

2-7-2008

Emil Kmetec interview, Professor Emeritus, College of Science and Mathematics, Wright State University

Lewis Shupe
Wright State University - Main Campus

Emil Kmetec
Wright State University - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/archives_retirees



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Shupe, L., & Kmetec, E. (2008). Emil Kmetec interview, Professor Emeritus, College of Science and Mathematics, Wright State University. .
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/archives_retirees/7

This Oral Recording is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wright State University Retirees Association Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu, library-corescholar@wright.edu.

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: February 7, 2008

Interviewer: Lewis Shupe
Professor Emeritus, Department of Communication

Interviewee: Emil Kmetec
Professor Emeritus, College of Science and Mathematics

Lew Shupe: This is Lew Shupe, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Communication at Wright State University. Today is February 7, 2008, and I am interviewing Dr. Emil Kmetec, Professor Emeritus from the College of Science and Mathematics, as part of the Wright State University Retirees Association's oral history project. Dr. Kmetec, I'll call you Emil during the interview, if that's okay.

Emil Kmetec: That will be fine.

LS: Thank you for being here.

EK: You're welcome.

LS: To get us started, could you just tell us a little bit about your background and how you came here to Wright State?

EK: Well, I graduated from the University of Wisconsin; I got my PhD there in plant physiology, and took post-doctoral work, a post-doctoral stint in New Orleans at the LSU School of Medicine, where I worked on the biochemistry of intestinal worms. It was a very productive time. At that point, my major professor there was retiring and I needed to find a place to work and to carry out some more research. Then I went to Case Western Reserve, where I spent another three years doing research on kidney problems, mammalian kidney, and I spent the rest of my research career doing that kind of research. After Case Western Reserve, the opportunity became available to join a new university, and I thought it was an appropriate move on my part at that point in my life, so I came down and joined the biology department at the new university that was being built here.

LS: How did you hear about that?

EK: I was told about it by the chairman of the biochemistry department at Case Western Reserve.

LS: Who contacted you?

EK: Well, I contacted Ed Moulton and we arranged to meet. I think I spent an entire afternoon here with him and in Columbus talking about what the future was going to be here, and I think he finally convinced me that this was a good opportunity.

LS: Now when you said you talked with him here, describe that meeting, could you?

EK: He showed me a partially completed building in the middle of a cornfield. The road in from what is now Colonel Glenn, which was called Airway, was a dirt road made lumpy by trucks carrying bricks and mortar and whatever. What impressed me, of course, was the fact that the Air Force turned its land over to the state for the development of the university. It was a nice location, plenty of room for development, and the plans for Wright State looked very promising and that's really why I was pleased to come here and teach and help develop a university.

LS: What was your first impression when you saw that bumpy dirt road?

EK: I said, "Oh my gosh" [laughs]. It didn't look like a campus, of course, but things were shaping up very quickly. I looked at the lecture halls and the offices that were being finalized, and of course the laboratories and lecture halls for the sciences were all where the presidential wing was, but that of course was going to come at a future time. But that's where all of this was located.

LS: Did you anticipate at that time that you would be here as long as you have been?

EK: Well, yes, I was interested in being part of the development. That's one of the reasons I came here, to do my little part to help to evolve a university, and for the most part it went very well.

LS: Describe your department at that time, the first year.

EK: Well, there were three of us: Dr. Hubschman, myself and, oh what was her name? I can't think of her name, she was the laboratory person for beginning biology.

LS: So there were three of you.

EK: There were three of us. Our chairman was the head of the research laboratories in Yellow Springs, who never really had time to come here. We had very brief meetings periodically to develop our plans for the department. Much of the equipment was not here; I brought my own 35 millimeter projector because the university did not have one at that point. Howard Bales, of course, was acting as our dean in the sciences and was very cooperative and did a great job getting equipment for us and trying to make as few possible problems come up by anticipating what we were trying to do.

LS: How was the administration at that time?

