I have been able to attend that every year for several years. There's always an update, usually by the college president, on what's been going on during the year and what the current situation is, activities, finances.

One thing that I am very proud of, in making trips out to the college now, is to see how it has grown and what the institution is today and what has happened on that site, compared to those 368 acres of farmland that we walked across on that cold winter day. It's been quite a revelation to see what has happened and what a great institution that junior college is today.

Pogue: I want to thank you, Ron, for giving us an in-depth look at the first few years of this new Joliet Junior College.

Whitaker: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I've really appreciated it.

(end of transcript)