

7-10-2002

Interview with William M. Bost

William Marlin Bost

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CHARM
Oral History Project

July 10, 2002

Interviewee: William M. Bost

Interviewer: Dr. Craig Piper

Location: Mississippi State University

- Craig Piper: Dr. William M. Bost originally hales from Pontotoc, Mississippi. He graduated from Mississippi State University in 1949. Two years later he joined the Mississippi Cooperative Service in 1951, and served in several different capacities including district agent, associate director, and eventually director in 1962. Dr. Bost continued his education receiving a Masters degree from Cornell University and his doctorate in Administration of Higher Education from the University of Mississippi. Dr. Bost retired from MSU in 1981. A list of career and personal accomplishment could fill volumes, but Dr. Bost's contributions to MSU in agriculture in the Magnolia State and beyond are admirable. Thank you for joining us today Dr. Bost and participating in the CHARM Oral History Project. Ok, to start where did you receive your degrees aside from Mississippi State and what was your field of expertise? For example, at Cornell, what was your Masters Degree?
- William Bost: At Cornell my Masters degree was in Extension Administration-Rural Development.
- CP: And, what did that entail?
- WP: Well, it was a very broad topic obviously when you take a look at it. But, Mississippi is a rural state. Anything that you can do as far as furthering education and attracting jobs to this state is rural development because our biggest cities in Mississippi are considered rural as far as a nationwide concept of economic development is concerned. So, it was a very broad based study on how to develop the resources of the state of Mississippi to best serve our people.
- CP: Um, we mentioned that you originally from Pontotoc. Is that where you grew up and what was your life like there, and what kind of inspired you to come to Mississippi State?

WB: Yes, that is true. Off just a little bit. Actually, for us in Pontotoc County, we recognized that there are... well, let me back up a little bit and see why we don't recognize differences. But, I came from a little town of Ecpu, just north of Pontotoc and I lived in the country from that. We lived on a farm. I grew up on a farm. I always wanted to see if I could find some way to help small farmers do better economically and to live better. This was my motivation as a kid growing up, and this was my motivation for going to school and I really wanted to go to Mississippi State University because I could see that it was dedicated primarily to serving the working people, the common people of the state. And, I felt like that if I could get a degree from Mississippi State University, I could probably be positioned to help...

CP: Can you remember University people coming out to your town or was that not even...

WB: That really wasn't really very much done at that time. Did have a county agent that came out to the farm on occasion and offer any kind of assistance he could in the way of advice, technical information, but it was rare.

CP: When you first, as a student, set foot on the campus, what were your impressions of the school?

WB: Well, I was almost overwhelmed by the school. It was mostly...to compare it to one today is strictly...it would be unbelievably small. We had very few women students at all on the campus, very few cars of any kind on the campus, and so if you wanted to go to downtown Starkville, generally you walked or you hitchhiked to town and back. But, I was still overwhelmed with the library, Hand Library, the dormitory that burned down in later years.

CP: Old Main?

WB: Old Main.

CP: Did you live in Old Main?

WB: I lived in Old Main dormitory (laughs) for two years. It was quite an experience. All who lived there liked to take time out and tell you all about Old Main dormitory so long...lot of good tales still exist from the experience. But, generally I guess that would be about all the comments that I could make about how it appeared at

that time. It would appear to be a handful of buildings and a handful of people as compared to today in size.

CP: Moving on. After you got your degrees, now you were at Mississippi State in 1951 working for the extensions service.

WB: Right.

CP: Were you getting your other degrees while you were working for them or were you...

WB: No. I had no time to do that. I started working as assistant county agent in Calhoun County, and was not located close enough to Mississippi State University or to the University of Mississippi to attend on a part-time basis, and let that be compatible with my job. So, I did no organized studies for eight or ten years. I guess it was in 58, 1958 I applied for a Farm Foundation Fellowship to go to school, and was awarded a \$5,000 fellowship to attend one of five or six universities. Cornell being one of them, Penn State, Iowa State, and few others like that, none in the south. I selected Cornell University because of its reputation in agriculture and in research. I just wanted to go there. I took sabbatical leave. We could take one year of sabbatical leave after we had enough service years to meet that requirement. I believe we had to get five or six years on the job before you were eligible for sabbatical. But, then sabbatical leave, we were paid half time, half salary from extension service at Mississippi State University. The five thousand dollar fellowship, I didn't have to do any work on the fellowship part too, so I moved my family to Ithaca, New York, we stayed a year up there in that frozen tundra (laughter) and went to school and got the Masters degree there. Later, I got that degree in 1959 I guess. Later, I got a Doctorate of Education from the University of Mississippi in 1970. I did take some courses at the University of Mississippi for a period of years, of course, it was at night. They taught a bunch of education courses and administration courses from six to nine p.m. each night during the week. So, you get in a full days work and go to school three hours once a week and carry your three-hour course. So, I started my work there and was able to finish up with a little concentrated school.