EK: Well, there was none. The administration was very loose because Ohio State and Miami University were represented and we saw very little of them, to my recollection. In the sciences, we kind of cooperated and talked a lot between ourselves. When we were on the 4th floor of Oelman Hall, it was the only building at that point, all our offices-

LS: Was it Oelman, or Allyn?

EK: Allyn Hall, yes. I remember Mr. Allyn; he was very nice to the early faculty. We had a large lunch room on that floor and there was nowhere to eat on campus, so we all carried our lunches. There was a refrigerator there that everybody fought over, and you tried to keep from getting your lunch stolen by somebody else. But we solved a lot of our problems over lunch and we interacted. The whole faculty and the sciences and liberal arts and education and business, we all interacted very much and talked about some of the things that we should be doing and the coursework. I think we accomplished a whole lot during those lunch periods, which sometimes extended from ten o'clock until three or four o'clock with different people coming in, depending on their schedules. But it was a very productive period in the development.

LS: So you were all in Allyn Hall, all your offices?

EK: Yes, all the offices.

LS: Wow, that's great. That's interesting. How did the class-work work? The rooms?

EK: The rooms were the standard rooms with the chairs in them. They had projection equipment, no projectors, but you could do some overheads once in a while. I remember the lectures in biology were huge; 400 some people at a time. We did have a microphone to help us, and the microphone didn't work half the time, so we had to speak with a loud voice to be heard. But we did have an overhead there where we were able to project some of the illustrations that we were talking about.

LS: So this was the first year. What was your impression when the students arrived? It must have been a little bit unsettling.

EK: Well, of course no one knew where to go, there was no catalog at the time, just a list of courses, but it worked out. It was very nice. One of the things that I did that first year was to organize a meeting with the local high school teachers, and we spent much of a Saturday morning and part of an afternoon having a meeting with these teachers. I had asked a number of people from the different parts of the university to tell a little bit about what programs were being planned and what they were doing and what their aspirations were for the university. Then we had some of the high school teachers stand up and tell a little bit about what their expectations were and what some of the problems that they were facing in transferring students and teaching students in preparation for university life. It was very successful and we had several hundred people turn out for that talk and I think everyone felt a little bit more comfortable after that.

LS: So you had the classroom setting. As a science person, what about the laboratories?

EK: Well, there were no research laboratories. There was one laboratory for beginning biology-

LS: So you had access to a lab?

EK: Yeah, I had access to a lab in Yellow Springs.

LS: Only in Yellow Springs.

EK: Yes, with our chairman who had that; I can't remember the name of the laboratory. I can't remember his name, either.

LS: So you taught on campus, but you did lab work in Yellow Springs.

EK: Yes. Lab work in my spare time, which was very small [laughs]. In fact, as most faculty will well remember, most of the early development work took much of our time. Preparations for teaching and program development were time consuming because we had not taught those courses; everything was new. One of the things that I recall was that a lot of the people in the sciences felt that we should become more than a teaching university. We did not want to become what would be like a community college; we wanted to become a teaching and research institution, and I think the sciences especially went that way almost right away. Everyone wanted to get into a lab and develop a research program, and it's very pleasing to see that it has evolved in that direction. Because the university is now more than just a teaching institution; it's a good research institution as well.

LS: During that first year, what were several of your biggest surprises or pleasant moments?

EK: Well, I had never taught a class on Saturday mornings, and being only two of us in biology at that point, it fell into my lap to have an eight o'clock class on Saturday morning. I recall the students coming in, in all form of dress, with greasy fingers and hands and dirty clothes; they were coming from their jobs. It was very enlightening to see how dedicated these people were. I also had never taught in the early evening, which was something new, and I think many of us had to adjust to this schedule because we were evolving in such a way that our schedules were either during the day or early evening or even evening classes, which were all part of the university day. There were no special people coming in at certain times; it was all part of the faculty's requirements to meet these needs. It was done that way so that we could reach students who worked and who had different time schedules. It worked out pretty well, we got accustomed to that and it was alright. If you had to teach over dinnertime, you had the rest of the day pretty much free. I think people didn't mind it after awhile.

