

## UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Lenoir C. Wright

INTERVIEWER: Anne R. Phillips

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[Begin Side A]

AP: It's a rainy Friday. Say something and I'll see—I'll just test the machine.

LW: How are you today?

AP: Fine.

[recording error]

AP: —relations study program—

LW: Language is, of course, very important, and in the Asian field it is extremely important because while English is the number two language in China and Japan, now. In China, it was first Russian; then that was dropped when they had the big fight between Mao [Zedong was a Chinese communist revolutionary and founding father of the People's Republic of China, which he governed from 1949 to 1976] and [Joseph] Stalin [was the leader of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953].

But they still don't—you really ought to have a language if you're going to work—So when we found out—Professor Cooley [history professor] and I, who were then working together—found out about this program called the self-study language program, we thought we should adopt it. And again, it wasn't very happily received, but because it doesn't cost much, we were able to get it through. And the real credit for this project goes to James Cooley.

AP: I see.

LW: He's headed it and run it almost from the beginning, and I wanted him to because I was on

my way out. I wanted him to have something nice in his thing, but I was supportive.

But the way it works is that—it's largely a student—reliance on the student. The student is given a book and a tape, and then he prepares—he or she prepares lessons for every time the class meets. And then there is a native informant who is just maybe some

student, say a Japanese student who happens to be in residence, and that's crucial. And so the student helps in—it's a linguistic program, not a written program. And then we used some professor at some university where the language is taught to give the examination so you could get credit—

AP: I See.

LW: —official credit.

And I thought it was a wonderful idea, and we taught Chinese and Japanese and Russian, Hebrew, I think Arabic. But not to very many—But it never took with the students, and again it never took with the administration either. [chuckles] But—it was based on the Yale system, and during World War II [global conflict fought between 1939 and 1945], Yale University was in the forefront of teaching service people rapid languages. And this was the program that they used. It was, of course, not a substitute for academic instruction, which we figured would come if, for instance, a student went to graduate school. But this would give them a step up. And I still think it was a wonderful idea. I'd say twelve or thirteen people, I think, went through the program. And I don't know if it is still operative or not.

AP: I don't know either, but that was a good idea and would be very valuable.

LW: Well, I think the official language people who were already at the institute had some reservations, but when they saw it was not going to be a massive encroachment on their bailiwicks, they didn't raise too much trouble. But I think they sort of were scornful of it. I've never heard this expressed, but I imagine that they were because it didn't get into the literature, which is where you ought to be if you're going to be into the language of a country.

AP: But it certainly would give the flavor, it would give—If we think about international studies, we have to consider language and music and the culture of a country, dress, customs, foods, as well as the formal writing and history, literature.

LW: We'd hoped to interest the school of business in these programs but never got very far with that—on the theory that people who went into foreign work would need—say people going to China to be in business would definitely need to know something about the language and certainly the customs and so on which are so foreign to us. I met a businessman the other day and he was saying our company, his company had gone to China and spent three weeks negotiating for a contract. And at the end of the three weeks they found they had nothing. [laughs]

AP: Oh my!

LW: They didn't know how they went about their business. Well, you know, in the western world, there's a system laid out in the law. And you negotiate and then you sign a contract, and that contract is binding under the law and there's no question about it. But this doesn't work in every country. I think there are—the Orientals are not litigious like

we are, you know, we get mad and we say, "I'm going to take you to court." [laughs]  
They tend to negotiate things in a group, and the individual finds himself submerged in that group, and that's where the decision is made. Companies consult with all of their people before they make a major decision. The chief executive officer, the CEO, doesn't make the decision—that's binding on the company in that situation. But not out there. And we can't quite understand.

AP: Most North Americans, perhaps especially people in business, have a very difficult time not being able to nail it down, you know, pin it down.

LW: We have a little bit of trouble with European law—not English, our system's based on English common law—but the other, the Roman law system, it's a little different because [unclear] we can manage that. But where there isn't any system of law and they don't have any lawyers and they don't have any court—where in the courts the defendant is judged guilty to start with. [laughs]

AP: Yes, yes, until proven innocent. Yes. So did some of the international students take the language program?