CP: When you were still working for Mississippi State, while you were going?

WB: Yes I was.

CP: Must have been tough on you.

WB: Tough, still tough. (laughter) When I meet a lot of Mississippi State folks.

CP: And that degree was in administration?

WB: Administration in Higher Education, yes.

CP: How long did you serve at Mississippi State University? 51 to....

WB: 51 to 81. So, I served thirty years, and of course had about three years of service in United States Navy during World War II, which also counted on my retirement. But, I worked thirty years for the university.

CP: And, your naval experience that was three years, that was during the war?

WB: During World War II. But, it was mostly all located in San Diego, California. I had some duties up and down the coast there, but mostly it was housed at San Diego.

CP: Ok. Now this is the part...this is going to take a long time, but that is why we are here. What were or are some of your career highlights? I know that there are many, but...

WB: Well, I don't like to talk about these much, but we will go through a few since you asked. You know it's a little dangerous to ask a retired person to talk about himself or to reminisce about his work (laughs). But, since you have done that, I will be glad to go through some of them. I was fortunate to have a lot of good people working for me and with me and if I had any success, and I think I did, in service to the university, was because of my ability or my good fortune in getting a lot of good people employed and getting them working together with me. But, I received the US, the United State Department of Agriculture Superior Service Award on two occasions. One, for work in Tippah County as county agent there over a staff of people on a program of economic and community development. Then later, I received another Superior Service Award from the Department of Agriculture, one of two given out annually, for unification of staff and development that contributed significantly to the economic development of our state. Other awards...I served on numerous positions and committees at the national and regional level, such as extension...being Chairmen of the Extension Services Committee on Economic Development. That was a nationwide committee. I was awarded two

commendations by the Mississippi legislature; one, in 1966, and one again in 81 for outstanding contributions in agriculture and economic development in the state. Governor [Bill] Waller gave me an outstanding Mississippian Award. Progressive Farmer selected me as the Outstanding Mississippian in contribution to agriculture in 1980, and several of these kinds of awards.

CP: I noticed just looking at newspaper clippings, that you pretty consistently said in each one of those, it's working with people and getting people to work together. That seems to be your guiding philosophy. How do you...and this is just...I just want...You know when you are getting economic development, and you want people to work together, I guess to better the economy in the region and so on. How do you go about...because you have people from all different walks of life? How do you go about approaching people and getting them to work?

WB: That is a good question obviously, or you would not have asked it (laughter). The answer to that is, I wish that I could really be definitive, and give an answer that's satisfactory all over the country because that is the key. But, you start, in my opinion, with the people that you recruit and employ. You get people who like people, and like to work with them. If you can determine it, you want to hire people who have a little bit of missionary spirit about them, missionary zeal about them. A desire to help people. When they are motivated by this, in any discipline, they are very productive. So, that is probably the biggest single determinant on what a person will do or how they will work in an organization. Of course, you have got to have training. And, you got to zero in on...you got to be focused. You here about focused, or athletes getting in a zone? But, the athlete can't describe or define that zone to you much. But, some days he or she in that zone, everything will go right, and they score well or do well. But, they can't get in that zone every day. This is somewhat akin to that. You want to do the best you can. You want to do things that will motivate the ones that you are working with. I always tried to tell our personnel, and live by the philosophy that it's not a question of whether you can do the work of ten people, but can you get ten people to work. Then, you multiply your efforts so tremendously. Mississippi State University is so fortunate to have local staff in each of the eighty-two counties in Mississippi. Now, we had more serving during my time. The staffs have been reduced somewhat. But, this university, through the county extension offices, have outreaching to ever farm, and home, and community in this state. That is a fine attribute for service for Mississippi State University. More importantly, it is a fine delivery system for Mississippi State

University and the Department of Agriculture and other research centers to the farms and homes and people of the state.

CP: Did you ever, and I'm just kinda...but, did you ever go into a situation when you looked at a community, not that it was hopeless, but I mean did you ever say, what can we do, we are trying to deal with the situation and I don't know what direction to take, and you know...I'm sure that there were mistakes along the way, but did you ever just feel like...what I'm trying to say is, did you ever feel like it was impossible? Did you ever feel that nothing would become of something? Or...

