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J. B. Black Jr. interview, First Dean of the School of Business, Wright State University

Robert Wagley

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J. B. Black

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview Date: November 11, 2003

Interviewer: Robert Wagley
Professor Emeritus, Wright State University

Interviewee: Dr. J. B. Black, Jr.
First Dean of the School of Business, Wright State University

What is your personal background and how did you come to Wright State?

Well, I drove up here, as a matter of fact; it wasn't very far. I was at Miami. Dale Kawthorne, who was Dean at Miami, was really a super boss, because the agreement between Ohio State University and Miami was that we would have business and they would have sociology and psychology and engineering, back and forth. Kawthorne was looking for someone to be Dean and told me, since I had turned it down when I looked and helped him find somebody, I said, 'Well, I didn't turn it down, I was never asked.' I became interested at that point. I had a strange idea that I could start a college, in a university, and eliminate all the kinds of politics that go with higher education. This would be a puritanical group and we would really be concerned with the needs of the students, research and service, and it would just be a great thing. It lasted for almost a year or so. I ended up being appointed what was then Director of Business Administration, and later named as Dean as we approached independence, which we did yet before I left, I think.

Were any other business faculty on staff?

There were two that I remember. One taught Economics and the other one didn't. Norm wasn't there. Bill Evans was there and a guy in Economics, a young man who was there for a good while afterwards, but I don't recall the name right now. There were a couple others who were part-timers, and I don't really remember. Bill Evans and this other guy are the only two that were full-time, as I recall, when I went aboard.

The first job I had to do was to start hiring. We did acquire, D_____ was one of the first to come aboard, Boris Landford was another one that we got very early. I got Chairman of the Finance Department, Bob Dolfin, and to head up the business department, a guy from Martinville, Indiana who was a lawyer came on board.

Oh, Bob Wade. He's the one who hired me.

Yes, Bob Wade. He did make some mistakes but, other than that, he was a pretty good man. So that kind of formed, then we brought in Williams from Miami. He came in Finance. As I recall we had about eight or 10 by the time we started up in the fall of 1966. I came in the late spring or early summer of 1966. Norm and I worked very

closely together and we went to the annual meetings in San Francisco that year. Incidentally, we had the largest suite of any school in the AACSB. It was only by six inches but we.....we had all kinds of room.

We hired 12 people at that meeting. I think one backed out but I think we eventually got 11, if I'm not mistaken. We were growing at that point. Norm was tremendous in helping and we worked as a team to bring these people in.

One of the things I did...I think we had been on quarters, I'm not sure whether we were going or coming on quarters, but we had trimesters. Everybody taught the first and second quarters, then the third trimester we divided into hexesters. There was half....that would have been the summer. What I did was to sign contracts with these 12, where they would teach the autumn and spring trimesters, and then one of the two hexesters, and that would constitute their salary. There was no summer school, this was it. Applying straight percentages to that, we were able to get it up where it sounded like awful good salaries. I hired a guy from Texas A & M. He was an outstanding professor at Texas A & M, he was very good. Don Tracy. He was there after about a year of the program, and he was there the first year we had that....two trimesters and a hexester. He came up to me one day and said, 'You know, J. B., you screwed me.' He didn't realize what I had done to him and the salary sounded awful good compared with normal two semesters or two trimester salaries. That's how we lured some people in. Then they kind of liked it and they stayed.

Was Joe Childs the one that....?

Joseph Chinjungchow; yes. Norm and I met him at one of the Midwest meetings, I can't tell you which one. It was before we went to San Francisco. The problem was that neither one of us could understand him. In conversation, we just didn't know what he was saying. His credentials looked good. He was, I think, a New York University Ph. D. Everything looked fine, but we simply could not understand him and we couldn't bring somebody like that into the campus because some of the local people in the Dayton area, you couldn't understand them either, for different reasons.

