

Mississippi State University Libraries

Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Project

Oral History

Dr. Vance Watson

December 7, 2011

Interviewer: Dr. Mike Ballard

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**(Tape Side One, 000)**

Dr. Ballard: Echoes of Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Oral History Project. The date is December 7, 2011, one o'clock in the afternoon in the Stennis-Montgomery Room of Mitchell Memorial Library on the Mississippi State University campus. The interviewee today is Dr. Vance Watson. Interviewers are Mike Ballard with the University Archives and Congressional Center and Mattie Abraham, Curator of Manuscripts. Also sitting in on the interview is Ryan Semmes, who is Archivist in the Congressional Center. And so Dr. Watson, we will proceed. What is your relationship to the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building?

Dr. Watson: [Edited (changes made by Dr. Watson on 09/27/2012)] Thank you for the opportunity to be in here. The building is very special to me. It happened to be the first home I had as a new faculty member here in 1966. The building has a rich history in agriculture. It's the landmark building for agriculture on campus, and the Experiment Station section of it, which is on the west end, is particularly endearing to me because that's where my first office was. When I arrived on campus in the summer of '66, the building was very crowded at that time, with a lot of different departments involved, and the reason it was so crowded was that they were waiting for the opening of Dorman Hall, and most of us on that end of the building exited and took a new home in Dorman Hall in the fall of that year,

but certainly a very special time in my career because three different times after that I had assignments back in the Lloyd-Ricks building after I had started there and then moved to Dorman and then back in there three different times.

Dr. Ballard: You've already answered part of the next question; what time frame are we talking about? Of course, as you've said, you jumped around a little bit, (*laughs*) came back, and...

Dr. Watson: I started in there on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June of 1966 and then retired on Halloween of 2008, and in and out of that building my whole career.

Dr. Ballard: How much has the... as a follow-up... the inside structure, the floor space, the office space; how much has that changed over the years?

Dr. Watson: I watched that building change with some of our in-house carpenters over time. Mostly it was paint and wall coverings that changed. I think the biggest improvement in the latest renovation was to add that building to the central heating and cooling structures of the University, because prior to that each office had its own window unit to heat and cool, and think that really took away from some of the characteristics of the building that stand out so well now.

Ms. Abraham: Dr. Watson, getting to a little meatier question; what are some interesting experiences that you had, and perhaps tell us about some of the personalities that you met during your time there.

Dr. Watson: Well, interesting experiences; my first office assignment actually there were four of us in a small office. I was placed in with a group of USDA personnel that were also located there, and I think that started a relationship that developed over time where the combination of state and federal employees in that building gave Mississippi State the opportunity to have one of the best working relationships of any of the Experiment Stations in the country. Most of the time the federal people were displaced in other locations; and the fact when you're sharing offices, drinking coffee together, having lunch together and all of those things has some unique and special relations that develop.

Ms. Abraham: I've seen you smile about some of the experiences you've had. Are there any particular ones...

Dr. Watson: Well...

Ms. Abraham: ...that stand out?

Dr. Watson: I think some of the personalities that were in the building, and I really think personalities are what make a building, and the longer the building stays there the history that comes about is based on the successes and the mannerisms and the different types of people that are in and out of there, and certainly that building has a lot of well-known people. The first one I would mention is the person that hired me, a faculty member by the name of C. Dale Hoover. Dr. Hoover was hired here at the University in 1938, and in 1946 he was made the Head of the Department and served in that role until his retirement in 1972. That's unusual in today's world for sure, to have a long-term administrator like that with the successes that he had. Hoover was a great scientist, and the thing that I would give him credit for is the kinds of people that he was able to hire and to move here with him, and a lot of those went on to higher administrative roles or University President roles here and at other places around the country; and Dr. Bill Giles was one of his hires, who became our thirteenth President. Dr. Louis Wise was the second Vice President of Agriculture that we had and was one of Hoover's hires. But I think the thing that he probably is best known for is his ability to encourage teamwork, and as a result of that, the first PhDs in the University were graduated from his department. In fact, the first 14 PhDs that Mississippi State awarded were in the Agronomy Department, and six of those were international students, even that early in the program, and those six then helped set a trademark where we had a very strong international effort, and Agronomists out of the department actually work in over 53 countries around the world. So he, he made a mark there, and I'm particularly indebted to him for giving me the opportunity to come here, and it happened sort of by accident. I grew up in the boot heel of Missouri down in the southeast corner, and one