LS: Your statement about students indicated that you had a lot of respect for those early students.

EK: Very much.

LS: That's very nice. Take us into a year or two once you were getting settled in here. How did things change?

EK: Well, I guess the university was beginning to organize a little bit more with the appointment of deans and an administration: the equipment that we needed was coming in and it was arriving as we needed it; we had better office help. The early years, the first year or so we did not have an office for each department; there was a central typing pool and certain women who were in there were assigned to different departments, but almost anybody could end up typing what you needed to type. The laboratories in Allyn Hall were being completed; the offices in Allyn Hall were much improved.

LS: How long were you with the affiliation of having to go to Yellow Springs?

EK: Until Oelman [Hall] was completed. When Oelman was completed, the top floor was all research laboratories.

LS: In Oelman.

EK: Yes. So we were able to establish a home base there and our offices and our department was located in that building.

LS: That must have been a big change for you.

EK: Yes it is [laughs]. It was sort of the beginning of the time when faculty was beginning to separate and being located in different locations that were becoming harder and harder to access. You began to see faculty less frequently; the interaction between sciences, liberal arts or education or business was a little less because we were separated, and as more buildings were brought online it became even more so.

LS: So in your history at Wright State, you started out in Allyn, you moved to Oelman, where did you go from Oelman?

EK: Into the biology wing that was built here between the medical school and the library.

LS: So you've moved around campus.

EK: Yes. That was inevitable as facilities became available.

LS: Do you have any information or stories about the administration, the deans, and the presidents in your work with them?

EK: I think the deans for the College of Science, as it was in those days, worked very hard to bring together the faculties and satisfy the needs of the different departments. I think anyone who went through these first ten years or so can readily testify that they spent an inordinate amount of time doing committee work and planning. The design of laboratories took a tremendous amount of time. But everyone was fairly cooperative; it was a matter of doing the things that needed to be done. When I came here I was playing the bassoon, for instance, and I had to give that up because there just wasn't enough time. I played with the philharmonic for one concert and that was pretty much it. There just was no more time; I couldn't find time to practice.

LS: Tell me a little bit more about your bassoon history. Did you have any connection with the music department here?

EK: I played a recorder for many years, and I performed on the recorder. I started this at the University of Chicago when I was an undergraduate, and I performed at Wisconsin, and I performed in New Orleans, and I performed in Cleveland and then here. But I had to give up the bassoon because it was a much more demanding instrument. And the music department here, yes, in my spare time I tried to get together some students who were playing instruments, and I had some music. We did get together a number of times with about fifteen or so students with different instruments, and we made some noise and I think we played one concert before we gave that up. Because I have no background in conducting and there was no music available here, and the students were just doing this on their own, so it was difficult with the students working and going to school.

LS: I mentioned to someone that I was going to interview you and they said, "Ask him if he still plays the recorder".

EK: Yes, I do [laughs]. I play clarinet now.

LS: Do you? That's interesting.

EK: The music department was in its formative stage and there were very poor facilities until the Creative Arts Center was built. There were no practice rooms to speak of. I didn't interact too much in those days with the music department. I was just interested in the students and trying to do what I could. Because I like music very much; I play a lot and I'm very involved with it now. But when the Christmas dinner, what's that-

LS: The Madrigal dinner?

EK: Madrigal dinner, yes. We played in that, the first Madrigal dinners, my group on the recorder provided the music for that. I remember having them offer a small amount of money to help defray our expenses for this, and I said, "That would be very nice", but what they did was put it on my payroll [laughs] instead of coming across with some money. Fifty dollars or something, they put it on my payroll check that I got, and then I had to go and pay tax on top of that, which was unexpected.

LS: Did your group of musicians do any other things?

EK: Yes, we played around town.

LS: Did you? That's nice. What about other events of students that you remember, beyond music. Was there any student activity much?