LW: Yes, some of them did. And I think one or two of them were really benefitted by it and went on to graduate school.

AP: You mentioned that some graduates of the program went on to maybe the State Department or jobs higher.

LW: Foreign service.

AP: Foreign service. And did others go on to graduate work—graduate school from International Studies?

LW: Yes. Although some—you see the International Studies Program was—you were a major in history—and had this as an adjunct course. So some went on into history or English or geography or whatever you had and didn't—But one hopes that they were benefitted by the enlargement of their horizon.

AP: I would think so. What about your own language study? You were in India and when you were in Iraq, did you pick up some of the language or did you study it formally?

LW: I studied Arabic with a private instructor, and I got a smattering—I was, of course, teaching when I was in Iraq and didn't have much time to work on the language. But I didn't in India for the simple reason that English was such a pronounced language. You know that English is the lingua franca of India today, although Hindi is the official language. There's something like thirty or forty subordinate languages. The people in the south of India cannot understand Hindi; they might as well be talking in French. So India is pretty strong in English. Although now the central government run from New Delhi, of

- course, is trying to force the strong separatist movement among the Tamils and the Tamil Nadu, which is where Madras would be.
- AP: And that's more politically or culturally or motivated—Or is it a religious issue, as you see it?
- LW: Oh, it's a religious—
- AP: Division?
- LW: They were a Dravidian culture and not Hindi culture. That has sort of been glossed over a little as modernity has intruded. But the language difficulty and the sort of nationalist feeling that these people have. You've probably been reading in the paper about Kashmir, which was divided between Muslim Pakistan and India, and they're in revolt. Of course what's happening in Eastern Russia must necessarily have an impact out there.
- AP: Yes, it's been an extremely volatile time, extremely fluid time in Europe and the Soviet Union in the past few weeks.
- LW: But the feeling against the Russians as an overlord and once they get that out of the way, you're going to see a lot of nationalist feeling—the Balkanization problem is going to reassert itself and is already starting to in the Soviet Union.
- AP: Mr. [Mikhail] Gorbachev [the eighth and last leader of the Soviet Union] has to be careful when he goes to speak and tries to convince because he may not convince, when he—especially in the Latvia—Lithuanian countries.
- LW: I think a lot of people have claimed (and I tend to agree) that the three Baltic Republics are going to be allowed to go their own way. Although they're so tied economically to Moscow, it is going to be difficult for them to break away cleanly, at least for a while. But when we talk about the southern part of the Soviet Union, that's another matter. I don't think they want to let them go because that would take over half of the Soviet Union if all of them slipped away. And then the Baltic—Any significant part of the whole—Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and all those Muslim republics are in revolt.
- AP: Yes, I wonder how much students now realize that—even read, even keep up, students on this campus or any other campus, and how much students were aware in the '50s at Woman's College, or in the '60s, I guess I'm asking how much were they aware of world-wide events or national here? Did you, could you judge that in any way, on campus?
- LW: Well, yes I thought they were not interested and not knowledgeable—the two went hand in hand. Maybe I said this last time, but the Europeans have it all over us because if you drive sixty miles, you're in another country and another language, and the impetus there is to learn that language. Whereas we drive five hundred miles and we're still in the United States—unless we live in the border area, and the border areas are somewhat knowledgeable. I don't know how many people really speak Spanish in this country

except the Spanish-speaking people who come in. Do you know an organization called English USA?

AP: I don't think so.

LW: Well, it's an organization that's run by a man named [Samuel I.] Hayakawa, who was a senator from Hawaii. [Editor's note: Hayakawa was a linguist, English professor, and a United States senator from California from 1977 to 1983. He founded the political lobbying organization US English.]

AP: Oh, all right, yes.

LW: And he wanted to make English the official language.

AP: I didn't realize he was behind that.

LW: In the past, when we had an influx of Irish people, they seemed to very quickly, at least the second generation, learned English and so on. But now Latinos are objecting to having to learn English, and they want to be taught in Spanish; they want everything translated—voting instructions translated into Spanish. I don't think that's a very good thing for a country.