weekend I was at home and my father asked me to attend an Experiment Station field day with him. The Superintendent of that little Experiment Station in Missouri happened to be a graduate of here and I had known him since I was a small child, and just a matter of conversation he asked me what my plans were, and I was, at that time, finishing a Master's Degree at the University of Missouri and I told him that I had planned to go on to a Doctorate and I had offers from LSU and from the University of Florida. I was trying to make up my mind there, and he said, 'Well, have you contacted my old school?' And I said, 'Well, tell me... tell me about your school.' (*laughs*)

Dr. Ballard: (*laughs*)

Dr. Watson: And he said, 'Well, my university, (or my college at that time) is Mississippi State, State College, Mississippi.' And I said, 'No, I haven't.' So he wrote on a paper Dr. Hoover's name and address, and as a courtesy to him and my father I wrote Dr. Hoover a letter when I returned to the University of Missouri that weekend, and lo and behold I get a call about three weeks later offering me a position here with an opportunity to work on a Doctorate and be a faculty member, too, and I thought that was really unique that something like that would happen, and we chose, because of that personal touch that he had, to give it a try here. We came to stay two years, and we stayed 43. (*laughs*)

Dr. Ballard: (*laughs*)

Dr. Watson: Sometimes good things do work out that way.

Dr. Ballard: Well, you mentioned Dr. Wise... I know you want to say a few things about him. I never saw a photograph of him without a big smile on his face.

Dr. Watson: That's right. Wise was a unique person, and the thing that I really appreciate about it, he and I have had the same responsibility in Agronomy; he was in forage and pasture crops and turf grass, and those were the areas that I came here to work in. But he had already gone out of the department at that time and was vice president when I came, but he took an interest in me and invited me to some trips

that he took around the State, and I learned an awful lot from him by doing that. He was a guy that was highly respected in the legislative circles because of the personality that he had, and the individual touch that he had with people. I think the thing that will be the most significant, or one of the most significant on his list of accomplishments, though; he had the vision to start the Seed Technology Program here. Actually, he and Dr. Giles started that. Giles was involved in it for a year before he became the 13<sup>th</sup> President here, and then Wise took on that challenge after that time, and at that time Lloyd-Ricks was so full of people that they housed that part of the department and program in the Textile Building across from the library here, in the Twin Towers Building as we know it, and it grew very famous because of its international aspect that it took on, and then it grew to such a big program that in the early '70s they built a building just for the Seed Technology research effort. At that time, most of the international efforts in seed production were all government handled by the countries around the world, so they sent lots of students and employees in here for training, and then we had faculty stationed all around the world out of that program. In the late '80s that began to change as seed programs became privatized, and then most of the effort in this country and at this university switched then to Biotechnology efforts. And Wise will get the credit for actually being the father of that program I think.

Ms. Abraham: Interesting. Well another person you mentioned that seems significant is Dr. Rodney Foil. I know you want to talk about him.

Dr. Watson: Rodney's special on my list because he gave me the first opportunity in administration. At that time he was the 14<sup>th</sup> Director of the Experiment Station. I was being recruited by Texas A&M, and the faculty and Department Head in Animal Science went to him and told him that I had had a great team effort with their faculty of trying to combine the two disciplines together and they wanted him to try to keep me here. So he offered me an administrative role that was half time to coordinate all of the forage and pasture and livestock research activity in the state at our Branch Stations. We had 13 of those stations at the time, about

5,000 head of animals scattered around the state, and mainly keeping an inventory of what those were and what types of research they were, trying to focus these into a centralized database so we could keep up with them. A coordinator's role, though, has no line responsibility; you've got to be on the fence all the time as a diplomat. That was a great experience, though, and the thing I really learned to love and appreciate about Rodney was in 43 years in working with people throughout the United States I have never met another individual that could come into a meeting of diverse personalities, diverse opinions, whether the meeting was one hour long, all day long, or a multi-day meeting, and when it became his turn that he could summarize the essence of that meeting in about five minutes and everybody agreed with it. I've never seen anybody else that could do that as good as he can, and I've told him that on a number of occasions, and I think others have too, and he still likes to hear that. He says it today...