EK: Well, a little bit later on when the shootings occurred up north here at Kent State, I was vice-president of the faculty at the time, and I interacted quite a lot with the students. We had a rally out here in the center of the campus and I tried to convince everybody that rather than demonstrating less peacefully than they had in mind, maybe what we should do is go on a letter writing campaign. So we furnished paper and envelopes to students, and pencils and pens, and we had everybody out there writing letters to the governor as to what they felt should be done about it. I was also called as a representative from Wright State to Columbus by the governor at that time to discuss the problem.

LS: So you were faculty president- what did they call it then, they've changed the name-

EK: That was the vice-president of the faculty.

LS: Who preceded you as the vice-president, do you remember?

EK: Yes, it was- he was in business- now I can't remember his name.

LS: Who followed you?

EK: Well, the first vice-president was elected in the lunchroom, basically, that we talked about. During that time, Carl Menari and I wrote the first by-laws for the faculty. After that was finished and we presented it to the faculty, it was approved by the faculty and then I was elected the vice-president of the faculty, for two terms.

LS: So you were one of the first vice-presidents, right?

EK: Yes, I was the second and third. I can't remember the name of that man. He was in business, and I think he owned several restaurants in town, too. I just can't remember his name.

LS: So, you are now a member of the "over the hill gang", right? Isn't that what they call you?

EK: Well, I don't know if it's over the hill yet. [Laughs]

LS: No, I think that's what they refer to the past vice-presidents.

EK: Oh, well then I suppose I'm way over. [Laughs]

LS: That's an interesting part of the history.

EK: Yes, well, that was a time when we were trying to evolve the university organization in such a way that the faculty and the administration could get together to work out the problems. That was the intent at first; the students were not on that initially. We felt that at that point what we needed was to get the faculty and the administration together in the Academic Council, as it was called. And from there the evolution took place to what it is now.

LS: So you were one of the instrumental people in establishing the Academic Council.

EK: Yes, Carl Menari and I were the two that spearheaded that whole issue.

LS: That's an important part of this history.

EK: Sometimes we had trouble getting people to faculty meetings. I tried using music to attract them; I got to the audio visual people and they played classical music- Mozart and a few other things like that- loud, ahead of time to hopefully have people come in and enjoy a little bit of that and then turn it off and have our meeting.

LS: Sounds like the Pied Piper.

EK: Several of us did that, too. We scoured the hallways poking our heads into doorways urging people to come to the meetings.

LS: Did you have the appointed people who were on the council, or could anybody come in?

EK: No, the people on the council were voted in. I was talking about the General Faculty Meeting. Not many people liked to do that.

LS: That's interesting. How has Wright State changed over the years, in your perception?

EK: Wright State has grown, and I'm personally very pleased to see that it has evolved in much the directions that most of the early faculty felt it should evolve. There were questions about Nutter Center, of course, being part of the university, because subsequent to that decision, faculty salaries and facilities and supplies and things like that began to dwindle. That, of course, had repercussions later on. But realistically, I think looking back at it, I think Wright State needed something to attract the attention of the people and the state and the immediate environments, to have a rallying point, so to speak. They would have a sense of loyalty, maybe, developing from the sports activities.

LS: If you could go back, would there be any things that you would have done differently in those early years?

EK: Not really. I think I was pleased to see how things were evolving. I was not so pleased with something I mentioned before: that is the separation of faculty and losing touch with people in other disciplines. This was important to me because so much of my thinking about what a university should be was to have more interaction between the different disciplines. I remember having conversations with the English department for program purposes- and I think I may have mentioned this to you before- that in the sciences, we wanted liberal arts education to accompany the science major, but in liberal arts they weren't so keen in having a science background as part of their liberal arts majors. I think before I retired I mentioned one time to somebody, or it might have been the council, that I'd heard that my son at Cornell had an interesting experience. When he was doing his English requirement, one quarter of the requirement was spent in the department that he was going to major in and that department then would oversee his writing ability and work with him doing topics that the department was concerned with. I think some of that is being done here now, which I think is a good thing. Because it makes the student more excited about what they're doing rather than just trying to pick a subject from space and writing about something they don't really want to write about. I like that plan.