At this meeting in San Francisco, we advertised positions and everything, as they always do. Who shows up, but Joseph Chinjungchow. I just decided the only thing to do was just level with him and tell him why we had not hired him before or why we couldn't hire him now. I said, 'Joe, we cannot understand you.' He said, 'Well, when in the classroom, I project and I am different.' I could see already that when he started doing that, he was, and I could understand him very easily. In the classroom he did a good job. I never had a student complain that they couldn't understand Joseph Chinjungchow. He also would draw his graphs.....he was an economist. He drew his graphs with, I would say at least 24 different colors. He would put, 'please do not erase.' They were masterpieces. I mean, he would have them up there, his students understood and he got good ratings....he was a good teacher. I guess he got some people upset with him in later years because he had elusions of grandeur and kind of pushed some people around a little bit, but I didn't have that experience with him.

Whenever he got excited, you couldn't understand him.

But, in the classroom, and I observed him, he wasn't bad at all. It was with a dialect, but I was still English.

What is your most memorable personal experience at Wright State?

Well, we had a lot of them. Of course, one of the things we were trying to do was become an independently accredited University. I was one of a team of three or four that went before the legislature, or a committee, in Columbus, to make our plea to become independent, and they did. The initial term was that when we hit 5,000 enrollment, they would consider us as independent of Ohio State and of Miami. We actually took it up when we were about 3,700 and really gained independence a little short, but that worked wonders, too, because it gave us....

I'm not really answering the question, as you can see. When I was trying to put equipment in for the secretarial studies or whatever we called the general business department, I had to go back to the chairman of the department at Miami to get approval on anything. The chairperson at that time was a very fine lady, but she wanted manual typewriters. I said, 'Look, they're not using manual typewriters.' She said, 'You learn to put the proper pressure on each key with the manual typewriters.' I said, "The citizens of Dayton and the employers of some of our schools are using electric typewriters already.' Well, she just couldn't go for this. So we brought it up.....

Do you remember the Stockyards restaurant? Is it still there? That was enough to convince almost anybody. We took her there and wined her and dined her, and we got the electric typewriters and what we needed.

There were a lot of interesting things in those early years because everything was the first time. One of my closest associates there was Warren Abraham who, before we had a president, was the head honcho of the Miami side of it. The guy who was the head of engineering, or was an engineer, headed the Ohio State side. That was the division until the year _____ was brought in, then Warren became Dean of Continuing Education, or whatever title.

I would give Fred White and Warren Abraham an awful lot of credit for those early days, which were very exciting. Everything we did was new. We had no policies. Another person who was very close to me was Nolan Marcus. He was Dean of _____ Education, or whatever the title is there. He and Warren and myself were kind of the three stooges, or something.

We had a situation, after B_____ came on board. He decided the leadership throughout the university was not consistent and he would say in his address to the public, 'we have no leaders.' Technically, he was right, because we were appointed directors, so we didn't have the academic title of Dean or whatever would have been

appropriate, but it didn't make us feel very good to hear him say that. He called us to his house one night. This was probably 10:30 or 11 at night. He lived in Kettering at that time. This was before they built the presidential mansion so this was a rental home. Selected people were there....Warren, Norwood and myself were the only three of the university administration who were there at that time. He said we were going to have a search for Deans of each of the five colleges, or whatever we had at the time. That made sense. He said, 'You guys, I am going to appoint you with the appropriate titles.' The guy who was head of Arts & Sciences, his brother was a designer for G.M. He had really assumed a super position. Every time there was any kind of platform party, he was there a good while. That was one of the things that was plaguing B_____. The guy from the engineering of it did not want to be a Dean, he said he did not want to be permanently in one of those positions. He wanted to continue to stay and teach, and he was head of a department, something like that.