Dr. Ballard: *(laughs)*

Dr. Watson: In fact, I told him that just two or three weeks ago at a basketball game that I still have that on my list. I hadn't found anybody better than him at that since then. But he was the one that brought the Experiment Station into a different level, where he encouraged us to get together as teams of researchers, and we brought in advisory groups out of the public sector to come in each year and review our programs and give us their opinion as to whether we're on the right track or not. You know, we can be in a laboratory or on one of the university research farms, and as researchers we see and talk and do things with each other each day. Sometimes you can lose the focus of what the real issues might be with the producers, and those producer advisory groups that we had were very, very helpful to us. They became great supporters of ours then in the legislative process, because all of the units in the division of agriculture are separately budgeted units in the legislature, which creates a different kind of relationship than we might have if all those budgets came through as just a single one in the IHL board. And it was good for us, and it was good for the state to do that. And we

developed then with Farm Bureau, the Delta Council, the Cattlemen's Association, and others some very, very good working relationships that still pay big dividends today; and it, again, adds credence, I think, to the term of "People's University" that's often used for Mississippi State.

Dr. Ballard: Well you also have on your list Dr. Verner Hurt.

Dr. Watson: Yes, Verner Hurt is one that was tapped me to come back to Lloyd-Ricks...

Dr. Ballard: *(laughs)*

Dr. Watson: I think that was the third trip through there, and Verner asked me first to take a group of what were considered as small departments, and we pulled those together under one umbrella called Research Support Units. They first had the foundation seed and variety testing efforts that we had underway, those were statewide efforts managed out of here; and that worked real well. The next thing he did was added the University Farms to that. Then, in another few months he added the bulldozers, the carpenters, the motor pool, and all the vehicles that we had to deal with. And then within a year after that he added all the Branch Experiment Stations to it. So, I got a lot of hands-on practical budget management experience, and that's where I really learned to appreciate the role that support staff has; that's the side of the administrative structure that I can't really thank enough for my advancement, the support staff side rather than the traditional department head/dean type of accession in administration. Dr. Hurt moved me into that role in '87. When he retired in '95, he stayed on during the search process and I was selected as the director to follow him. So, Rodney was director 14, Dr. Hurt 15, and I was number 16. The other thing that happened in that same time period was that we had the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the University selected. It was the first time there was a 16<sup>th</sup> Director and President (same number at the same time), and both of us were classmates here; and that was Mack Portera. Dr. Portera (I still kid him about it), when I knew him (when) we were in the graduating class of 1969, he received a BS in Biological Science, and

I received a PhD in Agronomy; then he switched to Political Science. I told him Biology wasn't hard enough for him...

Dr. Ballard: *(laughs)*

Dr. Watson: ...So he moved over the other way. But we've had a lot of conversation and laughs about that since then.

Ms. Abraham: Well tell us about Dr. Baker Andrews, another one on your list.

Dr. Watson: Baker Andrews was a faculty member in the Agronomy Department that was a very unique personality. He's one that, he mentored a lot of young faculty here. Baker came, I think, in about 1931 if I remember. But his real claim to fame was in that shortly after World War II Baker took this big surplus of bomb-making material that was left from the war, a product called anhydrous ammonia, and teamed up with a faculty member over in Agricultural Engineering by the name of Felix Edwards, and the two of them, with a mule named Ike that was located out on the North Farm, learned how to inject anhydrous ammonia into the soil as a nitrogen-based fertilizer. That discovery and that process that they developed is listed as one of the top ten events in modern day agriculture. And a lot of those conversations happened in the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson building. Baker was always one that liked to get a group together and have conversation about new ways and new things to do. I never saw him without his corn cob pipe that he smoked all the time. But he was recognized worldwide for his efforts there. And then the other thing that happened is a Mississippi chemical company came into being about that time, and they hired him then to help develop their nitrogen fertilizer processes, and he moved on from the University to that. The University recognized Baker in 2008, and then recently dedicated this property on Highway 82 as the W. Baker Andrews Sustainable Agriculture Research Facility. So, he made a big contribution... all in the Lloyd-Ricks building.