LS: Well, you've kept pretty much in touch with faculty in other departments, didn't you, when the university became larger?

EK: Yes, we tried but our duties were such that we were still evolving each year and still planning courses, and as we went through the baccalaureate we were already planning ahead for the masters program, and soon thereafter we were planning for the medical school program, the nursing school was coming on board, those early years were just teaching, planning and doing what research you could.

LS: Because I know you have a reputation as being one who was friendly with faculty in every department.

EK: I tried, yes.

LS: That's nice. If you could use one word to describe your early perception of Wright State, what would it be? One word- and I'll give you a minute to think about that.

EK: One word? Early thoughts?

LS: Just one word to describe your early experience at Wright State.

EK: It was exciting.

LS: Did you get discouraged at any time?

EK: Yes.

LS: Which is just natural.

EK: It's a natural thing, yes. I think overall, the progress was great.

LS: Do you have any remembrances about any of the presidents at Wright State with whom you worked? Let me go back to Golding, for instance.

EK: Yes.

LS: You knew him and worked with him?

EK: Yes, I did.

LS: Fred White you knew.

EK: Oh yes, I worked with Fred White quite a lot, especially in the development of our library. The library was in that little building, I've forgotten what it was called in those days, but it was right where the moat and water surrounded three sides of it. That was the library. I worked with Fred White to get a library on campus because there was none before that.

LS: What is your first remembrance of biology in the library?

EK: Well, we were busy buying books, [laughs], and trying to get titles and what we were going to carry in periodicals.

LS: So if we go back in the history of the library, you were one of the first people to start the collection?

EK: Oh yes, I think all the faculty that were here in the first two or three years were involved with that, because there wasn't much else. Some of the books were borrowed from Miami and Ohio State. I think some of the books came from Dayton and the Montgomery County Library; he was a very good supporter of Wright State. Yes, that was another thing that I remember. I can't remember his name, but he got a library card for all the faculty.

LS: Do you remember who that was?

EK: Oh my, that was in 1964 or 1965. No, I don't, sorry. But he gave us that privilege, because we were not in Montgomery County.

Chris Wydman¹: So was he the director of the library there?

EK: Yes, he was the director of the library down on 4th Street. He also stored a number of books for us before we had facilities to display them. He would store them down in the basement of his library and then brought them over when we had space.

¹ Chris Wydman, WSU archivist, was present during the interview.

LS: So it was almost like an annex.

EK: Well, we never went there. It was a temporary holding spot. But yeah, we all had library cards to Montgomery County Library, which was very nice. The Greene County Library was very poorly developed in those days.

LS: That would be interesting to find out who that is.

EK: Yeah, he was a very cooperative gentleman.

LS: Are there any questions that you would like to have been asked as we end this?

EK: No, I think you covered some of the highlights. I think the more one talks about the past, the more one remembers, too. There are probably many things that I have forgotten about. I was involved early on in my research- another thought that came up- that this campus needed some facilities for isotope work. I was lucky enough to be sent down to Knoxville where the nuclear facility was located. They were running classes there for people like myself that needed additional experience- I already had some- but additional experience, and when I came back I helped develop the licensure for Wright State and the use of isotopes in the laboratories. I would teach a course in isotopes for many years until the safety department was well established, and then they took that over.

LS: Well, you've had an interesting history. Any parting thoughts?

EK: It's hard to keep up with the development of Wright State; it's doing very well. I think it's going to make a mark in Ohio.

LS: You said that your first or one word for the beginning of Wright State was "exciting".

EK: It was very exciting.

LS: What word would you use now?

EK: I think its maturing.

LS: Very nice. Well, Emil, thank you so much for doing this interview.

EK: You're welcome.

LS: We may have other questions that we may add to this at a later date, and if you remember anything please feel free to just call us.

EK: Okay, very good. Thank you.