WB: Yes. I think I understand what you are getting at, and the answer is yes. The fact that most of the communities in Mississippi forty years ago, thirty years or twenty years ago, were...they did not have too many resources available to them. I think that this is one thing you are struggling with...we had only a few sewing jobs in the state in the early...say twenty-five years ago, and that was about the only work that was available to the average people of Mississippi who needed a job. We also had an awful lot of our population...a high percent of our population never went to school at all, they could not read or write. Then, they are very much limited as to what they can do in the way of work to make a living for themselves or to help their fellow man. An educational system is primary wherever you go. There are certain other things that every community needs to work on. They need to do better. They need to help each other more. If they have access to education, to encourage each other to go to school. Do a lot of these kinds of things. This will not carry them all the way, of course. That's where universities like Mississippi State University. This university...I would be remiss if I didn't remind you and others who might hear this tape, that Mississippi State University is a land grant institution. The only one in this state. It has a unique calling, a unique function in the state in service to the state and people of the state. That is, it is supposed to do research, teaching, and on-campus instruction, and carry all this out to all the people of the state, and motivate them as best they can, and help them in adopting new practices and learning. So, you add the Mississippi State University's resources to those communities who are struggling, and then you add what is available in the way of economic development assistance from Washington, DC, the nations capital. There have been various programs over the years, and there still are, they are more and more available now than they used to be. Where you have positive assistance programs, you have an opportunity to plug those in to the local community that need them so much. One reason we have lost more than 60,000

jobs in the state of Mississippi in the last year to NAFTA is that we have low wage jobs in this state. That is the kind of job that had been moving to Mexico and to overseas for even lower wages. When it moves out our state, hopefully somewhere down the road, we will benefit from getting higher tech jobs, and higher paying jobs. But, right now, we can't get them, we don't have them, and that leaves us, our people who need work, underemployed. So, you got a lot of ramifications of economic development problems in trying to help people.

- CP: I never realized, until I got here that you know, when you close down a little factory in Ackerman, or Greenville, or wherever, it really hurts...
- WB: It hurts everybody.
- CP: That is true. I am with agreement on you. My hope is that we can keep talent within the state and develop businesses.
- WB: That is one of our greatest needs.
- CP: (laughs) I'm going to get off my soapbox. But, we are in agreement. Tell me about the development and finally the fruition of the Bost Center. How that came about. When you are talking, it seems that you realized that you got to have a hub, and that that center seems to be that kind of hub where you can have all the resources together and then disseminate them throughout the state.
- WB: Exactly. That was the motivation for the center and to get a lot of technical abilities and make them available, both in the center on campus and off campus. So, we started work on securing a building. We had only a small building, and not all of our people were housed in it at that time. I started the request through the university, of course, through the natural channels. The university approved these, and gave me the ok to carry our budget request to the legislature. I might mention at this point that the Cooperative Extension Service or the Mississippi State University Extension Service as it is now called carries it own budget directly to the legislature with interim approval by the university and the Board Of Trustees of course. But, the director of the Extension Service goes to the legislature and supports his budget request as a separate item. I did this with the building request and was fortunate enough to get support for it, and get it built, and designed according...as close as we could figure out how to do it at the time according to the function that we had in mind. That is, the one described by you. To house all the specialist and other people available for

service off campus in that setting so that when a person came to the building from the furthest county of the state, he could walk in the building and see an agronomist, a dairy specialist, and a machinery or ag engineer person to solve a problem that he might have with producing hay, and baling it and so forth. We had...we built and had an excellent television and radio studio system to hook up over the state. In fact, we produced and still produce a program every Monday night on television jointly with education of television people. Our folks did a good job with that. We established that and it still goes on right now. We had a fish disease laboratory and service...well, the Fish and Wildlife Service. We just sort of got the money where we could and as we could, and set up a fish disease laboratory and this is something which might be of interest...is of interest to a great many people. There were no such laboratories in the state. There was no production of catfish in the state because nobody knew how to grow catfish in a pond. Channel catfish have to have fresh water in order to reproduce. We had a man in Pototoc County who so happened I knew him. His name was Steely Gooch. Mr. Gooch started raising catfish in two little private ponds. He sought help from Mississippi State University and we really did not have any help for him because we did not have any specialists in that. We did not have fish disease specialist and diseases is a real problem with fish industry. If you don't handle that, and stay on top of it, you get wiped out overnight. So, we saved farms and borrowed from other sources and put in a fish disease laboratory and hired a fishery specialist, Dr. Tom Weber. We produced along with research here...we began to gear up to serve the catfish industry and research of other places. This was all coordinated through the fish disease department and laboratory in the extension building out over the state and in the delta at the time I retired. When I retired it had grown from zero in financial impact, economic impact, to more than forty five million dollars a year income. I don't know what it is now. I have not kept up with that, but it is probably at least twice that today, which is an entirely new industry. So, that is the way it was services out of that department. And, then you have a lot of other people who have contributed...a lot of other disciplines that contribute to that service there. We had also in that building a soil testing lab where people, even from home gardens or farms all over the state, they sent in soil samples to be analyzed, or they could bring them if they wanted to. It was done here. And, we had a set up and started a computing center and put in computers. The first computers in several pilot counties to begin a program to reach our goal to putting a computer in every county and serving them from a central base in the Extension Building on campus. Our mail system went out from there, and