We met that night. We were going to play games...we were going out and have a search committee go out, but three of them would be black. Shoot blanks, you know...The next morning, all three of us, the three stooges, were in early. Warren came over to my office and was sitting there, and he looked on my desk. I had the rotary four-way test there, the first one-is it the truth? Well, I could see what he was looking at and I said, 'No, it isn't the truth, is it?' We called Norwood in, whose office was right adjacent to mine, and we talked about this. We thought, you know, this is really childish. We're dealing with adults. What B_____ needed to do, in our opinion, was tell everybody the whole truth of exactly what he wanted and to tell _____ he didn't want him. There was somebody else, too, but I can't remember who it was. Both Norwood and Warren agreed with that statement. In those days, we had a special code word that we could get to the President any time we wanted to. This was at a time when students were locking Presidents up and doing all kinds of things, although I don't think Wright State knew how to do that yet. We called the code word and got in with him immediately. Let's see, Allyn Hall was the first building, then there was where the engineering people were, Oelman, and I was in Millett. When we went in, B_____ 's eyes were wide open. He thought we had an insurrection, he didn't know what, because this was following the night before. We simply sat down and told him what we thought and he was relieved. He breathed a sigh of relief because he hadn't really wanted to do what he was going to do. Very kindly, he did not want to hurt anybody's feelings, but if something like that slips, you are in real deep trouble. So that's the way it was done and that's the way we preceded.

That was as exciting as anything, I think, while we were there.

What was the role of the faculty on staff during the early years of the University?

We worked our tails off. I had everybody teaching two trimesters and a hexester, and some of them, two hexesters. They really worked. We started committees. AS I said, my burning desire was to have a nonpolitical university. I grew up in Bloomington, Indiana University, and I saw all the crap that went on there and how the Dean's wives made decisions for them, and I didn't want any part of that. We did have a very hard-

working, very energetic family. I don't think I can site any one and say they sat down on the job and didn't do much. There were many divergent opinions as to what constituted the best thing to do. P___ Landford was as different as day and night from everybody else, but he worked hard. He tried to do his best and I think he did a pretty good job, but some others didn't always agree.

I can't think of the gal who headed up primarily the secretarial area, typing, etc.

Rita Tilton.

Yes, she got married while working. She was certainly a very attractive gal. There was something political going on and she got involved with it. It had to do with University politics and she got madder than a hornet. Actually, they were using her. I know I went over to talk to her about it one time and I didn't get very far, although we became good friends and we remain good friends. I have a picture in my office of the faculty at that time, in the very early days, and Rita was there.

You mentioned several of the issues facing Wright State at that time. One was becoming a University. What other issues?

Naturally, the question about athletics. A guy by the name of Moore became my first athletic director. I don't know whether he had that title or on similar thereto. He was a real good guy. He was the leader who started that and we decided very early that we really couldn't afford football. The cost was tremendous, where would we draw from, and so on, so we let soccer be our fall sport. I remember some very funny games. Of course, they have been very successful with basketball and had excellent response to this, and other sports, as well.

There were the usual growing pains of any academic institution. One of the things I had to deal with was jealousies of faculty and staff, and so on. I have always tried, without much success, to tell people, 'Look, you worry about what you're doing and let me worry about what everybody else is doing, that's my job.' I had that problem here. I had a very fine professor who was coming in all the time complaining about what everybody else wasn't doing or something of that sort.

As you know, each professor knows that his subject material is the most important in the University. It is a pride of ownership and, you know, that's not bad, because I would hate to have a professor go in the classroom thinking what he had to teach wasn't worthwhile. That could really be horrible. I know, from my own experience, and I'm sure you have experienced it, too, that when I have had professors who just made me really work....I had a math teacher in Trigonometry at I.U. before I went in the war and, according to him, Trigonometry was the most important subject there ever was. If you were to go to Mars and, if there was anybody living there, the trigonometric relationships we had discovered here would be exactly the same there or anyplace else. He was just exuberant about it. He later became Chairman of the department, when I came on the faculty at I.U., which was my first faculty position. We had introduced mathematics in

the business curriculum. We discovered very quickly that mathematics was very important to us in business.