AP: And road signs, [unclear].

LW: Well, the French-speaking people in Canada—they've forced this duplication—it cost an enormous amount of money. Speaking of the Quebecers, I used to tell Canadians my theory about how to solve the PQ problems, the problems of Quebec, they don't speak good French, you know, so they should all be sent to France, and to Paris where the Parisians would laugh at them. They'd come back home and be happy to be part of Canada.

AP: To speaking—That's quite a solution.

LW: [laughs] I said it with tongue in cheek. I met a lady who was from the province Quebec, and she looked at me sternly and said, "But I speak perfect French!" I said, "Oh, madam, I was only kidding." [laughs]

AP: That is amazing.

LW: Well, but we just don't do well in languages—I don't know what, if it's an inborn incapacity or certainly no real incentive to learning it.

AP: When you came here, did the college require foreign languages of all students?

LW: Yes.

AP: French or German or—

LW: Yes.

AP: —that was required.

LW: That was part of the requirement. You had to choose one language and get to a certain level, intermediate level. Of course, you could take an examination and meet the qualifications. But English and history and language and science were the bulwark of the—and then that began to slip away. And now happily, it's sort of being resurrected, going back to the—

AP: At what point did it slip away or to diminish in some way, here, do you think, Dr. Wright? Or how could we account for it? Maybe that's the more important question.

LW: I think there was just a general surge in the education nation-wide that more opportunities ought to be made available to the students to follow their own particular bent. I don't know who was responsible for that, but I know that the—well, within the university there was a feeling in, I think I've told you that history and English were sort of running the place. And then as other departments and disciplines began to emerge and gather strength, for instance sociology; they couldn't understand why sociology wasn't just as important as history—maybe more so from their point of view. And I had a former head of the sociology department tell me, ask me if I didn't think that sociology ought to be made a requirement instead of history.

AP: Instead of—oh!

LW: And I was forced to say I didn't think so, but I didn't want to [unclear]. I didn't want to be argumentative so I didn't pursue the subject. I think the students like this idea that they could almost build their curriculum and take courses that they were interested in without this basic requirement. And I think that was a shame. I really feel that, you know, the old saying that if you don't study history you're going to make the same mistakes all over again. But it's hard to explain this to students; they just reject this idea that they see any value in history, that it will personally be valuable to them. Or English. Well, as long as they can write their name but the whole body of literature that is sort of a foundation upon which our society rests—the Shakespeare, the Bible and all the rest of those.

AP: So we have to ask again about the whole state of liberal arts. Have we gotten ourselves into a North American society of get rich quick, which doesn't always include the liberal mind, or the liberal imagination and I don't know. I get pessimistic when I think about the average man or woman in the streets and what little knowledge, what breadth of knowledge or depth of knowledge there really is. And what is the future of our society if we—?

LW: Well, you know there was this program, the St. John's Program, the Great Books program. I think that went a little too far the other way. I think you could build a solid foundation without having to read Aristotle, necessarily, not that Aristotle's *Politics*

wasn't a great piece of work. But to answer your question, I don't know what the future holds for us. There seems to be a *métier* controlling our thoughts and imaginations to a very great extent. The level of that projection isn't very high.

AP: I heard a scholar talk about some of the news commentators who were bringing reports from Beijing, from Tiananmen Square last June, June '89, and the scholar was saying that the interpretation, even the reporting of the news was not only distorted, but was just basically wrong. That the views that the commentators—the views that they were expressing on TV—the views were just not right, was not an accurate perception of the history of the culture or the Chinese government or culture. But that was the report that thousands and millions of North Americans got, just that little bit of news, which became gospel. So unless men and women can ferret that out for themselves, the truth, and continue to question, we're in a bad fix and we have to have something to base our actions and thought. That's the scary part. I mean, what do we do with people's minds? What's in them or not in them, the gaps.

[pause, recording error]

LW: I don't know, but the theater in New York is in a horrible state I think.

AP: The arts here at Woman's College—music and drama—have always been strong, here.

LW: Yes, they have.

[End of Interview]