our supply system went out from that building. We sent supplies and bulletins and research materials to all the county agents and other extension workers over the state from there, and to individuals who requested them. So, without getting too much other detail, that's generally how the way the building was designed and how it served.

CP: That kind of leads to our next question. In your years of service, what technological changes did you witness in agriculture, forestry, and in your case extension service.

WB: Yes, well, the catfish industry is one of course. We built it from...I say we I'm talking about the people of the state. The people in the delta where the land is level, and more easily formed into uniformed depth lakes that you could produce catfish on. And, now it has moved around into the hills a great bit more, in the hill sections where on level places, they build these lakes and go into the business. So, that was a business that came about directly as a result of research and extension in hand, in concert, carrying its development to the people. The research was absolutely necessary. The know-how. Then, the delivery to the field where they were instructed and motivated on the pond bank to grow catfish and do it right. The soybean industry in this state is another real good result of research and extension working together. Long about, I'd say early fifties the soybean industry in Mississippi was about a twenty million dollar deal. We did not grow much soybeans for market. They did not fit this state too well, our climate or our soil. We begin to get our research people got on this program and many of them, and I hesitate to call their names, but one man deserves his name be called. Dr. Hardwig, a researcher, plant breeder, here at Mississippi State University that developed two or three different varieties of soybeans that were developed for Mississippi climate and soils. Then the extension people started recommending these out over the state and farmers started producing them and the soybean yields increased rapidly. As time went on, researchers developed other varieties, but this out us in the soybean business. It is a major contributor to the economy of this state now. One other small, sounds small, example of technological development, I like to use is getting farmers in Mississippi to start using hybrid seed corn. Sounds like a simple project, but at the time it was started, corn yields in the state of Mississippi averaged about twenty-five bushels per acre or possibly thirty. Farmers lacked open pollinated corn was a typical variety at that time. The most success we had on this project, I think, was counties all over the state had through the youth program...Corn companies started bagging up enough seed corn

for one acre, and would give that to county agents to give out to children, 4-H boys and girls where they would plant one acre of corn right by their daddy's open pollinated corn. And the daddy's corn would make twenty-five or thirty bushels to acre, and this hybrid seed corn would make forty or fifty bushels per acre. That little demonstration and the demonstration was the primary method of teaching in the extension service. You know if you were told about a job...how to do something, you may do it. If you actually do it, then it makes an impression on you, and you see it, and you do it yourself, you know it is accurate. That spread rapidly, and I suspect that the state yields of corn today would be around a hundred bushels per acre. So, then we had...thinking of other technological developments that agriculture carried forth. There were many over a period of thirty years, obviously there would be but, I think I was fortunate to live in a period when our research was focused, it was adequate, it was inspired, and the extension work was inspired. We moved a transition, not all of it good, from small farmers, small family type farms to larger farms. That just naturally had to evolve, even though you would like to maintain small family farms, as long as you could. We fought the trend as long as we could, but everything trended toward larger production units. Poultry for instance, we used to have a flock of hens or chickens on most farms. They would produce their own eggs, raise chickens, and have their own meat. Then it got to be a little larger farm, a little larger laying houses, and these concentrated until now, where the littler or smaller farmers could not compete. Now, we have five people in Mississippi that are the poultry industry in this state. They own it, they produce the poultry, the chickens, the eggs, and ship out all over the world. One of our major contributors, but you don't have a bunch of farmers producing this except as these five integrators contract with farmers to produce chickens for them. So, the moved this way and the swine industry moved generally about the same way. We had a lot of people feeding a few pigs, a few hogs on small farms. This moved into larger units of confinement of swine. These are maybe the basic, the bigger impacts things that I can think of.