I was teaching mainly junior level courses, Finance 301 or whatever the number was, core course, and the students just weren't able to do the math very well. They were having all kinds of problems, so I went to see our Dean at I.U. The Dean was Art Weimer, who was premiere Dean in the Midwest, in my opinion. I told him what the problem was, and so on, and he said, 'J.B., I've got a suggestion for you.' I thought I was going to get some real good wisdom. He said, 'Why don't you teach them what you want them to know?' You know, that's the best advice I think I ever had from anybody. He did set up a liaison between myself and this favorite math professor, who was then Chairman of the department, and we worked together to try and improve the curriculum for our students. So, good things came of it. Meanwhile, the ones who already had it, I taught them, that was my orders. It was fun.

What was the relationship between the students and the faculty during those early years?

I think it was really pretty good. In fact, as I think back, it was surprisingly good. I had a number of students who took great pride....I can remember students coming to me and saying, 'You know, this is a new University and we are just starting and everything else, but we can compete with anybody.' They felt what they were learning was as good as it was at Miami or Ohio State or you name it. That was the reaction they had. Of course, they were pioneering.

The school colors were being selected by the student body. Initially, they were three colors-gold, green and white. I know you still have the green. All things were new and they were trilled to have this opportunity to be the first one...

I really gave the first degree that we ever granted at Wright State. It was a posthumous degree to an outstanding brilliant student who had a mysterious death. He didn't have a tongue, or his tongue was greatly reduced, and he had a terrible time talking, but his mind was real sharp. He was a senior when this happened.

(there appears to be a lapse in the interview, as part of a previous interview is on the beginning of tape 2, side A, then this current interview comes on)

.....I never will forget...I don't know why, just what this was, but we got a little blue or green card that had each member of the faculty's name and address listed, their religion, and some other things that I think, legally, you can't do.

I believed in an open door policy. When some member of the faculty was in the office and what I was telling the member in the office, I was also telling to the guy who was out in the hall waiting to come in. I wanted him to hear it because that would stop a lot of...

Norm came to my office one time. He wanted to know, he said, 'I'm really worried about this.' He said he was going over these cards. He, as department head, had to do something with the cards and I don't recall what it was. I think they had about 10 or 11 in economics at this point, maybe 12. He said, 'Every single one of the faculty, with the exception of myself, is a Catholic. Is that a problem?' I said, 'Norm what were the criteria for hiring? Did they have anything to do with being Catholic or Jewish or anything?' He said, 'No, I tried to hire the best I could find.' I said, 'Well, there's your answer. It's highly coincidental that they are all Catholic.'

That is the kind of thing you run into. Norm was a conservative Jew. The Six Day War, Norm had cousins fighting in it and he was very upset. I don't begrudge him, I would be upset, too. He was a conservative Jew and he believed in ketchup on steak. We went to Chicago to one of the meetings one time and went into this steak house. It was a very good one...it's gone now, the guy who owned it died. Norm asked for his steak to be well done and the waiter said they didn't do well done steak; medium was as well done as they did. Norm finally said okay. Then he wanted some Heinz 57 sauce. This was a top steak house and they didn't have Heinz 57. He named two or three, Worcester sauce, etc, and then asked for ketchup and they said they didn't have ketchup. Norm was going to leave and I told him to sit down. It was the best steak I think I have ever eaten in my life. He finally enjoyed his.

He had been with IBM just prior to coming to Wright State, and had been a speech writer for the head of IBM. Norm had a lot of talent. We knew the capstone course and I had him...he did a very good job.

One thing Norm had not had was accounting. I finally convinced him that it was very important, an economist wasn't going to be keeping our books, but he needed to know accounting just as all business students need to know accounting. That is the bottom line, that is what you read to find out which direction is up. When he got into this capstone course, he became.....