Dr. Ballard: Well, one of the people that has always fascinated me and she's on your list is Dorothea Dickens, who is such a pioneer in home economics.

Dr. Watson: I didn't have the opportunity to know her, but like you, I am so fascinated with her and the fact that she's a Greenwood native and worked here from 1929 to 1964, but recognized, and given credit now, to be the first female researcher in the United States to do research in Home Economics. She first published in the Market Basket... I think it was called the Market Basket of Wisdom... in 1929, on the food habits of Mississippians, and, of course, we're still publishing on those today...

*(All laugh)*

Dr. Watson: But the thing that Dorothea did in terms of research is that there was a culture in Northeast Mississippi from Starkville north and east of here where soil as a part of the diet was a very common thing; whether it was a mineral deficiency, or what it might be in the, in the human diet. And I understand, from talking with some people in Starkville, there's still a little bit of that that goes on today. There is a bank, a ditch bank on the street behind the Piggly-Wiggly store here in town, that that still happens from time to time. People gather some of that and use it as part of their cooking here; now that's something Dorothea's famous for. And the other thing that I heard about her is, if you remember, the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson building, at that time, had a road down either side of it, and I understand that she was terrified of the motorcar, the automobile and that, as one of her trademarks, she always carried a parasol with her. And she'd step off of the sidewalk with that, and she would hold that parasol high over her head to make sure that people saw that she was in the group. But they tell me she was a wonderful lady, a very spirited personality; one I wish I had had the opportunity to meet. But, the fact that that accomplishment that she had is first in the country, of doing Home Economics research, and it all happened in that facility there, that's something that should be noted and kept as part of history. And I know the others that have been recommended to do interviews have stories like this that go on and on and on, and I think that's what the buildings are all about.

Dr. Ballard: Mm-hm.

Dr. Watson: The names that are on the outside of that building are there because of the roles that they were in, and Lloyd and Ricks and myself were the three people during the time the University's been here that had the opportunity to serve as Director of the Experiment Station, Director of the Extension Service, and Dean of Agriculture; and that's the reason that they're there now. And one of my former students, Senator Perry Lee, authored a bill that in 2007 that added my name to that building. I'm indebted to him for that, but again, I think the real significance are the personalities that occupied that building over the time since 1929 when it was first occupied and, of course, still going on today with a new renovation and facelift that it had.

Ms. Abraham: I believe you're right, and we certainly thank you for suggesting this oral history project because I do believe just from hearing what you're telling us, this could be very significant...

Dr. Watson: Right.

Dr. Ballard: And just to give a little perspective, there are 38 more interviews of people you have identified that we will be interviewing, and that's great. Is there anything else you can think of that you want to add, or?

Dr. Watson: One other thing, I'm so honored to have my name on there, and then at the dedication as I saw my long-time friend Dean Coleman in the background that day, I said here is an opportunity for us to capture something that we often miss, and we're here honoring this new renovation and this name change and all, but the real important things are the folks that spent their career in that building and the things that they accomplished, both individually and together as teams. That's why I think oral histories are so important. I think that the success that the CHARM project and others like that have had really reinforced that in my thinking, and we ought to do these types of things more frequently rather than less frequently.

Dr. Ballard: I agree.

Ms. Abraham: Do you have anything to add?

Dr. Ballard: No.

Ms. Abraham: Well thank you very much.

Dr. Watson: Yeah, thanks for letting me come and be the first one see how this works out.

Ms. Abraham: Enjoyed it.

Dr. Ballard: And we'll see that you're involved from now on.

*(all laugh)*

Dr. Ballard: Maybe not directly, but...

Dr. Watson: There you go.

Dr. Ballard: We'll be in touch.

Dr. Watson: Okay.

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