CP: Did you...now you...you know because you said it, its...you know these transitions...I just know the transition from the small to the large. How did you...how did you tell people...you know discuss people...you know say to people, you know this is we see this going this way, you know. Because I know it must have been hard sometimes.

WB: Some of the toughest work to do in education and working with farmers and farm families is in that vein. In that as an agent or

whoever deals with a farmer...take for instance in growing cotton, the farmer you are dealing with may have been growing ten acres of cotton, and rubbing out a living. He would milk ten cows and sell milk, and ten acres of cotton and get by on it. But, the pressures of everything getting more expensive and he needed...the family needing more income, he would press more and more for more income. You would try to figure out a way to do it and in the area of financing and financial advice to that family is crucial. A lot of it people decided for themselves that I just can't go any further. I cannot use chemical weed control on my cotton. Suddenly, you could not find people to hoe cotton. You could not hire them. They were not available. So, chemical weed control, as a county agent, I carried a little round drum-type roller around in every community in Tippah county and I rolled out a smooth bed for planting cotton. I sprayed that bed. It was early days of chemical weed control. As the hybrid seed corn illustration worked, this little hand installed field of cotton with chemical weed control was sitting by the side of the others that got real grassy and this did not get real grassy. But, when that farmer looked at the cost of doing chemical weed control, he had to have a tractor, had to have specialized spray equipment with the tractor. He had to have specialized knowledge. So, a lot of them could not get it, so they dropped out and got a job and moved to Starkville or somewhere.

CP: Yeah.

WB: They could not compete. They went as long as they could go. Then the farmers...where the county agents were crucial in this, the farmers that did buy the tractor and the spray rig, the county agent had to go teach him how to set the spray rig. Cause you spray too much, you kill the cotton, if you didn't, it didn't kill grass. So, this was...instruction. But, the method was always the same. But, I strayed too far from your question I guess, and most people just fell out or fell off on the wayside as they recognized themselves that they had to do something to make more money.

CP: But, it seems to me though that despite that the soybean, the catfish, the hybrid seed corn...did advance the state though...

WB: It did. It did. That makes me...that reminds me that I should have mentioned two agriculture production programs that we had in the state, and these things contributed to that. But, in 1964, we announced a program of 1.5 by 75. Our farm income, as I recall, was about 950 million dollars a year in 64. So, we set a goal of a billion and a half by 1975. We said we going to call it 1.5 by 75.

Its an agricultural production program and we are going to use that as a focus for everybody to zero in, not just extension workers, but for researchers and for the farmers themselves, industry to help out with. We just want to see how much we could increase the production of this state from 900 million to one and a half billion and we got it in 73, two years early. Then immediately went into another one-- 3 by 83 (laughter). 73 to 83, in another ten years, we wanted to increase it to three billion. And, we did successfully. By 81, I guess. So, all of that was increased income to the entire state. Another thing that developed in that process, that I am extremely proud of, that I failed to mention is...along in there, I conceived the idea of establishing a food and fiber center. I named that, for lack of a better name. What its duty was...it was supposed to be staffed with people who were not all agriculture specialists. They were engineers, they were...everything but agriculture specialists. They were economists, there were management specialists, there were food specialists, they were these type...who could take the Mississippi agriculture products and further process them and begin to get more of the finished processing industry in the state. It has been very successful, that food and fiber center.

CP: So, you have seen a lot of changes in agriculture in this state and at MSU. So, have things...so, you have seen these things and we have talked about them, but how have they remained the same? Particularly at Mississippi State, and as far as extension service is concerned.

WB: Well, of course I have been off the scene for twenty years now. I have been retired for twenty years. I have always been an interested onlooker. Once an extension worker, I guess you are always are one. And the function of the university has never changed although from time to time emphasis may tilt one direction or another. So, while the programs of my day were oriented at some of those things that we discussed during this session, such as the catfish production, soybean production, and increased corn production, and cotton and others. That is still in effect today, but there are so many fewer people involved in that. And, I think that it has tilted a little more general economic development, which also included developing all your agricultural resources. But, Mississippi State University still has and I hope will always have and realize that it's function is as a land grant institution, and being so it's unique from Ole Miss, Southern, and all the other universities in the state. It has a mission of teaching, research, and extension that must be carried out for the benefit of

the common people. They still feel this, and if it does a good job, it will remain motivated by this drive.

CP: I think its like that at every department, not just exclusive to agriculture. Can you think of anyone else that we could interview for this project? Any names?

WB: I would need to give that a little more thought. I guess I don't right off hand.

[end of interview]